



THE TALIBAN TAKE-OVER:

The Impact on Extremist Organisations and on EU Audiences At Risk of Radicalisation

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AfD	Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany)
AQ	Al Qa'ida
AWD	Atomwaffen Division
CT	Counter Terrorism
Da'esh	Islamic State in Syria and the Levant
DMG	Deutsche Muslimische Gemeinschaft e.V.
EU	European Union
EUMS	European Union Member States
EUROPOL	European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation
FKD	Feuerkrieg Division
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
IS-K	Islamic State Khorasan Province
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer
NA	Alianza Nacional (National Alliance, Spain)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisations
NRM	Nordic Resistance Movement
P/CVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
PEGIDA	Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamicisation of the Occident
RWE	Right-Wing Extremism/ist
SA	Srbska Akcija (Serbian Action)
TTP	Tahrik-e Taliban Pakistan
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain
UN	United Nations
US	United States of America
VE	Violent Extremist/ism
VRWE	Violent Right-Wing Extremism/ist

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite expectations of the contrary, the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban did not have a major direct impact on grassroots audiences within the EU. The Taliban have no interest in European jihadism, while the two main global jihadist organisations, Al Qa'ida (AQ) and Da'esh, were, for different reasons, not well positioned to exploit the events of Kabul for promoting jihadist ideas in Europe. Da'esh of course, saw the Taliban's takeover as a threat and could not use it to advance its cause in Europe. AQ, on the other hand, decided not to exploit the opportunity, because it felt unsecure in its relationship with the Taliban and because of reservations on the ideologically spurious character of the regime.

This report reviews propaganda and social media activities of jihadists and right-wing extremist (RWE) groups and assesses the impact of the fall of Kabul on their narratives.

Right-wing extremist (RWE) groups showed an initial interest in the Taliban takeover for two opposing reasons. Some groups, focused on xenophobia and Islamophobia, thought the expected massive wave of Afghan asylum seekers would offer them the opportunity to mobilise anti-immigrant sentiment and were positioning themselves for that purpose. Since this wave of immigrants has not yet materialised, these groups have turned their attention elsewhere.

The other range of RWE groups had a less conventional reaction to the fall of Kabul, seeing the Taliban as an example of the "triumph of the will" that could inspire other RWE groups drifting towards forms of violent mobilisation. The propaganda techniques of the global jihadists, while already familiar to RWEs, enjoyed a fresh surge in popularity. The absorption of jihadist techniques appears to be a long-term trend for the RWE spectrum. Even the inspirational value of the Taliban was still being discussed one year after the takeover, suggesting some lasting impact.

In this context, there is little space for targeted strategic communications, Afghanistan per se not being much of an issue. If anything, the situation in Afghanistan could offer new opportunities for narratives that normalise and take the shine off jihadism as a political-military movement with internal rivalries, hatred, civil wars even – much like any other political or military movement.

Paradoxically, the fall of Kabul could end up benefiting the RWE side more in the long term. The negative impact in terms of Western failure in Kabul can fade over time, but this cannot really be eradicated, even if the Emirate were to implode in the future. What RWE groups have learned in terms of propaganda techniques cannot be unlearned. Addressing these issues might already be beyond the scope of counter narratives.

INTRODUCTION

The fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on 15 August 2021, the way it happened (with the country's elite fleeing and de facto handing the capital over to the more radical wing of the Taliban, the Haqqani network) and the poorly planned withdrawal of foreign states and troops all contributed to project an image of Western failure and underperformance. At the same time, the reaction in the media, but also Western policymakers, viewed the Taliban takeover as a victory of jihadism as a whole. Fears of Afghanistan turning once again into a safe haven for global jihadist groups bent on exporting violent jihad worldwide, were displayed by both the media and policymakers alike. Moreover, there was a strong expectation of a massive wave of Afghan refugees making their way for Europe, via Iran and Turkey.

In this context, it is not surprising that there might have been strong expectations of an impact from the Taliban takeover as far as Europe. The new wave of refugees, already estimated in 2021 to amount to 500,000, would have been twice the size of the previous largest wave from Afghanistan that hit Europe in 2015. Right-wing and xenophobic groups could only be expected to seize the opportunity to stir trouble and reinvigorate narratives of "great replacements" by Muslim immigrants. Jihadist groups were expected to use the victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan as a propaganda opportunity for relaunching global jihad, whose image had been tarnished by the destruction of the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria and by the AQ-Da'esh rivalry. Jihadist sympathisers and disaffected Muslims in Europe were feared to be potentially galvanised into action by the combination of a display of weakness, ineffectiveness, and lack of determination by Western powers and of resolution, determination, and readiness to sacrifice by the Taliban.

Over a year later, these fears have turned out to be mostly unwarranted, even if they cannot be entirely ruled out for the future. Although large numbers of Afghans did leave the country, few had made it to Europe by the summer of 2022. Since far-right propaganda tends to be based on the manipulation of facts, one of the main reasons for right-wing actors to get excited had not materialised yet.

No major propaganda campaign of jihadist groups, aimed at exploiting the Taliban's success, materialised in the months following the fall of Kabul and seem unlikely to ever happen. Does this mean that there has been no impact whatsoever?

This report reviews the propaganda and social media activities of jihadists and right-wing extremist (RWE) groups and assesses the direct impact of the fall of Kabul on their narratives, which (as hinted above) was very modest, as well as the indirect impact, which neither media nor policy makers had anticipated. This indirect impact is much harder to assess, especially with such a short-term perspective, so the findings of this report in that regard can only be tentative.

The report is set out in four sections. The first is dedicated to briefly setting out the post-fall of Kabul context in Afghanistan, as well as describing the general narratives emerging from the fall of Kabul, regardless of any reference to Europe. The second section focuses instead on narratives specifically aimed at audiences within the European Union, trying also to evaluate their impact so far (to summer 2022). The third section looks at potential P/CVE interventions; given the limited exploitation of Afghanistan in the narratives of extremist groups, this section focuses on specific aspects, such as the evolution of the propaganda from RWE groups and actors. The last section discusses indirect interventions and the implications that different diplomatic and aid strategies could have on the extremists' narratives and on their potential impact.

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on information available in the public domain (social media, media, reports) and on a series of interviews and contacts with policy makers, researchers, and journalists. In total

nine researchers and academics, four staff of social media monitoring organisations, seven officials of EU member states and two journalists have been consulted.

Social media accounts linked to both jihadist and right-wing groups are of course easily accessible; some comments which appeared in not easily accessible chats have been obtained via the BBC Monitoring service. An effort was made to contact several researchers and journalists, but the response rate was relatively low. Some images have been extracted from social media and websites, while others have been contributed by interviewees.

The nature of social media activities is such that they are difficult to cover without a systematic effort, which was beyond the scope of this paper. Organisations monitoring social media on a commercial basis were understandably reluctant to share more than a general summary of their findings. As a result, this report does not incorporate any statistics or data and summarises instead the opinion, views, and shared findings of the different interviewees.

SECTION 1: JIHADIST & RIGHT-WING NARRATIVES ON THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER

1.1. THE AFGHAN CONTEXT

That the Taliban and Al Qa'ida (AQ) have maintained close relations was clear even before al-Zawahiri was killed in a drone strike in Kabul in July 2022. However, evidence dating back to the 2002-2011 period shows that there were tensions and long-standing issues between them. As of August 2021, AQ considered that it only had sub-components of Taliban it could trust, first and foremost the Haqqani network. AQ sources acknowledged that the majority of the Taliban was opposed to its plans to align the Emirate with global jihadist aims and that this was a source of tension. AQ and other foreign jihadists, mainly Central Asians, tried to resist the demands of the Emirate that they would be subjected to a complete and detailed census and that the Emirate should determine the areas where they would be expected to reside. As of July 2022, the matter was still the object of a tug of war between the Taliban and foreign jihadists.¹

Analysts mention two possible explanations concerning the muted reaction of AQ to the Taliban takeover. One is that due to the friction mentioned above and fearing a drift of the Emirate along a route similar to that taken by Al-Nusra Front / Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria, AQ might want to keep some distance in case friction intensifies. One should note that the organisational relationship of Al-Nusra and AQ was once much closer than the Taliban and AQ have ever been.²

The other explanation provided is that AQ, wary of creating trouble for the Emirate in its delicate phase of consolidation, opted to mute its propaganda campaign in order not to embarrass the Taliban and facilitate its establishment of diplomatic relations with other countries.³

Sources within the Taliban, AQ and affiliated groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan all support the first explanation. They described a split in the Taliban movement, wherein the primary intent was on bringing under control Qaidists and other foreign fighters, while aligning them to the foreign policy interest of the Emirate. This included further cementing good relations with Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Russia, and China, and using foreign jihadists as a tool of pressure towards Pakistan and Tajikistan to try to obtain diplomatic or political concessions from them.⁴

Those who monitored Taliban social media noted the effort to position themselves as moderates, facilitated by the attacks of the Islamic State's propaganda, portraying the Taliban as traitors to the cause of global jihad.⁵

1.2. GLOBAL JIHADIST NARRATIVES

In the immediate aftermath of 15 August 2021, there was an expectation among many external observers that such a 'monumental' development would 'electrify' the global jihadist movement.⁶ Instead, as a result of the Afghan context discussed above, the propaganda campaign of AQ and its affiliates, centring around the return to power of the Emirate, has been very modest and largely

¹ Antonio Giustozzi and Michael Jones, 'The Loneliness of a Global Jihadist: Al-Qa'ida Under al-Zawahiri', *RUSI Commentary*, 17 August 2022; Antonio Giustozzi, 'Al-Qa'ida and the Taliban: diverging paths?', *RUSI Journal*, forthcoming.

² See Antonio Giustozzi, 'Al-Qa'ida and the Taliban: diverging paths?', *RUSI Journal*, forthcoming.

³ AV, 2.08.2022.

⁴ See Antonio Giustozzi, 'Al-Qa'ida and the Taliban: diverging paths?', *RUSI Journal*, forthcoming.

⁵ Arthur Bradley, *Tech against Terrorism*, 16.08.22.

⁶ *Ibid.*

limited to the first couple of months after the regime change in Kabul. AQ central released a celebratory message on 31 August, 16 days after the fall of Kabul and the date of the completion of the US withdrawal, as if AQ had doubts that congratulating the Taliban earlier entailed some risks. It is worth noting in this regard that “prominent al-Qaeda supporter Warith al-Qassam” cryptically criticised on social media “those who had doubted that al-Qaeda leadership figures would publicly comment on the return of the Taliban to power.”⁷ Clearly, there had been some tension over the delay.

