JIHADI COUNTER-TERRORISM: LOCAL RADICAL ISLAMISTS GOVERNANCE *VS.* GLOBAL JIHADISM[1]

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This article deals with the confrontation between international terrorist organizations that follow the idea of global jihadism and those radical Islamist organizations that try to redirect their activities towards local state-building. In particular, it touches on the issue of counter-terrorist activities carried out by localized groups against the globally oriented Jihadists. This is an extremely relevant and yet recent issue, since these trends have recently begun to manifest themselves in a most peculiar way. This was particularly evident after the new spokesman of the Islamic State made a speech in which it was stated that the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group was behind the assassination of the previous leader of the organization. Another example of such counter-terrorist activities is the activity of the Taliban after they came to power in Afghanistan and proclaimed the Islamic Emirate in this country. The main focus of this paper is on the phenomenon of counter-terrorism agencies that are embedded in these terrorist organizations and the narratives they construct when they disseminating information about their activities.

Keywords: *Jihadism, counter-terrorism, Islamist governance, Jihadi Governance.*

Local Radical Islamists and Global Jihadism

In 2021, the French news agency France 24 published an article entitled 'Total failure: The war on terror 20 years on'.[2] The article tried to convey the idea that the war on jihadism declared by US President George Bush 20 years ago turned into a failure, because today we witness an increase in the number of jihadist terrorist groups and their spread around the world. The agency also noted that, on the contrary, over time, even after the murder of Osama bin Laden, we witnessed a greater globalization of the jihadist threat, referring primarily to the phenomenon of the ISIS[*] caliphate, as well as their opponents from Al Qaeda[*] with an extensive network of loyal radical armed groups around the world. In addition, if we look at the numerous reports of international think tanks in the field of global security, they all mention the threat of jihadism in one way or another, but at the same time there are estimates that show a decrease in the activity of global jihad and its transition to a phase of local involvement (Ramakrishna 2023: 3).

First of all, I would like to provide a definition of the key terms of this article. It focuses mainly on two terms, radical Islamism and Jihadism, which I generally consider to be synonymous in many ways. Both terms are highly controversial and are often misused in the media and by politicians, so I want to emphasize that in this paper I am referring to their academic definitions. I understand Radical Islamism as a political doctrine whose proponents 'seek to impose the strict traditions of Islam on society by force, to gain a total control over human behaviour, and to replace secular laws with the Sunnah. They are ready to use illegal and violent means to achieve this, including intimidation of people, terrorism and the overthrow of governments' (Grinin 2019: 23). Nevertheless, not only the concept of Islamism, but even radical Islamism is very heterogeneous and diverse (Grinin and Korotayev 2019: 428). For this very reason, in my article I also add the term Jihadism, which refers to a peripheral branch of extremist Islamic thought whose proponents call for the use of violence and see it as the only right path to expel non-Islamic influence from traditionally Muslim lands in order to establish Islamic rule in accordance with their ideas of the divine law (Brachmann 2008: 17).

The issue of Jihadism and radical Islamism is not new and has been present in security discourses for more than 20 years. Many researchers trace the ideological roots of modern jihadism back to the appearance of Sayyid Qutb's writings and essays (Calvert 2009: 46), which influenced the emergence of a large number of militarized Islamist movements. Their number and the number of supporters only increased during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. At the same time, the first splits within the jihadist movement emerged: some favored participation only in the Afghan campaign, while others (such as the notorious Abdullah Azzam) advocated switching to supporting the Palestinian struggle against Israel immediately after the USSR's defeat in Afghanistan (Duderija 2023: 1076). In this article I will not delve into all the historical cleavages, confrontations, disagreements and changes in the Jihadist field of Islamic politics.

