

# A View from the CT Foxhole: Ahmad Zia Saraj, Former General Director of the National Directorate of Security of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

By Paul Cruickshank

*Ahmad Zia Saraj served as the General Director of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan from September 2019 until August, 15, 2021. He is currently a visiting professor at the war studies department of the King's College London (KCL).*

*Under his leadership, the NDS arrested thousands of terrorists including key Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) operatives such as the group's leader Aslam Farooqi; Sheikh Omar Kunari, chief of ISKP regional cells; and Abu Jawad, chief of the group's media wing. The elimination of key al-Qa`ida figures such as Abu Assem Omar, chief of al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS); Sheikh Mohsen al-Masri, al-Qa`ida's top planner; Qari Hanif, the deputy leader of AQIS; and Mustafa al-Tajiki also occurred through the operations conducted by the NDS special forces during his tenure.*

*Saraj served as the Deputy Director General for operations at the NDS from March 2019 to September 2019 where he supervised all operations across the country against terrorist cells, oversaw counterintelligence operations, and countered organized crime. Prior to heading the NDS, he served in the organization as Chief Director of the CT department, deputy Director for Counterintelligence and Foreign intelligence, and the chief of the foreign relations department.*

**CTC: You served as the head of Afghan intelligence during a tumultuous period of Afghan history that resulted in the Taliban taking back control of Kabul in the mid-August 2021. What are your reflections about this period?**

**Saraj:** I was involved in intelligence in Afghanistan for 20 years, in different roles, but I was involved mainly with the issue of CT, either directly or indirectly. Later on in my career, very directly; earlier, as an officer of signals intelligence during which time I was collecting information that enabled us to carry out some operations to eliminate the targets or to stop some terror attacks.

Overall, when I look back to all those years—and we worked day and night, because that was the nature of my work—I feel very proud about it because we were working towards preventing loss of life and we were working for a good cause. And this cause did not end with the collapse of Afghanistan. As an individual, in any capacity that I can, I will continue my struggle against these groups.

You asked about the period that preceded the Taliban takeover. First of all, it was a very difficult time, of course. We could see a nation, the ship of a nation sinking, with all its hopes and dreams that had been made for the people in the last 20 years of golden

times. We had, for the first time, people experiencing democracy, freedom of speech, and all the liberties that one can think of for the very first time in the history of that country. We could see that ship sinking, but unfortunately, we did not have the tools to save it or we had run out of the options to save it.

We had a one-sided Doha Agreement<sup>1</sup> where the U.S. fulfilled all the pledges that was mentioned in that agreement, while the other party, the Taliban, fulfilled *none* of the agreements, including reducing violence and cutting their ties with the international terrorist groups. We also were witnessing a congregation of highly motivated and highly inspired terrorist groups because the withdrawal of the U.S. and of the other foreign troops had given a chance for all these people to gather together and put their hands together and eradicate everything, including the Republic government, to make sure that they could then use—after the withdrawal of U.S. forces—Afghanistan as a base. We also had determined regional powers including Russia, Iran, China, and Pakistan that just wanted to see a U.S. withdrawal, perceived the presence of the U.S. and coalition forces as a threat to their national security. Furthermore, there was the release in 2020 of 5,000 Taliban prisoners,<sup>2</sup> which was something that when I think about all those difficult days, made things harder.

**CTC: In your assessment, what were the main drivers of violent extremism within Afghanistan during the period when you were working on these issues in the country?**

**Saraj:** The presence of the U.S. and the coalition forces by itself was like a magnet that had invited or pulled in a lot of terrorist groups who are just searching for a place to go and to waste their energy for this cause of fighting against the foreigners. Because there are people that have different motivations in different parts of the world. And this presence of the coalition forces had given them the chance to come and join in this battle. And then, it was fueled or made stronger by the presence of the madrasas, that are producing more than enough fighters that they could very easily replace the losses that they had in the battlefield. Even if you look only in Pakistan, there are around between two and a half million to three million people in those madrasas. The problem is that many youngsters in these madrasas are being indoctrinated into an extremist version of the religion. Even if we assume that's just 10 or 20 percent of those in the madrasas, we're talking about 300,000 to 600,000 people, which by itself is a big, big problem not only for Afghanistan. We will, sooner or later, also see this creating problems for the rest of the world. Most of the participants are taught a unique/extremist version of the religion which is, in most cases, very contrary to the true values of Islam.

