



# Implications of the Afghan Peace Negotiations on Terrorism in Central Asia



American Security Project



Perspective

—  
Cat Cronin

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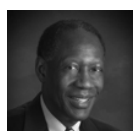
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Lieutenant General Norman R. Seip, USAF (Ret) served in the Air Force for 35 years. His last assignment was Commander of 12th Air Force.



### **David Wade**

David Wade is a consultant helping global corporations and organizations with strategic advice, public affairs and thought leadership, crisis communications, political intelligence gathering, and federal and legislative strategy.

# Asymmetric Operations

## In this Report:

This paper examines the relationship between six primary terrorist organizations in Central Asia. It explores the characteristics of Central Asian countries that make the region hospitable to terrorism, and it offers a brief history and summary of the Taliban, al-Qaeda, ISIS, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Jihad Union, and the Haqqani Network.

As the US and the Taliban continue to meet in an effort to negotiate peace, the connections between terrorist organizations must be re-examined. Since the strong connections have allowed the groups to expand across Central Asia and develop deep networks, the peace talks have implications for the entire region. The paper concludes with recommendations on how to help keep Central Asia stable as the uncertainty of the negotiations continues.

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## IN BRIEF

- The United States met with the Taliban in Qatar in early July for the seventh round of direct talks since late 2018. The ultimate goal is to end the violence in Afghanistan.
- The six primary terrorist organizations active in Central Asia include the Taliban, al-Qaeda, ISIS, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Jihad Union, and the Haqqani Network.
- Central Asian countries share numerous characteristics, including strict state control of religious practices, poor socio-economic projections, discrimination against minority populations, and authoritarian leadership and corruption.
- Excluding Afghanistan, Central Asian countries have mostly been spared from domestic terrorist attacks, but they are a significant exporter of foreign fighters. However, it is possible that groups will use existing networks to move their operations further into this region.
- As terrorist organizations in Central Asia have used their networks to adapt and spread, the peace talks with the Taliban have implications for the entire region.

## About the Author

*Cat Cronin is a Master's Student interested in terrorism and counter-terrorism. She holds a BA in Peace and Conflict Studies from Colgate University and is currently pursuing a dual Master's degree in Political Science and Public Policy from Duke University.*



## Introduction

In an attempt to broker peace in Afghanistan, the United States met with the Taliban in Qatar in early July for another round of direct talks.<sup>1</sup> These talks have important implications for the war-torn country. Due to the interconnectedness of terrorist organizations in the region, the outcome of the negotiations will also affect the entire region of Central Asia. If negotiations are successful, most international forces will likely leave the country soon after. But what about the other terrorist groups who are not party to the proposed agreements? Will they continue to plague Afghanistan? Or will they use existing connections to spread north and cement themselves into Central Asia? Although the future is uncertain, there is undoubtedly concern that if the talks go poorly or if Afghanistan is not stabilized, the connections between the Taliban, al-Qaeda, ISIS, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Jihad Union, and the Haqqani Network may cause Central Asia countries to experience a domino effect and a wave of terror.

## Current Peace Talks – Concerns and Implications

In early July, the United States and the Taliban met for the seventh round of direct talks since late 2018.<sup>2</sup> Attending these talks were US Special Representative for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, and 14 members of the Taliban, including the “Guantanamo Five” – five high-ranking militants who were held in the Guantanamo Bay detention camp for 13 years. Not present were representatives from the Afghan government, as the Taliban does not view the government to be legitimate.<sup>3</sup> The Taliban arrived at the negotiating table from a position of strength as it currently controls or holds influence over more Afghan territory than it has at any point since 2001.<sup>4</sup>

The first attempt at talks occurred in January 2012, but they collapsed due to opposition from the US and the Afghan government. The first time the Taliban and the Afghan government sat down was in July 2015, but little was accomplished. The Taliban later offered peace talks to the US in February 2017 after Trump was elected, and in October, the US agreed to negotiate. In November 2018, the Taliban joined multilateral peace talks hosted by Russia.<sup>5</sup>

This particular series of ongoing talks began a month later, in December 2018, as those in the government and terrorist organizations agreed that too many Afghans were dying in the war.<sup>6</sup> In the last five years, 45,000 Afghan troops and police officers have been killed fighting terrorist groups, mostly from Taliban attacks.<sup>7</sup> 2018 saw the highest number of civilian deaths in Afghanistan’s 18-year war, rising to 3,804 casualties (up 11% from 2017) and 7,189 injuries. The fatalities are occurring from both terrorist groups as well as Afghan and international forces. Pro-government forces actually killed more civilians in the first three months of 2019 than terrorists (over 350 people, which equates to 52.5% of all deaths during the time).<sup>8</sup> By the end of the first half of 2019, there were a total of 1,366 civilian deaths and 2,446 injuries, with more deaths (717) still attributed to pro-government forces.<sup>9</sup>



U.S. Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad. State Department photo.