Over the course of the following days, AQ’s main branches followed suit. Apart from the official statement, there was semi-official or unofficial chatter related to events in Afghanistan, but it was not much, and this was mostly limited to August.⁸

The message from AQ central hoped for the forthcoming liberation of a number of ‘Muslim lands’, but only mentioned Europe when wishing that its people (and those of East Asia) break free from the ‘shackles of American hegemony’. After that, however, AQ central kept silent and did not release any other propaganda or even statements. Remarkably, then leader Ayman al-Zawahiri did not comment at all on the Taliban takeover in any of his videos. Al-Zawahiri was not releasing much in terms of videos in those months, but the magnitude of this event should have justified his intervention. There were rumours that he might be dead (we now know these were not true) or critically ill (which he might have been). When towards the end of 2021 however, he resumed a more proactive propaganda effort, he still did not comment at all on the victory of the Taliban. Instead, he released a video criticising the United Nations (UN). The video was widely seen as an obvious criticism of the agreement the Emirate had reached that allowed the UN to take over salary payments for staff in health and education. Al-Zawahiri’s video was echoed by more explicit criticism of the Emirate’s decision from Qaidist intellectuals, such as Al Maqdisi (on Twitter on 20.12.2021).

Indeed, the rare commentary on the Emirate during its first year in power came from Qaidist sympathisers / influencers such as Al Maqdisi himself. In general, these commentators defended the Emirate against the criticism directed against it by Da’esh, while at the same time criticising it on some specific points, mainly to do with the Taliban’s efforts to appease Western powers. Already in the immediate aftermath of regime change in Kabul, Qaidist commentators advised those colleagues, known to harbour reservations about the Taliban, to hold their tongue for the time being. A prominent Qaidist commentator, Shibl Osama, asked his colleagues to provide constructive criticism to the Taliban, advising them and pointing out mistakes ‘when they occur’, and acknowledged that the Taliban were ‘not a yardstick for Tawhid’ (monotheism), that is not examples of virtue to be followed by Qaidists. Still, a debate on these issues started up on Telegram immediately.⁹

Apart from relations with the UN, other points of criticism that started being mentioned in August 2021 and which reappeared over the following 12 months included:

- The Emirate’s relations with Russia, China, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan;¹⁰
- Talks with India;
- Talks with the US;

⁷ ‘Jihadist supporters hail completion of US Afghan withdrawal’, BBC MONITORING, 31 Aug 2021.

⁸ Laurence Bindner, Jihadoscope, 08.08.22.

⁹ ‘Jihadists online celebrate Taliban ‘victory’, BBC MONITORING, 6 Aug 2021.

¹⁰ Liam Duffy, 28.07.22.

- The belief that the Taliban might not fully implement Islamic Law, as understood by Salafis;
- Their ban on carrying out attacks abroad from Afghanistan;
- Praise for Turkish president Erdogan;¹¹
- Efforts by some of its leaders to appease the West on women's rights.¹²

Pro-AQ groups have been active on servers such as Rocket.chat, where both official and semi-official releases appear (there are a number of media houses associated with AQ). The peak in Afghanistan-related propaganda on servers was between July and September 2021. Even then, there was very little from official AQ channels. The effort was almost entirely borne by the semi-official media houses, which were mostly redistributing selected material from the Taliban's own propaganda output. This was, in fact, largely Haqqani network material and in particular Badri 313 videos (the Haqqanis' special unit, under the Ministry of the Interior). After September, even this redistribution of Taliban propaganda started declining fast.¹³

Needless to say, Da'esh denounced the Taliban as 'agents of the US', even if some pro-Da'esh commentators saw the positive side of having the opportunity to face the Taliban while they were busy taking over the country and were vulnerable to challenges.¹⁴ Da'esh supporters also commented that the Taliban's example could undermine the jihadist cause, encouraging negotiation.¹⁵ Pro-Da'esh social media accounts, such as *Taliban Exposed*, reinforced these accusations in the wake of the killing of al-Zawahiri in Kabul (31 July 2022), pointing at the Taliban themselves revealing details of the secret annexes of the 2020 Doha Agreement, that foresaw the US-Taliban intelligence cooperation.¹⁶

Sources also noted that Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-K) output increased greatly and that the number of subscribers rose steeply on Rocket.chat. It appears that the Taliban takeover granted the Da'esh media house Al Azain an international profile that it previously did not have. Those monitoring Rocket.chat activity say that 'everybody asks about Al Azain'.¹⁷

1.3. RIGHT-WING NARRATIVES

To the limited extent that the Taliban discussed western liberalism, their views tended (at least superficially) to echo those of RWEs, facilitating the extension of sympathy from the latter often seen in tropes and imagery mixing jihadist and far-right narratives and styles.¹⁸ Most report that convergence between RWE and jihadism comes from the United States of America (US), where the success of the Taliban in defeating the US "deep state" was sometimes noted with satisfaction and as a source of inspiration for their own ideological aims. If the "underdog" Taliban could win against a force as mighty as the US military, then so could violent right-wing extremist (VRWE) groups. However, European users also appear on these predominantly US sites.¹⁹ Both US and European

¹¹ 'Jihadist cleric 'counters extremist falsehoods' on the Taliban', BBC MONITORING, 16 Dec 2021; 'Jihadists online celebrate Taliban 'victory', BBC MONITORING, 6 Aug 2021.

¹² 'Jihadist cleric implicitly accuses Taliban of appeasing West', BBC MONITORING, 16 Jan 2022.

¹³ Borgonovo, ITSTIME, 28.07.22.

¹⁴ 'Jihadists online celebrate Taliban 'victory', BBC MONITORING, 6 Aug 2021.

¹⁵ Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 300, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al 'Iam al-Markazi, 20/08/2021.

¹⁶ Taliban Exposed [@talibs_exposed], Twitter, 10 Aug 2021, https://twitter.com/talibs_exposed/status/1557244318699634689

¹⁷ Borgonovo, ITSTIME, 28.07.22.

¹⁸ Tom Bennett and Tim Hume, "'Hard Not to Respect That': Why White Nationalists Are Toasting the Taliban," Vice News, 18 Oct 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/qj8g7w/hard-not-to-respect-that-why-white-nationalists-are-toasting-the-taliban>.

¹⁹ Shaan Tharoor, "The U.S. Far Right Has a Curious Affinity for the Taliban," Washington Post, 3 Sept 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/09/03/far-right-america-taliban/>; Marco Zaliani, "La Reazione Dell'ecosistema

RWE narratives celebrated the “chaotic Western withdrawal” from the “forever war in Afghanistan”²⁰ and the “David-versus-Goliath humiliating defeat” of the most powerful military forces in the world, including the American, European, wider-Western states, and NATO in general. Such RWE celebrations and common enemy narratives highlight, once again, the ideological similarities between jihadist and right-wing extremist factions.²¹

RWEs used the Taliban victory to reinforce shared beliefs including anti-West, anti-globalism and anti-liberalism, anti-Semitism, anti-LGBTQ and anti-feminism, hard-line conservative, and religious values, and more. The tagline “one struggle” was also adopted by the far-right to highlight their commonalities and shared fight against the liberal democratic world order. The tagline appeared on platforms like Twitter, Telegram, and Discord, and at times included images (image 1). This was more prominently seen with American RWE members who compared the Taliban to the Founding Fathers and Confederate State (image 2), and the Kabul siege to the Capitol Hill siege.



Image 1: Post from RWE User on Nazi-Muslim Alliance



Image 2: Post Comparing Taliban to the Confederate State (US)

During the Afghan takeover, Taliban online propaganda occasionally took aim at Western audiences. One image shared by the Taliban media wing was of Taliban fighters mimicking the 1945 American flag raising from Iwo Jima – intending to mock the image and the US military (image 3).

Digitale Della Destra Alla Vittoria Talebana,” Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società, Nov 2021, <https://www.sicurezzaeterrorismosocieta.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/SicTerSoc14-La-reazione-dellecosistema-digitale-della-destra-alla-vittoria-talebana-Marco-Zaliani.pdf>.

²⁰ “Was It All Pointless?: Veterans Tormented by Taliban Takeover,” Euronews, 20 Aug 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/08/20/shocking-military-veterans-stunned-by-taliban-s-rapid-takeover-of-afghanistan>.

²¹ Dave Keating, “Can NATO Survive the Afghanistan Debacle?,” Internationale Politik Quarterly, 17 Aug 2021, <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/can-nato-survive-afghanistan-debacle>.

The narrative convergence was also profoundly visible in the use of typical far-/alt-right language and content style on social media. Far-right audiences embraced and propelled to fame a pro-Taliban Twitter user, Khostay, who used his account to disseminate propaganda in the western language of memes.²² The account had 35,000+ followers, constant engagement from Western audiences, gained a devoted far-right Twitter audience, and was praised in forums like 4Chan, 8Chan, and other “chans”, BitChut, etc.²³



Image 3: Post by Taliban’s Media-Wing Imitating the Iwo Jima US Military’s Image

At the other end of the spectrum, the RWE online sphere crafted their own narratives and language on the Taliban in much the same way – converging the two extremist sides. Far-right users gave Taliban meme stars the nickname “akh-right” – the Islamist version of alt-right – bringing discourse that has been primarily confined to fringe platforms and “Chan Cultures” into mainstream spaces and social media platforms.²⁴ In embracing the Taliban, far-right users across platforms coined new jargon like “Chadliban” or “Talichad”²⁵, “Talibased”²⁶, and “Taliban Pill”²⁷, and infused the Taliban into their memetic aesthetic, including StoneToss comics and characters like Pepe the Frog, Wojak, Yes Chad, Trollface, Soyjack, and others. The strategy aimed to give RWE and Taliban ideologies and narratives a greater viral reach and audience-base, as well as helping to normalise hate speech and violent rhetoric by shrouding it in ironic humour.²⁸

“The Base”, a US-born but globally recruiting neo-Nazi group, is the English translation of “Al Qa’ida” and described their own mission using the term “white jihad”. The white jihad trend has been

²² Moustafa Ayad, “Gen Z’s Alt-Right Declares New Hero: The Taliban,” The Daily Beast, 20 Aug 2021.