At this point, the most important thing for me is to operationalize the concepts of global and local Jihadism. If we turn to such prominent ideologues and leaders of jihadist movements as Osama bin Laden (al-Qaeda*), Anwar al-Awlaki (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula*), Dokka Umarov (the Caucasus Emirate*), Ayman al-Zawahiri (al-Qaeda), Umar al-Baghdadi (Islamic State in Iraq*), Abu Sufyan al-Sulami (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant*), Abu Muhammad al-Adnani (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), *etc.*, we can observe their radical disagreement and rejection of all modern international political institutions, their rejection of any negotiation process with representatives of ' infidels', their non-recognition of borders between countries of the Muslim world and their refusal to limit their actions to the borders of a particular country. Their approach is to declare war in general against the 'un-Islamic' world order, which is seen as an occupation and a threat, and any negotiation processes are considered treason and often even an argument for accusation of apostasy (Robinson 2020: 32). The most important examples of such groups are al-Qaeda under the leadership of Osama bin Laden and the Islamic State.

In contrast, armed Islamist movements that confine their activities to a particular country take a different stance. They often show an ability to negotiate with the international community in order to obtain guarantees for the peaceful establishment of Sharia law within recognized borders, they may refuse to recognize all other governments as

'illegal' and 'occupiers', they may insist on the removal of their organizations from the list of terrorists, and they try in various ways to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the international community (Cold-Ravnkilde and Ba 2022: 7). An example of such a localized group is the Taliban[*], which came to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 and had previously been firmly integrated into the strategy of al-Qaeda network, but then began to show more independence, agreeing to negotiate with the international community (from the EU and China to the UN) and signing agreements with the United States. Another example is the change that has taken place in the Syrian organization Hayat Tahrir al-Sham[*]. Its leader, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, has been actively giving interviews to Western media since 2021, stressing the break with al-Qaeda and ISIS and calling for it to be removed from the list of terrorist organizations (Boghani 2021), while another prominent representative, Abu Maria al-Qahtani, criticizes al-Qaeda and advises it to dissolve (Zelin 2022).

At the same time, when researchers consider the processes within Islamism as a broad concept, they note that the sharpest confrontations often occur not along the lines of Islamists and secularists, but along the lines of moderate and radical Islamists (Grinin, Korotayev 2019: 431). A similar situation can be observed in the relations between the newly formed local administrations of radical Islamists and the proponents of global uncompromising jihadism (mainly the Islamic State). This is well illustrated by the abovementioned Taliban and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham[*], with whom the Islamic State fought fiercely, accusing them of apostasy.

The result of this situation is that such local governments of radical Islamists have developed their own counter-terrorist departments. This is a rather contradictory situation, since from the point of view of the UN and the legislation of most countries, terrorist organizations are engaged in counter-terrorist activities. In this article, I take a closer look and examine the activities of these counter-terrorist departments within the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taliban) and the Syrian Salvation Government in Idlib, where Hayat Tahrir al-Sham plays a leading role.

Data and Methods

The research strategy used in this article is a comparative case-study, where the cases are radical Islamist administrations (the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and the Syrian Salvation Government[*]) and their counter-terrorism departments are observations. In this paper, I used data from news agencies, reports from research centers and government organizations. The research also involved speeches by officials of the organizations studied and materials from their official news resources. Qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis were used for the study. This made it possible, on the one hand, to identify the main narratives disseminated by the organizations and, on the other hand, to study the discourse at three levels: the level of linguistic practices, the analysis of discursive practices and the analysis of socio-cultural practices as a consequence of the application of these discourses. Statistical data on the work of the relevant agencies were also collected and systematized.

The Case of Taliban

In the early days of the Taliban's rise to power, Afghanistan faced a deadly terrorist attack at the Kabul airport that killed 183 people (including 13 US Army soldiers). The

