

Feature Commentary: Militant Social Inheritance and the Limits of Counterterrorism Assessment in Afghanistan

By Wahid Gulrani

Counterterrorism in Afghanistan was often effective at degrading militant organizations and removing their leaders, but far less attentive to what outlived them. This article introduces the concept of militant social inheritance: the process by which the relational, infrastructural, and symbolic assets that an armed group accumulates—kinship ties and brokerage relationships, sanctuaries and financial channels, names and narratives—survive the group’s degradation, or a shift in the political order around it, and pass to allies, successors, or rivals. Drawing on the examples of the Haqqani network, al-Qa`ida-Taliban ties, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, and Islamic State Khorasan Province, the article shows that these assets are transferred, lie dormant, or are repurposed on a slower clock than the one by which counterterrorism measures success. It argues that inheritance is conditional rather than automatic, and that post-operation assessment should ask not only whether an organization was degraded but what survived it and who was positioned to take it up.

Twenty-five years after the September 11 attacks, one of al-Qa`ida’s most durable assets is not a training camp, a commander, or even a functioning headquarters. It is a surname. Usama bin Ladin has been dead since 2011. His son Hamza, once promoted by al-Qa`ida as a possible heir, was declared killed by the United States in 2019.¹ Al-Qa`ida’s central organization has been severely degraded, its senior leadership repeatedly targeted, and its ability to operate from Afghanistan as it did before 2001 sharply reduced. Yet, the bin Ladin name still circulates in jihadi propaganda and still carries political value. Recent assessments describe al-Qa`ida as a far more decentralized and attenuated organization than the one that planned 9/11, but one that continues to trade on inherited prestige and historical memory.²

That a name can outlast the network that made it famous points to the central argument of this article. Counterterrorism in Afghanistan was often successful at degrading organizations and removing individuals, but much less attentive to what happened to the relationships and symbolic assets those organizations had accumulated. An armed organization is not only a command

structure and a roster of operatives. It is also a web of trust, kinship ties, brokers, sanctuary arrangements, financial channels, operational knowledge, reputations, names, and narratives. These assets do not necessarily die when the organization that assembled them is weakened, and they can change hands when the political order around it shifts. Some are destroyed. Others remain embedded in people and places. Still others pass into the hands of adjacent networks, successor groups, former allies, or later generations. I call this process militant social inheritance.^a

The distinction I want to draw is not between counterterrorism success and failure but between two different objects of analysis: the organization and the social estate around it. By social estate, I mean the accumulated, transferable assets an armed group builds over years of operation and that are distinct from the group itself. Three kinds are worth separating. The first is relational: kinship ties, brokerage relationships, patronage, and the personal trust that lets people vouch for one another across otherwise closed worlds. The second is infrastructural: sanctuary geographies, financial channels, smuggling and travel routes, and the operational knowledge possessed by the people who ran them. The third is symbolic: names, reputations, martyrdom narratives, and claims to historical significance. Organizations are relatively easy to see and target. Their estates are not, and the three kinds of inheritance travel by different rules. Symbolic assets are the most portable: a name or a narrative can be claimed by almost anyone. Relational assets are the most durable but the least transferable, because they live in particular people and places and pass mainly to those already inside the relationship. Infrastructural assets sit between the two: routes and sanctuaries are tied to geography, but they can change hands among those who know how to use them.

These distinctions have a temporal dimension that assessment easily misses. Organizations operate on the clock of operations—a

a The term is the author’s own, but the concept draws on several bodies of work. Pierre Bourdieu’s treatment of social capital as an accumulated, convertible, and transmissible resource, and his account of symbolic capital, inform the notion of a social estate; see Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital” in John G. Richardson ed., *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York: Greenwood, 1986), pp. 241-258, and Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990). Max Weber’s account of the routinization of charisma addresses how authority is transferred once a founding leader is gone; see Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). On how pre-existing social networks shape the formation, cohesion, and collapse of armed groups, see Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014). On the persistence and remobilization of wartime networks after armed organizations formally disband, see Sarah Zukerman Daly, *Organized Violence after Civil War: The Geography of Recruitment in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), and Anders Themnér, *Violence in Post-Conflict Societies: Remarginalization, Remobilizers and Relationships* (London: Routledge, 2011).

