



August 23, 2018

Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's geography, complex ethnic makeup, and recent history of unstable and decentralized government have made it a hotspot for 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 complex, often shifting relations between them and various other state and non-state actors. While Al Qaeda and the Taliban have fought alongside each other in Afghanistan, the Taliban is not an affiliate of Al Qaeda and has not been assessed as a threat to the U.S. homeland, and is considered only peripherally here. This product provides context for lawmakers as they assess the state of the conflict in Afghanistan and the U.S. position in the region.

Al Qaeda Core

The top echelon or "core" of AQ leadership remains a primary military target of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. 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. AQ leaders (including Hamza bin Laden, son of AQ founder Osama bin Laden, who has recently taken a more prominent role in AQ messaging) are currently thought to be based in the mountainous, tribal-dominated areas of both Afghanistan and Pakistan, often moving between the two.

For years after 2001, U.S. officials maintained that AQ had only a minimal presence in Afghanistan. However, some analysts argued that the large number of U.S.-led coalition raids against AQ and affiliated groups that were announced over the past decade indicated a numerically larger and geographically broader AQ presence. In late 2016, U.S. officials announced that 250 AQ operatives (50 leaders and 200 other fighters) had been killed or captured in 2016, including the AQ commander for northeast Afghanistan, Faruq Qahtani. It is unclear how many of these belong to separate affiliates. A June 2018 Department of Defense (DOD) report stated that the AQ "has decreased" and that the "few remaining [AQ] core members are focused on their own survival."

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 close 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. AQIS leader Asim Umar is an Indian national with deep roots in Pakistan; AQ leaders are traditionally Arab (Zawahiri is Egyptian; Qahtani was Qatari). The relocation of some leaders from

Afghanistan/Pakistan to Syria has given Al Qaeda Central further incentive to create a locally sustainable affiliate.

The group has reportedly gained traction in places like Karachi, far beyond AQ's traditional mountainous strongholds, though its influence appears somewhat limited. According to a July 2018 UN report, AQIS, made up of "several hundred people," is "relatively isolated" but "continues to seek security gaps for opportunistic attacks." AQIS has claimed a number of such attacks in Pakistan and Bangladesh (mostly against security targets and secular activists, respectively). Additionally, a large and complex training camp discovered in Afghanistan's Kandahar province in 2015 was attributed to AQIS. The State Department designated AQIS a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), and Asim Umar as a specially designated global terrorist, in June 2016. Umar's deputy was killed in a joint U.S.-Afghan operation in Ghazni province in December 2017.

"Afghanistan faces a continuing threat from...the highest regional concentration of terrorist groups in the world."

Department of Defense, July 3, 2018

Islamic State- Khorasan Province (ISKP)

The Islamic State officially announced the formation of its Afghan affiliate in January 2015. ISKP (also known as IS-K) has a presence in the country's east, particularly in Nangarhar province, which borders the region of Pakistan formerly known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). There, ISKP is reportedly made up mostly of former Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants who fled Pakistani army operations in the FATA in late 2014. In the spring of 2015, ISKP assassinated the top Taliban leader in Nangarhar and established control over part of it. ISKP has condemned the Taliban as "apostate," accusing it of having narrow tribal, ethnic, and/or national interests.

Since at least early 2017, ISKP has demonstrated growing operational abilities in the north as well. A March 2018 video released by ISKP demonstrated their hold over a number of districts in the largely Turkic-populated province of Jowzjan, highlighting ISKP's potential reach in areas dominated by ethnic groups not generally seen as receptive to Pashtun-based militant organizations. While a series of defeats at the hands of Taliban fighters in July 2018 likely reduced ISKP presence in the area, ISKP is still seen as a threat in light of reports that IS fighters, many of whom are Central Asian in origin, are seeking to relocate from Iraq and Syria to Afghanistan. The senior ISKP leader in northern Afghanistan (a former IMU and Taliban

commander) was killed in a U.S. airstrike in April 2018. In announcing the strike, NATO described Jowzjan as “the main conduit for external support and foreign fighters from Central Asian states into Afghanistan.”

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

In January 2016, the Obama Administration designated ISKP an FTO and gave U.S. forces legal authority (previously limited to AQ) to target ISKP. ISKP leader Hafiz Saeed Khan, a former TTP member, was killed in a U.S. strike in July 2016; successors Abdul Hasib and Abu Sayed were killed in April and July 2017, respectively. 2017 saw intense fighting against ISKP; at least half of U.S. combat casualties in Afghanistan in 2017 may have occurred in anti-ISKP operations, some by friendly fire. ISKP strength is estimated at 3,000-4,000 fighters.

