

September 2020

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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.

# In this Report:

The Haqqani Network functions as an autonomous branch of the Taliban that carries out operational attacks and serves as a conduit for other terrorist organizations' activities. By avoiding the publicity of other terrorist organizations, the Haqqani Network has been able to operate at a high-level, playing a double game of disrupting the peace agreement signed in February 2020 in Doha, Qatar, while also signaling peaceful messages towards American and allied forces as the U.S. leaves Afghanistan.

This report explores the history and capabilities of the Haqqani Network and offers policy recommendations for the U.S. to consider as the February 2020 Doha peace agreement continues to see American forces withdraw from Afghanistan. The Haqqani Network is likely to play a significant role in events in the coming months.

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### **IN BRIEF**

- Beginning with its patriarch leader, Jalaluddin Haqqani, the group has been able to establish relations with a variety of terrorist groups to further its objectives.
- Recent endeavors with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria–Khorasan Province illustrate a growing trend of increased attacks on Afghan security forces that will likely continue after American troops leave Afghanistan.
- Sirajuddin Haqqani's roles as deputy emir and militant commander of the Taliban's forces have allowed the Haqqani Network greater influence over the Taliban's decision-making.
- The Haqqani Network aims to reestablish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and strives to support the Taliban in ruling over the country once again.
- U.S. policies will differ depending on whether the Doha agreement stands; However, the U.S. must factor in the role of the Haqqanis when it comes to the U.S.' goals in the region.

### About the Author

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### Intro

Considered by the U.S.-led Coalition and Afghan forces alike to be the "most lethal and sophisticated insurgent group" operating in Afghanistan, the Haqqani Network functions both as an independent organization and as a fierce branch of the Afghan Taliban.¹ In recent years, the Haqqani Network has increased its influence in the Afghan Taliban's leadership circle, as leader Sirajuddin Haqqani was promoted to deputy emir of the Taliban, or the second in command, as well as the commander of its military forces. Among the varying factions within the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani Network appears to be the most unified division largely because of its understanding of how to connect differing organizations, both state and non-state actors, as well as its cohesive tactical approaches.²

In 2012, The United States Government designated the Haqqani Network as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) because of its sustained engagement in the Afghan insurgency, ties with other terrorist organizations including the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda, and ongoing assaults on U.S. and allied forces in the region.<sup>3</sup> The group utilizes brutal tactics including suicide attacks, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and well-coordinated assaults to achieve its objectives.

The Haqqani Network strives to remain out of the public's perception and has aligned with other terrorist organizations to distance itself from some of its varying activities. As peace negotiations between the U.S. and the Afghan Taliban have continued, the Haqqani Network has played a double game of continuing to fight while simultaneously relaying peaceful messages to diplomatic emissaries of the U.S. to further the removal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan.

# **Background**

## Group's Beginnings

Founded by Mujahideen leader Jalaluddin Haqqani, the Haqqani Network was formally established in 1996. Following the successful removal of Soviet troops from the Afghan-Soviet war, Jalaluddin allied with the Afghan Taliban to establish Taliban rule in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> Jalaluddin was a fearless Afghan commander who was a member of the Hezb-e Islami faction.<sup>5</sup>

Based primarily in North Waziristan, Pakistan, the Haqqani Network was created as a Sunni Islamist militant organization. The group engages in cross-border activities into eastern Afghanistan and Kabul and over time has aligned itself with the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, and al-Qaeda.<sup>6</sup> While the Haqqani Network operates independently, founder Jalaluddin and his son and current leader, Sirajuddin, each pledged allegiance to the Afghan Taliban's leadership.

### **Location and Tribal Ties**

The Haqqani Network's base of operations is located in North Waziristan, Pakistan, a region that borders Afghanistan in remote mountains. Specifically, the group resides in Miram Shah, a town within Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in the northern parts of the country. In Pakistan, the group operates "base camps for conducting activities, including weapons acquisitions, the training of suicide bombers and logistical planning for military operations." While the Haqqanis reside in Pakistan, the network's operations span across the border into Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, the group's stronghold spans the Loya-Paktia region, which includes provinces in Paktia, Paktika, Khost, and sections of Ghazni. The Khost region is particularly significant as it offers routes that connect Afghanistan and Pakistan and thus allows the flow of supplies, arms, and people to cross the border more easily. Sirajuddin and his forces control these regions through military might and the support of the local populations.