The goal of the new talks is to reach an agreement by September 1, 2019, but the latest round concluded on August 12 with no agreement.<sup>10</sup> An acceptable agreement will have to broker political power-sharing and security provisions between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The US wants four outcomes to emerge from the deal, including a permanent cease-fire, a promise by the Taliban to not permit a sanctuary for other terrorist organizations (particularly al-Qaeda and ISIS) on Afghan soil, serious discussions between the Taliban and the Afghan government, and an eventual US and NATO troop withdrawal.<sup>11</sup> So far, the Taliban has tentatively agreed not to allow ISIS or al-Qaeda on Afghan territory, and the organization seems prepared to stop fighting if it receives a good enough deal. However, the group will not agree to a deal until the withdrawal time of all foreign troops is lowered – the US offered a 2.5-year deadline (down from 3 years), but the Taliban wants all foreign armies gone within 9 months.<sup>12</sup>

There is much unpredictability surrounding the outcome of the new talks. The US is wary of withdrawing all its troops too soon in fear that Afghanistan will fall into chaos. A full withdrawal does not necessarily mean the country will collapse, but war could continue, and the chaos could lead to the emergence of new violent groups. Furthermore, continued war without an American presence could open up a security vacuum that new or existing terrorist groups may seek to fill.<sup>13</sup> Successful talks will lead to two new challenges: intra-Afghan dialogue and the enforcement of a peace document (if one is signed) across all factions of the Taliban.<sup>14</sup>

There are discussions that intra-Afghan dialogue may occur within the next few weeks, after US-Taliban negotiations conclude.<sup>15</sup> US Special Representative Khalilzad said the talks would “take place between the Taliban and an inclusive and effective national negotiating team consisting of senior government officials, key political party representatives, civil society and women.”<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, the Taliban will only agree to begin the intra-Afghan talks after a foreign force withdrawal is announced. Many are hoping that this agreement will be reached at the eighth round of talks, scheduled to start in August.<sup>17</sup>

But while the Taliban is discussing peace deals in Afghanistan, other regional militant groups are not present at the negotiating table.<sup>18</sup> If other organizations make their way onto Afghan soil, the deal may fall apart, plunging the country back into violence. Despite its tentative agreement, it remains unclear how the Taliban will hold up its end of a deal by preventing Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorists. The Taliban has influence over 14 of the 18 terrorist groups who operate in Afghanistan and to achieve this request, it would likely have to break its allegiances.<sup>19</sup>

However, the consequences of breaking the allegiances are also uncertain and may cause chaos to spread throughout Central Asia. Furthermore, the Taliban does not have full control over all groups. For example, it is closely allied with al-Qaeda but has never been able to completely curtail the organization’s activities. Not only did al-Qaeda not ask the Taliban “permission” to conduct attacks such as the ones on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 or on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in 2001, the group actively defied the Taliban’s “orders to abstain from international attacks.”<sup>20</sup> If it no longer acts as a protectorate, will the Taliban fight the organizations that refuse to comply, like it did when the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan betrayed the group in favor of ISIS? Or will it continue to display reluctance to sever its ties with other powerful groups?

The terrorist organizations in the region are not isolated to one country – they are able to adapt and spread to different regions depending on political developments and vulnerabilities. These groups have spent years cultivating their networks throughout Central Asia, which makes the implications of the current peace talks more concerning for the region.

## Central Asia

Central Asia consists of five former Soviet republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) and Afghanistan, which shares many similarities to the other countries. Central Asian countries share a variety of characteristics, including strict state control of religious practices, poor socio-economic projections, discrimination against minority populations, and authoritarian leadership and corruption.<sup>21</sup> These countries consistently rank as some of the most corrupt states worldwide. Furthermore, Central Asia's history of political and religious oppression rather than integration makes the population vulnerable to terrorist groups which exploit their grievances.<sup>22</sup> Central Asian governments use the threat of Islamic terrorism as a way of justifying a monopoly of political power and the suppression of opponents and critics.

Excluding Afghanistan, Central Asian countries have been mostly spared from domestic terrorist attacks, but they are a significant exporter of foreign fighters. Approximately 4,000 people from the five “stans” traveled abroad to fight for ISIS within the last decade. The majority originate from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which have the highest number of foreign fighters per capita, with 1,500 and 1,300 respectively. Trends suggest a possible “shift in focus and re-location to Central Asia” may cause the region to experience more domestic attacks in the future. This could be a result of Central Asia's increasing economic and political connections to China that may intensify the “root causes of political violence in the region.”<sup>23</sup> If talks with the Taliban are successful and terrorist groups cannot operate out of Afghanistan, it is likely they will move to other parts of Central Asia. The border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan is already used for drug trafficking and smuggling, which increases the likelihood of foreign fighters returning to the area to set up operational cells.<sup>24</sup>

Continuing trends related to climate change may also make the threat of terrorism more likely in Central Asia. The last few decades have seen an average temperature rise of 0.39° C per decade, which has resulted in longer and more devastating droughts.<sup>25</sup> The droughts have led to a limited amount of available drinking water as it is evaporating faster, leaving behind saline soil which cannot be used for agriculture. Furthermore, warming temperatures are melting the Central Asian glaciers, further decreasing the water supply. Scientists predict that total crop yields in the region are expected to drop by 30% by 2050 due to climate change's effects on weather patterns.<sup>26</sup> As water resources diminish and food insecurity rises, the appeal of terrorist organizations will likely grow. After all, “climate shocks and stresses are pushing many into extreme poverty. Joining an armed group is sometimes the only option available.”<sup>27</sup>



The countries of Central Asia. Image credit: Wikimedia Commons.

