

American Foreign Policy Council

TABILAN

QUICK FACTS

Geographical Areas of Operation: Number (estimated WHEN)

Numerical Strength (Members): Approximately 25,000

Leadership: Moulavi Haibatullah Akhunzada

Religious Identification: Sunni Islam

Quick Facts courtesy of Stanford University's Mapping Militant Organizations (July 2016)

OVERVIEW

The Taliban is a Sunni fundamentalist militant group, founded by Mullah Mohammad Omar, that emerged in 1994 during the Afghan Civil War (1992-1996). The Taliban, or “religious students” in Pashto, was just one of many factions in the civil war. The group led a brief but well-received campaign to rid southern Afghanistan’s Kandahar region of its predatory commanders and bandits in the spring of 1994. The group continued to grow in size and power, and in 1996 it seized Kabul and took control of the Afghan government. In 2001, the Taliban refused to hand over al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden to the United States government. In response, the U.S. and NATO forces invaded Afghanistan and toppled the regime.

Many of the Taliban’s top leadership, including Mullah Omar, slipped over the border into Pakistan and reestablished an ad hoc command-and-control center in the Pashtunabad neighborhood of Quetta, earning the moniker “the Quetta Shura” from U.S. and Afghan intelligence agencies. The Taliban slowly metamorphosed into a more organized, centralized, and capable organization, and by 2006 launched a protracted campaign of violence and intimidation throughout Afghanistan’s southern and eastern provinces. Similarly, a Pakistani offshoot of the Taliban emerged as several tribal shuras supportive of the Afghan Taliban pledged bayat

(allegiance) to Mullah Omar and began cross-border attacks providing manpower, weapons and logistical support to insurgent fronts in eastern Afghanistan and beyond.

After the drawdown of American and coalition forces from Afghanistan at the end of 2014, which ended the NATO-led ISAF mission, the coalition began a new, follow-on mission, called the Resolute Support (RS) on January 1, 2015. As part of the Resolute Support Mission, the United States and coalition forces are now engaged in a train, advise, and assist mission to support the Afghan security forces to maintain increased security across the country. In September 2014, the United States and Afghanistan's newly-elected National Unity Government signed the Bilateral Security Agreement, which provided the basis for the United States and NATO coalition to leave behind an estimated 9,800 U.S. troops and 5,500 coalition troops in Afghanistan.

The Resolute Support mission serves two main purposes: to train and assist the Afghan national security forces, and conduct unfettered counterterrorism operations against al Qaeda, its affiliates, and the Afghan offshoot of the Islamic State, or ISIS Khorasan.¹ According to the original Agreement, the number of U.S. troops was to be reduced to 5,500 before the end of 2016. But, given Afghanistan's deteriorating security situation and the ANSF's lack of requisite capacities as a counterinsurgent force,² the U.S. instead delayed the impending troop drawdown and committed to maintaining a residual force of 8,400 troops in Afghanistan through the end of the Obama administration.³

HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

The Taliban rose to power after Afghanistan's devastating civil war (1992-1996). It renamed the country the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and quickly implemented a strict interpretation of sharia (Islamic law). The core of the original Taliban movement originated from a clerical *andiwāl* (war comrades) network of Islamic conservatives, made up of *madrassa*-educated ethnic Pashtun men from poor or lower class backgrounds.

The Taliban has been highly resilient due to three attributes: it is centralized and therefore efficient; flexible and diverse, therefore adaptable to local contexts, and; highly pragmatic in its use of narco-resources to finance itself.⁴ But the question of just who the Taliban is remains largely unknown. Some experts interpret the movement to be a loose network of militants based along tribal lineage, others describe the Taliban as a Pakistani-created and funded proxy army, while still others suggest the Taliban are an umbrella organization of various militant networks, marginalized

tribes and clans, as well as criminal gangs, some of whom pledge allegiance to the core element of the former Taliban government, Mullah Mohammad Omar. The organizational construct of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, its offshoots, and its Pakistani extension, the *Tebrik-i-Taliban* Pakistan, are presented below.

Quetta Shura Taliban (QST)

The remnants of the former Taliban government manifested itself as the *Quetta Shura* in 2002. Initially, the movement consisted of a ten man Rahbari Shura (Leadership Council) consisting of eight old-guard Taliban military commanders from southern Afghanistan and two others.⁵ In October 2006, it announced the creation of the *majlis al-shura* (Consultative Council) consisting of 13 members and some additional “advisers.”⁶ Since that time, the *Quetta Shura* has become far more complex. As the Taliban began to spread its influence and gain de facto control of some rural areas in southern Afghanistan, the *Quetta Shura* began assigning shadow government positions to various areas and regions with heavy Taliban footprint and support. The *Quetta Shura* ballooned in size, likely because of its effort to manage and bring some organizational efficiency to what was and essentially is a franchise of tribal and communal networks with loose ideological relations.