<https://www.thedailybeast.com/generation-zs-alt-right-declares-new-hero-the-taliban>.

²³ Adam Rawnsley, “Afghanistan’s Shitposting Taliban Stan Finds Right-Wing Fame,” The Daily Beast, 12 Sept 2021.

<https://www.thedailybeast.com/afghanistans-shitposting-taliban-stan-malang-khostay-finds-right-wing-fame>.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ A term combining the far-right alpha male ethos “Chad” and the Taliban.

²⁶ “Based” in far-right subcultures indicates some they consider authoritative, unbiased, and anything that “owns the libs (liberals)”.

https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Alt-right_glossary#Based

²⁷ “Red pill” and “black pill”, among others, is used to reference converting to the far-right and, more extreme, realizing that the system is too far gone to change, so nihilism, which usually means the best possible outcomes are death or violence – so Taliban Pill references aligning and realizing the inspiration of the Taliban.

²⁸ Bennett and Hume, “Hard Not to Respect That,” VICE News.

spotted again since the Afghan takeover, where a common theme is RWE actors praising the readiness of the Taliban to die for their ideas. This trend does not have a well-defined core ideology and is largely an American trend. It is a sort of cultural movement, so far only identified online. A common theme is anti-Western and anti-deep state propaganda, with anti-Semitic dimensions at times. Another theme has been lauding the Taliban for having defeated an invincible enemy, showing that all you need is the will. There is also the adoption of jihadist iconography for the purposes of RWE ideas; for example, the calendars of martyrs used by the jihadist is turned into a calendar of supremacist attacks.²⁹

The expected Afghan refugee influx is also used to reinforce the right-wing “great replacement” theory and the idea that globalisation is a plot to perpetrate “white genocide”. Extreme right “news channels”, both mainstream and fringe, gave voice to great replacement ideas during the Afghan takeover, helping to fuel ultra-nationalist anti-immigration narratives that act as foundational ideas for VRWE actors and groups.

²⁹ Laurence Bindner, Jihadoscope, 08.08.22; Borgonovo, ITSTIME, 28.07.22.

SECTION 2: ASSESSING THE OVERALL IMPACT OF JIHADIST & RIGHT-WING NARRATIVES ON EU AUDIENCES

2.1. EUROPE-RELEVANT JIHADIST NARRATIVES

None of the commercial monitoring firms appear to have a complete picture of violent extremist communications in Europe. Monitoring WhatsApp exchanges has become increasingly rare due to legal changes introduced by Meta, which have made entering chats with scraper software potentially illegal. Some of the companies monitoring WhatsApp have now dropped the app from their lists. Telegram, by contrast, remains easier to monitor, but it has been heavily targeted in police crackdowns since 2019, driving many users with extremist inclinations away towards Rocket.chat and other alternative platforms. There was nonetheless a return to Telegram in 2020.³⁰

While the gaps in monitoring discussed above should be considered, EUROPOL, in its 14.07.22 report on terrorism, did not note any particular impact of regime change in Afghanistan on the European security landscape.³¹ A source within EUROPOL later confirmed that there was no AQ attempt to mobilise groups or individuals in Europe, with the Taliban's victory as an example.³² This is largely echoed by the police forces of EU member states, which were contacted for this study. After regime change in Afghanistan, there were expectations of a direct impact, which were not met. There were some communication intercepts that drew attention of law enforcement, however the flow decreased rapidly. This included communications between a mix of Afghan and other detainees who expressed support for the Taliban takeover.³³

Direct Taliban propaganda efforts aimed at Europe never materialised, and any known impact that Taliban material has had in Europe was through AQ distribution channels, which are not EU-specific.³⁴ Within the political Islam stream, specific groups have reacted, mostly by welcoming the Taliban's victory even in the absence of a "big wave of euphoria": Hizb-i-Islami and the non-Afghan branches of the Muslim Brothers, Hizb ut-Tahrir.³⁵ The one significant exception is of course Da'esh.

Much of what is seen on WhatsApp and Telegram channels is not strictly jihadist in content but could be described as contributing to creating an extremist, anti-authoritarian milieu in which the jihadist "fish" could easily swim. It features themes such as the justification of jihad in religious terms, relishing in the humiliation of the "imperialists", etc. There is also sympathy and justification of the Taliban's jihad without any reference to global jihad, but simply taking the Taliban's point of view.³⁶

It is worth noting that while in general Da'esh-AQ rivalry remains strong, it appeared to be decreasing, at least up to al-Zawahiri's killing in July 2022. The two core constituencies (the first generation of global jihadists, loyal to AQ, and the new generation mainly pro-Da'esh) remain well

³⁰ Interview with Laurence Bindner, Jihadoscope 08.08.22.

³¹ "European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2022 (TE-SAT)," EUROPOL, 2022, pg 5, 6, 34.
<https://www.europol.europa.eu/publication-events/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2022-te-sat>.

³² Interview with Europol ECTC Specialist, official, 7.09.2022.

³³ Interview with Italian official, Ministry of the Interior, 2.08.2022.

³⁴ Interview with Italian official, Ministry of the Interior, 2.08.2022.

³⁵ Interview with German official, Justice Department, 13.09.2022.

³⁶ Interview with researcher Liam Duffy, 28.07.22.

distinct.³⁷ However, especially in Europe loose sympathisers of the two groups did not appear very interested in intra-global jihadist diatribes – some Da’esh supporters were clearly sharing happiness about the Taliban takeover with AQ supporters.³⁸

2.2. THE IMPACT OF THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER AMONG AUDIENCES IN EUROPE

Afghan communities in Europe have, in recent years, had comparatively low levels of involvement in any type of political violence, whether planned or carried out.³⁹ In Italy, for example, jihadist activities are mostly detected within the Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian communities, with Afghans barely appearing. This was true of the pre-regime change landscape and remains true today. Over the past 10 years, there have been just 4 cases of Afghans being involved in any kind of violence (including planned violence) across Europe.⁴⁰ The main recent event involved two Afghans arrested in Sweden on terror related charges who were detained in April 2021, i.e. before the takeover.⁴¹ EU Member States (EUMS) subsequently intensified checks on arrivals from Afghanistan, fearing infiltration by terrorist organisations, however they did not identify any threats nor any sign of anti-Taliban dissidents being threatened by the Taliban.⁴²

According to sources in the Dutch Ministry of the Interior, no concern was proactively raised regarding jihadists narratives aimed at the diaspora, while consultations with representatives of Afghan diaspora communities on different topics have taken place.⁴³

In Italy, the police have not detected security-relevant commentary on the Taliban takeover in WhatsApp chats, Telegram, or TikTok. No evidence of fundraising linked to Afghanistan has been detected in Italy either.⁴³ In Belgium, Salafi and Islamist circles have expressed satisfaction for the change of regime, however the police are still assessing what this might mean in terms of potentially violent jihadist activities in Belgium.⁴⁴

A common view within European police forces is that Da’esh does not appear to have an organised presence in Europe, contrary to AQ, including in diaspora communities. Both organisations face a structural crisis in Europe. In terms of future risks, some communities are seen at greater potential risk. In Italy, for example, there are some fears concerning the Pakistani and Indian communities, however so far, no evidence of risk has emerged. The Pakistani community in Italy has indeed been figuring prominently in counter-terrorism activities, even after 15 August 2021. 14 Pakistanis were arrested in one of the largest CT raids ever in June 2022.⁴⁵ Neither this, nor other episodes, are seen as related to events in Afghanistan. One very minor exception is that of a Pakistani citizen detained for having praised the TTP, Bin Laden, Taliban and for having held jihadist material, praising martyrdom. This was deemed to be a case of self-radicalisation.⁴⁶ Despite the very limited links of jihadist activities to the Taliban takeover, the Pakistani community is also seen as potentially at risk for two separate reasons:

³⁷ Interview with German official, Justice Department, 13.09.2022.

³⁸ Interview with Arthur Bradley, Tech against Terrorism, 16.08.22.

³⁹ According to date kindly provided by Claudio Bertolotti, START InSight.

⁴⁰ Interview with Bertolotti, START InSight, 22.07.22.

⁴¹ REMIX Staff, “Sweden: Security Forces Arrest Two Afghan Migrants Suspected of Planning Terrorist Attack,” Remix News, 12 Apr 2021, <https://rmx.news/article/sweden-security-forces-arrest-two-afghan-migrants-suspected-of-planning-terrorist-attack/>.

⁴² Interview with Italian official, Ministry of the Interior, 2.08.2022.

⁴³ Interview with Italian official, Ministry of the Interior, 2.08.22.

⁴⁴ Interview with Belgian official, Ministry of Interior and Justice, 09.08.22.

⁴⁵ Redazione Cronache, “Arrestati 14 pakistani legati ad attentato a Charlie Hebdo del 2020,” Corriere della Sera, 7 Jun 2022, https://www.corriere.it/cronache/22_giugno_07/genova-arrestati-14-pakistani-legati-ad-attentato-charlie-hebdo-2020-32f6ca92-e640-11ec-864b-88ccbc1cac69.shtml.

⁴⁶ GI-Agenzia Italia, “Arrestato pakistano a Bari che inneggiava alla jihad sui social,” 29 Dec 2021, <https://www.agi.it/cronaca/news/2021-12-29/terrorismo-arrestato-pakistano-inneggiava-alla-jihad-15058924/>.

- The widespread narrative of ‘victory’ in Afghanistan within the community, which crosses over party and sectarian divides. Pakistan’s support for the Taliban is seen as having been key to defeating western powers, especially the US, and this is a matter of pride. In 2020, the Pakistani man who carried out an attack against the old office of Charlie Hebdo did not have a jihadist background and appears to have acted out of hurt national pride, as at that time, there was a lot of anger in Pakistan against France.
- The pre-existing presence of activists and networks of Pakistani Islamist, Salafi and possibly Deobandi⁴⁷ organisations in Europe.