## Country Information

Although the Central Asian countries share many characteristics, they differ in their recent history and geographic terrain, making some states more vulnerable to terrorism than others. Included below is a brief description of each country that provides insight on why it may be hospitable to terrorist organizations looking to move or expand their bases outside of Afghanistan and into other areas of Central Asia.

### Afghanistan

The roots of terrorism have been present in Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion in 1979. The invasion led to the rise of the Mujahideen (a collection of insurgent groups) whom the US initially supported and some of whom later developed into groups including the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The Mujahideen coalition government ruled Afghanistan during the mid-1990s until the Taliban took over. After 9/11, the US determined Osama bin Laden to be the perpetrator of the attacks and that he was hiding in Afghanistan, so the US launched Operation Enduring Freedom, which began the Global War on Terrorism. Now the War in Afghanistan has spanned 18 years and has become America's longest war, costing the US \$1 trillion.<sup>28</sup> Rather than seeing a decline in violence, in 2018, Afghanistan was named the world's deadliest country for terrorism.<sup>29</sup>



Mujahideen in Kunar, Afghanistan in 1986. Image credit: Wikimedia Commons / Erwin Lux. CC BY-SA 3.0.

### Kazakhstan

In December 1991, Kazakhstan became the last of the Republics to declare independence from the Soviet Union. Compared to some of its neighbors, Kazakhstan is a more peaceful state.<sup>30</sup> The geographically large country has abundant oil and mineral reserves that have permitted it to maintain the highest GDP in the Central Asian region.<sup>31</sup> The country consists of a slightly more diverse population than its neighbors, and as such, the Kazakh government continues to “maintain strict controls on freedom of assembly and religion.”<sup>32</sup>

### Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan, a country almost entirely bordered by mountain crests, became an independent state in August 1991.<sup>33</sup> It has been struggling with widespread poverty and ethnic population divisions ever since.<sup>34</sup> One of the more ethnically diverse countries in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan is majority Kyrgyz with a small Russian minority which “still exhibits a tenuous relationship with the Kazakh population and national government due to political authoritarianism, exclusion of national minorities from public life, and cultural impoverishment.”<sup>35</sup> Unlike other Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan operates under a Parliamentary Republic, but this comparatively progressive form of government has not prevented issues such as corruption and grave abuses at the hands of the powerful, due to shortcomings in law enforcement.<sup>36</sup>



## Tajikistan

After declaring independence from the Soviet Union in September 1991, Tajikistan almost immediately fell into a five-year civil war.<sup>37</sup> Since then, the country has struggled to overcome poverty and stabilize itself, and thus it remains highly dependent on Russia. Over nine-tenths of Tajikistan's geography is mountainous, consisting of numerous glaciers which are melting due to global warming, which in turn may damage towns and cities and push people into neighboring states.<sup>38</sup> Recently, Tajikistan has been trying to strengthen its tourism industry, but last summer's terrorist attack on four American and European cyclists has discouraged Westerners from choosing it over traditional destinations.<sup>39</sup>



A mountainous region in Wakhan, Tajikistan. Photo courtesy of Ninara. CC BY-SA 2.0.

## Turkmenistan

Due to its desert geography and lack of water, much of Turkmenistan is largely inhospitable to life.<sup>40</sup> The country was a Soviet republic until declaring independence in October 1991. It was known afterward for the “bizarre dictatorship” of Saparmyrat Niyazov who ruled until 2006 and turned the country into a “desert republic with grandiose monuments and golden statues of himself.”<sup>41</sup> Turkmenistan is rich in natural gas resources, and it possesses the sixth largest reserves in the world.<sup>42</sup> Like its neighbors, the country remains incredibly repressive.<sup>43</sup>



A statue of the legendary founder of the Turkmen people, at the Independence Monument in Turkmenistan. Image credit: Dan Lundberg / Flickr. CC BY-SA 2.0.

## Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan was established as a Republic by the Soviets in 1924 and declared its independence in August 1991.<sup>44</sup> Due to climate change, the country's water supply is diminishing: intense droughts in 2000, 2001, and 2008 “caused numerous artificial reservoirs... to dry up, causing major shortages not just for irrigation but also of drinking water.”<sup>45</sup> Although less than 10% of the land is arable, Uzbekistan is rich in minerals and natural gas, which are cultivated by the majority rural population.<sup>46</sup> As such, the country is known to be “resource-rich,” but also “desperately poor and wildly corrupt,” and many Uzbeks view Islamic values as a good alternative to chaos, corruption, and violence.<sup>47</sup> Uzbekistan also suffers from a very poor human rights record and is closed to independent scrutiny.<sup>48</sup>

