

# Terrorist Groups in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's geography, complex ethnic composition, and history of conflict and instability have created space for numerous armed Islamist groups, some of which engage in transnational terrorist activity. This product outlines major terrorist groups present in Afghanistan that are 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 relations between these groups and other actors, most notably the Taliban. These dynamics may inform assessments of U.S. policy in Afghanistan in light of the Taliban's renewed control of the country.

The Taliban interact with the groups below in varying ways that may affect U.S. interests. Observers differ on how Taliban rule might empower or undermine these terrorist groups or Taliban behavior toward them. U.S. public assessments of the threats these groups pose to U.S. interests, including to the U.S. homeland, vary. President Joseph Biden and other U.S. officials have stated that the United States will maintain "over-the-horizon" capabilities to address terrorist threats in Afghanistan. As of mid-March 2022, the United States has not carried out any such strikes since the U.S. military withdrawal was completed on August 30, 2021.

## Al Qaeda Core

The top echelon or "core" AQ leadership was a primary target of post-2001 U.S. operations in Afghanistan. The core includes 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 U.S. forces killed Hamza bin Laden, son of AQ founder Osama bin Laden and a rising leader in the group, "in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region."

Taliban-AQ links date back to the 1990s, when Bin Laden pledged allegiance to the Taliban, who in turn provided a safe haven to Al Qaeda as it planned the September 11, 2001, and other terrorist attacks. Those ties were reinforced by their shared battle against U.S.-led international forces in Afghanistan as well as through intermarriage and other personal bonds between members of the two groups. AQ sympathizers celebrated the Taliban's August 2021 takeover as a victory for global Islamism.

Although most official assessments concur that AQ-Taliban ties remain close, they also indicate Al Qaeda is maintaining "strategic silence" (per U.N. sanctions monitors) to not undermine Taliban efforts to obtain international legitimacy. Those assessments also agree that the Taliban in turn are likely to allow AQ figures to remain in Afghanistan so long as they do not threaten the United States or its allies. The February 2020 U.S.-Taliban accord committed the Taliban to preventing any group, including Al Qaeda, from using Afghan soil to threaten the security of

the United States or its allies. The State Department reports some "progress" in Taliban counterterrorism commitments.

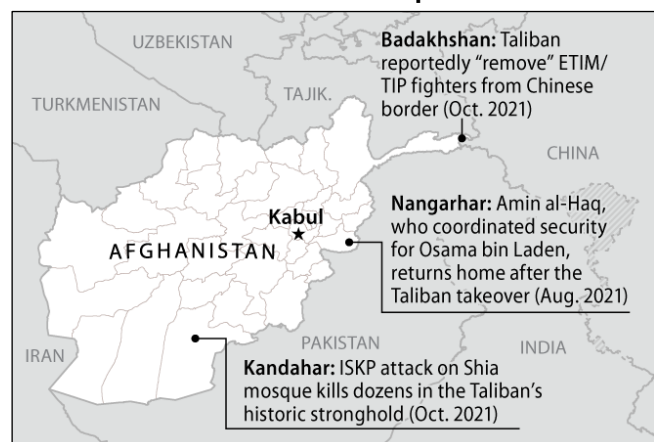
U.S. defense officials assess as of March 2022 that Al Qaeda has the intention, but not the capability, to conduct external operations; they further assess that Al Qaeda could reconstitute that capability in one to two years in the absence of sustained counterterrorism pressure.

## 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 a Foreign Terrorist Organization, or 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. 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 (who are predominantly Arab) 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 with roots in Pakistan and his successor Osama Mahmood is Pakistani.

AQIS reportedly solidified its presence in Afghanistan by embedding its members in Taliban ranks and is estimated to have 200-400 fighters in the country.

## Recent Terrorism-Related Developments



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 initially 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, see below) militants who fled Pakistani army operations in the FATA after mid-2014.

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. An ISKP contingent in northern Afghanistan was similarly defeated in 2018. Still, ISKP continued to conduct attacks against various targets, including a suicide bombing at Kabul's airport that killed and injured dozens of U.S. service members and hundreds of Afghans in the midst of the August 2021 U.S. military withdrawal.

The fallout from Taliban takeover for ISKP is mixed. The Taliban appear to view ISKP as the primary threat to their renewed rule and have launched offensives against the group and executed at least one imprisoned former ISKP leader. At the same time, U.N. sanctions monitors assess in early 2022 that the number of ISKP fighters has increased to as many as 4,000 with the escape of former ISKP prisoners from jails opened after the Taliban takeover. ISKP again controls limited territory in eastern Afghanistan and has claimed numerous large-scale bombings against civilians, mainly targeting Afghanistan's Shia minority. ISKP attacks in 2021-2022 include bombings of Shia mosques in Kunduz, Kabul, and Kandahar, as well as in Peshawar, Pakistan.

U.S. defense officials assessed in March 2022 that ISKP "could establish an external attack capability against the United States or its allies in twelve to eighteen months, but possibly sooner if the group experiences unanticipated gains in Afghanistan."

## The Haqqani Network

The Haqqani Network is an official, semi-autonomous component of the Afghan Taliban, a longtime ally of AQ, and a U.S.-designated FTO (since 2012). It was founded by Jalaluddin Haqqani, a leading anti-Soviet Islamist commander 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 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; U.N. monitors have described the Haqqani Network as the "primary liaison" between the Taliban and AQ. In September 2021, Sirajuddin became the acting Interior Minister in the Taliban government, the highest ranking of several Haqqani Network-aligned individuals to hold cabinet posts. The U.S. Department of State has for years offered a reward of up to \$10 million for information leading to Haqqani's arrest.

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.

## Other Groups

**Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).** The TTP, also known as the Pakistani Taliban, has "distinctive anti-Pakistan objectives," per U.N. monitors, but also fought alongside

the Afghan Taliban against the Afghan government inside Afghanistan (where the TTP has thousands of fighters). An umbrella organization for a number of Pakistan-based extremist groups that came into conflict with the government of Pakistan after 2007, the TTP began to splinter following the 2013 death of leader Hakimullah Mehsud. In 2014, some TTP members pledged allegiance to the Islamic State 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 (Mehsud'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. The TTP may benefit further from the Taliban takeover and release of TTP prisoners in Afghanistan. TTP attacks in Pakistan escalated considerably after the Taliban takeover, leading the Pakistani government to seek the mediation of the Afghan Taliban (Sirajuddin Haqqani specifically, per some media reports) in brokering a month-long ceasefire that ended in December 2021. Attacks have escalated in 2022.

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"There are no recent signs that the Taliban has taken steps to limit the activities of foreign terrorist fighters in the country. On the contrary, terrorist groups enjoy greater freedom there than at any time in recent history."

*-Twenty-ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, February 3, 2022*

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**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 1992-1997 civil war, the IMU allied with the Taliban and launched attacks into other Central Asian states. After U.S. military operations began in 2001, the group's focus was in Afghanistan and Pakistan. U.N. sanctions monitors report that IMU, along with other Central Asian terrorist groups, has "greater freedom of movement" in Afghanistan under the Taliban government.

**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 February 2022 that ETIM has hundreds of fighters in northern Afghanistan and a larger presence in Idlib, Syria. The Taliban reportedly have moved Uyghur militants away from the Afghan-Chinese border in response to Chinese government concerns.

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