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raid, a strike, a capture, each with a visible before and after. Estates operate on a slower clock. A kinship tie is formed over a generation and can lie dormant for years before it becomes useful again. A sanctuary geography can outlast several of the distinct groups that shelter in it over time. A name can wait a decade for an heir. Because inheritance unfolds on this longer horizon, it rarely registers in the after-action assessment of any single operation, which is precisely the window in which counterterrorism has trained itself to measure success. The social estate is invisible not because it is hidden but because it often moves too slowly for capture by the instruments pointed at it.

None of this is to say that leadership targeting is futile. The scholarship on decapitation has already shown why that claim is too simplistic. Jenna Jordan has demonstrated that older and more locally embedded groups are often resilient after the removal of their leaders,³ while Bryan Price has shown that decapitation can shorten the life of some organizations, particularly younger and more centralized ones.⁴ Both findings matter. But both largely ask what happens to the targeted organization itself. The more neglected question is what happens to the social estate around it after that organization is degraded, fragmented, or gone.

That question matters because relationships survive differently from organizations. A command post can be destroyed in an afternoon. A kinship tie cannot. A leadership council can be dismantled. A financier who has worked with the same intermediaries for 20 years may still know whom to call. A safe-house network may change users without changing geography. A cleric who once vouched for one armed actor may later vouch for another. Sarah Parkinson's work on militant networks shows how informal social structures can preserve mobilization even when formal organizational structures are disrupted.⁵ The Afghanistan case suggests a further possibility: Those social structures can sometimes persist beyond the organization itself in its original form and become useful in new settings or to someone else.

The Haqqani network illustrates the point. Its power was never reducible to the number of fighters it commanded. For decades, it operated as a brokerage nexus, connecting insurgents inside Afghanistan, actors in Pakistan, Arab militants, religious institutions, financiers, and cross-border sanctuaries. Vahid Brown and Don Rassler's history of the network shows how deeply its authority depended on personal ties, family relations, and its ability to connect otherwise separate worlds.⁶ The United States targeted that network relentlessly. Senior figures were killed, pressured, or forced underground. Yet, the relationships around the network proved harder to eliminate than any individual leader. By 2021, Sirajuddin Haqqani was not merely the head of an insurgent network; he had become acting interior minister under Taliban rule. A brokerage system built outside formal state institutions had been repositioned inside one of the most powerful institutions in the country. This is relational and infrastructural inheritance at its most consequential: a group that refused to die, but also a web of connections that changed address, carried from an insurgent network into the institutions of a state.

The continuing relationship between al-Qa`ida and the Taliban is a less clean, but still revealing case. Nelly Lahoud's reading of the documents recovered from bin Ladin's compound complicates the mythology of al-Qa`ida as an omnipotent organization and shows a leadership that was often isolated and frustrated.⁷ Yet, some of the relationships built during the 1990s survived the death of bin Ladin

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and the degradation of al-Qa`ida's central apparatus. Personal ties, religious obligation, shared memory, and sanctuary arrangements can retain value even when one partner becomes far weaker than the other. Recent assessments continue to describe al-Qa`ida's presence in Afghanistan as limited but enabled by a permissive environment under Taliban rule.⁸ What survives is less a powerful organization than a relationship that outlived the organization's strength.

The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) shows why organizational boundaries are not enough to understand this inheritance, and it is also a case in which counterterrorism plainly degraded its target. U.S. drone strikes killed the group's founder, Baitullah Mehsud, and his two successors, and a 2014 Pakistani military operation destroyed its sanctuaries in Waziristan, forcing it into Afghanistan, where it survived by embedding itself in the Afghan Taliban's insurgency.⁹ The TTP is not the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, and it pursues a different political project. Yet, when Kabul fell in August 2021, the estate it had sheltered in became available to it in concrete form. Hundreds of TTP members, among them founding deputy emir Maulawi Faqir Muhammad Bajauri, were freed from Afghanistan's prisons; fighters and families already settled on the Afghanistan's side of the border no longer faced the strikes and arrests they had faced while U.S. forces were present; and monthly TTP-claimed attacks roughly tripled between 2020 and 2022.¹⁰ The organizations remained distinct; the sanctuary, the cross-border relationships, and the freedom of movement did not. This is exactly the kind of outcome conventional metrics can miss: One movement may achieve its own victory while relational and infrastructural assets built over years of insurgency become useful to another actor. The scholarship on terrorist alliances has long shown that armed organizations seek one another out for capabilities, access, protection, and legitimacy.¹¹ The Afghanistan case suggests that some of those assets can remain available even after the organizational configuration that first produced them has changed.