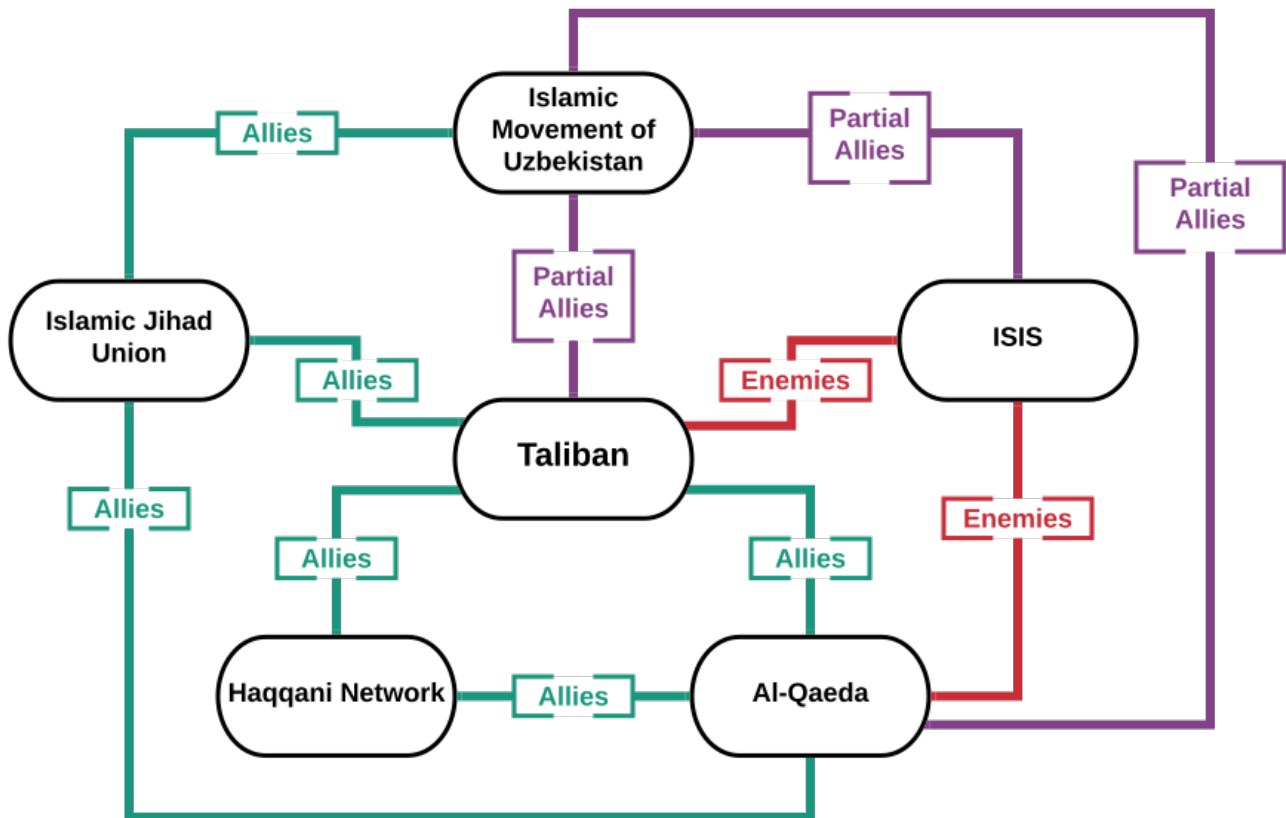


Jiva, a city in southwest Uzbekistan, is one of the best preserved old cities in Central Asia. Photo courtesy of Jose Javier Martin Espartosa. CC BY-SA 2.0.



# Terrorist Organizations

Many of the terrorist organizations that plague Central Asia are strongly interlinked and affect multiple countries. Several, including the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and the Haqqani Network, emerged as a direct result of the Soviet-Afghan War. Others, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Jihad Union, originated within Uzbekistan and rapidly spread throughout the region. ISIS is the only major organization to come from outside of Central Asia, although it was built from the remnants of the al-Qaeda branch in Iraq. After several decades, all six remain significant threats, both in Central Asia and beyond. It is useful to understand these groups, their capabilities, and their networks as they will all be affected if the US and Taliban are able to reach an agreement during the current talks.



The web of relationships between the Taliban and terror groups in the Central Asia region.

## The Taliban

The Taliban, technically classified by the US as an active insurgent group, was founded in Afghanistan in 1994 by Mullah Mohammed Omar, who led the group until his death in 2013.<sup>49</sup> However, the group's roots lie in the 1980s when the Mujahideen fought against the Soviets during the invasion of Afghanistan. Some of the Mujahideen later formed into the Taliban. The Taliban filled the government vacuum that existed after the War and officially ruled Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001. However, only Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates recognized the government as legitimate. By 1998, the group controlled 90% of Afghanistan.<sup>50</sup> The US-led invasion of Afghanistan vastly wounded the organization, and in the first few months of the operation, 30,000 Taliban fighters were killed.<sup>51</sup>

The goal of the group is to re-establish a Taliban-controlled government in Afghanistan and implement strict Sharia law. To achieve this objective, the Taliban actively targets Afghan government forces and coalition troops. After the 2009 US troop surge, they increasingly focused on targeting civilians. The Taliban uses a variety of methods, including suicide bombings, IEDs, rockets, assassinations, massacres, and kidnappings.<sup>52</sup> In December 2017, the Taliban was estimated to have an annual budget of \$300-\$500 million.<sup>53</sup> The insurgent group is mainly financed through the production of poppy and the drug trade. By the late 1990s, it controlled 96% of Afghan poppy fields, and after 2001, poppy and heroin funded 60% of Taliban activity. The organization is also financed through illegal timber trading, extortion, and lucrative mining operations, along with donations from local mosques and businesses and contributions from Islamic charities from countries in the Gulf region and Pakistan.<sup>54</sup>



Flag of the Taliban. Image credit: Wikimedia Commons.