In April 2013, Taliban *emir* (leader) Mullah Mohammad Omar died after falling ill. The news of his death was kept secret among a handful of Taliban leaders for more than two years, on tactical grounds. After his death, the Taliban continued to release official statements under his name. Furthermore, the group published his biography in April 2015 to mark his 19th year as their supreme leader, stating that the *emir* “remains in touch” with daily Afghan and world events. In July 2015, the Taliban released a statement, wherein Mullah Omar backed peace talks with the Afghan government as a “legitimate” route to ending the conflict and the occupation of foreign forces in Afghanistan. This farce continued until July 2015, when Afghan intelligence announced the Taliban leader had died years earlier in a hospital in Pakistan.⁷ Later that month, the Taliban itself confirmed Mullah Omar’s death. Subsequently, Mullah Omar was succeeded by his deputy, Mullah Akhtar Mansour – who served as the Minister of Civil Aviation during Taliban regime – in a hasty selection process that was disputed by high-ranking leaders of the movement.⁸ Soon after Mullah Mansour’s accession, fractures began to appear in the movement, as some of its political and military leadership members, including the prominent Mullah Abdul Zakir, Mullah Mansour Dadullah (brother of former senior commander Daddulah), and Mullah Mohammad Rasool (the governor of Nimroz during Taliban regime), protested that the late *emir*’s son, Mullah Mohammad Yaqub—who asserted that Pakistan engineered Mullah Mansour’s succession—should become the leader.⁹ They accused Mansour of “hijacking the movement because of personal greed,” which led to the creation of a splinter group, the High Council of Afghanistan Islamic Emirate, led by Mullah Rasool.¹⁰ The split soon erupted into infighting between the two sides,

with Mansour's side gaining the upper hand, as the clashes led to Mullah Dadullah's death due in November 2015.¹¹ Intense clashes under the leadership of Mullah Rasool continued into the spring of 2016.

In January 2015, news emerged that Mullah Abdul Rauf Alizai had sworn allegiance to the Islamic State's Afghan offshoot, known as Wilayat Khorasan, and had been appointed its deputy commander, after falling out with Taliban. (The U.S. State Department would formally declare the Wilayat Khorasan a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in early 2016.¹²) The following month, however, Alizai was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Helmand province while travelling in a vehicle full of explosives and ammunitions with his brother-in-law and four Pakistani militants.¹³

In August 2015, al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri pledged allegiance to the Taliban, declaring his support for Mansour. In September 2015, the Taliban captured the northern city of Kunduz province, which helped rally some of the heavyweight dissidents, including Mullah Abdul Zakir, Umar's brother Mullah Abdul Manan Akhund, and son Mullah Yaqub, to acquiesce to Mansour accession as "commander of the faithful."¹⁴ Subsequently, Manan was named the head of *Dawat Wal Irshad*, the Preaching and Guidance Commission, and Yaqub was given a seat on the executive council of *Quetta Shura*, as well as in the Military Commission by making him the military chief of 15 provinces.¹⁵ On August 8, 2016, the Taliban announced that Mullah Rasool's deputy, Mullah Baz Mohammad, and Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Akhund, another recalcitrant commander in Uruzgan, together with their followers, had reunited with the Taliban.¹⁶ At this time, it has not been established whether the breakaway faction of Mohammad Rasool will reintegrate with the main group as well.

In May 2016, a U.S. drone strike killed Mullah Mansour in a remote village of Pakistan's Balochistan province, which shares a border with Iran.¹⁷ On May 25, the Taliban confirmed Mansour's death and selected one of his deputies, Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhonzada, as its new leader. As his honorific title *Mawlawi* (used for a high-level of religious scholarship) suggests, Akhonzada was previously committed to the religious affairs of the movement, and was not directly involved in the command structure, which is why he lacks "any familiarity with the bigger issues," according to the former head of Afghanistan's intelligence agency, Rahmatullah Nabil.¹⁸ Akhonzada has left the operational command of the movement in the hands of his deputies: the incumbent and *de facto* leader of the Haqqani Network, Sirajuddin Haqqani, and the young Mullah Mohammad Yaqub.¹⁹ According to one Taliban commander, who spoke to reporters about the Taliban leadership on condition of anonymity, the two deputies have already "divided Afghanistan into two parts," each wanting to control his own front.²⁰

Since the onset of his administration, current Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has prioritized reconciling with the Taliban by reaching out to Pakistan to facilitate negotia-

tions, as well as by establishing a Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), which includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, and the United States, in pursuit of a peace settlement. However, the Taliban has continued its offensives and refused to attend the peace talks. As a result, in the first quarter of 2016, Ghani effectively eschewed amnesty and passivity as a policy option toward the insurgency, yet continued to welcome those who wish to reconcile.²¹