Tied closely to the group's longevity and identity, the region has supported the Haqqani Network and is a driving force behind its sustained success. The Haqqanis stem from the Zadran tribe, which is one of the Pashtun tribes located throughout Afghanistan and Pakistan. Both the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network are largely Pashtun and share a common goal of increasing the number of Pashtuns in government positions. Pashtun tribes comprise roughly 40% of the Afghan population, yet are severely underrepresented in governing roles. It is important to note that while the Haqqanis strive



Map of the Haqqani Network's base of operations. Source: Office of the Director of National Intelligence

for more representation in the Afghan Government, they do not provide social welfare support to the public they currently reside over. Instead, the group generally allocates funds towards military endeavors.

### Goals and Ideology

The Haqqani Network's primary goals include reestablishing the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and supporting the reemergence of the Afghan Taliban's authority over the country. Before this can happen, the Haqqanis believe Western forces, i.e., the U.S.-led Coalition forces who support pro-democratic leaders in Afghanistan, must be removed from the country. To achieve these aims, the group has favored a military-centric approach, opting for committing high-profile assassination attempts, suicide attacks, and waging a war of insurgency against the West. The group's brutal approach has been widely successful as an effective fighting force and at attracting foreign fighters.

Similar to the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani Network adheres to a Sunni Islamic interpretation called Deobandi. <sup>16</sup> The strict Deobandi interpretation believes that jihad is necessary to remove Western influence from Afghanistan to attain its objectives. <sup>17</sup> Jihad is the "holy war waged on behalf of Islam as a religious duty," or the literal meaning of "struggle or effort," in defense of Islamic principles. <sup>18</sup>

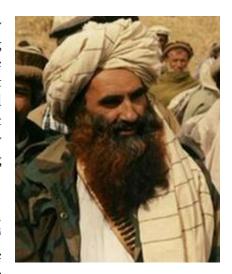
# Leadership

The Haqqani Network is a primarily clan-based and hierarchical organization. Almost all of its leaders are family members, but the few who are not blood relatives graduated from the Dar al-Ulum Haqqaniyaa madrassa in Pakistan, where the now-deceased patriarch Jalaluddin Haqqani once attended.<sup>19</sup> The Dar al-Ulum Haqqaniyaa madrassa, a religious school, is also known to have ties with the Taliban.<sup>20</sup>

## Jalaluddin Haqqani

The founder of the Haqqani Network, Jalaluddin Haqqani, was a "legendary tribal fighter" who battled the Soviets in the 1980s with the Mujahideen during the 10-year Afghan-Soviet war. <sup>21</sup> During the war, his leadership and effective tactics earned him a fierce reputation for his military prowess. <sup>22</sup> Throughout the Afghan-Soviet war, Jalaluddin established close relations with groups and individuals throughout the Sunni Gulf states. <sup>23</sup> These ties would later benefit the Haqqani Network financially. Jalaluddin was highly respected by many organizations and was often instrumental in solving disputes among bickering jihadist factions in the Afghan-Pakistan region.

One of the friendships Jalaluddin made during the war was with Usama Bin Laden, who Jalaluddin later mentored during al-Qaeda's formulative years. <sup>24</sup> In the mid-1990s, Jalaluddin allied with the Afghan Taliban. He became the group's Minister of Tribal and Border Affairs, <sup>25</sup> a position he served in until the U.S. invasion in 2001. <sup>26</sup>



Jalaluddin Haqqani. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Following the 2001 U.S. invasion, Jalaluddin led some Afghan Taliban and Pashtun troops in the fight against the U.S.-led coalition.<sup>27</sup> As a close associate of Bin Laden, Jalaluddin also aided al-Qaeda members in escaping to Pakistan,<sup>28</sup> where he and his forces harbored the members following the collapse of the Taliban government.<sup>29</sup>

Jalaluddin remained the leader of the Haqqani Network until he became bedridden for several years.<sup>30</sup> The Afghan Taliban announced his death on September 4, 2018, but it is possible he passed away earlier.<sup>31</sup> Jalaluddin was succeeded by his son, Sirajuddin, who had taken over the Haqqani Network's day-to-day operations.