The Haqqani Network

The Haqqani Network, a U.S.-designated FTO since September 2012, is an official, semi-autonomous component of the Afghan Taliban and an ally of AQ. It is named after 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. According to 2015 media reports, Jalaluddin died of illness at least a year earlier, a claim denied by the Taliban but never definitively disproved. The group’s current leader is Jalaluddin’s son Sirajuddin, 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 whom the Haqqanis have close ties going back to the anti-Soviet jihad. A December 2015 DOD report to Congress called the Haqqani Network “the most critical enabler of al Qaeda” in Afghanistan, though the current relationship is less clear. The Haqqanis have also been described as a “veritable arm” of the Pakistani intelligence service, the ISI.

The Haqqanis are blamed for some of the deadliest attacks of the war in Afghanistan, including the May 2017 bombing in Kabul’s diplomatic district that left over 150 dead. In 2012, then-Chairman of the Intelligence Committee Senator Dianne Feinstein claimed the network was responsible for the death or injury of over 1,300 U.S. troops. Additionally, the Haqqanis are currently believed to hold at least one American in captivity, a university professor kidnapped in Kabul in 2016. In 2012, the group kidnapped an American backpacker and her Canadian husband; that couple, and the three children to whom she gave birth while in captivity, were freed by a Pakistani army operation in October 2017.

Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

The TTP, also known as the Pakistani Taliban, was described by the State Department in 2010, the year they were designated an FTO, as having a “symbiotic

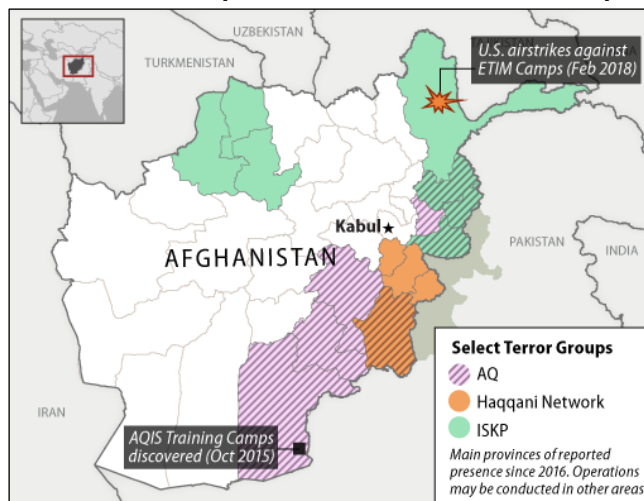
relationship” with AQ. An umbrella organization for a number of Pakistan-based extremist groups that came into conflict with the Pakistani state after 2007, the TTP began to splinter following the 2013 death of leader Hakimullah Mehsud. In 2014, a large number of TTP members pledged allegiance to IS; they were disrupted by Pakistani army operations and relocated to eastern Afghanistan as part of ISKP. TTP leaders have pledged to strike within the United States, though the last incident for which they claimed responsibility was a 2010 bombing attempt in New York City, carried out by a Pakistani-American who reportedly received training from TTP militants in the FATA.

Smaller Groups

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Designated an FTO in 2000, the IMU was once a prominent ally of AQ. Formed by Uzbeks who fought alongside Islamist forces in Tajikistan’s civil war (1992-1997), the IMU allied with the Taliban, and launched attacks into other Central Asian states. Since the U.S. invasion in 2001, the group’s focus has been in Afghanistan and Pakistan. IMU leader Usman Ghazi pledged allegiance to IS in July 2015, dividing the group. Amid concerns about returning IS fighters, the alignment of IMU (and the 500 fighters reportedly under its command) with ISKP could further increase IS influence in a region long targeted by extremist groups.

East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). ETIM, also known as the Turkistan Islamic Party, advocates the establishment of an independent Islamic state for the Uyghurs, a Muslim-majority, Turkic-speaking people who live in western China. The U.S. government designated ETIM as a terrorist organization in 2002, citing the group’s ties to AQ. In February 2018, the U.S. launched airstrikes in northern Afghanistan against camps used by ETIM, which commands around 400 fighters. U.S. drone strikes have also targeted ETIM leaders in Pakistan several times since 2010.

Provinces with Reported Presence of Terror Groups



Source: Graphic created by CRS using information from various media and U.S. government reports, 2016-present.

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