In May 2016, the new Taliban leadership announced it would not resume peace talks with the Afghan government and would remain committed to battlefield operations. The decision was driven by the conviction of many of the movement's commanders that political settlement to the conflict is not a desired option, given the attainable prospect of victory over the Afghan government. This view has been strengthened by the movement's recent offensives in nearly half of the country's 34 provinces, particularly the capture of a city in Kunduz in September 2015 (in which the Taliban freed 600 prisoners, including nearly 150 insurgent fighters), and again in August 2016, when Taliban fighters seized Khanabad district in Kunduz, a province that holds symbolic and strategic significance to the Taliban as it was once its key northern stronghold.²² Afghan security forces subsequently retook both territories, however. Since a political settlement does not seem to be in the offing, the two sides will likely remain in what experts have termed a "mutually hurting stalemate."²³

Tebrik-i-Taliban Pakistan

Tebrik-i-Taliban Pakistan is an umbrella front bringing together rogue resistance organizations like *Lashkar-e Jhangvi*, *Jaish-e Muhammad*, *Sipah-e Sahaba Pakistan*, and possibly some of the banned Kashmiri groups like *Harakat ul-Mujahedin*.²⁴ Though the group was officially formed in 2007, its seeds were sown as early as 2001 as a result of Afghan-Pakistani militant communication and collaboration.

Following the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, Taliban supporters and sympathizers in Pakistan's western tribal areas quickly pledged support and provided additional manpower and resources to help the Afghan Taliban resistance. The Pashtun tribes who dominate the western tribal agencies of Pakistan share ancestral lineages with many of Afghanistan's Pashtun tribesmen and both have long resisted colonial attempts at occupation. Even in a modern context, the core of the Afghan resistance movement against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was based in these same areas, using Peshawar as a *de facto* capital and the tribal agencies of North and South Waziristan as training areas and key junctions for transiting personnel and weapons into Afghanistan.

The initial flow of Taliban fighters into Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) became a tidal wave following the collapse of the Taliban regime in Kandahar and after the monumental battle of Tora Bora in December 2001 and the subsequent spring 2002 battle of the Shah-i-kot Valley (known in the West as "Operation Anaconda"). Along with the Taliban came hundreds of fleeing Arab and foreign fighters

linked to al-Qaeda, many of whom settled among their Pashtun supporters and sympathizers in North and South Waziristan. Home of the legendary *mujahedeen* commander Jalaluddin Haqqani, North Waziristan is also the operational space of many al-Qaeda leaders and the network of Hafiz Gul Bahadur.

Baitullah Mehsud soon emerged as a charismatic Pakistani version of Mullah Omar. Young, radical but oddly not schooled in Islamic *madrassas*, Baitullah hailed from the Mehsud tribe and gained prominence in February 2005 when he signed a “peace accord” with the Pakistani government.²⁵ As part of that deal, Baitullah pledged not to support al-Qaeda and restrained his forces from attacking Pakistani state targets and military targets in exchange for the end of Pakistani military operations in South Waziristan. The deal disintegrated in 2006, leaving South Waziristan a largely independent militarized zone where Taliban officials and al-Qaeda leaders found sanctuary. Baitullah Mehsud commanded a core of 5,000 hardened loyalists, mostly tribally affiliated Mehsud kinsmen, launching spectacular raids and ambushes against the superior Pakistani military forces.²⁶

On December 14, 2007, a militant spokesman announced the formation of the *Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP). Baitullah Mehsud was appointed the *emir* of TTP’s forty-man shura; Hafiz Gul Bahadur was appointed as the *naib emir* (deputy); and Maulana Faqir Mohammad of the Bajaur Agency was appointed third in command.²⁷ The TTP consolidated its objectives to enforcing *sharia* throughout the FATA, uniting against NATO forces in Afghanistan by supporting Mullah Omar’s Afghan Taliban, seeking to remove Pakistani military checkpoints from the FATA, and vowing to protect the Swat district and Waziristan from future Pakistani military operations. Following the Pakistani government’s siege of the Red Mosque in Islamabad in July 2007,²⁸ Baitullah Mehsud and the TTP turned its guns on the Pakistani government. The following month, forces loyal to Mehsud humiliated the Pakistani military when they ambushed and captured 200 government soldiers.²⁹ Subsequently, the December 2007 assassination of Pakistan’s former two-time Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto reverberated around the world and drew considerable attention to the deteriorating security situation in the country.