**CTC:** What for you are the lessons learned for the international community from all those years of counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan?

**Saraj:** The first important thing that was a lesson for everybody is that the armies that countries have are mainly designed for conventional fights, and terrorism by itself is a totally different kind of threat. These armies either were not very well trained for that or it was a very new phenomenon to them. While the military doctrines of most of the countries engaged in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) had given all necessary guidelines on how to deal with enemies in a conventional way, there was not enough focus on asymmetric fights. Many countries had to update their doctrines as they were learning from ground realities in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. So, a lot of lessons were learned in that direction. And for these armies, it was a big lesson that with countering terrorism, you need to have a lot of other skills and a different kind of unique force.

There are issues that you need to be very careful about. The terrorist adversaries are hiding among the people. And when any kind of operation happens, even if there is no collateral damage or civilian casualties, the first thing that comes out is disinformation. And this is also multiplied by the fact that the psychological operations or the propaganda of war was also happening. The terrorists, of course, they lose nothing because they don't care about the people. They don't care about the civilian casualties. They don't care about anything. So, in fact, you see that it's a fight against a group who has no law, does not care about anything, does not care about the human life. On the other hand, the armies have to respect everything: international law, humanitarian law, and so on. So, all these things restrict the armies more and more with their operations, while the terrorists have freedom to do anything they want.

Also, the shelter the terrorists got, for example, in a country like Pakistan made it even more difficult to fight against terrorism. In these kinds of fights, one of the biggest lessons is to have patience. If you don't have patience, then it makes it very difficult to prevail. The fight in Afghanistan was like cutting the branches of a tree. The root was in Pakistan while the coalition forces and the Afghan security forces were only cutting the branches. Since the root was intact, the branches would be cut and then the next year the root would produce more branches. This was a big test of patience of international troops in a war of attrition. Despite all evidence about the roots of the problem, no country was willing to cross the border and deal with the roots, simply because no one wanted to enter a war with a nuclear-armed state.

**CTC:** What did the United States and its allies get right in their approach to Afghanistan in the decades after 9/11? What did they get wrong?

**Saraj:** I would say that there were a lot of battles that were won. There were a lot of very effective operations; a lot of very bad people, including Usama bin Ladin and thousands of other very bad people, were eliminated. And in all these years that the coalition forces were involved, they didn't have any failure in a battle. The battles were always won, but it was the war or the big strategy that then the coalition forces lost, along with the Afghan government. I think one of the biggest problems that existed was that the United States and coalition forces selected Pakistan as a partner. Pakistan was

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totally against the mission, so partnering up with a country that was constantly stabbing the coalition forces from behind was one of the biggest mistakes that led us to this situation that we are now in.

**CTC:** Under the terms of the Doha Agreement, the Taliban promised to prevent al-Qa`ida or other terror groups from using Afghan soil to threaten the United States and not to cooperate with such groups.<sup>3</sup> Al-Qa`ida itself has pledged that it will not use Afghanistan to launch international terror attacks.<sup>4</sup> However, according to U.N. monitors, al-Qa`ida “has established up to eight new training camps” in Afghanistan and can draw on 400 fighters there.<sup>5</sup> What is your assessment of the continued links between the Taliban and al-Qa`ida and the potential that al-Qa`ida could once again launch international terror from Afghanistan?

**Saraj:** As I said earlier, first of all, there was no part of the Doha Agreement that the Taliban fulfilled, and they didn't act in good faith on any of it. It was only the United States that agreed to everything. Al-Qa`ida has stated it will not use Afghanistan as a launchpad for future operations against the West. But the problem is that Afghanistan could be used by them in the future as a command and control center, with the actual launching of an operation being from a place such as Yemen or Somalia. Al-Qa`ida are now in a position to make Afghanistan their command and control center. It's a safe haven that they can do their planning without any worries about the U.S. or its allies' targeting them. And al-Qa`ida and other groups now have the potential to grow in Afghanistan.