These cases suggest that estates pass on in more than one way. Some assets are handed over deliberately, as when a network shares a route, a financier, or an introduction with an ally it judges useful. The Haqqani network's long role in hosting foreign militants and connecting them to partners in Afghanistan and Pakistan is a case of such deliberate transfer. Others simply lie dormant, a sanctuary or a kinship tie that no one is using until circumstances make it valuable

again. The cross-border sanctuary and relationships that sustained the Taliban in Pakistan after 2001, when the movement appeared defeated, show how much can wait in dormancy for a change in circumstances.¹² Still others are repurposed by actors who never belonged to the original organization and may even have fought it, picking up a narrative, a reputation, or a local accommodation and turning it to their own ends. The TTP's invocation of the Taliban's 2021 victory as vindication and model for its own campaign against the Pakistani state is one such repurposing.¹³

Deliberate transfer, dormancy, and repurposing leave very different traces, and none of them looks like the destruction of an organization. This is part of why inheritance is so easily missed: It is not a single event with a date but a set of quiet transactions that can unfold long after the organization that generated the asset has left the field. Infrastructural inheritance runs through each of these cases rather than standing apart from them. The Haqqanis' cross-border sanctuary and financial channels, the safe haven al-Qa`ida retains under Taliban rule, and the border geography from which the TTP operates are all estates of this kind. Because routes, sanctuaries, and financial channels are held and operated by people, infrastructure tends to pass along the same channels as relationships, which is why the two are treated together here.

Symbolic inheritance is easier to overlook and, in some ways, harder to defeat. The bin Ladin name is the clearest example. Its value does not depend on al-Qa`ida retaining the organizational strength it possessed in 2001. Indeed, its symbolic utility may become more important as centralized control weakens. In September 2026, al-Qa`ida marked the 25th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks with a video that repeatedly featured Hamza bin Ladin, whom U.S. officials declared killed in 2019. Sara Harmouch and Bruce Hoffman argue that the renewed use of Hamza allows an increasingly decentralized al-Qa`ida to draw on the authority and founding mythology of the bin Ladin lineage even as the organization leaves its formal succession unresolved.¹⁴ Whether Hamza is alive is therefore less important analytically than the fact that his image, voice, and surname remain usable. The organization may lose a person while retaining the symbolic asset attached to him.

The earlier effort to cultivate Hamza as an heir was an attempt to convert family lineage into organizational legitimacy. His reported death did not eliminate that asset. Seven years after the United States declared him killed, al-Qa`ida could still place him before a new generation of supporters as a bridge to its founder. This is precisely why the distinction between organizational survival and symbolic inheritance matters. A group can lose leaders, operatives, territory, and command capacity while retaining a name, a story of sacrifice, or a claim to historical significance. Symbolic capital can travel without the organizational structure that originally produced it.

The Taliban's return to power in 2021 created another symbolic asset: the claim to have outlasted and defeated a superpower. That narrative has mobilizing value well beyond the Taliban itself. Rival groups have tried to reinterpret it, appropriate parts of it, or deny the Taliban ownership of it. Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) illustrates the gap between symbolic and relational estates, and the limits of inheritance itself. Rather than inheriting the Taliban's claim to victory, ISKP has tried to devalue it, casting the Doha agreement that preceded it as a surrender to the United States rather than a triumph of jihad, while advancing its own claim to the

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jihadi mantle in the region.¹⁵ A symbolic asset that a rival cannot inherit, it can still contest.

ISKP has recruited defectors from other militant formations and inherited the globally recognizable Islamic State brand, but it has not inherited the dominant local relational estate held by the Taliban and the Haqqani networks. Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines describe an organization able to build alliances and rivalries across the region while remaining locked in violent competition with the Taliban.¹⁶ The contrast is useful: Symbolic capital may be relatively portable, while local trust, protection, and kinship-based networks are far harder to inherit. Even a brand confers little until the people it seeks to recruit or coopt accept the claim. An outsider can adopt a brand; they cannot simply adopt a valley.

The three forms of inheritance differ in how they travel, but all of them depend on a further condition, and it is here that the argument also meets its limits. If inheritance implies heirs, then the crucial variable is the match between an available estate and an actor able to use it. An asset with no capable claimant is inert; a capable claimant with no accessible asset gains nothing. The Haqqani estate found its heir in a movement already positioned to absorb it; the bin Ladin name has repeatedly sought heirs and only partly found them; the local relational world in Afghanistan has so far refused to be inherited by the Islamic State. Assessing risk after an operation therefore means asking not only what survived but who in the vicinity has the standing, the proximity, and the credibility to take it up. And inheritance is not automatic. It is a claim that must be recognized by the people in whom the asset actually lives.