The Pakistani government quickly blamed Baitullah Mehsud and the TTP for orchestrating the assassination of Bhutto, offering transcripts of alleged phone conversations with Mehsud and his operatives discussing the attack, a claim Mehsud and the TTP strongly denied.³⁰ Rifts between rival commanders under the TTP banner impacted the organization’s unity throughout 2008, eventually leading to major disputes between Hafiz Gul Bahadur, Baitullah Mehsud and Maulvi Nazir. An increase in U.S. drone strikes targeting militants in North and South Waziristan strained the TTP as top and mid-level leaders died throughout 2008 and 2009 and scores more were arrested in 2010. The Pakistani military moved on the TTP and the TSNM in Bajaur and Swat, prompting a closer cooperation among militants who renewed their

vows of union in February 2009 when they formed the *Shura-Ittehad-al-Mujahedeen* (United Mujahedeen Council) which again brought Hafiz Gul Bahadur, Baitullah Mehsud, Maulavi Nazir and Siraj Haqqani together.

Major Pakistani military ground operations (under the rubric of *Operation Rah-e Nijat*) targeted the TTP in South Waziristan in October 2009, concluding by April 2010. Beginning in October 2009, the Pakistani military launched a major offensive against Taliban strongholds in South Waziristan. The symbolic village of Makeen, the hometown of Baitullah Mehsud, as well as Ladha, Kotkai, Kaniguram, and Sararogha were the primary targets of the operation.³¹ Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani, in announcing the completion of the ground offensive on December 19, 2009, claimed that 589 Taliban fighters and their supporters had been killed in the offensive and that 79 Pakistani soldiers also died in combat.³²

Just prior to the South Waziristan operation, on August 5, 2009, an American UAV strike killed Baitullah Mehsud, his second wife, and several of his bodyguards. A chaotic rebuttal from TTP spokesmen denied his death, but within two weeks, and following an alleged power struggle within the TTP for the top leadership position, the TTP acknowledged Mehsud's death and announced Hakimullah Mehsud as his replacement.

In October 2013, Pakistan's Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, paid an official visit to Washington in an effort to strengthen U.S.- Pakistan relations as well as to solidify America's commitment to ensuring security and stability in Pakistan and the region.. Eight days later, on November 1, a U.S. drone strike killed Hakimullah Mehsud along with his uncle after a meeting with several senior Taliban leaders in a small mosque.³³

Following Mehsud's death, Maulana Fazlullah, the founder of TTP's Swat chapter, presided over a tumultuous period for the organization, marked by ideological differences and internal rivalries.³⁴ In May 2014, a powerful faction of TTP, the Mehsud tribe, parted ways with the central leadership of the organization after failed attempts at peace talks and convincing Fazlullah to give up "un-Islamic" practices, such as "the killing of innocent people, kidnapping for ransom and extortion."³⁵ The new break-away faction calls itself *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan-South Waziristan* (TTP-SW), and is led by Khalid Mehsud (aka Khan Said Sajna), the former Chief of TTP's South Waziristan chapter, who was listed by the U.S. State Department as a SDGT on October 21, 2014.³⁶ Khalid Mehsud was reportedly killed in U.S. drone strike in Afghanistan's Khost province on November 25, 2015.³⁷ However, Azam Tariq, the faction's spokesman, denied reports of Mehsud's death, and the faction has since continued to fight against the Pakistani state and foreign forces in Afghanistan under the leadership of the Afghan Taliban.³⁸

Fractures in TTP led to speculation about a weakening of the group, however, the organization's activities have intensified. In June 2014, TTP militants stormed into a

cargo area of Pakistan's Jinnah International Airport in Karachi, leaving more than 20 people dead.³⁹ In response, Pakistan's Army and Air Force launched a counterterrorism operation in North Waziristan called *Zarb-e-Azb* the same month, aimed at TTP and terrorists of "all hues and colors," which had killed over 1,800 militants by the end of the year.⁴⁰ TTP's responses included the November 2014 attack on a paramilitary checkpoint at Wagah border with India that killed around 60 people, and the attack on a military-run public school in Peshawar the following month, in which TTP militants entered classrooms, shooting and killing 145, including 132 children.⁴¹ The attack prompted a global response. Even the Afghan Taliban, with which the TTP is closely affiliated, condemned the attack as a "deliberate killing of innocent people, women and children [which is] against Islamic principles," and offered their condolences to the victims.⁴² Pakistan's government responded by lifting the six-year moratorium on the death penalty for militants convicted on terrorism-related charges, and intensified the North Waziristan military operation, *Zarb-e-Azb*, which has killed some 3,500 "terrorists" as of September 2016, according to the Pakistani military's top spokesman, Lieutenant General Asim Bajwa.⁴³

