

Updated June 24, 2020

Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's geography, complex ethnic composition, and recent history of conflict and instability have created space for numerous regional armed groups. This product outlines major terrorist groups affiliated and allied with Al Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS, ISIL, or by the Arabic acronym *Da'esh*) and the convoluted, often shifting relations between them and various other state and non-state actors. These dynamics may inform assessments of U.S. policy in Afghanistan in light of the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement, which commits the Taliban to undertake counterterrorism efforts and commits the United States to a full military withdrawal by April 2021. The Taliban is not a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), but it relates to the groups below in varying ways that may have ramifications for that withdrawal, which U.S. officials describe as "conditions-based."

Al Qaeda Core

The top echelon or "core" AQ leadership remains a primary U.S. target in Afghanistan; CENTCOM Commander General Kenneth McKenzie, Jr., described eastern Afghanistan as the "home of Al Qaeda" in June 2020. Also known as Al Qaeda Central, the core is made up of AQ leader Ayman al Zawahiri and his deputies, an advisory council of about ten individuals, and members of various AQ committees such as military operations and finance. In September 2019, the White House announced that Hamza bin Laden, son of AQ founder Osama bin Laden and a rising leader in the group, had been killed in a U.S. counterterrorism operation "in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region."

U.S. officials have maintained that U.S. raids and airstrikes on AQ targets, including a large training camp discovered in Kandahar province 2015, have reduced the AQ presence in Afghanistan. It is unclear what threat AQ poses in light of this counterterrorism pressure. A November 2019 report from the Department of Defense (DOD) cited a Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) estimate that the 300 AQ members in Afghanistan were "almost certainly focused on survival." In May 2020, the United Nations (U.N.) relayed a Member State's assessment that AQ "is quietly gaining strength in Afghanistan while continuing to operate with the Taliban under their protection."

In May 2020, the U.N. also reported that senior Taliban leaders "regularly consulted" with their AQ counterparts (including Hamza bin Laden in June 2019) during negotiations with the United States. Al Qaeda has welcomed the U.S.-Taliban agreement, "celebrating it as a victory for the Taliban's cause and thus for global militancy." The U.S.-Taliban agreement commits the Taliban to preventing any group, including Al Qaeda, from using Afghan soil to threaten the security of the United

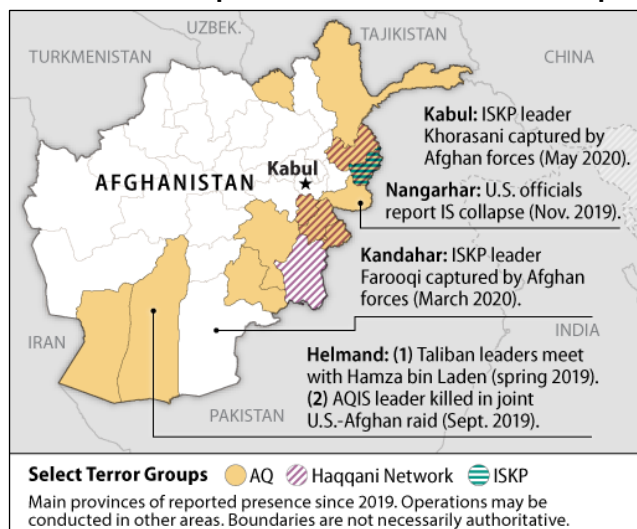
States or its allies. It is unclear what verification mechanisms, if any, are in place to ensure Taliban compliance and to what extent the U.S. withdrawal (ongoing since March 2020) might be paused or reversed based on Taliban action with regard to Al Qaeda.

Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent

In September 2014, Zawahiri announced the creation of a formal, separate Al Qaeda affiliate in South Asia, Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). Because of the relative geographical proximity of AQIS and the AQ core, differentiating between the two is difficult, but some key distinctions exist. Overall, AQIS represents an attempt by AQ to establish a more durable presence in the region by enhancing links with local actors. Former AQIS leader Asim Umar, who was being "sheltered" by Taliban forces when he was killed in a joint U.S.-Afghan operation in Afghanistan in September 2019, was an Indian national with deep roots in Pakistan; AQ leaders are predominantly Arab. The relocation of some AQ leaders to Syria further incentivized Al Qaeda to create a locally sustainable affiliate in Afghanistan and the surrounding region.

While AQIS reportedly has attempted to solidify its presence in Afghanistan by embedding fighters in the Taliban, its operations have mostly been elsewhere: AQIS has claimed a number of attacks in Pakistan and Bangladesh, mostly against security targets and secular activists, respectively. According to the November 2019 DOD report, DIA assessed that AQIS would need "several years without sustained counterterrorism pressure ... to develop the capability to attack outside South Asia." AQIS has "several hundred members" (per the State Department), and was designated as an FTO in June 2016.

Provinces with Reported Presence of Terror Groups



Source: Graphic created by CRS using information from various media and U.S. government reports, 2019-present.

Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP)

The Islamic State announced the formation of its Afghan affiliate in January 2015. ISKP (also known as ISIS-K) was once concentrated in eastern Afghanistan, particularly in Nangarhar province, which borders the region of Pakistan formerly known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). There, ISKP was mostly comprised of former Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants who fled Pakistani army operations in the FATA after mid-2014.

While it was once arguably one of the Islamic State's most successful affiliates, ISKP was "nearly eradicated" from its main base in eastern Afghanistan in late 2019 by U.S. and Afghan military offensives and, separately, the Taliban. A previous ISKP contingent in northern Afghanistan was similarly defeated in 2018. ISKP and Taliban forces have sometimes fought over control of territory or because of political or other differences, though some raise the prospect of Taliban hardliners defecting to ISKP if Taliban leaders reach a political settlement with Kabul or accede to a continued U.S. counterterrorism presence. A number of ISKP leaders have been killed in U.S. strikes since 2016, and Afghan forces arrested and captured two successive ISKP leaders in spring 2020. U.S. officials caution that ISKP remains a threat, and recent attacks attributed to the group (including a May 2020 assault on a maternity ward in Kabul) indicate the same operational resilience it has demonstrated when pressured in the past.

In addition to attacks against government targets, ISKP has claimed numerous large-scale bombings against civilians, particularly targeting Afghanistan's Shia minority (about 15% of the population). Sectarian conflict has not been a hallmark of the war in Afghanistan; ISKP attempts to encourage it, following the example of the Islamic State elsewhere, could further destabilize the country.

The Haqqani Network

The Haqqani Network is an official, semi-autonomous component of the Afghan Taliban and an ally of AQ. It was founded by Jalaluddin Haqqani, a leading member of the

anti-Soviet jihad (1979-1989) who became a prominent Taliban official and eventually a key leader in the post-2001 insurgency. The Taliban confirmed his death from natural causes in September 2018.

The group's current leader is Jalaluddin's son, Sirajuddin Haqqani, who has also served as the deputy leader of the Taliban since 2015. Sirajuddin's appointment to lead the network likely strengthened cooperation between the Taliban and AQ, with which the Haqqanis have close ties going back to the anti-Soviet jihad; Zawahiri reportedly met with senior Haqqani leaders in February 2020. The May 2020 U.N. report suggests that the Haqqanis may also have reached a "tactical accommodation" with ISKP.

The Haqqanis are blamed for some of the deadliest attacks of the war in Afghanistan. In 2012, the year the Haqqani Network was designated as an FTO, then-Chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Senator Dianne Feinstein claimed the network was responsible for the death or injury of over 1,300 U.S. troops. The year before, then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen described the Haqqanis in 2011 as a "veritable arm" of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency.

Smaller Groups

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The TTP, also known as the Pakistani Taliban, conducts most of its attacks (much reduced in recent years) in Pakistan, and reportedly maintains safe havens along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border where AQ has also operated. An umbrella organization for a number of Pakistan-based extremist groups that came into conflict with the Pakistani state after 2007, the TTP began to splinter following the 2013 death of leader Hakimullah Mehsud. In 2014, some TTP members pledged allegiance to IS and subsequently relocated to eastern Afghanistan as part of ISKP. Mehsud's successor Mullah Fazlullah was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Afghanistan's Kunar province in June 2018. TTP leaders have pledged to strike within the United States, though it is unclear whether TTP has such capacity: the last such incident for which they claimed responsibility was a failed 2010 bombing attempt in New York City, carried out by a Pakistani-American who reportedly received training from TTP militants in the FATA.

"Afghanistan continues to be the conflict zone of greatest concern for Member States outside the ISIL core area and suffers by some measures the heaviest toll from terrorism of any country in the world."

United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Report S/2020/53, December 2019

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Designated an FTO in 2000, the IMU was once a prominent ally of AQ. Formed by Uzbeks who fought with Islamist forces in Tajikistan's 1990s civil war, the IMU allied with the Taliban, and launched attacks into other Central Asian states. After the U.S. invasion in 2001, the group's focus was in Afghanistan and Pakistan. While some IMU fighters and leaders have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, the

U.N. reported in May 2020 that IMU “has not demonstrated any independent operational activity for some years and remains under the command and financial control of the Taliban.” It operates in northern Afghanistan.

Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). ETIM has advocated for the establishment of an independent Islamic state for the Uyghurs, a Muslim-majority, Turkic-speaking people in western China. The U.S. government designated ETIM as a terrorist organization under Executive Order 13224 in 2002, citing the group’s ties to

AQ; it has launched airstrikes against EIM targets, most recently in February 2018 against camps in northern Afghanistan used by ETIM. The State Department has since alleged there is “a lack of independent evidence that a group by that name [ETIM] is still active,” but the UN reports it has 500 fighters in northeast Afghanistan.

Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs

IF10604

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS’s institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.