As far as future risk goes, there is speculation that the Indian Muslim community in Italy (and presumably the rest of Europe too) might also be vulnerable as the context of Afghanistan evolves. It has been at the centre of considerable propaganda efforts by jihadist groups, due to recent religious tension in India. The Bangladeshi community in Italy is a special case and is not seen at high risk.⁴⁸ Vice versa, Arab communities are not seen as likely to be influenced by events in Afghanistan. The large Syrian communities are described as very Syro.⁴⁹

Despite much speculation by some analysts that Afghanistan could become a host of European foreign fighters again, episodes of European citizens travelling to Afghanistan for political reasons have been very few after 15 August and they have been limited to one or two cases in France, as far as data shows.⁵⁰ The most prominent case has been that of Omar Omsen (Omar Diaby), leader of a small French jihadist group known as Firqat ul Gharaba, linked to AQ, which was among the first groups to congratulate the Taliban for their takeover, at a time when the group was actively involved in recruiting volunteers for armed jihad on French ground. In the summer of 2022, a live event on Telegram featured Diaby after he was released by HTS in Idlib (Syria), where he stated that he wanted to travel to Afghanistan, but not immediately, because the country was “not ready”. He stated his intention to move to a country where Muslims are not “discriminated against”, although he also mentioned Indonesia as a possible alternative destination, alongside Afghanistan.⁵¹

The expectation is in fact that the more remote the takeover becomes, the less likely an impact.⁵²

Some observers argue that it is not currently a priority for Da’esh to carry out attacks in Europe, as it does not make sense tactically. Instead, Da’esh might prefer to focus on fundraising.⁵³

Given the dearth of developments directly related to security, the main measurable impact of regime change in Afghanistan have been the reactions by Muslim non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and Muslim community associations in Europe. The most notorious case has been that of Barakat City, the organisation of Idris Sandi, which has a relatively large following in France. The organisation was banned after congratulating the Taliban on their takeover, however that only made it more popular. It stopped short of supporting the idea of a jihad in Europe but used arguments such as ‘God is on the Taliban’s side’, stating ideological sympathy.⁵⁴

The chairman of the Muslim Brothers-linked "Deutsche Muslimische Gemeinschaft e.V." (DMG), Khallad Swaid, commented positively on Twitter on the international troop withdrawal, which he assessed as an opportunity for “peace, justice and prosperity”. While he stayed away from endorsing violence or jihadism as a principle, he also put the massive restrictions on women's rights

⁴⁷ Deobandism is a South-asia specific form of Islamic revivalism, influenced by Salafism.

⁴⁸ Interview with researcher Foschini, 29.07.22.

⁴⁹ Interview with researcher Borgonovo, ITSTIME, 28.07.22; Marone, 29.07.22.

⁵⁰ ‘EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT)’, Europol, 14 July 2022, 36.

⁵¹ Interview with Laurence Bindner, Jihadoscope, 08.08.22.

⁵² Interview with Italian official, Ministry of the Interior, 2.08.22.

⁵³ Interview with researcher Liam Duffy, 28.07.22.

⁵⁴ Interview with Laurence Bindner, Jihadoscope, 08.08.22.

into perspective by comparing the right to full-face veils with the secular principle in France.⁵⁵ In Spain, the spokesperson for the Muslims against Islamophobia association, Ibrahim Miguel Ángel Pérez, expressed happiness about the Taliban takeover and described it as the liberation of Afghanistan from American imperialism. He argued, however, that the Emirate was going to be a moderate regime and ready to compromise.⁵⁶

Individual sympathisers of jihadist groups, such as German convert @FalkBernhard (622 followers on Twitter), rejoiced at the Taliban's victory and continued to tweet in support, mainly presenting the Taliban as a sort of defeat of the imperialist West. In the case of associations, they stayed away from endorsing violence or jihadism, although they usually avoid discussing the links between the Emirate and AQ. The most popular Europe-based sympathisers of the Emirate on social media, have occasionally criticised the Emirate, for example on girls' education: @awsanzar (10,100 followers on Twitter); @Emran_Feroz (37,800 followers on Twitter); @Paktyaw4l (12,600 followers on Twitter).

None of this (Muslim Associations and individual sympathisers) amounts to anything resembling a direct security threat, but it is still relevant because it seems to indicate how extremist or ultra-conservative views are being expressed in public more easily following the Taliban takeover. This might signal the further undermining of EU values within sections of Muslim communities in Europe.

Given that WhatsApp chats are mostly not monitored due to reasons cited in section 2.1 on Europe-relevant jihadist narratives above, any picture of what is going on in this platform can only be partial. Evidence indicates that WhatsApp is used by extremists, including jihadists. Social media channels are used to cast the recruitment net wider among the public, and the responsive individuals are then contacted for proselytising. At the same time, many communities also deemed to be fertile recruitment ground by the jihadists are targeted by recruiters for infiltration. Networks of sympathisers use WhatsApp chats and similar to remain in contact and circulate material deemed to be just above the illegality threshold.⁵⁷

Undoubtedly, the fall of Kabul prompted a massive increase in IS-K propaganda aimed at countering the Taliban's and AQ's narrative of success. As many as thirty new outlets have been involved in this effort, in a decentralised effort that differs substantially from Da'esh efforts elsewhere, for example in Africa (which are instead completely centralised). For the first time, a significant portion of this propaganda was released in English. There might be multiple reasons for this, not all related to Europe. One possible reason that is, however, relevant for European security is the intent to stimulate recruitment in Europe, perhaps in order to replace the loss of many Da'esh media operators due to the police crackdown in recent years.⁵⁸

In terms of fundraising, current knowledge is that over the last 1-2 years, the police have seen grassroots efforts outwardly claiming to be in favour of Da'esh prisoners in Syrian camps and for detainees held on terrorism charges (online). Fundraising takes place through non-Da'esh specific Facebook and Twitter accounts, which have no violent content to avoid being shut down.⁵⁹ There

⁵⁵ "Verfassungsschutzbericht 2021" Verfassungsschutz Baden-Württemberg, 14 July 2022, https://im.baden-wuerttemberg.de/fileadmin/redaktion/m-im/intern/dateien/publikationen/Verfassungsschutzbericht_BaWu_2021_Web.pdf.

⁵⁶ Luis F. Quintero, "La asociación de Musulmanes contra la Islamofobia celebra la victoria talibán: 'Aman a su país'," Libertad Digital, 23 Aug 2021, <https://www.libertaddigital.com/internacional/mundo/2021-08-23/la-asociacion-musulmanes-contra-la-islamofobia-en-espana-celebran-jubilosos-la-victoria-taliban-6811534/>.

⁵⁷ Interview with researcher Ali Fischer, Human Cognition, 10.08.22 ; Interview with Europol ECTC Specialist, 7.09.2022.

⁵⁸ Interview with Europol ECTC Specialist, 7.09.2022.

⁵⁹ Interview with Belgian official, Ministry of Interior and Justice, 09.08.22; Interview with researcher Borgonovo, ITSTIME, 28.07.22; Richard Hall, "Isis Suspects Raise Thousands through Online Crowdfunding Campaign from Syria Camp," The Independent, 25 July 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-syria-camp-al-hol-paypal-telegram-online-crowdfunding-a9021006.html>; Interview with researcher Borgonovo, ITSTIME, 28.07.22; Richard Hall, "Isis Suspects Raise Thousands through

is even evidence of fundraising for IS-K in Europe now, at least online, confirmed by Taliban sources as well as the detention of an IS-K operative in Afghanistan, who had raised thousands of euros in Germany and Spain.⁶⁰

2.3. RIGHT-WING NARRATIVES IN EUROPE

What the Belgian authorities say of Belgium seems to apply across the EU: two streams of RWE reactions to regime change in Afghanistan have been detected. One centred around Islamophobia (all Muslims are ultimately like the Taliban and are therefore dangerous) and one centred around the inspiration that the Taliban's victory provides for anybody opposing liberal democracy and aspiring to violently overthrow it.⁶¹ The latter had a more lasting impact than the former.

As mentioned in section 1.3 about right-wing narratives above, the expected Afghan refugee influx was used to reinforce the RWE "great replacement" theory and idea that globalisation is a plot to perpetrate a "white genocide". Extreme right "news channels", both mainstream and fringe, gave voice to great replacement ideas during the Afghan takeover, helping to fuel ultra-nationalist anti-immigration narratives that act as foundational ideas for RWE and VRWE actors and groups. In France for instance, Breizh-Info, a far-right "news site" known for relaying propaganda and mis/disinformation, published "Immigration. Afghanistan to Afghans, Europe to Europeans!", in which great replacement ideas were grossly espoused:

"Not a single Afghan should cross the European border. Those who are here waiting for asylum must be expelled, like all the people who are on our territory and who have nothing to do with it; We no longer have time to feel sorry for the fate of others."⁶²

Also in France, Generation Identity, a French turned pan-European RWE (and deemed VRWE by the French government) movement, was famous throughout 2018-2021 for organising hostile anti-migrant policing groups across European borders. The group was banned in France in March 2021. Former members, however, remain prominent in the French far-right, for instance within the *Zouaves* group,⁶³ which was responsible for violence against pro-migrant and Afghan refugee activists during a rally for far-right presidential candidate, Éric Zemmour. They continue to promote great replacement and anti-migrant rhetoric using crises like Afghanistan.⁶⁴

In Germany in particular, following positive statements by some politicians ready to welcome the expected wave of arrivals, right wing extremists were particularly vocal, even raising the spectrum of 'civil war conditions' in Germany. In practice, due also to the failure of the 'wave' to materialise, no RWE/VRWE attacks against the Afghan diaspora were identified in Germany in the year following the Taliban takeover. After a few months, the 'Afghan wave' ceased to be a topic of commentary among the ranks of German far-right audiences and RWE individuals and groups.⁶⁵

The Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident (PEGIDA), a pan-European anti-Islam far-right movement from Germany, used the crisis to re-state their rejection of migrants and

Online Crowdfunding Campaign from Syria Camp," The Independent, 25 July 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-syria-camp-al-hol-paypal-telegram-online-crowdfunding-a9021006.html>; Interview with Europol ECTC Specialist, 7.09.2022.

⁶⁰ Personal communication with Borgonovo, ITSTIME, 29.9.22; video of the confession of an IS-K detainee, circulated by Taliban intelligence on 04.10.22 (https://twitter.com/khorasandiary/status/1577341083843010563?s=20&t=K2j0F33UqzYcO_cdGp_wiA).

⁶¹ Interview with Belgian official, Ministry of Interior and Justice, 09.08.22.

⁶² Dir, "Immigration. L'Afghanistan Aux Afghans, l'Europe Aux Européens!"

⁶³ A far right group with roots in older far right organisations such as Groupe Union Défense and Action Française.