In August 2014, a second splinter group, called *Jamaat-ul-Ahrar*, formed in Mohmand tribal agency near Peshawar under the leadership of Omar Khalid Khorasani, who had served as a spokesman to Fazlullah until he was sacked after accusing the leader of deviating from the movement's ideology by opening negotiations with the Pakistani government.⁴⁴ The attacks attributed to Khorasani's breakaway faction included the November 2014 twin bombings in Mohmand Agency, which targeted peace committee volunteers, killing six;⁴⁵ twin bombings at two churches in Lahore on March 15, 2015, which killed 15 people;⁴⁶ the March 27, 2016 suicide attack on members of a Pakistani Christian community at a park in Lahore that killed over 70 and injured more than 340;⁴⁷ and the suicide attack on a local mosque in Mohmand agency on September 16, 2016 that killed 28 people.⁴⁸

Khorasani's *Jumaat-ul-Arhar* rejoined the TTP in March 2015 following temporary peace talks between Taliban and the Afghan government, which they feared would leave them baseless and caught between the Pakistani military and a potentially inhospitable Afghanistan.⁴⁹ Khorasani was subsequently killed by a U.S. drone strike in July 2016.⁵⁰

In September 2016, General Asim Bajwa claimed Operation *Zarb-e-Azb* had succeeded in defeating terrorists and all but declared the operation over.⁵¹ The TTP's new leader for North Waziristan, Akhtar Mohammad Khalil, who was appointed in spring 2016 by the main *emir*, Mullah Fazlullah (believed to be hiding in Afghanistan), appeared in a video released in mid-September on the TTP's official propaganda outlet, Umar Media, countering Pakistani military's claims.⁵² The video features three Pakistani security personnel captured and put on display, as well as TTP fighters firing rifles, rockets, mortars and machine guns at Pakistani troops in remote mountainous areas.⁵³

Most of the regional commanders of TPP have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, and have close relations with ISIS's regional offshoot, *Welayat Khorasan*. However, despite their affiliation with and support for IS Khorasan, TTP appears committed to its core anti-state philosophy and campaign against the Pakistani government and military establishment. Looking ahead, some TTP's disgruntled members may be coopted into IS Khorasan, but the possibility of the entire group merging with IS Khorasan appears very unlikely. Still, all signs point to an inescapable reality that TTP's end is not yet in sight.⁵⁴

The Haqqani Network

The Haqqani Network is based out of a Taliban bastion in neighboring Pakistan. The village of Dande Darpa Khel near Miramshah (North Waziristan) is its main headquarters, while Zambar village in the northern Sabari district in Khost province serves as the group's major operations hub.⁵⁵ The group also maintains a major presence in the Zadran dominated districts between Paktia and Paktika provinces, which also serve as a major transit point for insurgents infiltrating into Logar province and southern Kabul.

Jalaluddin Haqqani, who was never part of the original Taliban movement of Mullah Omar, was coopted into the Taliban in 1996 after the religious militia neared his stronghold of Paktia. Haqqani was allowed by Mullah Omar to operate his network as an offshoot under auspices of the Taliban regime. He (and later his oldest son Siraj Haqqani) has pledged *bayat* (allegiance) to Mullah Omar, becoming the Minister of Tribal and Border Affairs, the Governor of Paktia and eventually the Taliban's overall military commander under its ruling regime. In 2003, Jalaluddin led the Taliban's strategy for the eastern zone. Suspected of suffering from lupus for some time, the elderly Haqqani handed the reins of his terror network over to his son Siraj in 2007 after developing health issues.

The Haqqanis hold clout on both sides of the border and, through Siraj's leadership, the group provides a critical bridge to Pakistani Taliban groups and al-Qaeda-linked foreign fighters. Electronic signal intercepts by U.S. and Indian intelligence agencies reportedly confirm a link between ISI officers and Haqqani operatives who are said to have jointly planned and executed the deadly suicide car bomb attack against Indian embassy in Kabul on July 7, 2008.⁵⁶ In September 2012, the U.S. formally designated the *Haqqani Network* as a foreign terrorist organization.

A series of complex assaults against Afghan government and economic institutions in Kabul, Jalalabad, and Khost cities have been attributed to the *Haqqani Network* and its "Kabul Strike Group"- a shadowy guerrilla front that plans and conducts sophisticated attacks that often include a commando style raid with suicide-bombers against urban targets. On February 19, 2011, a brazen day-light attack against Jalalabad's

main bank, which involved gunmen and suicide bombers dressed as border police, killed at least 42 people and wounded more than 70 in one of the deadliest attacks ever carried out by the *Haqqani Network*.⁵⁷