## Sirajuddin Haqqani

Sirajuddin Haqqani began leading the Haqqani Network when his father Jalaluddin Haqqani became ill. Along with other close relatives, Sirajuddin is the driving force behind the Haqqani Network's operations.<sup>32</sup> The younger Haqqani is considered far more radical and violent than his father, evident in his tactics of using suicide bombs and IEDs.<sup>33</sup> Sirajuddin was the orchestrator of the assassination attempt on Afghan President Hamid Karzai in April 2008, and has shown minimal remorse for killing innocent civilians.<sup>34</sup> Unlike his father, Sirajuddin is in favor of utilizing criminal acts to achieve his objectives. These actions include "drug trafficking and kidnapping for ransom" to assist the network's funding.<sup>35</sup>

In August 2015, Sirajuddin was named the deputy of the newly appointed Afghan Taliban emir Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Mansur, which further aligned the Afghan Taliban with the Haqqani Network.<sup>36</sup> Sirajuddin remains in this role today. As deputy emir and military commander of the Afghan Taliban, Sirajuddin has been largely responsible for the effective insurgency that has been waged in Afghanistan since assuming leadership from his father.<sup>37</sup>



Haqqani Network leader Sirajuddin Haqqani. Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation

Sirajuddin's increased role in the Afghan Taliban has allowed the Haqqani Network more influence in the Afghan Taliban's day-to-day operations and leadership to exert the Haqqani's power. He is well respected among jihadist circles because of his persistent commitment for the Haqqani's support of global jihad. Sirajuddin's contributions consist of "armed conflict to expand the Islamic world- by providing shelter, training camps and financing in Afghanistan and Pakistan." Similar to his father, Sirajuddin has been employed to diffuse disputes among varying Taliban factions. The U.S. Department of State designated Sirajuddin Haqqani as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in March 2008, and is currently offering a \$10 million reward for information that could lead to his arrest. 39

### Yahya Haqqani

Yahya Haqqani, also known as Qari Saheb, is a senior member of the Haqqani Network and brother-in-law of Sirajuddin Haqqani. Since mid-2009, Yahya has served as the Haqqani Network's main link to al-Qaeda. 40 Yahya also acts as Sirajuddin's Arabic interpreter, and he is the primary liaison between the Haqqani Network's foreign fighters who are Arab, Uzbek, and Chechen. 41 Additionally, Yahya engages in the group's "financial, terrorist, and propaganda operations," and he has been instrumental in obtaining financial support for the Haqqani Network's operations. This role includes generating funds for the Haqqani fighters and creating Afghan Taliban media for propaganda videos. 42

The U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Yahya Haqqani as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in February 2014. There is a \$5 million dollar reward for information that may lead to his arrest.<sup>43</sup>

## Aziz Haqqani

Aziz Haqqani is a brother of Sirajuddin Haqqani, and a senior figure in the Haqqani Network. Aziz heavily engages in both the decision-making and logistical processes of the Haqqani Network in its cross-border operations against the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the Afghan Government.<sup>44</sup> He additionally operates as the main channel for the Haqqani's activities in Kabul and for other major attacks in Afghanistan.<sup>45</sup>

# Hafiz Azizuddin Haqqani

In a May 2020 United Nations (UN) Report, Hafiz Azizuddin is mentioned to have allegedly taken command of a new joint unit comprised of 2,000 armed men in cooperation with al-Qaeda. The alleged new joint unit will be financed by al-Qaeda. In addition to controlling the development of this new unit, he also leads the joint front of operations in eastern Afghanistan. 47



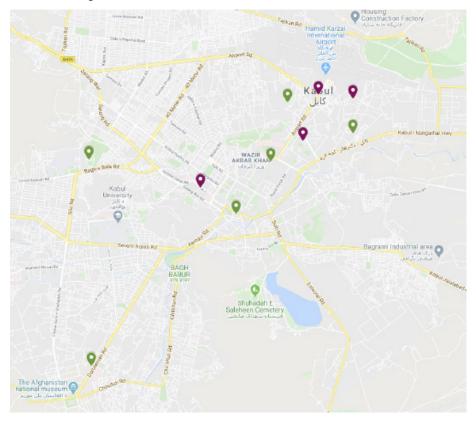
Yahya Haqqani. Source: Department of State



Aziz Haqqani. Source: Department of State

# **Major Events**

The Haqqani Network is responsible for some of the highest-profiled attacks of the past two decades, and many of the attacks have been located in Afghanistan, specifically in Kabul.<sup>48</sup> Some of the attacks have been political, such as the 2008 assassination attempt against Afghan President Hamid Karzai.<sup>49</sup> Others have been aimed at Western organizations in hopes of dispelling Westerners from the country. The map below highlights some of the violent and deadly attacks that have transpired in the area.



Map Key: Green markers illustrate confirmed Haqqani Network attacks. Red markers display events that were likely orchestrated by the Haqqani Network, but are not confirmed.