When it comes to the links between al-Qa`ida and the Taliban, first of all, there are already al-Qa`ida people playing the role of advisors in different ministries of Taliban. They have already been issued Afghan passports, and they have been given Afghan nationality, and they operate in different ministries, especially the security ministries as advisors, influencing the Taliban's future direction. Secondly, a large number of leading Taliban figures are more al-Qa`ida than the Taliban. For example, Qari Baryal who is now the governor of Kapisa Province has a greater allegiance to al-Qa`ida than to the Taliban.<sup>6</sup> Maulawi Noor Jalal, who is the deputy interior minister, is more al-Qa`ida than Talib. Furthermore, the governor of Panjshir, Abdul Hakim, his connection with al-Qa`ida is more than to anything else. Taj Mir Jawad, the first deputy of the Taliban intelligence chief, is more al-Qa`ida than being a Talib. And this list goes on and on and on. So this shows just how deep the connections between al-Qa`ida and the Taliban are.

The other area that one needs to explore is the investment of



*Ahmad Saraj*

al-Qa`ida within other terrorist groups, especially after Usama bin Ladin was killed; for the preservation of the leadership of al-Qa`ida, they invested in other terrorist groups like ETIM, like TTP, like IMU. A lot of these groups operate under the guidance of al-Qa`ida. So, that connection has also become deeper and deeper, which if you put all the dots together, the picture is that definitely al-Qa`ida has become stronger since the Taliban takeover. Al-Qa`ida poses more of a threat.

I also want to emphasize the deep roots that al-Qa`ida has built over the years in the tribal areas of Pakistan, in parts of Afghanistan, and also the presence that they have in Iran. Their presence in these areas puts them in a strong position to grow, especially as Afghanistan, again under the control of the Taliban, is now in the center. And al-Qa`ida has been very busy giving vision to all of these terrorist groups, including the Taliban, and, of course, Taliban is the host for everybody else. Al-Qa`ida has also separately built up a strong relationship with organized crime groups operating in the borders between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. There are common areas such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, weapons smuggling, and other types of illegal lucrative business which offers benefit for both parties. So, if you put all these dots together, that definitely gives the picture that the threat is growing. The leader of Taliban in one of his recent speeches<sup>7</sup> summarized what I said. He said that the 'conquest of Kabul is just the beginning, not the end, of a long mission.' This is exactly the mentality of all terrorist groups, led by al-Qa`ida echoed by the Taliban leader.

This brings us to the question of where al-Qa`ida might attack next. I don't think al-Qa`ida will for a while conduct any attack like 9/11 because they are in a triumphant mood in the wake of the U.S. pull out from Afghanistan. With higher morale and bigger goals, they think that it's time for the U.S. to end its presence in the Middle East. So, my assessment is that al-Qa`ida will prioritize next on the Middle East. They will try to create problems for the U.S. and its

allies to push them to leave the region. I think this will likely be their focus before they again contemplate bigger attacks inside the U.S., U.K., and other parts of the West. This is an area that the interests of some of the regional powers align with the terrorist groups.

**CTC: There is growing concern about the international terrorism threat posed by Islamic State Khorasan group (ISK or ISKP) in the wake of the terrorist attacks perpetrated by the group in Russia in March 2024 and Iran in January 2024, which combined killed almost 250 people.<sup>8</sup> There have been more than 20 external operations plots/attacks in the past year and a half by ISK, including significant plotting activity in Europe ahead of the Paris Olympics.<sup>9</sup> What is your assessment of the international terror threat posed by ISK?**

**Saraj:** Contrary to the other parts of the world where the tensions between the West and Eastern powers grow on a daily basis, the U.S., U.K., China, Russia, and Iran have all been helping the Taliban try to confront ISKP. Some like the U.K. and U.S. have provided intelligence about the ISKP fighters and operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere.<sup>a</sup> Other countries like Iran have already sent advisors to work alongside the Taliban in their fight against ISKP. But despite all these assets, advice, and experience that the Taliban have received from all these very important players, they have not been able to fight effectively against ISKP.