organization 'Islamic State of Khorasan Province' (further ISKP[*]) claimed responsibility for this terrorist attack. It became clear that the issue of the ISKP activity would become extremely problematic for the new authorities in Afghanistan. UN Special Representative Deborah Lyons reported to the UN Security Council that the Islamic State was present in every province of Afghanistan and that the number of IS fighters had increased from about 2,000 to 3,500 since the fall of the Afghan government (Jadoon, Sayed, and Mines 2022: 44). Khalil Hamraz, a spokesman for the Taliban's Directorate of Intelligence, admitted that the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan had unintentionally helped the ISKP and that many of their fighters escaped from jail following the Taliban's amnesty (Tabish, Munir, Asghar 2022: 34). Since the Taliban's rise to power, the ISKP has repeatedly urged its supporters throughout Afghanistan to take advantage of the situation in which they are left face-to-face with the Taliban and attack its members. In 2021, the ISKP launched 365 attacks, killing 2,210 people; in 2022, it launched 154 attacks, killing about 700 people; and in 2023 (as of October), 75 attacks, killing no more than 200 people (Islam and Mostofa 2023: 181). The primary targets of ISKP attacks in Afghanistan can be divided into two types: first, the Hazara community, a Persian-speaking ethnic group, practicing Imamite Shi'ism; and second, various Afghan infrastructure and soldiers of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

As can be seen from the statistics above, after the explosive increase in ISKP activity and lethality in 2021, the activity of this Islamic State affiliate has declined considerably. This decline is directly related to the increase in the number of Taliban operations against this group after they came to power. It is worth noting here that even before the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, General Kenneth MacKenzie, head of the US Central Command, when testifying to the House Armed Services Committee, noted that the Taliban had fought very effectively against IS-affiliates in Afghanistan and were close to destroying them completely (Schogol 2018).

However, at that time, the clashes between the Taliban and the ISKP took a different form – they were armed clashes between two insurgent groups. Now, however, the Taliban had to act as a government and find new responses to the growing challenges posed by their terrorist adversaries. From the very first days, the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI), headed by Abd-ul-Haqq Wasiq (who remains in charge today), was tasked with countering terrorist activity in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Already then, the spokesman for the agency, Khalil Hamraz, mentioned the ISKP most often in his speeches and press releases (four times more often than any other organization or group) as the top priority in the agency's work. The General Directorate of Intelligence initially approached the problem of terrorism by relying on its local offices in each province and increasing the number of officers in provinces where ISKP outbreaks or direct terrorist attacks had previously been observed. I draw this conclusion by analyzing the monthly reports and press releases of this department. However, from the second half of 2022 (at the same time as the ISKP's activity began to decline sharply), the agency adopted a new strategy. Now a separate department was created within the General Directorate of Intelligence, specializing exclusively in the activities of the ISKP. In addition, it was given at its disposal an elite unit – the 'Red Squad' special forces, divided into several battalions of 300–350 men. The most famous is 'Badri313', which was involved in guarding the Kabul airport from the very beginning. After the IS was cleared from Nangarhar province, some of the Red Squad battalions were redeployed to

Kunar province, where they also managed to push out Islamic State militants (Payne 2023). After the ISKP was finally deprived of territorial control, the Special Forces began to conduct operations primarily in Kabul. During one such operation in February 2023, two high-ranking ISKP members – Qari Fateh and Abu Usman Al-Kashmiri – were eliminated (Basit 2023). Qari Fateh appears to be the most prominent, as he was responsible for preparing a number of major terrorist attacks, including one against the diplomatic mission of the Russian Federation in Kabul. In April of the same year, an ISKP cell that was behind the August 2021 Kabul airport bombing and a series of terrorist attacks against Afghanistan's Shia community was identified and defeated. There have also been other smaller counter-terrorist operations carried out by Special Forces throughout Afghanistan, which I will not dwell on in detail, except to say that in all cases they were carried out by the Red Squads under the authority of the Directorate General of Intelligence.