### Attacks on Western Interests

The Haqqani Network has been known to target Western actors and interests. In December 2009, the Haqqani Network orchestrated a bombing against the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) Forward Operating Base Chapman. The bombing, called "one of the most lethal strikes against the agency in decades," resulted in the deaths of seven American intelligence officers. Two years later, in September 2011, a suicide truck bomber targeted a NATO base in the Wardak Province of Afghanistan, which killed four Afghan civilians and wounded seventy-seven U.S. soldiers. During the same month, the Haqqanis launched a day-long, multi-location attack in Kabul which targeted the U.S. Embassy and the headquarters of the ISAF, resulting in sixteen deaths. In June 2012, the Haqqanis arranged for a suicide bomber to attack Forward Operating Base Salerno near the Pakistan border. Two Americans were killed, and many more were close to being struck. Another base, Forward Operating Base Goode, was targeted the following year in October 2013, but Afghan forces intercepted the truck bomb deployed by the Haqqanis. The device, loaded with over 61,500 pounds of explosives, did not detonate, but was the largest truck bomb ever constructed.

### U.S. and Afghan Response to the Haqqani Network

In February 2010, the U.S. targeted the youngest of Sirajuddin's brothers, Mohammad, in a drone strike that resulted in his death.<sup>55</sup> A year later, the U.S. hindered the Haqqani Network in August 2012, when it conducted a drone strike killing Badruddin Haqqani, the brother of Sirajuddin and a senior Haqqani leader.<sup>56</sup> The Haqqani Network was further disrupted in November 2013, when its former head of fundraising, Nasiruddin Haqqani, was gunned down near Islamabad, Pakistan.<sup>57</sup>

In November 2019, three prominent Haqqani Network leaders were exchanged for 10 Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) personnel.<sup>58</sup> Haji Malik Khan, Hafiz Abdul Rashid Omari, and Anas Haqqani, brother of Sirajuddin, were exchanged for the ANDSF members along with two Western professors, Kevin King and Timothy Weeks, who had been held hostage for years.<sup>59</sup> More recently, in May 2020, Afghan forces arrested eight in a network comprised of both Haqqani forces and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) militants.<sup>60</sup> The raid killed five members of the joint network which was responsible for attacks during Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's official swearing-in ceremony in March, and on the Bagram airbase in April.<sup>61</sup>

# **Current Roles and Capabilities**

### Size

It is challenging to discern the exact number of militants in the Haqqani Network, but experts believe there are roughly 10,000 members, which composes roughly 20% of the Taliban's fighting forces. Many in the Haqqani Network are recruited from northern Pakistan and southeastern Afghanistan. However, senior leadership has extended recruitment outreach beyond the immediate region, and the Haqqani Network has attracted foreign fighters from Uzbekistan, Chechnya and Turkey. The Haqqani Network has attracted foreign fighters from Uzbekistan, Chechnya and Turkey.

## Capabilities

Operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Haqqani Network utilizes a wide array of tactics to achieve its goals. The Haqqani Network was the first terrorist organization to "regularly use suicide bombings in Afghanistan," and is responsible for some of the most violent attacks the country has experienced.<sup>64</sup> In addition, the group routinely employs IEDs, a tactic often used by al-Qaeda.<sup>65</sup>

When not conducting operations, Haqqani forces are often training their militants in base camps for future attacks. The group's control of southeastern Afghanistan forces other organizations to first obtain approval before engaging in activities in the region.<sup>66</sup>



Haqqani Network weapons cache seized by Afghan and coalition security forces in July 2011. ISAF photo

The Haqqanis' most beneficial role is as a conduit for other group's operations. From the connections that founder Jalaluddin established, the Haqqani Network has fostered relations with a variety of organizations and actors, including terrorist groups and nations. The Haqqanis have established a unique role that allows the group to be "able to diversify the resource mobilization of networks to which it has access." This position has allowed for the group, and other actors, not to overburden themselves by spreading too thin.

#### **Finances**

With the ascension of Sirajuddin as the Haqqani Network's leader, the group has transitioned to crime for financing its operations. Once compared to the Sopranos of Afghanistan, the Haqqanis employ a variety of means to generate money. Some of the illegal activities the group engages in include extortion, kidnapping for ransom, and trafficking rare gems and drugs. The group is also funded through wealthy Arab Gulf individuals, dating back to when Jalaluddin would travel around the region. Jalaluddin's sons continue to frequently visit the Arab Gulf to solicit funds for the Haqqani's operations. It is also believed that Pakistan has long supported the terrorist group financially due to its ties with the Pakistani ISI.