The Taliban is linked to a number of active terrorist organizations in Central Asia. It cooperated with al-Qaeda before 2001 by providing a safe haven for Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda members.<sup>55</sup> Although the two are distinct groups, they share a religious motivation and geographic location, and al-Qaeda has continuously pledged its loyalty to the Taliban.<sup>56</sup> The organization also collaborated with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in the early 2010s and allowed IMU to integrate its operations in Northern Afghanistan. Finally, the Taliban shares a rich history with the Haqqani Network, which has provided weapons and training to militants since the mid-1990s.<sup>57</sup>

Throughout the last few years, the Taliban has continued to once again expand its operations. In September 2015, the insurgency captured the city of Kunduz, the first large city seized since 2001.<sup>58</sup> By January 2018, the Taliban controlled or threatened 70% of Afghanistan.<sup>59</sup> By the end of the year, the US military has estimated there are approximately 60,000 Taliban members in Afghanistan and Central Asia.<sup>60</sup> However, some experts argue the number could be significantly higher – as high as 100,000. Either way, it is a substantial increase from the 20,000 remaining fighters that the US estimated the group to have in 2014.<sup>61</sup> As the group regains power, it remains one of the largest threats to people in Central Asia.

## Al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda also has its roots in the 1979-1989 Soviet-Afghan War when the Mujahideen fought against the Soviet Army and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.<sup>62</sup> In the beginning, the group was heavily reliant on external support. Osama bin Laden supported the Mujahideen with money, weapons, and fighters.<sup>63</sup> In the mid-1980s, he was aided by the Haqqani Network, which provided training and combat experience. The Haqqani Network also gave bin Laden land in the region between Afghanistan and Pakistan, where he built a training camp for jihadists. After the Soviets left the country, al-Qaeda was officially established.<sup>64</sup> Prior to 2001, the Taliban provided a safe haven for al-Qaeda and, in exchange for protection and shelter, bin Laden paid \$10-\$20 million per year along with “unconditional support.”<sup>65</sup>

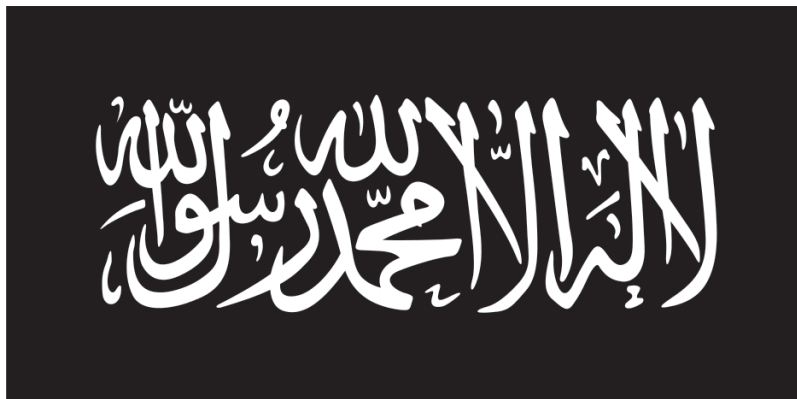
The goal of al-Qaeda is to destroy Western influence and the state of Israel, while also creating an Islamic caliphate (stretching from Spain to Indonesia) with a strict Sunni interpretation of Shariah law. As such, al-Qaeda targets Western presences in the Middle East, along with politicians and security forces that may prevent the group from realizing its ambitions. In attacks, al-Qaeda utilizes suicide bombings, IEDs, rockets, small arms attacks, grenades, kidnapping for ransom, assassinations, and hijackings.<sup>66</sup>

Today, al-Qaeda is geographically expansive, in large part due to its enormous network and worldwide affiliates. The terrorist organization has significant global influence, which has led to the emergence of many powerful groups, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Qaeda in Yemen (AQY), al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), al-Qaeda Kurdish Battalions (AQKB), al-Shabaab, and Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>67</sup> For years

it has competed with ISIS for global influence and allegiance.<sup>68</sup> Al-Qaeda suffered small blows in 2015 when several groups, including Boko Haram and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, switched their allegiance to ISIS. Al-Qaeda has made an effort to differentiate itself from ISIS by calling its members “moderate extremists” and avoiding mass casualty operations, particularly those that result in the deaths of Muslim civilians. As of 2018, there are roughly 40,000 members of al-Qaeda and its affiliates, with the majority located in Syria, Somalia, Libya, and Yemen.<sup>69</sup> Although al-Qaeda is headquartered in Afghanistan and Pakistan, only 800 or so members remain in that region.<sup>70</sup>

## The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

ISIS emerged in 2013 after it split from al-Qaeda, and it rapidly attracted tens of thousands of worldwide supporters.<sup>71</sup> At its height, it controlled vast territories in Iraq and Syria and had accomplished its goal of forming an Islamic state with a caliphate.<sup>72</sup> In its attacks, ISIS historically engaged in suicide bombings, executions, car bombings, and kidnappings, but recently has focused more on guerilla warfare tactics. The group is financed through extortion, robbery, human trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, and the sale of captured oil resources. It used to be the wealthiest terrorist organization in the world – in 2014, it was worth \$1.3 - \$2 billion, but by June 2017, it had lost 80% of its revenue sources.<sup>73</sup>



Flag of al-Qaeda. Image credit: Wikimedia Commons.