Past attacks attributed to the *Haqqani Network* include the multi-pronged assault on two Afghan ministries and a prison headquarters in Kabul that left 19 people dead and more than 50 wounded; an 11-man commando-style suicide bombing raid against several government facilities in Khost City; and the July 4, 2009 assault against a remote U.S. outpost in Paktika's Zerok district that killed two U.S. soldiers and injured four others. On July 21, 2009, suicide bombers armed with rocket-propelled grenades and assault rifles attacked government installations and a U.S. base in the cities of Gardez and Jalalabad. However, one of the most brazen attacks attributed to the *Haqqani Network* occurred in Kabul on October 4, 2009 when terrorists dressed in police uniforms assassinated the security guard protecting the UN's guest house and stormed the facility, eventually detonating several suicide vests and killing at least twelve people, including six UN personnel. The deadly suicide bombing of an CIA forward operating base in Khost on December 30, 2009 that killed seven senior CIA operatives and a Jordanian intelligence officer has been speculatively attributed to the *Haqqani Network*, the TTP and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. In June 2013, *Haqqani Network* fighters staged a large-scale coordinated attack with 13 suicide bombers on two high-profile Afghan government targets, including the Kabul International Airport.

The *Haqqani Network* was at its zenith in the period between 2004 and 2010, during which time it boasted more than 3,000 fighters and supporters. However, following the deaths and arrests of several Haqqani sons and hardline commanders, the network's influence has faded somewhat. By mid-2015, rumors emerged that Jalaluddin Haqqani had died the previous year following a protracted illness.⁵⁸ Pakistani intelligence and the leader's relatives reportedly confirmed his death; however, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid rejected reports of Haqqani's demise.⁵⁹

Despite all the turbulence, the network has demonstrated persistent capability to carry out operations, particularly those focused on Kabul. In 2011, three high-profile attacks were attributed to the *Haqqani Network*: the attack on Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul on June 28, 2011; the truck bombing in Wardak province on September 10, 2011 that injured 77 U.S. soldiers; and the September 13, 2011 coordinated attacks on U.S. Embassy and NATO headquarters in Kabul, killing 16 and leaving more than 160 injured.⁶⁰ In June 2012, the network's militants carried out a 12-hour siege of a popular hotel on the outskirts of Kabul, leaving at least 20 dead.⁶¹ After a relative lull in their terror campaign in 2013 through mid-2014, the network resumed its offensives with by back-to-back attacks in the summer of 2014: on July 15, the network carried out a truck bomb attack in a market located in a remote eastern district in Afghanistan, killing 72 people, and then, two days later, suicide attacks targeted Kabul airport with volleys of grenades, killing 5 people.⁶² On June 22, 2015, militants

staged a coordinated attack on the Afghan parliament, with a suicide car bomb and gunfire, which killed five people and seven attackers.⁶³ The Taliban claimed responsibility, but Afghan intelligence alleged that the *Haqqani Network* was responsible, backed by Pakistan's ISI.⁶⁴

The network has engendered a global response. In 2011, the then-Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen, the Haqqani Network “as a veritable arm” of ISI in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee.⁶⁵ In early 2015, the Pakistani government officially outlawed the *Haqqani Network*, mainly in response to the military public school attack and pressures from the U.S. to stop differentiating between “good” and “bad” militants.⁶⁶ However, the country's promises and policies never translated into effective practical counterterrorism as they merely focused on displacing rather than destroying the network. In May 2016, the U.S. Congress proposed a \$300 million cutoff in military aid to Pakistan if the network's “safe havens and freedom of movement” were not “significantly disrupted.”⁶⁷ Two months later, reimbursements allocated for Pakistan's counterterrorism and counter-insurgency operations were suspended, following former U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter's refusal to certify that Pakistan had made any noteworthy efforts in dismantling the Haqqani and other terrorist networks.⁶⁸

Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin (Party of Islam)

A young Islamist named Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a Kharoti Pashtun from the northern Afghan province of Kunduz, formed the *Hezb-i-Islami - Gulbuddin* political faction in Pakistan in 1976 in response to the growing influence of leftist movements in the Afghan government and university campuses. During the 1980s, Hekmatyar, along with guidance from Pakistan's intelligence services and financial assistance from U.S. and Saudi intelligence services, propelled *Hezb-i-Islami* into the biggest *mujahedeen* organization fighting the Soviet occupation. Hekmatyar is infamous for his brutal battlefield tactics and backstabbing political deals, including the assassination of many of his political rivals.⁶⁹

The U.S. military has estimated Hekmatyar's forces to number around 400-600, although experts suggest the number is more likely to total around 1,500 full-time fighters.⁷⁰ *Hezb-i-Islami* cadres have fallen out of favor with many Taliban fronts at the local level, with violent clashes and killings attributed to both sides occurring throughout 2010.⁷¹ Unlike the Taliban, *Hezb-i-Islami* leaders have participated in clandestine and overt talks with the Afghan government since 2009, both abroad and in Afghanistan—an indicator the group is militarily weakened and biding its time for a political rebirth and to bolster its rank-and-file. In February 2003, the U.S. Department of State designated Gulbuddin Hekmatyar a SDGT for having participated and supported terrorist acts committed by al-Qaeda and the Taliban.⁷² At the same time, the United Nations also included Hekmatyar on its sanctions list against known terrorists, which would obligate all UN members states to impose sanctions

on the group, including asset freezes.⁷³ Hekmatyar loyalists were politically active in the former Afghan government led by Hamid Karzai, with several occupying important cabinet level positions, including Abdul Hadi Arghandiwala as the Minister of Economy, and Karim Khurram as President Karzai's Chief of Staff.