⁶⁴ "French Identitarians Are Mobilising around the 2022 Presidential Elections," ISD, 17 Feb, 2022, https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/french-identitarians-are-mobilising-around-the-2022-presidential-elections/.

⁶⁵ Email-exchange with German official, German Federal Ministry of the Interior and for Community, 30.08.2022.

refugees in Germany and disdain towards the EU and Western politicians like Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron, while praising the wits of the Taliban and former-US President Trump.⁶⁶

The expected mass influx of Afghan refugees during the first year post-regime change have not met expectations (or fears) raised by headline-grabbing news reporting. In Italy, about 6,000 Afghans entered the country legally over 11 months. Thousands have also entered, or attempted to enter, as unregulated migrants. The exact figured of this flow cannot be known, given the unofficial method of migration, but the bulk of the 500,000 or so refugees that were, or are still, said to be on the move are stuck between Iran and Turkey.⁶⁷ The type of commentary discussed above therefore started petering out once it became clear that no massive wave of refugees was entering Europe, at least so far.

Conversely, as already mentioned, the stream of RWE reactions sympathising with the Taliban and with jihadism in general had a longer-term impact. Across the European spectrum, a number of ultra-nationalist, RWE, and neo-Nazi groups posted announcements following the Taliban's victory. There are echoes of *White Jihadism* in Europe, as there is a lot of sharing across continents, including for example praise for the Taliban from France because they used rudimentary weapons to defeat the US.⁶⁸ The Nordic Resistance Front (NRF), a pan-Nordic neo-Nazi movement spanning Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland, and Denmark, not only released a 2.5 hour podcast on the Taliban's victory, they also reshared the official statement of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (the Taliban) after the takeover of Kabul with the title "Nationalist Socialist Taliban".⁶⁹ The latter press release is captioned:

*"It took the Taliban less than two weeks to take back their country, after Globohomo⁷⁰ just spent 20 years and trillions of dollars to make it into a gay democracy, complete with soyfeed and OnlyFans. Unless this is yet another GayOp to be unveiled, this should be seen as a major white pill⁷¹."*⁷²

In France, the Vilains Fachos, a small neo-Nazi group which operates a racist, anti-LGBT and antisemitic Telegram channel with 10,000 subscribers before being



Image 4: Post from the Vilains Fachos on Telegram

⁶⁶ "Back to the Past: PEGIDA Saw It Coming, We Warned!," PEGIDA, 17 Aug 2021, <https://www.pegida.de/>.

⁶⁷ Interview with Bertolotti, START InSight, 22.07.22. According to the Italian Ministry of the Interior, in the first 10 months of 2022 there were 6,585. In 2021, Afghanistan did not rank among the significant countries of origins of irregular migrants.

⁶⁸ Laurence Bindner, 08.08.22; Boronovo, ITSTIME, 28.07.22.

⁶⁹ NORDIC FRONTIER #199: Leo Frank and the Taliban," NRM, 24 Aug 2021, <https://nordicresistancemovement.org/live-20-00-nordic-frontier-199-leo-frank-and-the-taliban/>; "NORDIC FRONTIER SPECIAL: National Socialist Taliban," NRM, 17 Aug 2021, <https://nordicresistancemovement.org/nordic-frontier-special-national-socialist-taliban/>.

⁷⁰ "Globohomo" is an anti-gay slang term for "globalists," a term conspiracy theorists use to describe their supposed enemy -- the evil global elite who control the media, finance, political system, and so on.

⁷¹ White pill is a far-right term referring to an optimistic view of their own worldview in the face of adversity. "Being whitepilled is believing whatever movement you belong to and feeling good about your role within it." See: "The Extremist Medicine Cabinet: A Guide to Online 'Pills'," ADL, 6 Nov 2019, <https://www.adl.org/blog/the-extremist-medicine-cabinet-a-guide-to-online-pills>.

⁷² "NORDIC FRONTIER SPECIAL: National Socialist Taliban," NRM.

banned in September 2022 and 1,800 after its relaunch, announced it was proud of recognising the Emirate and called the Taliban brothers and comrades (image 4).⁷³

Similarly, Alianza Nacional (NA), a far-right neo-Nazi party in Spain, announced that the “newly formed Government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has begun to rectify the measures of the Puppet Government imposed by the United States”⁷⁴, suggesting that the Taliban reversing, or in their words ‘rectifying’, Afghan governance was good. NA also stated that the EU “has become the ‘paradise’ – Hell would be more appropriate – of weak thinking; goodism, multiculturalism, gender ideology, pacifism, hedonism.”⁷⁵

Some RWE actors not only celebrated the Taliban victory, but claimed it was inspiring and that they needed to learn from/emulate the Taliban example. For instance, NA stated:

“The Afghans have taught us a lesson in love for the homeland, freedom and Religion. Twenty years of unrelenting struggle against the Occupying Armies of the United States and its British, Spanish and other Puppet States. In the end, with God's help, Victory awaits you.”⁷⁶

Sentiments of inspiration and encouragement were also seen on other platforms linked to known RWE activists and groups.⁷⁷ An RWE activist from the “Identitarian Movement” in Austria tweeted:

“The victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan means a crushing defeat for globalism. Drag queens, homoparades and human rights ideology have a break there. It's time that Europe liberated itself from its status as an American colony!”⁷⁸

On some neo-Nazi Telegram channels, users shared posts and images celebrating the Taliban and the need to take inspiration from their actions: “They were just some friends with a crazy dream of autonomy and freedom for their people. Freedom from the jew, and the autonomy to forge their own destiny. Hail the Guerilla Fighters. Hail Revolutionaries of Every Stripe.”⁷⁹ Such narratives were found on NRM Telegram channels, where members of the neo-Nazi group wrote in support of the Taliban:

“Sleep tight knowing that the Taliban will restore order in Afghanistan. Soon paedophiles will be raining from the rooftops.”⁸⁰

In Germany, an ex-Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) member, Dubravko Mandic, posted a meme on Instagram celebrating the Taliban and their shared aim to “revolt against the modern world” (image 5).

⁷³ Elodie Descamps, “Les Vilains Fachos’ Que Sait-on Du Groupe Néonazi Qui Appelle Au Meurtre de Jean-Luc Mélenchon?,” Gentside, 16 Nov 2021, https://www.gentside.com/societe/les-vilains-fachos-20-ce-que-lon-sait-du-groupe-neonazi-qui-appelle-au-meurtre-de-melenchon_art100771.html.

⁷⁴ “El Islam, Fiel a Sí Mismo,” Alianza Nacional, 18 Sept 2021, <https://alianzanacional.net/2021/09/18/el-islam-fiel-a-si-mismo/>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “Ofensiva Talibán,” Alianza Nacional, 9 Aug 2021, <https://alianzanacional.net/2021/08/09/ofensiva-taliban/>.

⁷⁷ Thilo Manemann, “Fluchtgrund Taliban: Wie Die AfD Das Thema Migration Wieder Aufzugreifen Versucht,” Belltower.News, 16 Aug 2021, <https://www.belltower.news/fluchtgrund-taliban-wie-die-afd-das-thema-migration-wieder-aufzugreifen-versucht-119937/>;

Jared Holt, “Far-Right Extremists in United States Applaud Taliban’s Takeover of Afghanistan,” DFRLab, 23 Aug 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/far-right-extremists-in-united-states-applaud-talibans-takeover-of-afghanistan-7b28ae7f0128>.

⁷⁸ Manemann, “Fluchtgrund Taliban: Wie Die AfD Das Thema Migration.”

⁷⁹ “Far Right Users Champion Taliban’s Advancements in Afghanistan,” SITE Intelligence, 12 Aug 2021, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/index.php?option=com_acymailing&ctrl=archive&task=view&mailid=33013&tmpl=component.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

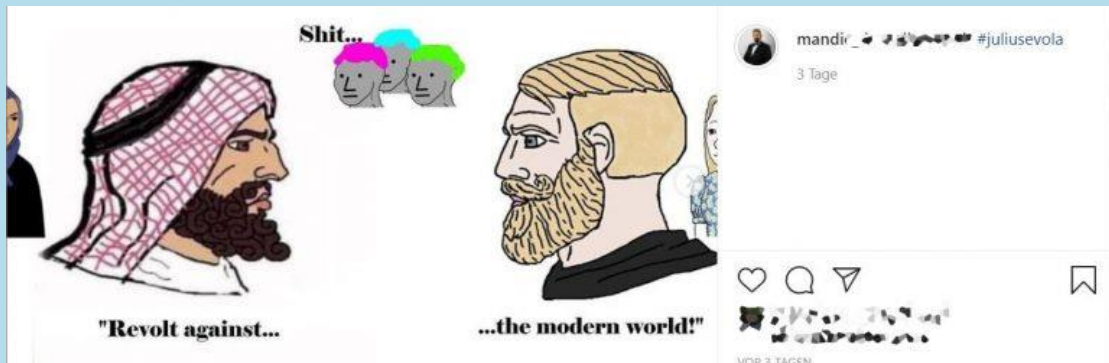


Image 5: Post from Dubravko Mandić's Twitter

In an interview in January 2022 with Simon Lindberg, the Swedish leader of NRM, he stated that the Taliban, and other radical Islamist extremist groups, share a common denominator with RWE/VRWEs: their opposition to Jews/Jewish interests. Lindberg states that “like me, Hezbollah, Hamas, the Taliban and others work to varying degrees against the Jewish power structure that controls most of the world today.”⁸¹ These narratives were prevalent in RWE propaganda after the Taliban takeover, and if nothing else, highlights growing convergence of ideas and enemies.

Although it was the Taliban takeover of 2021 that inspired a renewed attention towards jihadism within the ranks of RWE, the most persistent impact was made by the propaganda techniques displayed by AQ and Da’esh, as previously discussed in section 1.3 with regard to the US. The Taliban’s propaganda, focused on their claim to statehood (even before August 2021) and never offered a suitable template to RWEs. Even their reliance on websites and Twitter did not suit far-right admirers. This attraction to the propaganda style of AQ and Da’esh has been more than a short-term infatuation. One year after the fall of Kabul, there was still no sign of RWEs growing tired of the new propaganda techniques - quite the contrary. Intercepted RWE communications were still explicitly discussing sharing common enemies with jihadists and of the need to imitate AQ and Da’esh, and forming an army of influencers and learning how to “instil fear” in the enemy (image 6).⁸² The tagline “one struggle”, discussed in section 1.3 about the wider global right-wing narratives, was among others accompanied by European attempts to illustrate it graphically – for instance a Christian and Muslim standing side-by-side facing their “liberal enemy” (image 7),⁸³ and a German poster of a Nazi-Muslim alliance.⁸⁴

⁸¹ “Interview with Simon Lindberg – One of the World’s Most Dangerous Anti-Zionists,” NRM, 23 Jan 2022, <https://nordicresistancemovement.org/interview-with-simon-lindberg-one-of-the-worlds-most-dangerous-anti-zionists/>.