Flag of ISIS. Image credit: Wikimedia Commons.



ISIS is very influential and has sparked a global following. Through its social media campaigns and high-quality production videos, the group has been particularly successful in the recruitment of foreign fighters. Not only have thousands flocked to the Middle East and North Africa region to join the group, but hundreds of radicalized individuals have launched attacks from their home. Additionally, other terrorist organizations were encouraged to switch their allegiance; the Central Asian group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, pledged its loyalty in 2015. ISIS is successful in attracting individuals from Central Asia who feel repressed, particularly young Uzbek men who are eager to prove themselves and engage in attacks abroad.<sup>74</sup>

Within the last few months, ISIS has been expanding into Afghanistan and Central Asia. ISIS first appeared in Afghanistan with a few dozen fighters in the summer of 2014, during the peak of its power. Now, ISIS commands thousands of fighters in the region, many of whom originate from Central Asia. People in Central Asia view ISIS as a much larger threat than the Taliban due to its sophisticated military capabilities and its tactic of civilian targeting.<sup>75</sup> Currently, ISIS is using Afghanistan as a launching pad to attack Pakistan, but it is also setting itself up to focus on Central Asia in the future.<sup>76</sup>

## **The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan**

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is one of the longest-lasting Central Asian militant groups in modern history.<sup>77</sup> IMU seeks to establish Islamic rule throughout the countries in which it operates, (Afghanistan, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) and wage war against anyone who is considered an enemy of its mission or a threat to Islam. This goal involves expelling Western interests from Central Asia, principally through violent attacks. IMU uses tactics such as suicide bombings, kidnappings, firearm attacks, low-intensity bomb attacks, and vehicle-borne explosive devices.<sup>78</sup>

IMU dates back to 1991 when it was founded in Uzbekistan's Ferghana Valley. Due to the country's anti-Islamic views, the Uzbek government quickly outlawed the organization, and its leaders fled to Tajikistan where they plotted against Uzbekistan. In the following years, the leaders formed alliances with other major terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban.<sup>79</sup> Al-Qaeda supported the Uzbek-based group logistically and financially and trained IMU's initial militant members in Afghanistan.<sup>80</sup> The Taliban also supported many of IMU's operations, and in return, IMU fought alongside the group in 2001 during the US-led invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>81</sup> With the defeat of the Taliban, IMU lost its opium corridor between Northern Afghanistan and Central Asia, which had previously brought in hundreds of millions of dollars from the drug trade.<sup>82</sup> Although severely damaged, IMU was eventually able to build up to more than 2,000 members by recruiting extremists from countries throughout Central Asia and Pakistan.<sup>83</sup>

The Taliban and IMU remained close and, in the early 2010s, the Taliban allowed the smaller group to integrate into its shadow government in Afghanistan's northern province.<sup>84</sup> A turning point for the group came in 2015 when leader Usman Ghazi pledged his allegiance to ISIS and angered the Taliban, who retaliated by killing most of IMU's members in raids.<sup>85</sup> Today, what remains of IMU is split between those who seek to preserve the group's name and previous alliances with al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and those who have continued to be allied with ISIS.<sup>86</sup> Those loyal to ISIS have provided the group with linkages across Central Asian countries and have allowed ISIS to capitalize upon IMU's network to expand its activities into Afghanistan.<sup>87</sup>

## The Islamic Jihad Union

The Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) is an “umbrella term that refers to a network of extremists in Central Asia comprised of Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Kazakh radicals who are linked to, but not formally associated with, the IMU.”<sup>88</sup> The group emerged from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in the early 2000s after internal splits – while IMU aimed its attacks on Central Asia, the Islamic Jihad Union wanted a more global focus. The Sunni violent extremist group aims to overthrow the Uzbek government, but it also has an international agenda and seeks to damage Western influence, infrastructure, and personnel.<sup>89</sup>

In the early 2000s, the Islamic Jihad Union conducted attacks in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and operated training camps in Kazakhstan. Today, IJU mostly operates against international forces based in Afghanistan. It cooperated with the Taliban and helped them seize Kunduz City in 2015; today, the two groups are still conducting joint raids. IJU also coordinates major joint activities with al-Qaeda, such as the 2015 attack on an Afghan military base. IJU primarily operates out of Afghanistan and is estimated to have 100-200 active members.<sup>90</sup>