I would like to pay special attention to the media campaign organized by the Directorate General of Intelligence. But to understand its origins and reasons, I will start with the way the ISKP has built its propaganda since the declaration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. They regularly try to appeal to Afghanistan's ethnic minorities. The Taliban movement is commonly referred to as a 'Pashtun nationalist movement', which is contrasted with the internationalist composition of the ISKP (Asfandyar 2022). This is also reflected in the translations of propaganda products into numerous languages of the region (in some cases even using Tajik Cyrillic alphabet). Examples include the attack on a Hindu temple in Kabul by Abu Muhammad al-Tajiki; the attack on a bus carrying Taliban fighters by Muaz al-Tajiki; the attack on a hotel housing the Chinese diplomatic mission by two militants of Tajik origin; and the killing of the leader of a Tajik suicide squad, Yusuf al-Tajiki, indicating the presence of entire squads of Afghan Tajiks within the ISKP (Botobekov 2022). It is noteworthy that the ISKP has never reported any such suicide squads from other ethnic minorities in Afghanistan. Further confirmation of the importance of the Tajik factor in the activities of ISKP can be found in statements by the General Intelligence Directorate of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan about a raid on an ISKP safe house, during which IS propaganda aimed at Tajik speakers was suppressed. This press release was the first time that GDI officials emphasized the ethnicity of the militants arrested in their raids. Moreover, in a video of the Taliban raid, one of the men arrested stated that the ISKP was collaborating with the National Resistance Front*, an ethnic Tajik insurgent group from Afghanistan that formed around Ahmad Masood (son of the famous Ahmad Shah Masood) and composed mainly of officials from the deposed Afghan government (Webber 2022). The authenticity of the words of the arrested person raises a number of doubts, since given the ideological differences between the organizations make it almost impossible to believe, in cooperation. However, it should be noted that in 2022 the Taliban began attempts to emphasize the cooperation between the National Resistance Front and the ISKP in order to discredit these organizations in the eyes of their existing and potential supporters.

In 2023, the General Intelligence Directorate launched a new media wing, Al-Mersaad, which specialized exclusively in ISKP counter-propaganda. This media outlet produces materials in Dari, Pashto, Uzbek, Arabic and English. The pronounced 'Tajikness' of the ISKP has been recognized by the General Intelligence Directorate, and therefore a significant part of the messages in this media outlet are directed at the Tajik

audience (Basit 2023: 11). The largest media campaign took place in August 2023, when Al-Mersaad published a series of video interrogations of seven arrested ISKP militants. They were all citizens of Tajikistan. All the detainees claim in the video that they aspired to a kind of Islamic lifestyle, which is impossible in Tajikistan, and so ISKP propaganda seemed attractive to them. They had nothing personal against the Taliban and were shocked by their leadership's order to blow up civilians. Kidnapping for ransom was cited as an important source of ISKP funding. It is noteworthy that this time there were no more accusations of the clandestine cooperation between the ISKP and other structures, but more emphasis was placed on the lack of deep understanding of Islam and Islamic politics among those who come from Tajikistan to join the ranks of terrorists. In addition, it also emphasized that all arrested ethnic Tajiks were from Tajikistan, not Afghanistan. In October 2023, another Al-Mersaad film was released, claiming that 90% of suicide attacks in Afghanistan were carried out by people from Tajikistan. The video also included footage of the interrogation of a 16-member of the IS cell arrested by the GDI in Badakhshan, all of whom were Tajik nationals. The video reiterated that Tajik nationals fall into the ISKP because of their lack of knowledge of Islam, as Tajikistan, unlike the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, has no comprehensive Islamic education and the government resists any manifestation of the Islamic way of life. Special attention has been paid to the fact that the government of Tajikistan misrepresents information about the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, leaving many citizens of this country misinformed and sensitive to ISKP propaganda.

Another type of activity for this media source is religious materials aimed at discrediting the ISKP, its beliefs and the legitimacy of its attacks in terms of Islamic law. These religious materials also provide information on why the government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan[*] has legitimacy in terms of Islamic principles of authority (Basit 2023: 14).

Thus, if we summarize the activities of the General Intelligence Directorate of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, we can see that this department was able to successfully transform itself to fight the Islamic State in Khorasan Province. The main evidence of this is the significant decrease in the number of terrorist attacks and casualties in 2022 and 2023. This decrease coincides with the cardinal reorganization of GDI activities and the emergence of special forces focused exclusively on countering the ISKP. Particular attention is drawn to the fact that the General Intelligence Directorate is the only agency of the Islamic Emirate to have its own controlled media wing. And this media wing, judging by the preliminary results, can also be described as quite successful. Whereas earlier the Taliban's counter-propaganda was limited to accusations of the ISKP's cooperation with the US intelligence services and the National Resistance Front, Al Mersaad's media wing is producing better quality products with a more detailed analysis of the reasons for and consequences of joining the ISKP. It has also been very successful in translating the ISKP's propaganda claims into a more favorable format for itself, by showing that the ISKP is not predominantly composed of Afghan ethnic minorities, but of foreign nationals.

