

## AFRICA

# What the Taliban takeover means for Africa - Jacob Zenn & Suat Cubukcu

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Orion Policy Institute's Senior Fellow Suat Cubukcu interviewed Jacob Zenn for the OrionTalk to discuss the implications of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan for Africa.

[Jacob Zenn](#) is a faculty at Georgetown University and a senior fellow at Jamestown Foundation in Washington DC. He studies insurgency groups in Africa. In this conversation, he explains what the Taliban's victory means for the Jihadist groups and counterterrorism efforts in the countries like Somalia, Mali, and Nigeria. He also deep dives into what the US withdrawal from and failure in Afghanistan mean for the future of its counterterrorism cooperation and engagement efforts in the region.

## What are the key implications of the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan for the insurgent groups in Africa?

Jacob Zenn: One of the key implications for the jihadist groups in Africa is actually on the counterterrorism end. In the past few years, there had been an increase in the US counterterrorism efforts in Africa. But the way that Afghanistan is being portrayed as a debacle, where we failed, or at least the United States failed in nation-building and the evacuation. I think it more or less extinguishes the possibility of the United States' counterterrorism footprint in Africa. This could be a benefit in a sense for some of the jihadist groups that they won't have to face additional pressure.

The idea of having US boots on the ground in Africa is less likely now. For the jihadist groups themselves, clearly see that there is a path to jihadist victory, which has not been seen much when you think about the last 20 years. Jihadist groups have had short-term, but then they got defeated by superior firepower by the state forces.

When we look at the al-Qaeda groups, which are ostensibly aligned with the Taliban, - lie the group in Mali, called JNIM (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims), and al-Shabaab in Somalia - they have declared their loyalty to the Taliban in the past

I think both of those insurgencies can look very positively on the Taliban experience in the sense that the Taliban showed that if they are willing to fight long enough, state power can get tired and leave at some point. France, being the main state power in Mali, have been there intensively for the last eight years, and even this past year, President Macron of France has indicated that his country has become a little bit tired there, and although it might have been a bluff, he did suggest that France could reduce its footprint in Mali and leave.

I don't think that is imminent, but the fact that those conversations- which were coming from at the top echelons of the French leadership could give a group, like JNIM, hope that if they can keep this intense level of uncertainty for ten more years, then, maybe France would get tired and leave. Al-Shabaab, meanwhile, is fighting against mostly African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), which is essentially a regional UN-backed military coalition against al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab is still hanging in there, and it's still quite powerful in the countryside. I think al-Shabaab too could look at this and say that they've had an advanced force against them for 15 years, and they can last for another ten years.

But, the main point is that state forces can be expected to get tired at some point and retreat. I think al-Qaeda groups can look to that positively. I would add a caveat, though, that I don't think al-Shabaab has commented on the Taliban's victory, and JNIM has gotten into that more, but they may be a little bit hesitant to be too pro-Taliban given how moderate the Taliban's public appearances have been.

### **How are the Taliban's ideology and governing experience different from that of the insurgent groups in Africa?**

Taliban had some experience in governments from the pre 9/11 period, and they did some form of shadow governments in the past decade and a half or so, and now, when they are governing again, they're trying to co-opt the institutions that had existed under the US-backed government.

There is a difference in the African Jihadi groups, none of which have real experience in governing. They, more or less, have experienced in shadow governance. So, if a group, like al-Shabaab, or JNIM, or an al-Qaida group that ever came to power, they would probably have less of a foundation to govern than do the Taliban.

However, JNIM or its predecessors did govern briefly in Mali around 2012 and 2013, but they didn't really know what to do. They were inexperienced, and they made a lot of mistakes, somewhat like the pre 9/11 Taliban. They focus so much on Sharia punishments instead of improving living conditions.

Although the groups in Africa, like JNIM, have so much experience governing, they have learned lessons from their own mistakes in the past. Al-Shabaab, sort of governed in the rural areas of Somalia, but it's not yet tested in the urban areas.

The group known as Boko Haram, which is called Islamic State in West Africa Province, or ISWAP, is exercising some administrative responsibilities in rural areas of Northeastern Nigeria. However, that's not too sophisticated and mostly low-level taxation. So, none of them are really tested in how to govern a country as the Taliban. But these groups in Africa, they're more rigid, more extreme than the Taliban. The Taliban had to make some concessions in its ideology to get to the place where it is today that the US was willing to basically leave.

We've seen that with the Taliban's nationalistic rhetoric with its adopting international standards, like talking about women's rights. You really haven't seen that from any of the African Jihadi groups, which basically reject the international legitimacy of all of the engagements that the Taliban is doing diplomatically now.

But we might see some evolution at least among the al-Qaeda groups in Africa, where they begin to adopt the more conciliatory message towards international engagement, and if any group would do that, it would probably be JNIM in Mali, partly because their leader, Iyad Ag Ghaly, was formerly a Malian diplomat.

**What are the lessons learned from Afghanistan for the African governments, such as Mali and Somalia, which deal with insurgency? What do these governments can do to avoid becoming another Afghanistan?**

I think that there are important warning signs coming from the Afghan governments' collapse.

In so far as it shows that governments that are corrupt and hoard money among the top officials and don't provide services to the countryside are bound to face opposition.

If we look in Northeastern Nigeria, Northern Mali, and rural Somalia, the governments are ripped, and the effective delivery of services is very low in those parts of those three countries. You could add northern Mozambique or even Eastern Congo; we look at the ISIS provinces that are emerging there.

It's no surprise that the Taliban gained a strong foothold in the rural areas, so do these Jihadists groups in Africa gain a strong foothold in the rural areas. I also think of concern is the extent to which, in Somalia, the military effort against al-Shabaab is really foreign-backed.

That just shows that if somehow the foreign support were to diminish, you could see an Afghanistan scenario playing out because it proved that when you withdraw a significant level of foreign support from a national government, at least in Afghanistan approved just completely, to fall like a pile of cards. I think some of the other governments, like Nigeria and Mali, are probably stronger, and they don't rely on foreign support as much. But, still, they might not be as strong in the long term as some foresee, especially considering the way the jihadist groups embed themselves locally and have a very long-term outlook on the endurance of their answers.

### **How does the US failure in Afghanistan can affect its counterterrorism cooperation and engagements in Africa?**

One possibility is that the idea of 'international counterterrorism coordination' or 'supporting national armies,' at least for the near future, will be like a 'bad word' in the United States' discourse. Because the Afghanistan situation, as far as I can see, is being viewed as a complete debacle. I cannot see the US President is saying, "we need to engage more in a country like Somali, Mali, Cameroon, Niger, or Mozambique," which probably many Americans are not too familiar with on a map, so I think that the US counterterrorism support is going to diminish in the countries that Americans are not particularly familiar with.

I think a lot of these African insurgencies are perceived as very far away, and their areas of use are not familiar with, and I even think it could be a successful political tool to say: “Oh, we’re going to move our troops from Africa, we don’t need these drone bases in Niger or somewhere else.”

I think that’s the most important near-term implication is that there’s going to be less US international counterterrorism engagement and perhaps more geopolitical engagement with countries like China and Russia, but that’s a whole different ballgame of Afghanistan’s ramifications.

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