Of course, the Taliban claim that there is no presence of ISKP in Afghanistan and claim that they have subdued and killed most of them. But the reality is none of the important leaders that we knew of have been either arrested or killed. They are alive, and if you see the activities of ISKP, it gives you a different picture. First of all, they shifted their focus from inside of Afghanistan more towards outside. They have a regional network in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, Maldives, Bangladesh, India, and Central Asia, and the leader of the regional network is Salahuddin.<sup>b</sup> Salahuddin and Shahab al-Muhajir are very close friends because during the Republic days, both of them were the people responsible for carrying out attacks in Kabul. So they know each other very well, and Salahuddin has now taken over the regional cells. They are consolidating their position. They are trying to carry out more attacks like they did in Moscow and Iran, and they have that capability to create more external attacks, whereas in Afghanistan they have limited their attacks. But the *quality* of the attacks they have carried out in Afghanistan has been quite significant because they eliminated some of the key members of the Taliban in those attacks. Some point to the

a Editor's Note: *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius reported in September 2023, citing a senior administration official, that the CIA shares counterterrorism information with the Taliban but not targeting data or "actionable intelligence." David Ignatius, "In Afghanistan, the Taliban has all but extinguished al-Qaeda," *Washington Post*, September 14, 2023.

b Editor's Note: Mawlawi Rajab Salahuddin (alias Mawlawi Hanas) operated in Afghanistan as the deputy to ISK leader Shahab al-Muhajir. See Amira Jadoon with Andrew Mines, *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2023).

number of the attacks being reduced,<sup>c</sup> but the quality of the attacks has increased.

ISKP has increased recruitment. The recruitment process is very fast. The Taliban released 4,000 of them from prison after the collapse of the Republic. ISKP is increasingly now recruiting from different parts of the world. They pass messages to their followers that Afghanistan is a way more safe and better place than Syria and Iraq and other places, and invite them to come to Afghanistan, exactly the way al-Qa`ida invites followers from different parts of the world to come to Afghanistan for various reason including training, as it is very safe to regroup and grow there. So that process is going on. ISKP has also infiltrated Taliban ranks, especially in the ministries of defense, interior, and intelligence; they have deep infiltrations. Whenever the Taliban tries to do anything, ISKP becomes aware of it. So overall, ISKP has shifted its policies. They are busy regrouping, and their focus nowadays is more on targets outside of Afghanistan. Along with other reasons, one of the main factors in focusing outside is that the publicity the attacks get outside of Afghanistan, they do not get inside Afghanistan. It must be noted that the shift of focus does not mean they have forgotten Afghanistan. The presence of the group is felt in certain areas of Kunar, Nooristan, and Nangarhar provinces. The movement of Taliban is more restricted in those areas and Taliban stationary posts are frequently attacked, but in the absence of a free journalism, the incidents rarely reach public domains.

**CTC: Zeroing in on the capability and commitment of the Taliban to counter ISKP in Afghanistan, do they have the capability? Do they have the commitment?**

**Saraj:** I think they have neither the capability nor the commitment. First of all, when it comes to the commitment, there was already a lot of cooperation between ISKP and the Taliban in the past, and there is still a kind of relationship between some ISKP fighters with the intelligence of Taliban. So that's number one, which relates to the intention. On the capability, as I said, they have already received a lot of assistance from the U.S., U.K., China, Russia, and Iran, but they have not been able to arrest the top leaders. They have not been able to stop, for example, the attacks that ISKP did against Iran, Russia, and other places. So, that speaks to them not having the capability to sufficiently counter the group.

**CTC: During your time in leadership roles in Afghan intelligence, you oversaw the interrogation of many ISKP members. What did you learn about the group that is important for the international counterterrorism community to know?**

**Saraj:** First of all, there is a high level of commitment from these people. Even during interrogations, it was very clear that they had significant commitment to the group and commitment to the cause. They had an interesting code of conduct, a book that current ISKP emir, Shahab al-Muhajir, had written, and it was distributed



*Ahmad Zia Saraj speaks to Afghan military officials in Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan, in early 2021.*

among all their fighters. It gave lots of directions. For example, what should you do during an operation? What should you do after the operation? If you're arrested and if you're interrogated, how should you act?

The other thing that was very clear from those leaders was that the decision making that they had was very decentralized. The leader himself would not affect the group that much. Even if you were arrested, the rest of the group would still carry on and do the operation. The main decisions were made by a shura of six people consisting of the most important leaders. Therefore, whenever a leader was killed or arrested in the past, the circle would continue making decisions and continue its mission. The urban groups or the groups busy with terrorist operations were intentionally divided into cells of three to five operatives, and each cell only had knowledge of their cell. Therefore, the arrest of one person would only result in the arrest of two or three more accomplices while the rest of the cells would remain intact. But overall, I would emphasize the high level of commitment, and they also had a high level of secrecy between the cells. Those were the things that I remember from all the interrogations and the debriefings that we had with these people.