The concept of militant social inheritance only earns its place if it also explains failure, and here Afghanistan is also instructive. Not everything survives. Counterterrorism can destroy relationships as well as organizations. After 2001, parts of the foreign-fighter infrastructure that had operated from Afghanistan were shattered. Fighters were killed, captured, or dispersed; some networks resurfaced in other theaters, while others ceased to function at all. Where the human carriers of relationships are scattered far enough, where sanctuary disappears, or where potential heirs are rejected by the local networks they hope to join, there may be little left to inherit. Displacement is central to this dynamic and cuts both ways. Forced movement can sever or weaken the very ties that make inheritance possible, dispersing the people in whom trust and knowledge are stored; under other conditions, it can carry those ties into new settings and reconstitute them among the displaced. Militant social inheritance is, therefore, a conditional process. It is more likely when relationships are deeply embedded in kinship, locality, religious institution, or durable cross-border community, and less likely when repression and displacement break those ties themselves.

This leads to the most important policy implication. Assessment systems privilege what can be counted, and organizations lend

themselves to counting in a way their estates do not. A leader removed, a cell rolled up, a camp destroyed, a document seized, each is a discrete, auditable event that fits a metric and a briefing slide. A broker who still knows whom to call, a valley that still offers shelter, a name that still recruits, these have no natural unit of measure. What cannot be counted is not thereby unreal, but it tends to fall outside the frame through which success is judged, and a frame applied for 20 years becomes a way of seeing. Reviewing two decades of U.S. involvement, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction returned repeatedly to a mismatch between what institutions could quantify and the political and social realities that actually determined outcomes.¹⁷ Projects that completed their required tasks, the report found, were often deemed successful whether or not they advanced the broader goals they were meant to serve; one senior U.S. official quoted in it recalled trying troop numbers trained, violence levels, and control of territory as measures of progress, only to conclude that “none of it painted an accurate picture.”¹⁸ Counterterrorism assessment was never only a matter of counting. Intelligence and military analysts produced network studies, atmospherics, and strategic assessments that engaged directly with kinship, patronage, and local politics.¹⁹ The difficulty lay less in the absence of such knowledge than in how it was weighed. A removed leader could be reported as a result; a surviving broker, a kinship tie, a sanctuary arrangement, or an inherited narrative was harder to translate into a finding on which a decision could turn, harder to assign a likelihood of ever being acted upon, and easier to set aside when it complicated a record of progress.

This imbalance between what was known and what was privileged has grown more consequential, not less, since the 2021 withdrawal. With no declared forces on the ground, Washington now relies on an over-the-horizon posture built around remote intelligence and precision strikes. That posture is, if anything, even better suited to the organizational unit of analysis: It can find and remove a named commander from a great distance. What it cannot easily do is watch a brokerage relationship reconstitute

itself, register that a sanctuary has changed hands, or notice that a name has found a new claimant. The instruments have become sharper at seeing exactly what counterterrorism already saw well, and no better at seeing what it always missed. A strategy that measures itself strictly by the organizations and individuals it can reach risks mistaking the reach of its weapons for the reach of its understanding.

The corrective is not to abandon the metrics that worked but to add a second set of questions to them. After a successful operation, assessment should not end with, ‘Was the organization degraded?’ It should continue with: Which relationships survived the operation? Which brokers remained in place? Which routes, financial ties, and sanctuary arrangements still functioned? Which names and narratives kept their mobilizing value? And who was positioned to inherit them? These questions do not diminish operational success; they make its measurement more complete. A campaign can succeed against an organization and still leave behind a social estate capable of sustaining future militancy in another form.

Afghanistan’s 25-year counterterrorism experience should therefore be read neither as a simple story of victory nor as proof that counterterrorism failed. It is a lesson about the unit of analysis. The United States became highly capable of dismantling visible militant organizations. What it did not solve was the problem of their social afterlife. Organizations die more easily than the relationships and symbols from which they are built. Some of those relationships disappear with them. Others wait, embedded in families, institutions, routes, memories, and reputations, until another actor can put them to use.

Twenty-five years after 9/11, the question that should guide the next generation of counterterrorism analysis is no longer only whether an organization survived. It is what survived the organization, who inherited it, and what they did with it. Until assessment systems can answer that question, they will keep seeing the death of organizations more clearly than the inheritance that outlives them. **CTC**

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