⁸² Interview with Europol ECTC Specialist, 7.09.2022.

⁸³ “Bronze Age Skull 🗿 McKinleyLs on Twitter: “fuck It One Struggle...”,” archive.ph, August 18, 2021, <https://archive.ph/hVTTE>.

⁸⁴ Moustafa Ayad, “Salafism and Alt-Right Online Subcultures,” ISD, Nov 2021, pg 36, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Islamogram.pdf>.



Image 6: Screenshot of Neo-Nazi Telegram Channel by SITE Intelligence



Image 7: Archived Figure Shared by RWE Sympathizers

Some RWE organisations find the AQ propaganda style more congenial – more intellectual, with extensive distribution of ideological content. Others, especially the more extreme ones, prefer the Da’esh style, focused on graphical information about operations.⁸⁵

Aside from the activities and propaganda traceable to organised RWE groups, there was some talk, at least in English, French and Italian among RWE individuals, praising the Taliban and the example that they set of what a small group of highly motivated men can accomplish and for their conservatism and resilience. Some groups even mentioned a partial overlap in ideology: hostility to feminism and women’s rights, prioritisation of the defence of the fatherland.⁸⁶

The expressions of sympathy for the Taliban from the ranks of RWE activists and groups were eventually wiped out by the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 as it monopolised more attention. Nonetheless, internal debates within RWE movements over propaganda techniques inspired by jihadism and the value of following the jihadists’ strategy have continued to be detected.⁸⁷

In reality, this convergence of RWE and jihadists is not particularly new or restricted to the Taliban; it was noticed before the fall of Kabul.⁸⁸ RWE actors were already looking with interest to radical Islam in the 1980s, after the Iranian revolution.⁸⁹ Neo-Nazi groups have increasingly taken pages out of jihadist groups’ playbook over the last decade. Feuerkrieg Division (FKD), a European neo-Nazi branch of Atomwaffen Division (AWD), posted a re-stylized screengrab from a famous Da’esh

⁸⁵ Interview with Europol ECTC Specialist, 7.09.2022.

⁸⁶ Interview with Laurence Bindner, Jihadoscope, 08.08.22; Interview with Italian official, Ministry of the Interior, 2.08.22.

⁸⁷ Interview with researcher Marone, 29.07.22; Interview with Belgian official, Ministry of Interior and Justice, 09.08.22.

⁸⁸ Julien Bellaiche, “Connecting the Fringes: Neo-Nazi Glorification of Salafi-Jihadi Representations Online,” GNET Research, 24 Aug 2021, <https://gnet-research.org/2021/08/24/connecting-the-fringes-neo-nazi-glorification-of-salafi-jihadi-representations-online/>.

⁸⁹ Marone, 29.07.22.

'how-to' video on homemade explosives in 2019 (image 8).⁹⁰ AWD members produced and promoted jihadist-inspired images, including some of Osama bin Laden. In a 2019 post titled "The Islamic Example", AWD explained that the "culture of martyrdom and insurgency within groups like the Taliban and ISIS is something to admire and reproduce in the neo-Nazi terror movement."⁹¹

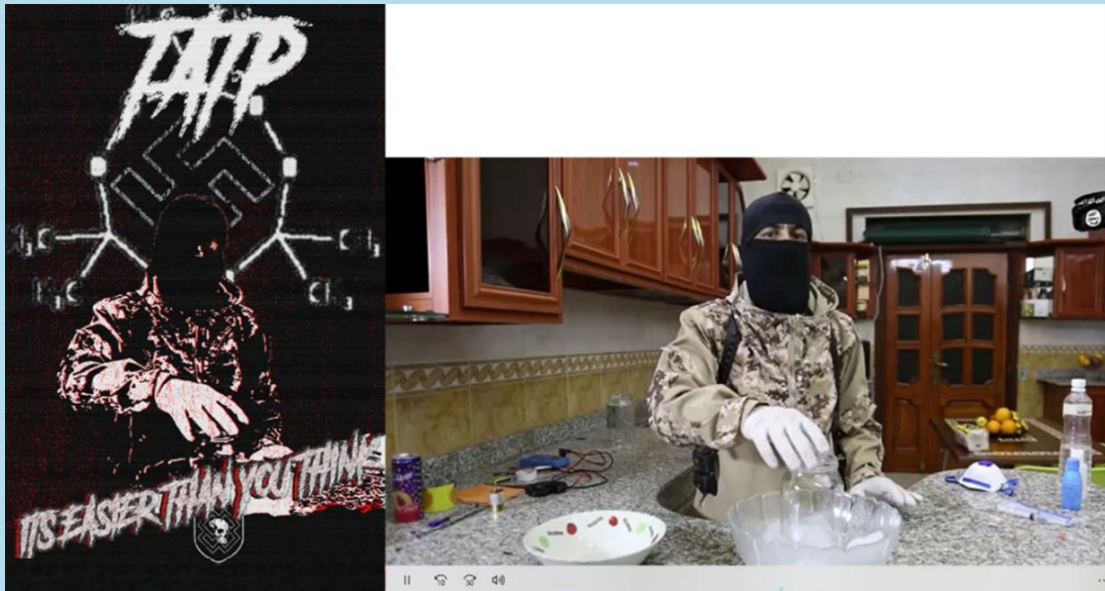


Image 8: Re-Stylized Screengrab of FKD Image Imitating Famous Da'esh Video From 2019

2.4. THE IMPACT OF RIGHT-WING NARRATIVES AMONG AUDIENCES IN EUROPE

In the year since the Taliban takeover, the observable impact is primarily to do with anti-Islam events and anti-migrant instances. It should be mentioned though that these events are not directly linked to, or a result of, the Taliban's takeover but rather influenced by radical right narratives generally and those correlating with the above-mentioned Afghan crisis. Although not a new trend, a growing number of "border patrol" civilian, militia, and state-led, anti-migrant vigilante far-right, RWE, and VRWE groups have emerged as a result of the Afghan crisis. For instance:

1. **Germany:** Late October 2021, Der III. Weg, an RWE neo-Nazi party, rallied civilian vigilante groups to the German-Polish border to forcibly prevent the crossing of refugees – the background to this was the mass Afghan migration fears.⁹²
 - a. Other RWE groups such as the Free Saxons, also joined the Der III. Weg border patrol efforts, as well as created their own border patrol groups.⁹³

⁹⁰ Ben Makuch and Mack Lamoureux, "Neo-Nazis Are Glorifying Osama Bin Laden," VICE News, 17 Sept 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/bjwv4a/neo-nazis-are-glorifying-osama-bin-laden>.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Kira Ayyadi, "Neonazis Wollen an Der Grenze „illegale Ausländer Aufspüren," Belltower.News, 20 Oct 2021, <https://www.belltower.news/guben-in-brandenburg-die-faschisten-vom-iii-weg-wollen-an-der-grenze-illegale-auslaender-aufspueren-122883/>.

⁹³ "Verfassungsschutz warnt: Rechtsextreme an polnischer Grenze," 28 Oct 2021, <https://www.zdf.de/uri/5039680b-b927-43c5-a1c8-e872a947578b>.

2. **Bulgaria:** Fuelled by great replacement conspiracy theories, RWE/VRWE vigilante and paramilitary groups have increased along Bulgaria's border with Turkey – including the Vasil Levski Military Union and Shipka Bulgarian National Movement, which have grown in numbers by exploiting fears of a new Afghan migrant crisis.⁹⁴
3. **Hungary:** The Hungarian government announced in late June 2022, new border hunter units with 2,200 staff, with a plan to add another 4,000 staff, to stop refugees crossing into Europe. This comes roughly 4 weeks after a violent incident along the Hungarian-Serbian border that left 3 dead and a dozen injured (though not at the hands of state forces, rather due to actions of the human-smuggler driving the car).⁹⁵
 - a. Two-time Olympic champion, Attila Vári, also announced assisting efforts to recruit and train border hunters; further normalizing anti-migrant narratives.

Demonstrations and riots have also taken place in a number of European countries:

4. **Greece:** In the month after the fall of Kabul, the rhetoric of the VRWE neo-Nazi Golden Dawn, largely disbanded in 2019, came into the limelight once more during a surge of anti-migrant and anti-Islam narratives. This was in large part due to the expected mass influx of Afghan refugees to Europe – this included RWE group riots with Nazi salutes.⁹⁶
5. **The Netherlands & Belgium:** Voorpost, an ultra-nationalist right-wing group in Flanders, Holland, and South Africa, regularly posts statements with anti-immigration, anti-Islam, and great replacement ideas, including after the Taliban takeover. The group organised rallies in September 2021 to protest the housing of Afghan asylum seekers in Wassenaar, South Holland, and Europe more generally.⁹⁷
6. **Sweden (& Denmark):** In mid-April 2022, right-wing actors and groups announced their plans of burning the Qur'an at public rallies during the month of Ramadan in multiple Swedish cities. The event was planned by Rasmus Paludan, leader of the Danish right-wing party Stram Kurs, as part of his anti-Islam and immigration campaign across Nordic countries.⁹⁸ This quickly escalated into violent riots including RWE/VRWE members setting police cars on fire and throwing Molotov cocktails, as well as other hard objects. The riots lasted more than 4 days and resulted in 20 destroyed police cars and more than 40 injured police and civilians.⁹⁹ Such violent anti-Islam riots were not a new incident solely sparked by the increased fears of Afghan refugees; similar riots and Qur'an incendiary incidents occurred in 2020 in Sweden and were also planned in other EUMS including Belgium and Denmark. These types of riots continue to gain traction among a growing number of civilians as Paludan and other RWE and VRWE actors continue to exploit crises like Afghanistan to spread xenophobic and racist rhetoric.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ Genka Shikerova, "Vigilante Keeps Hunting Migrants In Bulgaria And The Authorities Seem To Be Turning A Blind Eye," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 9 Dec 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-migrant-hunter-impunity/31601663.html>.