**CTC: Several ISKP attacks and plots, including the March 22 Moscow Crocus City Hall concert attack and a 2020 plot to attack U.S. and NATO bases in Germany,<sup>10</sup> have involved Tajiks, including individuals in the diaspora community. There is concern in the intelligence community that ISKP could use this Central Asian diaspora to mount attacks in Europe or the United States.<sup>11</sup> What is your assessment of the connections between ISKP terrorism and extremism among Central Asians?**

**Saraj:** What we had witnessed and what we had seen is they had managed to recruit people from different parts of the world. At one time, we had like 15 nationalities in our detention facility, and they were all recruited in different parts of the world. One of the things that made it very easy for them was using Telegram to recruit people in any part of the world. When it comes to the Central Asian countries, it's not only the Tajiks, but there are also plenty of fighters

<sup>c</sup> Editor's Note: In September 2023, Aaron Zelin assessed that due in part to Taliban operations against it, ISKP "has actually grown weaker in Afghanistan during the Taliban's second year in power—while paradoxically expanding its external operations capacity." Aaron Y. Zelin, "ISKP Goes Global: External Operations from Afghanistan," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 11, 2023.

that they have recruited from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and there were a few from Kazakhstan.

So, they have a pretty wide base of people that they have recruited, and of course, the Tajiks were among them. This gives them the opportunity to target anywhere in the world, but it's not only the nationalities that play that part. It's the usage of technology: the way they use it, the way they communicate with the people, and the way they educate those people through those encrypted apps. That makes it more and more difficult for countries to tackle the problem effectively because geography, distance, and borders do not matter any longer. The phone in the pocket of the person who has been indoctrinated is a training center. It's an education center. They can be educated how to build suicide vests. They can be educated how to target some areas. So overall, when you take all these issues into account, the world is less safe today than it used to be. The fact is that terrorist groups are becoming more and more sophisticated, and it's not the kind of terrorism that existed before in the 1990s or before 2000. It's a totally different level of terrorism; it's very sophisticated.

**CTC: Just how big a threat is ISKP? How worried do we have to be in the West as we approach Euro 2024 in Germany and the Paris Olympics, with the group having cells with connectivity into extremist circles in Europe? How big of a problem is this?**

**Saraj:** Of course, the terrorist threat is not just from ISKP but other groups, too. We need to be worried about all of them because they all use the same kind of tactic, and the flow of information and expertise between them is so fast. We've seen a lot of fighters starting from one group, then move to another group and then another. This process has happened a lot. Experience or information in one group does not remain in that group; it's shared with the others. That's why we should be worried about all of them.

Especially when it comes to ISKP, the worry is that one of the tactics they use is to encourage individuals to attack, and that individual can be anyone in any part of any country. Using end-end-encryption, ISKP can recruit, exchange information swiftly, plan, and execute attacks. It has meant that terror attacks have not needed the logistics of old. Now an ISKP terrorist in Afghanistan can recruit a member who is living in, say, Sweden and fund him using cryptocurrency. Because he's only busy with his phone and he's only using those apps, it can be very hard for the security services to detect that individual because that person may seem like a quite normal person. He may not appear to have any suspicious activities and so on, unless he is tracked through his telephone and his telephone is taken.

Another tactic that ISKP had used in Afghanistan and can be used anywhere is groups of three people, very small groups. These can create problems in any part of the world. The usage of a small group severely challenges the human source ability to collect intelligence before an operation is carried out, and the way the terrorist takes advantage of apps with high level of encryption makes things even more challenging for all relevant departments who have a responsibility to save innocent lives.

Encrypted messaging apps have helped terrorists speed up operations, enhance operational security, save time, save travel costs, and to plan and execute and even monitor attacks in real time. The NDS noticed that a newly recruited fighter does not need to physically attend a training camp to learn how to construct a

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bomb or how to target the enemy. All this can be done via a smart phone with less risk of exposure. Advancing technology has made it possible for someone to be trained in terrorist tactics in any part of the world, regardless of borders or travel restrictions. A terrorist in Afghanistan or Iraq can easily train another one in any part of the world.

The approach that ISKP has is that they target very soft targets. Again, this makes it extremely hard for the security services and law enforcement agencies to prevent attacks. So, to protect the Paris Olympics will require a lot of coordination, a lot of effort to make it safe for the people to attend and enjoy the Games.