The Case of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham[*]

On the evening of the 3rd of August 2023, a new spokesman for the Islamic State (IS) appeared online, which caused heated discussions in the ranks of radical Islamists, in-

cluding Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). This was because, according to the version announced by the Islamic State spokesman, HTS had killed the former IS leader and then handed his body over to Turkish intelligence, which was able to record it on its account at a very good moment – during Recep Tayyip Erdogan's heated election campaign (Szuba and Zaman 2023). Two days after this appeal, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham issued a statement denying its involvement in the killing and extradition of the IS leader to Turkey. For the purposes of this article, it is not so important whether the HTS is involved or not, but rather what role the HTS itself played in counter-terrorism activities against the Islamic State in the region.

The HTS also has a special intelligence agency, the General Security Service (GSS), which was created to combat terrorist activities against the authorities and the population of Idlib province. This agency was finally institutionalized only in 2020, but as the researchers note, its proto-version has existed since 2017, when the HTS began making its first arrests against the Islamic State. Between 2017 and October 2023, HTS publicly announced 59 operations to arrest members of Islamic State cells in Idlib. Of these, five were conducted in 2017, 22 in 2018, eight in 2019, eight in 2020, ten in 2021, six in 2022 and four in 2023 (Zelin 2023: 15). During these operations, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham arrested 279 people and killed 40. Some of those arrested were claimed by the GSS to have held high positions in the Islamic State and to have been leaders of various regional cells.

The distinctive feature of this particular case is that, unlike in Afghanistan, the Islamic State did not experience an explosion of activity in Idlib territory after the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group's announcement (*i.e.*, since 2017), as the Taliban authorities did. The highest activity came in 2017 and 2018, when IS attacked HTS fighters and other anti-Assad groups in Idlib. Since the summer of 2018, the Islamic State has not made any more official statements about successful attacks in territories under HTS control (Zelin 2023: 16). This fact, together with the statistics on HTS activities against IS, may indicate that HTS was able to largely prevent the growth of the terrorist threat before the emergence of the General Security Service. The emergence of the GSS was not driven by an urgent need. Rather, it was the institutionalization of already existing methods of countering the terrorist threat into a separate governmental department.

Unlike the case of the General Intelligence Department, the GSS does not have a separate affiliated media wing and therefore only releases official videos from its agency, and much less frequently than in the case of the Taliban. In these videos, the GSS spokesperson usually reports on activities that have been carried out to protect the population and prevent various outbreaks of violence, chaos, and terrorist attacks. In analyzing the GSS videos and textual materials, I did not find a single example of someone who had been arrested being given the floor, as it is often the case in Afghanistan. Another observation is that GSS spokespersons and representatives often refer to the Islamic State indirectly, using the term 'Kharijites'. The ISKP is also accused of Kharijism by the Taliban. However, in the case of the GSS, it should be understood that the term 'Kharijites', which the department fights against, does not only include militants and supporters of the Islamic State. Sometimes there are arrests of foreign fighters who are hardliners, but even they are oriented towards al-Qaeda, not the Islamic State. But of course the main efforts are directed against the latter. In general, the GSS is far less

transparent than the Taliban. The agency's reports are often quite vague and do not list specific individuals, organizations, and activities.