HIG has never had a prominent battlefield presence like the Taliban. Their onslaughts have primarily been high-profile attacks, such as a suicide bombing of September 2012 in Kabul – carried out in retaliation for a film mocking Prophet Mohammad – killing 12 people, including eight South African nationals working for a USAID-chartered air service, and another attack in May 2013 when a Toyota Corolla, packed with explosives, rammed into a pair of American military vehicles in Kabul, killing 16 people, including 6 Americans (two soldiers and four contractors).⁷⁴ The attack was carried out as a reaction to the talks about a long-term security deal between Kabul and Washington.

HIG is the most reconcilable of all the insurgent groups involved in the current peace process. In January 2010, Hekmatyar and the Karzai administration initiated talks on reconciliation in Kabul, followed by HIG delegation's attendance of the Afghan government's consultative peace *Loya Jirga* a few months later in June – the two sides subsequently met in June 2012 academic conference in Paris, and again in Chantilly, France, in December 2012 – to discuss issues and terms of reconciliation.⁷⁵ Talks were cast into limbo as Afghanistan and the United States negotiated a bilateral security agreement, which ensured a long-term U.S. and NATO presence in Afghanistan.

In the 2014 Afghan elections, Hekmatyar reportedly told his partisans to vote for his deputy, Qutbuddin Helal, who ran for president as an “independent,” gathering a meager 2.75 percent of the vote.⁷⁶

In May 2016, the Afghan National Unity Government and Hekmatyar came close to finalizing a 25-point peace agreement, which is widely regarded as a model for future peace deals between the Afghan government and other insurgent groups, like the Taliban, with much more significant presence, to follow suit.⁷⁷ On September 22, 2016, the Afghan government signed a draft of the long-awaited peace deal with HIG.⁷⁸ The terms of the agreement call for the faction to cease hostilities in exchange for recognition by the government, its support for the delisting of Hekmatyar as a SDGT and the removal of U.S. and UN sanctions against him.⁷⁹ However, the HIG representative, Mohammad Amin Karim, simultaneously said that the group will “keep struggling until the last foreign soldier leaves,” as “the restoration of independence is our main demand.”⁸⁰ The U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan issued a statement, lauding the accord and welcoming it as “an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process.”⁸¹ Additionally, the deal entails the arrangement of Hekmatyar's re-establishment in Afghanistan and its political apparatus by granting him an “honorary post” in the government, which does not entail power sharing.⁸² Even though the agreement is a

breakthrough, as it represents the first qualified success in the Afghan government's protracted peace campaign, it is still fragile and easily reversible, particularly given Hekmatyar's history of breaking agreements and changing sides in a political conflict.

GLOBAL REACH

The Afghan Taliban movement has restricted its area of operations to attacks within the borders of Afghanistan, although violent clashes in the frontier areas with Iran and Tajikistan have occasionally been reported. These clashes are likely smuggling operations gone awry, as Afghanistan's frontier regions with Iran and Tajikistan are well-established narcotics and weapons smuggling routes. Occasionally, Afghan Taliban leaders have threatened attacks against NATO countries whose soldiers are operating in Afghanistan (namely Germany, Spain and the UK) although none of the terrorist attacks in any of these countries have ever been attributed to the Taliban.⁸³ In the fall of 2009, the Taliban made an effort to promote a new "foreign policy" by releasing several statements on their website declaring the movement poses no regional or international security threat. Mullah Omar repeated this rhetoric in one of his two annual *Eid* statements to the Afghan people, which appeared in mid-November 2010.⁸⁴ In June 2015, Mullah Mansour sent a letter to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, warning him to stop making separate *jihadist* inroads in Afghanistan or the group would face the consequences of Taliban retaliation.⁸⁵

The Pakistani Taliban or TTP, especially following the Baitullah Mehsud's reign of terror between 2007 and 2009, have shown interest in not only attacking the Afghan government and security targets but also Pakistani state institutions and security targets. On several occasions in 2008 and 2009, Baitullah Mehsud threatened to launch attacks against international targets, including the White House.⁸⁶ On January 19, 2009, Spanish authorities seized 14 suspected associates of the TTP in Barcelona on suspicion of plotting a series of suicide-bomb attacks, which were to coincide with the run-up to the March 9 parliamentary elections and the March 11 anniversary of the Madrid commuter train bombings.⁸⁷ Similarly, the TTP claimed credit for the April 4, 2009 shooting attack at an immigration center in Binghamton, New York where 13 people lost their lives to a lone gunman. However, investigators quickly identified the gunman as a deranged Vietnamese immigrant with no ties to international terrorist groups or radical Islamist movements.