**CTC: As we look at the big picture, FBI Director Christopher Wray testified in April 2024 that “we’ve seen the threat from foreign terrorists rise to a whole other level after October 7.”<sup>12</sup> What is your assessment of the potential for the war in Gaza to reinvigorate the global jihadi movement?**

**Saraj:** The starting point for this reinvigoration was the withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan. It inspired the groups so much that they are now in that level of confidence that they think they can do anything and nothing can stop them. So, it's started from that and the attack by Hamas also made it even stronger.

In Afghanistan, they now have a safe haven for their planning, management, and command and control. That gives them the chance to plan for anything. The more we go into the future, the more dangerous it gets because now they have territories like Afghanistan, they have thousands of madrassas where the only thing they teach is an extremist invented version of a religion. This is a distorted interpretation of religion that is not reflective of the real values of this religion and the values that over 99 percent of Muslims around the world learn and practice. In Afghanistan, al-Qa`ida's allies, the Taliban, now control the economy. Global jihadi groups now have the chance to regroup, make themselves stronger, compensate for the losses that they had over the last 20 years, and be ready for the next onslaught.

**CTC: Pakistan sees the TTP, also known as the Pakistani Taliban, as a significant national security threat. The arrival in power in Kabul of the TTP's allies has provided the group with a degree of strategic depth. What is your assessment of the evolving relationship between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban and its impact on the relationship between Islamabad and Kabul?**

**Saraj:** Undoubtedly, the TTP-Taliban nexus is one of the main factors that caused the strategic rift between Pakistan and the Taliban. Pakistan expected the Taliban to hand over the TTP leaders to Pakistan after the collapse of the Islamic Republic in Afghanistan,

but they had seriously underestimated this relationship by ignoring the following factors. Firstly, the Taliban can never betray a group that harbored the Afghan Taliban in very difficult times. The TTP not only helped the Afghan Taliban by hosting them in FATA and other areas but also sent thousands of fighters in Afghanistan to fight alongside the Taliban against the coalition forces as well as the Afghan government. Moreover, the tribal connections play a significant role as a hurdle to the Taliban handing over these fighters to what the Taliban regard as the Punjab-dominated government in Islamabad.

In addition, the Taliban leaders can't justify such an act to the other terrorist groups such as al-Qa`ida who have deep connections with the TTP because al-Qa`ida and these groups believe that the TTP has a right to pursue jihad in Pakistan, as the Taliban did in Afghanistan with the support of all these groups.

Even if the top Taliban leaders theoretically intended to arrest and hand over or create hurdles for the activities of the TTP in Afghanistan, they would not be able to do so because of the bonds—both ideological and tribal—between the TTP and the Taliban group commanders. So, the tribal connections, the affiliation of the TTP with other active terrorist groups in the region as well as ideological bonds have put the TTP in a position that the Taliban can't use force against them. In other words, the Afghan Taliban neither have the will nor the capability to meet the expectations of the Pakistan government.

**CTC: Global jihadis felt in the summer of 2021 that they had defeated a second superpower in Afghanistan, and they feel they can exploit anger over the war in Gaza for recruitment. This does not bode well for the threat picture, but, in recent years, counterterrorism has slipped down the list of priorities in the United States and other Western countries. Is enough attention being put into counterterrorism efforts around the world today?**

**Saraj:** We know that counterterrorism is no longer the priority of the Western countries, but the important question is, how about the terrorists? Have they also dropped the Western countries from *their* priority list? Or do they still think the West, or the U.S., is enemy number one?

In my assessment, the terrorists are pursuing a phased strategy. Phase number one is consolidation in territories like Afghanistan and the other areas that the U.S. left. They seek to fill the gap. And to push the U.S. to leave the Middle East. With this, there is an alignment of interest and an alignment of strategy between terrorist groups such as al-Qa`ida and certain regional powers such as Iran, because they also want the same thing: to see the U.S. leave the Middle East. So that's why there is a kind of synergy between certain regional superpowers and certain terrorist groups, in a sense.

The second phase will be to put the U.S. and Western countries under attack and under pressure, especially if the United States does not disengage totally from the Middle East. There is that anger still directed towards the United States.