In addition to these engagements, the Haqqanis have also diversified their business interests to include additional legal business operations. These businesses include car dealerships, construction companies, and commercial and residential real estate holdings, but the companies are believed to be fronts used to develop the supplies necessary for constructing bombs.<sup>71</sup>

### External Relations – State Actors

The Haqqani Network has developed strong ties with other organizations and has positioned itself well to fulfill the desires and needs of other groups. The strategic alliances formed with non-Taliban groups allows the Haqqani Network to continue operating at high-levels in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>72</sup> The Haqqani Network held close relations with the U.S. in the past, and has ongoing ties with Pakistan, along with non-state actors including al-Qaeda, ISIS-K, and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). These close relations aid in the group's survival by allowing it to operate in the shadows and to finance its operations. The Haqqani Network has also worked with other smaller terrorist organizations such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

### **United States**

During the Afghan-Soviet war in the 1980s, the "Haqqanis were once the U.S.' closest allies in Afghanistan." In particular, the CIA established a close working relationship with Jalaluddin Haqqani by supplying the patriarch

with Stinger missiles to shoot down Soviet aircrafts. Jalaluddin also had a positive relationship with the late Texas Democrat, Charlie Wilson, who visited and championed the Mujahideen's cause.<sup>74</sup>

In 2002, Jalaluddin sent messages to former allies at the CIA stating he was open to working with the Agency once again to ally with the U.S.-friendly Afghan Government led by President Hamid Karzai.<sup>75</sup> The CIA held talks with Jalaluddin's brother Ibrahim and established plans to meet with Jalaluddin who at the time was leading Taliban troops. However, in Fall 2002, the U.S. military arrested Ibrahim in eastern Afghanistan as a potential terrorist threat.<sup>76</sup> The U.S. released him nine months later, but the prolonged response alienated Jalaluddin and



U.S. paratroops receiving airdropped supplies in Paktika province in 2007. Source: U.S. Army

relations quickly deteriorated. The negotiations fell through after terms could not be agreed upon, which led to chaos and subsequent American attacks on a family compound that resulted in the deaths of Haqqani children and women.<sup>77</sup> The two sides have since had tense relations.

### **Pakistan**

Pakistan's ties with the Haqqani Network stem back to the anti-Soviet era. The ties persist as a means to counter Indian influence in the region and to provide the Pakistani ISI a proxy to engage in various activities it would otherwise be unable to.<sup>78</sup> Pakistan's ISI has provided the group "weapons, training, and money," while also allowing it safe havens to reside within the state's borders.<sup>79</sup> The ISI also permits the Haqqanis to orchestrate attacks and "cross over into neighboring Afghanistan to carry them out."<sup>80</sup> As of 2012, the ISI "admits that it maintains regular contact with the Haqqanis, but denies providing operational support."<sup>81</sup> Some scholars argue that Pakistan views the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network as "armed allies,"<sup>82</sup> as the state generally leaves the organizations alone to operate, while at other times aids them during conflict.<sup>83</sup> Other senior U.S. intelligence officials have suggested that the ISI "gives advance warning to the Haqqani Network prior to launching select military operations in order to protect its terror proxy."<sup>84</sup>

While Pakistan denies overtly protecting the group, U.S. and Afghan officials have long stated the ISI provides sanctuaries for its forces.<sup>85</sup> In 2011, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen labeled the Haqqani Network as "a veritable arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence" agency.<sup>86</sup> Other military officials have echoed this sentiment, including former U.S. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis and General John Nicholson.<sup>87</sup> The U.S. has attempted to cease Pakistan's aid to the Haqqani Network, but Pakistan has yet to comply. In response to American demands, Pakistan has affirmed that it does not have the military capabilities to launch an offensive against the group in North Waziristan without spreading its forces too thin.<sup>88</sup>

In 2020, the U.S. State Department's annual terrorism report suggests Pakistan is not doing enough to counter terrorism in the country.<sup>89</sup> The report alludes to the ongoing support of the Haqqani Network as a proxy. Pakistan denies providing operational assistance to the Haqqanis, but its association with the Haqqani Network is believed to have aided the ongoing peace deal with the Taliban.<sup>90</sup>

## **External Relations- Non-State Actors**

### Al-Qaeda

The relationship between the Haqqani Network and al-Qaeda formed through years of working together. Dating back to Jalaluddin's time spent with Usama Bin Laden, the two networks have a strong bond built on "friendship, a history of shared struggle, ideological sympathy, and intermarriage." Al-Qaeda has historically depended on the Haqqanis to allow safe havens for its militants, and in return, the Haqqani Network has benefitted from al-Qaeda's military expertise and financial ties to Arab states. The alliance also enables al-Qaeda members to act as religious mentors to Taliban and Haqqani fighters.