## The Haqqani Network

Although the Haqqani Network operates independently and has its own command structure, it is technically a branch of the Afghan Taliban.<sup>91</sup> The organization, which can trace its roots to the late 1970s, was officially founded by Jalaluddin Haqqani in 1994 and merged under the Taliban in 1996.<sup>92</sup> During the 1980s, Haqqani fought against the Soviets in the Soviet-Afghan War and was supported by the CIA, who provided the group with weapons and cash.<sup>93</sup> Since its formation, the Haqqani Network has been a family organization, and all leadership positions are held by family members. The current leader is Jalaluddin Haqqani’s son, and the founder’s suspected nephew, Sangeen Zadran, is the chief military commander.<sup>94</sup>

The Haqqani Network wants to stay local, and its goals include establishing an Islamic state in Pakistan and Afghanistan, along with building a caliphate under Islamic law.<sup>95</sup> The group engages in a variety of tactics but is particularly well known for its high-profile attacks, including the June 2011 assault on the Kabul Intercontinental Hotel and the 2008 and 2009 suicide bombings of the Indian Embassy in Kabul.<sup>96</sup> The Haqqani Network receives funding through various means, such as receiving donations from mosques, extracting taxes in areas it controls, and engaging in extortion, smuggling, and kidnapping.<sup>97</sup> The group is known for its ability to adapt by allying itself with larger organizations.<sup>98</sup>



Map of where the Haqqani Network operates today. Image credit: NCTC.

The Haqqani Network is also strongly linked with al-Qaeda, primarily in the North Waziristan tribal region in Pakistan.<sup>99</sup> Despite its initial ties to the CIA, by 2009, the US considered the Network to be Afghanistan's most lethal group and the biggest threat to Americans living in the country.<sup>100</sup> At the time, the US "blamed the network for most attacks on international forces based in Afghanistan."<sup>101</sup> By 2012, the US Government had designated the Haqqani Network as a terrorist organization, as the group was actively fighting against Western interests in Afghanistan by conducting attacks on the US military and civilians.<sup>102</sup>

## Recommendations

As the US-Taliban talks continue and perhaps solidify towards an agreement, Central Asia is undoubtedly facing a highly complex situation with no clear or easy solutions. The biggest question is what will happen to the other terrorist groups who are not part of the negotiations. The following recommendations that relate to this concern in a broader sense may be somewhat idealistic, but they offer insight into the main areas that need to be monitored and addressed.

### 1. Make Afghanistan as stable as possible.

As terrorist organizations are connected throughout Central Asia, it is possible that the entire region could collapse if Afghanistan were to fall into chaos. Of course, this has been a goal of the US government for nearly two decades, but several steps could continue to be taken to help stabilize Afghanistan. In the event of a full troop withdrawal, one recommendation is to keep an intelligence presence active within the country.<sup>103</sup> President Trump has supported this view, arguing that it is essential to monitor what will undoubtedly be a tense situation between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Another recommendation to stabilize Afghanistan is to enhance efforts that will help individuals gain educational and professional skills. Today, half of Afghanistan's population of 15-24-year-olds – a prime age group for terrorist recruitment – are illiterate.<sup>104</sup> If a young adult cannot read, his job prospects decline, which may lead him to search for other forms of income and could result in him joining a terrorist organization. By keeping the workforce – particularly young men – engaged and capable of earning a steady paycheck, individuals will have less incentive to join a terrorist group. Afghanistan must develop a long-term budget that focuses on educational funding, especially in rural and conflict-prone areas where young adults are particularly at risk. The country must also continue to promote efforts that teach tangible skills that allow individuals to pursue employment or operate their own small businesses. The University Support and Workforce Development Program (USWDP), a five-year program funded by USAID that has taught skills to over 3,000 Afghans, offers a strong example for other projects to follow.<sup>105</sup>

### 2. Improve relations between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

If the current peace talks are successful, the next step will be negotiating between the Afghan government and the Taliban – two opposing forces who both believe the other lacks legitimacy to govern the country. Yet the Afghan government and the Taliban likely have the best understanding of what services the Afghan population needs most. As such, they must work together to help the country. There is also a clear need for a strong and reliable security force that can maintain stability, but this will likely be a source of contention and therefore challenging to implement.



As the security forces of the Taliban and the Afghan government are essentially in opposition, a herculean effort is needed to deconflict their goals and actions. Ultimately, the effectiveness of any united government will rely upon a monopoly of the use of force, which means the eventual integration of the two security forces. The difficulty of this goal cannot be understated, as the two sides have opposing goals and targets.

### **3. Increase the strength of coalitions that counter terrorism.**

It is necessary to increase the strength of coalitions that counter terrorism and terrorist financing, particularly at the regional level. One coalition that has potential is the Eurasian Group on Combatting Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism.<sup>106</sup> The group's nine members, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, aim to reduce the threat of international terrorism by ensuring the transparency of financial systems. Another potential group to work through is the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which is made up of Russia and several former Soviet states.<sup>107</sup> Although CSTO is seen to be a "pale replica of NATO," it informally binds several Central Asian states together and offers the potential for the countries to work together to fight a substantial terrorist threat.<sup>108</sup> These coalitions may be weak and faulty, but they are a base for Central Asian countries to work off of. Growing uncertainty in the region makes even the shakiest of coalitions worth examining. There is little downside in increasing the coalitions, as working together and sharing intelligence will help these countries to diminish the threat of terrorism on their soil.