The Gaza war is paving the way for extremist groups to recruit more and more people including people who were previously not interested in these ideas. The terrorist group Hamas attacked Israel, but the excessive force used by Israel has resulted in the killing of many civilians, including children and women. Seeing the kind of pictures and photos and news coming out from Gaza can motivate

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some Muslims who were previously moderate to side with these terrorist groups. Let's have a clear distinction between Hamas who carried out the planned attack on October 7 with no regard for the subsequent outcome for the innocent people in Gaza and the people of Gaza who witnessed one of the most brutal military offensives and faced a humanitarian disaster rarely seen in history.

Overall, my assessment is that in the short term, the Western countries probably will not see a wave of attacks, but after the terrorist groups build back their strength and capacity to plot international terror, my fear is there will be another wave of attacks in the West.

To me, it would be a big mistake not to focus on the threats from these terrorist groups, because they could be very serious. If there is another big attack, what would the international community's response be? I'm not sure whether the West will have enough capability to strike back or reduce the level of threats or not.

**CTC: So, you assess that targeting the United States is still the top international attack priority for these global jihadi groups? Because obviously with the Moscow attack and with the Iran attack, we saw the Islamic State target *adversaries* of the United States. But your assessment is their number-one external attack goal is still to target the United States and its allies, correct?**

**Saraj:** What I see is that they have been educated with that mentality for years and years. That mentality will probably only change over years. And again, causes like Palestine, issues like the U.S. bases in the Gulf countries—these are a good excuse for the terrorist groups to still consider the U.S. as enemy number one. So currently the biggest target, target number one, is the U.S. The first phase for the terrorists is to push the Americans out of the Middle East and the areas that they care about; the second wave of terrorism will be in the West itself.

**CTC: What are the most important things the international community can do to address the root causes of Islamist terrorism?**

**Saraj:** The biggest responsibility resides on the shoulders of the 99 percent of Muslims who do not share the worldview of the terrorists. Because if we count all the numbers of these terrorists

and very extremist groups, they don't even make up one percent of the whole population of Muslims around the world. But the problem is, this very tiny minority is very vocal. They are creating problems. And the issue is that many Muslims who do not share the worldview of the terrorists are quiet. They need to speak up, and the international community needs to support them. If they remain quiet, my fear is that these people unintentionally will be dragged by the extremists into a confrontation with the West that they don't want to be dragged into. To expect the Western powers to take the lead in this struggle will further strengthen the terrorist groups and pave a good recruitment ground as we all witnessed the developments after the start of the war on terror. It is time for the silent majority to take the lead and eradicate the roots of extremism that does not echo the real values of Islam.

**CTC: Of course, Muslims have played critical roles and made many sacrifices in the struggle against violent extremism in the past decades. You were one of them. And there are many others in Afghanistan who dedicated their careers and, in some cases, gave their lives to this important undertaking. Can you speak further about the contribution of Muslims around the world to fighting against these groups?**

**Saraj:** When it comes to the total numbers killed and injured by the terrorists, the biggest victims have been Muslims themselves. And this is the reason that Muslims who are quiet must become more active. They should not let this happen, and they should not wait until this tiny, small minority takes them to an unwanted confrontation with other countries that would be hard to reverse.

**CTC: When you think about the terrorist threats that we're all facing, what is the thing that's keeping you up at night? What are you most worried about?**

**Saraj:** What I fear is that an attack that happens on a soft target—say, on a shopping mall—triggers a wave of anger from the public against the whole Muslim community. This is something that would be a really difficult issue to deal with, especially for the Muslims who live in Western countries. These types of incidents will fuel the existing anger of right-wing groups in the West who may use it to marginalize and blame all Muslims for an incident neither they knew about nor had any involvement in. This will push moderate Muslims more towards extremism, and this is exactly what the minority extremist circles want.

Area number two is that the terrorist groups may be able to gain access to biological and chemical weapons. They were trying to develop these capabilities before 9/11. These groups want to kill and be killed for their cause, so what will happen if these people get those kinds of weapons? As the technology progresses, it becomes easier and easier for these people to gain access. We saw scientists, doctors, and engineers join ISIS in Syria and Iraq and give them a lot of knowledge about various forms of technology, how to use it, including things like encrypted apps to protect yourself from being detected. So, I'm worried about the very different world we would wake up in if this kind of knowledge and this kind of information is shared with the terrorists. There are probably a number of people who can support them financially to access those kind of materials. That's something that keeps me up at night. **CTC**

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