On May 1, 2010, Faisal Shahzad, a Pakistani-American, made a failed attempt to detonate a car bomb in Times Square in New York City. Shortly thereafter, in an interview with NBC's "Meet the Press," U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder said that based on the initial evidence collected, Shahzad was working with the Pakistani Taliban and that the movement directed the plot. In fact, TTP's top commander, Qari Hussain, who trained suicide bombers (calling them "the atomic weapons of Muslims") and plotted operations against the West, orchestrated the attack.⁸⁸ He was reported to have been killed in 2012 by a U.S. drone strike in North Waziristan.⁸⁹

Mehsud's close association with Arab al-Qaeda leaders and Uzbek militants in South Waziristan partially explained his global-*jihadist* rhetoric. Following his death in August 2009, the TTP's shura struggled to nominate a new leader that pleased both the Pashtun tribal constituency and the more global minded *jihadists* of al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda's influence won out, and Hakimullah Mehsud, the radical TTP commander of the Orakzai Agency, became the new *amir* for the TTP. Hakimullah ordered a number of deadly attacks against Pakistani and U.S. military targets in the region with some reports indicating he helped facilitate the suicide bombing attack against a U.S. intelligence base in eastern Khost province of Afghanistan. The deadly attack killed eight CIA officers and left six others severely injured on December 28, 2009.

RECENT ACTIVITY

Since the attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar in December 2014, the TTP and its affiliates have continued their offensives in Pakistan. The group has targeted civilians, government and military personnel, (as mentioned above), with the most recent high-profile attacks carried out on August 8, 2016, when suicide bombers targeted a government hospital in Quetta, Balochistan. In that attack, 77 people were killed and more than a hundred were injured. There was also a suicide attack on a mosque in Mohmand Agency the next month, all of which demonstrates the group's resiliency and persistence.⁹⁰

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) estimates that, in the first half of 2013 alone, over 1,300 Afghan civilians were killed.⁹¹ In 2014, the estimated civilian casualties were 10,548, including 3,699 civilian deaths, and 6,849 injuries—a staggering 22 percent rise.⁹²

For the first half of 2015, UNAMA and the UN Human Rights Office documented almost 5,000 civilian casualties in Afghanistan – with close to 1600 deaths and over 3,300 injuries.⁹³ By the end of December 2015, civilian casualties had risen to over 11,000, most of which were attributed to the Haqqani network, including the attack in August that killed 43 and wounded more than 300, and an even deadlier attack on the Afghan intelligence directorate in April 2016 that left more than 60 dead and some 300 wounded.⁹⁴ The vicious trend continued into 2016, with 11,418 civilians recorded killed or maimed in that year.⁹⁵ Ground engagements, mostly by anti-government elements (60 percent), continue to be the main cause of civilian casualties, followed by complex and suicide attacks and improved explosive devices (IEDs).⁹⁶

Meanwhile, in 2013 and 2014, the Afghan security forces – which have assumed primary responsibility for security from American and coalition forces – endured a staggering number of casualties.⁹⁷ The Afghan Ministry of Defense estimated that almost 1,400 soldiers lost their lives in 2013 alone fighting the insurgency.⁹⁸ Additionally, the year 2014 bore witness to an even higher death toll for Afghan security forces, with 1,868 soldiers and 3,720 police killed in the line of duty.⁹⁹ Furthermore, 2015,

a year of survival for Afghanistan, was the bloodiest year on record for the Afghan security forces, marked by casualties reported at over 20,000 deaths and injuries, according to Gen. John Nicholson, commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁰ The grim uptick continued into 2016 marked by the attack on April 19 that targeted a security compound responsible for protecting government VIPs and contractors in Kabul – killing 64 and injuring more than 300.¹⁰¹ Two months later, in June, Taliban suicide bombers attacked a police convoy in the western outskirts of Kabul, carrying 215 recently graduated cadets in five buses, two of which were destroyed by explosions, killing nearly 40 cadets.¹⁰²

The Taliban remains resilient and reportedly gained and lost control of at least 35 of Afghanistan's 398 districts. The group continues to contest for territory in at least another 35 districts and is more any time since their ouster in 2001.¹⁰³

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