⁹⁵ "Hungarian Police Blame Fatal Car Crash on Migrant Smuggler," InfoMigrants, 8 Aug 2022, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/42453/hungarian-police-blame-fatal-car-crash-on-migrant-smuggler>.

⁹⁶ Nektaria Stamouli, "Street Brawls and Nazi Salutes: Greece Grapples with Far-Right Resurgence," POLITICO, 18 Oct 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/street-brawls-nazi-salutes-greece-grapples-with-far-right-resurgence/>.

⁹⁷ "Voorpost Voert Actie Bij Attractiepark Duinrell," Voorpost. 21 Sept 2021. <https://voorpost.org/voorpost-voert-actie-bij-attractiepark-duinrell/>.

⁹⁸ Bilal Osman, "Police Should Have Stopped Koran-Burning Demos after the First Day," *The Local Sweden*, 22 Apr 2022, <https://www.thelocal.se/20220422/police-should-have-stopped-koran-burning-demos-after-the-first-day/>.

⁹⁹ "Dozens Held after Protests over Planned Quran Burning in Sweden," Al Jazeera, 18 Apr 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/18/three-injured-in-sweden-during-protest-over-quran-burning>.

¹⁰⁰ "Sweden: Quran Burning, Anti-Islam Rallies Lead to Riots, Warnings From Arab Nations," Statecraft, 18 Apr 2022, <https://www.statecraft.co.in/article/sweden-quran-burning-anti-islam-rallies-lead-to-riots-warnings-from-arab-nations>.

Overall, the level of impact was modest and short lived, for the reasons discussed above. One should, of course, consider that there are still large numbers of Afghans trapped in Iran and Turkey and that a migratory flow cannot be ruled out in the future.

2.5. FAR-LEFT NARRATIVES

In comparison to the RWE spectrum, the reactions to the Taliban takeover have been very muted on the far left of the spectrum. In Italy, within the anarco-insurrectionist left, there has been some celebration of ‘the great enemy’ being defeated in Afghanistan.¹⁰¹ Overall, the impact on the far left has been negligible.

¹⁰¹ Interview with researcher and journalist Battiston, 27.7.22.

SECTION 3: THE POTENTIAL FOR DIRECT P/CVE INTERVENTIONS

3.1. REDIRECTION AND DISRUPTION VS. RECRUITMENT

As discussed in section 2, there has not been a significant direct impact from the Taliban takeover in Kabul on Europe’s jihadism. The Taliban have no interest in Europe and AQ has also made no effort to exploit the Taliban takeover narrative for its European activities – as far as it has been possible to verify. There is, of course, a wide area of jihadist activity - private chats on WhatsApp, Telegram, and other apps, which are hard to monitor. Community chats are vulnerable to jihadist infiltration and jihadist networks and sympathisers stay in touch via their own chats. Whether any specific impact from the Taliban takeover is visible there is not clear.¹⁰² As noted in section 2.2, non-violent extremists and ultra-conservatives within the various Muslim communities in Europe seem to feel emboldened when stating their views in public.

The know-how to infiltrate, disrupt and redirect jihadist recruitment efforts on social media and private chats exists, but due to the high-level of monitoring of social media activities in Europe, jihadist groups are especially careful. The November 2019 crackdown on Telegram accounts linked to jihadism and particularly to Da’esh had a short-to medium-term impact, but their members readapted and started using other communication channels. Due to a new regulation on the dissemination of terrorist content online, which entered into application on 7 June 2022, EU Member States can now send removal orders to hosting service providers on terrorist content they have identified. Hosting service providers are obliged to remove the content within one hour after the reception of the removal order. At the same time the Regulation has strong safeguards in place to protect fundamental freedoms, including through the requirement for robust complaint mechanisms, right to redress and obligations on transparency reporting on removals and specific measures. In addition, the Regulation exempts journalistic or educational content. Nonetheless, there are still some grey areas, as Meta’s terms of use for WhatsApp and Facebook, which discourage automated extraction of content by monitoring organisations.

The RWE’s fascination with the Taliban as such was short-lived, however the latter’s takeover has had at least one long-term impact: the tendency of RWE and VRWE groups to adopt the propaganda style and imagery of the jihadists, which had started even before the fall of Kabul, has been reinforced. The jihadists provided a ready template. RWE and VRWE’s see the style of the jihadists as well tailored to appeal to the angry youth it is targeting. An apt counter-narrative will have to take this into account and offer the angry youth something that fulfils their need for respect and empowerment. Appealing to moderation, rationality, open-mindedness, tolerance, and liberal values is not going to be effective.

Regardless of any future development, Taliban, AQ or Da’esh, RWE and VRWE groups have already learned useful lessons and have incorporated new techniques in their arsenal of propaganda resources. At least for groups that seem intent on moving towards actual terrorist activities, the next target is to create an “influencers’ army” large enough to enable spreading the message faster and wider through private channels, relatively protected from scrutiny. Rather than strategic communications specifically dealing with the Taliban takeover, what will be needed is intensified monitoring of online activity and a more attractive alternative narrative, capable of influencing the typical recruitment targets of RWEs. EUROPOL has already received extended powers to shut down channels used by extremists, but vis-à-vis RWE its activities are hampered by the reluctance of the

¹⁰² Interview with researcher Liam Duffy, 28.07.22.

authorities of member states to prescribe RWE groups (a precondition for targeting them online). A typical example is the group known as *The Base*, which is banned in the USA, but not in Europe.¹⁰³ It is probably also wise to consider the possibility that counter-narratives are already ‘too little, too late’ and have a track record of failure and that more substantial action might have to be undertaken, such as social programmes.

The current relatively quietist approach to Europe by jihadist groups (that is the low level of terrorist violence and lack of direct efforts to generate it) might well be due to a focus on fundraising, or on recruitment for mainly non-combat roles. It is worth bearing in mind that there have been convictions in the UK of people sending money to imprisoned Da’esh members.¹⁰⁴ Fundraising is a common feature of private social media channels, such as those organised around local mosques, and infiltration by extremists is possible, even if such infiltration is not (well) documented yet there is enough loose evidence to back such speculations. Some observers point to an increase in fundraising in the wake of the withdrawal from Afghanistan.¹⁰⁵

The extent to which this fundraising is successful is not clear, but it is worth considering whether a campaign addressing the hijacking of causes by crypto-Da’esh groups would yield sufficient benefits. A campaign of this type could potentially be run via community organisations.

3.2. FACE-TO-FACE TRAINING, MENTORING, AND COMMUNITY WORK

In the European context, a community-based approach appears more promising than one focused on counter-narratives, even if the obstacles should not be underestimated. There are now numerous consolidated Salafi communities around Europe, which appear keen to keep state influence away from their neighbourhoods. This potentially represents the first layer of a milieu community where jihadist groups could find it easier to shelter from scrutiny. Communities and groups influenced by the Muslim Brothers can also represent milieus of this type, hard to penetrate and / or collaborate with for the European states. In a sense, the attitude of some Muslim associations in the wake of the fall of Kabul is an indicator of this trend and of how the Taliban takeover reinforced it, further legitimising regimes and movements which are at odds with the values heralded by the EU. Friction between EUMS authorities and some of the Muslim community associations (specifically those linked to political Islam and to Salafism) over the latter’s support for social ultra-conservatism in regimes like the Taliban’s, makes collaboration between the two sides against violent jihadism even harder. The age-old question asked many times over, remains unanswered: is there a political and social space for collaborating against violence with non-violent ultra-conservatives and even non-violent extremists?¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Interview with Europol ECTC Specialist, 7.09.2022.

¹⁰⁴ Recent examples include: Crown Prosecution Service, ‘Sally Lane and John Letts sentenced for sending money to Daesh supporting son,’ nd, <https://www.cps.gov.uk/cps/news/sally-lane-and-john-letts-sentenced-sending-money-daesh-supporting-son>; Crown Prosecution Service, ‘Man from Bradford found guilty of terrorism offences,’ 1 Sept 2022, <https://www.cps.gov.uk/cps/news/man-bradford-found-guilty-terrorism-offences>; West Midlands Police, ‘Three Black Country men have today (Friday 9 September) been jailed,’ *Facebook/Meta*, 9 Sept 2016, https://m.facebook.com/westmidlandspolice/posts/three-black-country-men-have-today-friday-9-september-been-jailed-after-being-fo/10157364571110099/?locale=es_LA&_rdr; and, Lizzie Dearden, ‘ISIS member convicted for sending Bitcoin from UK to free terrorists from Syrian prisons,’ *The Independent*, 6 July 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/isis-uk-bitcoin-syria-prisons-chaudhary-b1879152.html>.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with researcher Liam Duffy, 28.07.22.

¹⁰⁶ See Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), <https://academic.oup.com/jcs/article-lookup/doi/10.1093/jcs/29.1.132>; Alex P Schmid, ‘Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?’, ICCT Research Paper, May 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.19165/2014.1.05>; Sarah Knight, Katie Woodward and Gary Lancaster, ‘Violent Versus Non-Violent Actors: An Empirical Study of Different Types of Extremism’, *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* (Vol. 4, No. 4, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1037/tam0000086>; Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, ‘The Edge of Violence: Towards Telling the Difference Between Violent and Non-Violent Radicalization’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* (Vol. 24, No. 1, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2011.594923>; Sara Orofino, ‘Extreme and Non-Violent? Exploring the Threat Posed by Non-Violent Extremists’, *European Eye on Radicalization*, 14 July 2020, <https://eeradicalization.com/extreme-and-non->

While it is therefore unclear what type of mentoring or community work could have a positive impact in these communities, research and investigation are going to be needed for identifying avenues of intervention.

The same strategy of routing strategic communications through communities is not really applicable when the target is the RWE spectrum. However, as hinted in section 3.1 directly above, social programmes aimed at “at-risk individuals” might be more appropriate, keeping in mind their likely profiles. Here too, specific programmes would have to be developed ad hoc.

[violent-exploring-the-threat-posed-by-non-violent-extremists/](#); Emman El-Badawy, ‘Evidence for the Relationship Between Extremist ‘Non-Violent’ Ideas and Violent Radicalisation’, in Anthony Richards (ed), *Jihadist Terror: New Threats, New Responses* (London: IB Tauris, 2019), pp. 53–66, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781788315579.ch-006>.