Despite the Afghan Taliban agreeing to not allow terrorist groups to use Afghan soil to formulate terror plots, the relationship between al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and thus the Haqqani Network, persists. Al-Qaeda continues to operate covertly in Afghanistan and receives assurances from Afghan Taliban leaders that the Taliban will honor the groups' historical relations.<sup>94</sup>

#### **AMERICAN SECURITY PROJECT**

Al-Qaeda and the Haqqani Network continue to work closely together. In February 2020, prior to the signing of the U.S.-Taliban peace deal in Doha, Qatar, senior Haqqani leaders met with senior al-Qaeda leaders to discuss the peace process. Aiman Muhammed Rabi al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's leader since the 2011 death of Usama Bin Laden, met with Yahya and Hafiz Azizuddin Haqqani to assure al-Zawahiri of the group's loyalty, and to discuss the formation of a new joint unit. <sup>95</sup> The new joint force would be comprised of 2,000 armed fighters coming from the Haqqani and al-Qaeda ranks to entrench al-Qaeda's militants among the Taliban's forces. The new force would be financed by al-Qaeda and would be split into two different operational zones. Hafiz Azizuddin Haqqani would lead the overall unit, as well as forces located in the Loya-Paktiya area. This area includes the prominent Khost Province, in addition to Logar, Paktika and Paktiya. The head of the Haqqani's intelligence, Shir Khan Manga, would command the remaining forces in the Kunar and Nuristan regions. <sup>96</sup>

### Islamic State in Iraq and Syria - Khorasan Province

ISIS-K is another terrorist organization that has benefitted from relations with the Haqqani Network. While the group's operational capacity is not strong, the group has claimed credit for recent attacks that appear far



ISIS-K Flag. Source: Office of the Director of National Intelligence

greater than its capabilities. The May 2020 UN Report suggests the Haqqani Network may have aided ISIS-K with some of its assaults by providing "tactical accommodations." As ISIS-K lacks the ability to launch the high degree of attacks that have occurred, it is likely that the Haqqani Network has been behind some of the operations. Such an alliance does not bode well for the region, as it permits attacks to inflict casualties on military and civilian forces alike, while shirking the responsibility of the group which committed the assaults. Thus, counterterrorism funding might be diverted from countering more dangerous groups to smaller organizations that are not as significant.

### Lashkar-e-Taiba

Sirajuddin Haqqani is responsible for establishing Haqqani ties with the Pakistani terror group LeT.<sup>99</sup> The relationship between the two organizations is emerging, and so far, appears more "transactional than ideological." <sup>100</sup> The LeT is able to smuggle weapons and fighters across Pakistan's border into Afghanistan, while also providing explosive training and a willingness to conduct assassination attempts. The Haqqanis control large areas in the southeastern Afghan region, as well as in Pakistan, which would allow the LeT to conduct its activities in a larger area than it would otherwise be able to access. <sup>101</sup> The more this alliance develops, the more dangerous a threat it presents to civilian and Afghan forces alike.

### Taliban and the Peace Deal

## Relations with the Afghan Taliban

Similar to its unique position among other terrorist organizations, the Haqqani Network plays a special role within the ranks of the Afghan Taliban. Although the group operates autonomously, the Haqqani Network's leaders have pledged allegiance to the Taliban. By deploying the Haqqani Network to orchestrate some of the Taliban's attacks against Afghan and U.S.-allied forces, the Taliban's goals can be more easily attained. Should U.S. forces vacate Afghanistan completely, experts believe the Haqqanis will continue fighting against Afghan security forces. <sup>102</sup>

Currently, roughly 50-60% of Afghanistan is contested, with power claimed by both the Taliban and Afghan Government forces. <sup>103</sup> As the Taliban has increasingly come under scrutiny since signing the Doha agreement, the group has shifted more of its operational control to the Haqqani Network. While the Afghan Taliban as a whole is divided, the Haqqani Network remains a strong, unified militant fighting force.