### **4. Use international pressure to encourage Central Asian governments to loosen religious restrictions.**

An extremely challenging recommendation to implement, pressuring Central Asian governments to loosen their religious restrictions could have major implications. Uzbekistan in particular is affected by harsh religious laws that cause many to leave the country and become foreign fighters. Uzbekistan's restrictive laws include not being able to grow a beard (which is seen as a sign of religious extremism), being rigorously vetted to go on a pilgrim to Mecca and then accompanied by government officials, and accepting strict mosque rules set by the government.<sup>109</sup> Islamic political parties are outlawed, and religious activists are often arrested. Although meant to curtail terrorist groups, the restrictions have pushed the problem to other places rather than actually solving it. Clearly, "cracking down on religious practice and ideology are ineffective," and, in fact, appears to unintentionally promote extremism.<sup>110</sup> Pressuring Uzbekistan and other strict Central Asian states to loosen a few of their religious restrictions may help diminish the proliferation of terrorism within the region.

### **5. Determine the role of external powers and international support.**

While many states will be affected by the outcome of the US-Taliban talks, several also play a vital role in the present policy creation and implementation. Countries which are actively involved in supporting terrorist organizations, like Russia and Pakistan, still have much to gain through stabilizing Afghanistan and pushing for peace.<sup>111</sup> Other states, such as Qatar, have been acting as mediators for years, and have a clearly defined role in settling the conflict.

In late 2015, Russia stated that the "Taliban's goals 'coincide' with Russia's regarding ISIS," which has fostered collaboration between the country and the non-state actor and allowed Russia to have increased influence in Afghanistan.<sup>112</sup> In response to the peace talks, Russia has not acknowledged its support of terror groups and has instead offered to help Afghanistan fight terror groups through diplomacy and politics, rather than a military solution.<sup>113</sup> Ideally, Russia will continue to support the Taliban's peace efforts and provide assistance in a sincere attempt to stabilize Afghanistan.

Another important player to consider is Pakistan, which has a large role in sorting out Afghanistan. Pakistan is in a unique position, as many of the Central Asian terrorist groups have headquarters or bases in the country. Many in the international community are critical of the fact that Pakistan has been backing terrorist groups, including the Taliban and the Haqqani Network, by providing safe havens, military assistance, and intelligence.<sup>114</sup> Yet recently, Pakistan has been cooperating with the US, as it wants the US out of Afghanistan in a timely manner. Pakistan, who has supported the Taliban since the mid-1990s as a way to keep rival India's influence out of Afghanistan, has significant leverage in pushing the organization towards making a peace deal.<sup>115</sup> It is in Pakistan's interest to help stabilize Afghanistan, so its neighbor cannot "become a safe haven for anti-Pakistan militant groups."<sup>116</sup> But the country also has to be wary that if groups are forced to leave Afghanistan, they may try to use existing connections to inundate Pakistan.

Finally, it is worthwhile to consider the role of Qatar, a country that has been instrumental to the peace talks thus far and could continue to help after a foreign troop withdrawal. Qatar has hosted several rounds of the peace talks and has acted as both a negotiator and a mediator. Qatar is in a unique position: throughout the last decade, it has acted as a refuge to wealthy, high-ranking Taliban members and their families, while also still supporting US interests. The neutral country has acted as a mediator in several other international conflicts, such as the struggle in Sudan's Darfur region and the fissure between the Fatah and Hamas factions in Palestine.<sup>117</sup> The international community may further require Qatar's experience to help aid and maintain peace in Afghanistan and the broader region after a foreign troop withdrawal.

## Conclusion

The primary goal of the current talks is to stabilize Afghanistan and promote peace, therefore providing an exit ramp for US forces. Although Afghanistan has been substantially less stable than the rest of Central Asia, the country does not exist within a vacuum; it is linked to external forces, including intertwined terrorist groups and various state governments. As such, Afghanistan can't simply be "fixed" without the other issues that are present in the region being deconflicted. Other state governments, including the US, Russia, Pakistan, and Qatar, have differing roles in defining the outcome of the peace talks.

However, these state governments are assuming that long-lasting peace is possible among the Afghan government, all terrorist groups within the country, and the Afghan people. As of now, it is unclear if any peace reached will be enduring, as it is possible that a negotiated deal collapses, and that the Afghan government will ultimately fall to the Taliban. The world is holding its breath as the region faces a potential turning point for its stability. We can only hope that the involved players will show some flexibility in compromising as talks continue about Afghanistan's future – and the future of Central Asia.

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The American Security Project (ASP) is a nonpartisan organization created to educate the American public and the world about the changing nature of national security in the 21st Century.

Gone are the days when a nation's security could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor and competitiveness of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with our partners and with all the tools at our disposal and address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this we must forge a bipartisan consensus here at home.

ASP brings together prominent American business leaders, former members of Congress, retired military flag officers, and prominent former government officials. ASP conducts research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them via events, traditional & new media, meetings, and publications.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, energy challenges, and our economic wellbeing. Partisan bickering and age old solutions simply won't solve our problems. America – and the world - needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge that consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities that abound.



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