SECTION 4: THE POTENTIAL FOR INDIRECT P/CVE IMPACT THROUGH FOREIGN & AID POLICIES

An effective strategic communications approach, aimed at mitigating the impact of the Taliban's takeover, should be based on an understanding of what would look like success in the eyes of disgruntled audiences in Europe. What type of outcome in Afghanistan would have the strongest radicalising impact?

4.1. A VULNERABLE NARRATIVE OF EXCEPTIONALISM

Since there has so far been little direct impact from the fall of Kabul in terms of changes to the narratives of jihadist groups, strategic communications would be better framed in preventive terms. It would help normalise the rhetoric around the Emirate as a struggling new regime among many and take away any auras of exceptionalism since their takeover of Kabul. It should also be considered that the Taliban takeover might not be the last jihadist success that Europe will witness.

The impact of the Taliban takeover was not as dramatic as many purported it to be, partially because the Taliban are more interested in seeking legitimacy in Afghanistan than in furthering the cause of global jihad. Also because of a strong alternative narrative deployed by Da'esh, and in part because AQ itself has serious doubts about the Taliban's intent and wants to minimise the damage deriving from a likely future spat. AQ supporters have already criticised the Taliban's drive for legitimacy and regional integration, while the Taliban's Deobandi-style internal policies are seen as rather old fashioned by the AQ intelligentsia, which leans towards the more extreme tendencies of the Muslim Brotherhood.

EU member policies aimed at encouraging the Taliban's pursuit of international legitimacy have hit hurdles, in particular the inability of the Taliban to reach a consensus on girls' education, and in general, their ultraconservative internal policies. However, if ultimately successful, it might well be the best way to undermine any appeal Afghanistan might have among jihadists.

As regime change in Afghanistan loses its immediate resonance and fades into history, any risk of the Emirate becoming a model for extremist groups is likely to be linked to a possible radicalisation of the Emirate as a result of internal power struggles, for example. A radicalised Emirate, more appealing to Salafism, might find wider audiences even in Europe. AQ appears to have been betting on this, however they have been facing an uphill struggle. As mentioned above, AQ media houses have already shown a preference for propaganda from the Haqqani network, which highlights where their preferences lay.

It is possible, however, to conceive strategic communications policies that would undermine the Emirate as a model to follow, effectively normalising it as yet another post-conflict country facing massive social and economic problems. There is already awareness of the difficult conditions in Afghanistan within jihadist circles and so far, there has been little enthusiasm for moving there. Paradoxically, the media, by focusing on the exceptional features of the Emirate (women's rights, vice and virtue police...) could make it more appealing to radicalised individuals, whose instinct is to identify with outliers.

The isolation of the Emirate is seen by jihadist sympathisers as one of its virtues, not as a weakness. A puritan, pure, self-righteous state is the evolutionary line of the Emirate that they would prefer. To the extent that international engagement takes place, it is mostly hidden from public view. This plays into the narrative of isolationism and independence that some AQ-linked commentators keep

pushing. An effective strategic communications intervention would be to highlight how keen the Emirate is to engage and integrate into the global world order, and how small but steady progress is being made on that front. Stressing the dependency of the Emirate on humanitarian aid would also serve the strategic purpose of demythologising it, turning it into a ‘normal’ post-conflict country. Whilst a strong overarching narrative could be deployed via mainstream media, for the desired strategic effect of preventing radicalisation, useful interventions could also be worked out with Muslim community representatives in Europe.

The RWE and VRWE scenes have already long moved on from the fall of Kabul as such. They were never seriously bound to the Taliban’s success and their attitude towards it was opportunistic: one more episode to exploit for propaganda purposes. The genuine interest of the RWE and VRWE scenes lie in the propaganda techniques of AQ and Da’esh - the Taliban have little to teach to RWE and VRWE groups in this regard. This interest predates the fall of Kabul but has been strengthening after this date. The point is therefore not the narrative, but the style and technique. For this reason, a response is harder to fathom.

4.2. INFIGHTING AMONG JIHADIST GROUPS

Highlighting the divisions and the differences within the Emirate and among Emirate and foreign jihadists could be another useful strategic communications approach, undermining the myth of a unified “jihadist movement”. Criticism of the Emirate, as discussed above, is not unheard of even while scanning the best-known outlets of pro-AQ propaganda, so it would be relatively easy to drive this message home. The narrative that dominates in the Western media, which presents a black and white image of the Emirate as a coherent ‘evil state’ aligned with AQ, actually plays into the hands of AQ propagandists.

The media also downplays fighting between the Emirate and IS-K, tending to focus on IS-K’s attacks against civilians and minorities in isolation from its campaign against the Emirate. A counter-narrative highlighting the intensity of hatred and infighting among jihadist groups of different doctrinal and ideological orientation is likely to impact negatively on the image of jihadism as a whole. It is worth noting that AQ has always tried to avoid advertising its rivalry with Da’esh and in general, any dissent or friction with other jihadist groups, even at the price some of concessions to Da’esh, for example. Clearly, AQ’s leaders were of the view that intra-jihadist infighting was bad publicity and harmed the cause.

Similarly, while jihadist infighting might weaken the appeal of jihadism as a whole, highlighting the Emirate’s efforts to seek international legitimacy risks playing into the hands of Da’esh narratives. Exposing how Da’esh’s primary effort in Afghanistan is fighting a rival jihadist organisation would therefore nicely complement a strategy such as the one discussed in section 4.1 above. Undermining Da’esh’s claim to representing the only defender of Salafi communities could also help undermine its fundraising efforts in Europe.

CONCLUSION & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The very limited direct impact from the fall of Kabul on the narratives of jihadists and RWE and VRWE groups is clear, but it is also obvious that there has been an indirect impact that is worth considering.

The RWE and VRWE's concern with Afghanistan and the Taliban per se has been very short lived, but the lessons that they have drawn are not. The RWE and VRWE scene has been reconfirmed in its assessment that it has much to learn from the propaganda techniques of global jihadists, even if the link between the Taliban's victory and the global jihadist is rather tenuous. Some RWE and VRWE groups appear to have concluded that 'who dares, wins' and that being bold will intimidate their enemies, enabling an impact out of all proportion to their actual strength, especially when dealing with what they now perceive even more strongly to be weak and irresolute European governments.

While no-one among the jihadists has really tried to exploit the Taliban's victory for re-launching jihadism in Europe, the Khorasan branch of Da'esh has intensified its propaganda operations, including in English. This appears to be in reaction to its fear of Taliban rivals gaining the upper hand but might impact Europe as well, as it tries to boost its propaganda army among the various Muslim diasporas.

It is too early to say whether ultra-conservative Muslims and passive sympathisers of jihadism in Europe will feel encouraged to express their views more openly in the medium and long term as a result of the Taliban take-over. It seems unclear whether this will depend on how events evolve in Afghanistan and the fate of the Emirate: internal strife, Taliban infighting, friction between Taliban and AQ are all going to detract from the prestige of the regime, which never inspired high levels of open support. Should the Emirate consolidate, its very persistence to exist might encourage a more assertive posturing by ultra-conservative groups, even if there are already many models of ultra-conservative, illiberal states for Muslims to admire in the Arabian Peninsula.

There is no need for a P/CVE counter-narrative for audiences vulnerable to the call of jihadism, specifically targeted at filling the gap opened by the fall of Kabul, because the gap was small and might already be in the process of self-healing. This is especially likely to be the case if foreign and aid policies are expertly mixed to prevent the image of the Emirate from ever becoming a rallying point for Islamic radicals. Continued monitoring of jihadist propaganda on social media is required however, and any gaps in coverage, such as the one identified above concerning WhatsApp, should be filled. It should be kept in mind that, although for very specific reasons the fall of Kabul had a limited impact, there may well be other instances of jihadist movements coming to power in the future.

The Emirate's ultra-conservative policies will add little to the practices of countries such as Saudi Arabia - where it differs, it attracts little support - even sympathisers in Europe are critical of the closure of high schools for girls, for example. The more extreme elements are not likely to see the Emirate as a model attractive to them, because within the European context such elements are mostly Salafis or Salafi-leaning and / or attracted by the Islamic State. This could change only in the event of a radicalisation of the Emirate, with a more confrontational approach towards foreign governments and a closer cooperation with global jihadist groups. At the moment, the typical (mostly mild) admirers of the Emirate are socially conservative and tendentially illiberal Muslim, typically leaning towards the Muslim Brotherhood and sometimes towards Erdogan. This highlights the need to resolve the long-standing debate in Europe on the approach to be taken towards non-violent extremists - seek their cooperation or isolate them? While the issue has proven to be deeply divisive in the past, it needs to be addressed one way or another.

Existing P/CVE communication strategies should consider whether infighting and friction between Taliban and various jihadist groups should be used to show individuals at risk of radicalisation that jihadist movements do not lead to some kind of millenarian outcome, but merely to another change in elite in an unstable country. The very propaganda campaign of Da'esh vs. the Taliban lends itself to this argument: if even the Taliban, who fought for so long and sacrificed so many lives, are accused of trying to sell out... In this sense the fall of Kabul might end up offering more opportunities than risks, especially if the Taliban were to accelerate down the road of accommodation with other countries. Strategic communications highlighting the Taliban's requests for assistance and intra-jihadist violence and power struggles (not only in Afghanistan, but also in Syria, Nigeria, etc.) could easily be developed and deployed.

Since even RWE audiences were only temporarily attracted towards the clamour produced by the Afghan debacle, an ad-hoc counter-narrative makes little sense here too. RWE and VRWE propaganda has absorbed themes and techniques from jihadism and increasingly so during the year that followed the fall of Kabul, so what emerges is the issue of matching their propaganda techniques with increasingly effective counter-narrative techniques (as opposed to new, Afghan-specific content). Responding to their new techniques is in fact harder to do than in the case of jihadism. Having been appropriated by the RWE spectrum, they will remain in use even if the Taliban and other jihadists were to no longer be seen as some kind of 'models'. Preventing RWE and VRWE individuals and groups from deploying their propaganda far and wide will require speedier procedures for listing extremist organisations and greater capacity for countering day by day operations. Undermining the appeal of RWE and VRWE narratives and groups will likely require much more than strategic communications, such as social programmes based on the analysis of the root causes of their success in recruitment.

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