### Taliban and al-Qaeda relations

The Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda relationship has survived over two decades.<sup>104</sup> The alliance has remained throughout the U.S.-led Global War on Terror, as the two organizations have a common goal of removing U.S. forces from the



Taliban representatives at the Doha peace agreement, on February 29, 2020. Source: Department of State

region. Although the Doha peace agreement stipulates that the Taliban cannot allow terrorist organizations to use Afghanistan to launch attacks against the U.S. or its allies, the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda remains.<sup>105</sup>

The Taliban has yet to publicly denounce its ties with al-Qaeda and likely will not do so. If the group does, there is a high probability it would merely be a ploy to illustrate it is meeting obligations for the peace deal. In reality, the two terrorist groups' alliance has become increasingly clandestine as al-Qaeda has attempted to publicly distance itself from the Taliban to realize their shared objective of a U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, a May 2020 UN Report states that over the last year, senior leadership between the two sides met a reported six times to discuss training, operations, and offer safe havens for al-Qaeda within Afghanistan. Should a new joint Taliban-al-Qaeda unit form, it would break the conditions agreed to in late February at the peace signing.

There is a low probability of the Afghan Taliban breaking its historical ties with al-Qaeda. In the unlikely event the Taliban disassociates with al-Qaeda, the organization risks losing other regional groups that are loyal to al-Qaeda, thus decreasing its operational capacity. The U.S. needs to realize that despite the peace deal stipulations, the Taliban and al-Qaeda have a rich history of collaboration and share similar goals, and are thus likely to continue working together.

### **Peace Deal and Implications**

The peace deal has been widely acclaimed as a positive development in a region that has struggled for peace. However, recent developments, including Russian bounties and increased violence against Afghan security forces further risk derailing the U.S.-Taliban peace agreement. Additionally, experts state that the Taliban does not appear ready to sever ties with al-Qaeda, and is thus planning to violate the condition that the Taliban will not allow any terrorist group to recruit, train, or fundraise in Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda believes negotiations with the U.S. are positive, and even celebrated the Doha agreement as a Taliban victory. The current Taliban emir Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada issued a statement on July 28, 2020 on the Taliban's official website, the Voice of Jihad, stating that the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, what the Taliban refers to itself as, is "on the threshold of establishing an Islamic government." As events continue to unfold, it is becoming increasingly evident that the Taliban is not meeting its obligations of the agreement.

# **Policy Recommendations**

### If the U.S. Withdraws from Afghanistan

The U.S. wants to vacate its military forces from Afghanistan. Recent destabilizing events, including alleged Russian bounties and increased violence against Afghan security forces, further risk jeopardizing the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban peace deal. The current U.S. administration appears firmly committed to reducing its troop presence in the country. Should the U.S. troop withdrawal continue in this trajectory, the U.S. should pursue the following policy objectives to ensure its goals in the region may be reached.

First, the U.S. should engage with the international community and its partners to establish a plan to support the continued peace process and to respond in the event that negotiations collapse. As U.S. forces withdraw from Afghanistan, there is a risk of the peace process failing. If this occurs, an inevitable power struggle will ensue. The Taliban has illustrated it will continue attacking Afghan forces using the Haqqani Network's relations with other terrorist groups to carry out its assaults. Sirajuddin Haqqani himself said that "another challenge will be keeping the international community interested and positively engaged during the transition to peace," in a New York Times Op-Ed piece published days before the agreement was reached. The international community would benefit from Afghanistan not devolving into chaos once the U.S. leaves, and preventative measures may prove impactful.

Second, the U.S. must ensure that it maintains its ability to conduct counterterrorism missions within the region. As the region is a hotbed for terrorism, the U.S. will need to offer the military and Intelligence Community opportunities to counter actors that threaten the security of both the U.S. and the international community. To accomplish this, the U.S. should maintain agreements with other countries in the region that will allow the U.S. the ability to act in its national security interests. Countering the activities of radical extremists requires bases for the U.S. military to operate out of. The U.S. will need regional states to assist it in this challenge.

## If the U.S. Does Not Withdraw from Afghanistan

While the U.S. wants to remove its troop presence in Afghanistan, recent developments may see the February 2020 Doha agreement fall apart. As the November 2020 election cycle looms nearer, a change in administration may see the U.S. pursue an alternative course of action regarding troop deployments. Should the Doha agreement not come to fruition, the U.S. should pursue the following to reach its aims in the region.

