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Terrorist Groups in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's geography, complex ethnic composition, and history of conflict and instability have created space for numerous armed Islamist 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, most notably the Taliban. 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 in return for the full withdrawal of U.S. and international military forces, scheduled to be completed in August 2021. The Taliban are not a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), but it interacts with the groups below in varying ways that may have ramifications for U.S. interests. President Joseph Biden and other U.S. officials have stated that the United States will maintain "over-the-horizon" capabilities to address terrorist threats after the U.S. military withdrawal. The Taliban have made significant territorial gains since May 2021; it is unclear how these gains might empower, undermine, or otherwise impact the terrorist groups below or Taliban behavior toward them.

Al Qaeda Core

The top echelon or "core" AQ leadership has been a primary U.S. target in Afghanistan since 2001. Also known as Al Qaeda Central, the core is made up of AQ leader Ayman al Zawahiri (who reportedly is ailing) 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 argued that U.S. raids and airstrikes on AQ targets, including a large training camp discovered in Kandahar province in 2015, have reduced the AQ presence in Afghanistan. An April 2021 report from the Department of Defense (DOD) estimated that AQ core leaders in Afghanistan "pose a limited threat" because they "focus primarily on survival."

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. Taliban-AQ links date back to the 1990s, when the Taliban were in power and provided a crucial safe haven to Al Qaeda as it planned the September 11, 2001, and other terrorist attacks. Those ties have been cemented by their shared battle against international forces in Afghanistan as well as through intermarriage and other personal bonds between members of the two groups. In an

April 2021 report, United Nations (U.N.) sanctions monitors assessed that AQ and the Taliban "remain closely aligned and show no indication of breaking ties." The Taliban claim that there are foreign fighters in areas of Afghanistan under their control, but do not appear to have taken any tangible steps that might constitute a break in ties with Al Qaeda. It is unclear how, if at all, Taliban violations of the February 2020 accord might affect U.S. policy.

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, designated as an FTO in 2016). Because of the relative geographical proximity of AQIS and the AQ core, differentiating between the two is difficult, but some key distinctions exist. Essentially, AQIS represents an attempt by AQ to establish a more durable presence in the region by enhancing links with local actors, prompted in part by the relocation of some AQ leaders to Syria. 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 core leaders are predominantly Arab.

While AQIS reportedly solidified 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 April 2021 DOD report, AQIS threatens U.S. forces in Afghanistan, a reflection of the group's cooperation with the Taliban, but likely does not have the means to conduct attacks outside the region.

Provinces with Reported Presence of Terror Groups



Source: Graphic created by CRS.

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 arguably once 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. An ISKP contingent in northern Afghanistan was similarly defeated in 2018. These territorial losses have forced the group to "decentralize" according to U.N. sanctions monitors, who assess the group has around 2,000 fighters primarily in the east but also in northern Afghanistan. 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. Still, U.S. officials caution that ISKP remains a threat, and recent attacks attributed to the group 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, mainly targeting Afghanistan's Shia minority, including the May 2021 bombing of a girls' school in Kabul.

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. A Taliban military victory, on the other hand, might have a negative impact on ISKP.

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; U.N. monitors describe the Haqqani Network as the "primary liaison" between the Taliban and AQ. The April 2021 U.N. report indicates disagreement among Member States about whether the Haqqani Network may collaborate tactically with ISKP.

The Haqqani Network is blamed for some of the deadliest attacks of the war in Afghanistan, including the death or injury of hundreds of U.S. troops, and has historically been described as close to Pakistan's intelligence agency.

Smaller Groups

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The TTP, also known as the Pakistani Taliban, has "distinctive anti-Pakistan

objectives" but also fights alongside the Afghan Taliban against the Afghan government inside Afghanistan (where the TTP has a significant presence). 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 in response to Pakistani army operations that mostly drove the group from its safe havens in the former FATA. Continued military pressure (Mehtud's successor was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Afghanistan's Kunar province in 2018) greatly reduced the group's activity in subsequent years. However, reunification between TTP and some former splinter groups (possibly facilitated by AQ) since 2020 has swelled the group's ranks. That, and the possible boost TTP might receive from Taliban gains in Afghanistan, have raised the prospect of a TTP resurgence.

"The security situation in Afghanistan remains as tense and challenging as at any time in recent history ... The country remains host to a number of armed groups comprising foreign terrorist fighters, which are assessed to be allied variously with the Taliban, Al-Qaida and the Islamic State."

United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Report S/2021/486, April 2021

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 U.S. operations began in 2001, the group's focus was in Afghanistan and Pakistan. U.N. sanctions monitors report IMU is under the control of the Taliban, which is "less accommodating than it used to be" given previous IMU moves to align with ISKP. IMU operates in northern Afghanistan.

Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). ETIM (also known as the Turkistan Islamic Party) seeks to establish an independent Islamic state for the Uyghurs, a Muslim-majority, Turkic-speaking people in western China. In 2002, the U.S. government designated ETIM as an FTO, citing the group's ties to AQ; in late 2020, it removed ETIM from another list, the Terrorist Exclusion List (to which the group had been added in 2004), stating that "for more than a decade, there has been no credible evidence that ETIM continues to exist." U.N. sanctions monitors reported in June 2021 that ETIM has hundreds of fighters in northeast Afghanistan, as well as a larger presence in Idlib, Syria, and moves fighters between the two areas. ETIM in Afghanistan is reportedly focused on China; the Syrian contingent has "a more global outlook."

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