In addition, unlike the Taliban, the HTS's counter-terrorism activities have extended to the al-Qaeda affiliate Hurras al-Din and a number of foreign fighters with unspecified group affiliations but apparently hardline views on Islamic rule. The Taliban, on the other hand, refused to arrest al-Qaeda members and agreed to host them on the condition that they did not use Afghanistan to organize their attacks. The GSS never elaborated on or emphasized the arrests of Hurras al-Din members in its reports. When the GSS did announce the arrest or defeat of cells of other organizations, it immediately accused them of having links to the Islamic State. These accusations, however, seem rather far-fetched and were made in order to legitimize their actions (Zelin 2023: 17). Nevertheless, such information became one of the central topics in the communication of the HTS representatives with the international press. For example, Abu Maria al-Qahtani[*], one of the leaders and founders of the Abu Maria al-Qahtani's organization, said in interviews that the GSS was fighting not only the Islamic State but also al-Qaeda.[3] He also noted that the HTS as a whole was no longer a jihadist group and had abandoned the practice of committing terrorist acts not only outside Syria but also within Syria. Previously, Abu Maria had even published calls for self-dissolution against al-Qaeda. A similar position was expressed by HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, who in a February 2021 interview with Martin Smith of the PBS television program Frontline, HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani objected to the organization's inclusion on the list of terrorist organizations, calling it an 'unfair classification' (Spyer 2023: 2). In other words, in this case, on the one hand, HTS is unwilling to emphasize its counter-terrorism activities when communicating with the Islamist audience, and on the other hand, it is the narrative of HTS's fight against terrorism that becomes central when communicating with the international community.

Conclusion

In summary, it can be noted that the approaches of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan[*] and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham[*] are superficially relatively similar in this regard, as both have special counter-terrorism departments that primarily target Islamic State affiliates in their territories and prevent their terrorist activities, as well as arrest or eliminate key Islamic State figures in their regions. However, there are quite significant differences between the two approaches. The Taliban popularizes their counter-terrorism activities in every possible way and puts special emphasis on them, both in dialogue with the international community and among their own supporters and residents of their territories. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham avoids popularizing itself directly as a counter-terrorist movement for domestic audiences and uses such narratives only in dialogue with external actors. This has become particularly evident in recent rumors of the group's involvement in the elimination of the former leader of the Islamic State. First of all, this may be due to the fact that, unlike the Taliban, the HTS has recently made a temporary shift away from global jihadism towards local state-building. In addition, the Syrian movement is still quite strong with hardliners, primarily foreign fighters, who, despite their hatred of the Islamic State, hold ideological positions close to al-Qaeda. In recent years, the HTS has systematically purged its ranks of those elements that it considers too radi-

cal, but compared to the Taliban, there is still a significant presence of such figures, if not within the organization and the Idlib government, then on its territory.

Compared to the HTS, the Taliban has long since abandoned the strategy of recruiting international terrorist volunteers into their ranks, allowing them to define itself more clearly as a local Islamic movement. The Taliban's dependence on foreign fighters is virtually non-existent. However, international militants are present in Afghanistan, most notably in the Islamic Party of Turkistan[*] and al-Qaida. But the presence of all these organizations is conditional on direct agreements with the IEA that Afghan territory will not be used to organize terrorist attacks either inside or outside the country.

Given the context in which Hayat Tahrir al-Sham finds itself, it can be expected that in the coming years it will continue to systematic exclude international militants from its territory and increasing position itself as a movement that engages in counter-terrorism activities. Especially if the Taliban continue to be seen as an example of the successful development trajectory of radical militant movements in the Muslim world. In both cases, the further development of counter-terrorism departments can also be expected to continue, as the threat of the Islamic State remains. It is also likely that the practices of some localized Islamists will be shared and borrowed to combat global jihadists.

NOTES

[*] The organization is banned on the territory of the Russian Federation.

[1] The publication was prepared as part of the research (No. 23-00-027 'Army and Military Traditions in Politics, Society and Culture of Arab Countries') within the framework of the Research Foundation Program of the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE).

[2] France 24 (2021): 'Total Failure': The War on Terror 20 Years. URL: https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210826-total-failure-the-war-on-terror-20-years-on (accessed: 03.03.2023)

[3] URL: ماكرون يدفع الثمن.. انقلاب النيجر يرعب جيرانها العرب ويفضح مخطط فاغنر - YouTube

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