First, the U.S. should push for a new deal negotiated with an increased focus on the Haqqani Network and the roles it plays, while acknowledging its increased influence over the Taliban. When constructing a new agreement, the U.S. may consider including wording for what will happen between the Afghan Government and the Afghan Taliban after American forces leave, to decrease the potential for civilian casualties. The agreement should also force the Taliban to publicly denounce its relations with al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. While such proclamations may not be made earnestly, it could create tensions among the terrorist groups. By creating a cohesive, well-organized agreement that is agreed to and realized by all signing parties, the likelihood of conflict may be reduced.

Second, the U.S. might attempt informal talks with senior Haqqani leadership. Sirajuddin Haqqani is not Jalaluddin Haqqani; he is more radical and lacks the historical ties with U.S. Government agencies (CIA) to help foster new relations with his network. However, if the U.S. does not try to establish talks with senior Haqqani leaders, the

U.S. will not know if they would be willing to negotiate. Creating informal channels of communication may be beneficial for securing peace.

Third, if the U.S. does reach out and discovers that Sirajuddin and his network have no interest in negotiating, the U.S. should consider reallocating resources that are already directed towards the Afghanistan-Pakistan region to disrupt the Haqqani Network. As the conduit for terrorist organizations on each side of the Afghan-Pakistan border, targeting the Haqqani Network's activities would boost counterterrorism measures in the surrounding areas.

Fourth, the U.S. should establish clear and concise goals for the region. To fully implement policy change, or assist states in regional issues, the U.S. must first have its own realistic policy objectives in order. As it stands, the U.S. mission in Afghanistan and the region is unclear and would benefit from a revamp. An updated list of regional aims would guide America's policy forward and allow it better chances for stabilizing relations in the region.

### Regardless of the U.S. Leaving

In either scenario, the U.S. can and should strive for the following policy objectives regardless of its decision to stay in or leave Afghanistan.

First, the U.S. should consider pausing the troop removal until the Taliban, and the Haqqani Network, meet their obligations. While the Taliban has met some stipulations, such as not attacking U.S.-led Coalition forces, it has not fulfilled its obligation of severing ties with al-Qaeda, nor has it pursued intra-Afghan negotiations. Until the Taliban and the Haqqani Network demonstrate they are adhering to all of the agreed-upon rules, the U.S. troop withdrawal may be premature.

Second, the U.S. should more seriously factor in the role the Haqqanis play in peace negotiations. The U.S. would benefit from having a more holistic approach to negotiations by bringing the Haqqani Network directly into discussions. By leaving the wider Haqqani Network out of talks, the U.S. is allowing the Taliban a certain level of ambiguity to run the Haqqanis as an operational force.

Third, the U.S. needs to pressure Pakistan to finally sever its ties from its proxy, the Haqqani Network, or else face consequences such as losing military and financial aid. Pakistan and its ISI have served as a protector and enabler of the Haqqani Network's operations for too long. If Pakistan cuts ties with the Haqqanis, the terror group will no longer have safe havens for promoting jihad training, orchestrating attacks on Afghan and Western forces, and will be forced to adapt its tactics and strategies to survive. Pressure from the international community, whether that be condemnation for supporting the Haqqani Network or losing foreign aid, may compel Pakistan to reconsider helping the terror group. The U.S. may also attempt to improve relations between India and Pakistan in order to reduce the security concerns that lead Pakistan to see working with groups like the Haqqanis as beneficial. A recent U.S. Department of State report contends that Pakistan has done too little to counter terrorism in the region. Haqqani Network's activities would demonstrate its commitment to thwarting terrorist organizations.

Fourth, the U.S. would benefit from factoring the Haqqani Network's political objectives into its strategic approach. On the exterior, the group appears to be largely religiously motivated. However, the group has shown that it also has political ambitions. To develop a strategy to best work with, or disrupt the Haqqanis' operations, the U.S. will first need to view their objectives correctly.

## **Conclusion**

No matter the outcome of the eventual U.S. decision to remove troops from Afghanistan, the U.S. must consider all of the ramifications of leaving the country before declaring any form of victory. Moving forward, the Haqqani Network should be included in any peace discussions. The group likely has a more significant influence on the Taliban's stances and a larger role in its operations than the international community gives it credit for. As events have unfolded, the Haqqanis have purposefully remained in the shadows, continuing to operate at high levels, relatively unchecked. The Haqqanis favor a military-centric approach for realizing its political and religious aims, and will likely continue, if not increase, attacks on Afghan government forces upon the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan. Regardless of what the U.S. decides to do with its forces in the country, it should not forget to factor in the Haqqanis.

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