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Terrorist Groups in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's geography, complex ethnic composition, and history of conflict and instability have long created space for Islamist terrorist groups, some of which seek to conduct attacks abroad. United Nations (U.N.) sanctions monitors report that "the high concentration of terrorist groups in Afghanistan undermines the security situation in the region." Two of the most prominent such groups are Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP, the Afghanistan-based affiliate of the Islamic State) and Al Qaeda (AQ). Relations between these groups and other actors (including the Afghan Taliban, who returned to power in August 2021) and the respective threats they pose to U.S. interests are likely to inform congressional assessments of U.S. policy in Afghanistan. U.S. officials have told Congress that since the withdrawal of U.S. forces, the United States has no military or diplomatic personnel in Afghanistan, but has maintained "over-the-horizon" capabilities to address terrorist threats there.

Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP)

The group that reportedly poses the "greatest threat within Afghanistan" and beyond is ISKP (also known as ISIS-K or IS-K), and ISKP has launched plots and carried out operations in multiple countries, including in Russia in March 2024.

The Islamic State announced the formation of this Afghan affiliate in 2015, and ISKP was designated as a U.S. Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in 2016. ISKP was initially concentrated in eastern Afghanistan, bordering the region of Pakistan formerly known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). There, ISKP mostly comprised former Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, see below) militants who fled Pakistani army operations in the FATA after 2014. Today it recruits across Central Asia, and estimates of its size range from 2,000 to 5,000.

ISKP controlled territory in eastern and northern Afghanistan until it was allegedly "nearly eradicated from its main Afghan base" by U.S. and Afghan military offensives and, separately, Taliban operations in 2018-2020. ISKP continued to conduct attacks against various targets, particularly Afghanistan's Shia minority, the Hazaras. ISKP also carried out the suicide bombing at Kabul's airport that killed and injured dozens of U.S. servicemembers and hundreds of Afghans during the August 2021 U.S. military withdrawal. That suicide bomber was reportedly one of the thousands of ISKP prisoners who escaped from Afghan prisons after the Taliban takeover. The planner of the attack was reportedly killed by the Taliban in 2023.

While the Taliban and ISKP share some ideological similarities, they are "doctrinally distinct" given the Taliban's close relationship with IS rival Al Qaeda (see below) and ISKP's view of the Taliban's Afghanistan-focused nationalist political project as counter to the IS

vision of a global caliphate. ISKP has launched attacks against Taliban targets since mid-2021, killing several senior officials (including provincial governors in March and June 2023), as well as externally oriented operations, including cross border rocket attacks against Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, attacks against the Russian and Pakistani embassies in Kabul, and an assault on a Kabul hotel frequented by Chinese nationals. The Taliban appear to view ISKP as the primary threat to their rule and have launched offensives against it. In March 2024, a U.S. official said the Taliban "have made progress combating [ISKP], but they have struggled to dismantle [ISKP]'s clandestine urban cells and prevent attacks on soft targets."

While ISKP retains the ability to conduct high-profile attacks in Afghanistan, ISKP's external attacks are raising alarms in Europe and elsewhere. According to one expert, the group is "expanding its external operations capacity," as evidenced by its growing media presence (particularly propaganda targeting Central Asian nationals) and planned or actual attacks in Pakistan, India, Turkey, and Germany. ISKP claimed responsibility for mass casualty attacks in Iran and Russia in January and March 2024, respectively; the United States reportedly sent private warnings to both Iran and Russia that ISKP was planning attacks. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) commander General Erik Kurilla estimated in March 2023 testimony that ISKP could be capable of conducting "an external operation against U.S. or Western interests abroad in under six months," a warning he repeated in March 2024 testimony.

Al Qaeda

The presence of AQ's top leaders (sometimes referred to as Al Qaeda core) in Afghanistan dates back to the 1990s, when AQ founder Osama bin Laden (killed by U.S. forces in Pakistan in 2011) 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. AQ-Taliban ties were reinforced by their shared battle against U.S.-led international forces in Afghanistan after 2001, as well as through intermarriage and other interpersonal bonds. AQ remained a key target of U.S.-led military operations. In September 2019, the White House announced that U.S. forces had killed Hamza bin Laden, son of AQ founder Osama bin Laden and a rising leader in the group, "in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region." AQ sympathizers celebrated the Taliban's August 2021 takeover as a victory.

Since the Taliban's return to power, AQ-Taliban ties have remained close, but U.N. sanctions monitors report that the Taliban "seek to reduce the visibility of these relationships" and that the Taliban have taken some steps to "constrain" Al Qaeda, leading to tensions between the groups. In July 2022, the United States killed AQ leader Ayman al Zawahiri in Kabul. The circumstances of Zawahiri's presence there and what they might signify beyond

continued Taliban-AQ ties remain unclear; National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan suggested that some elements of the Taliban might not have supported or even been aware of Zawahiri's presence in Kabul. Neither the Taliban nor Al Qaeda have acknowledged Zawahiri's death; his presumed successor as AQ leader, Sayf al Adl, is reportedly in Iran.

A June 2023 report from U.N. sanctions monitors assessed that Al Qaeda is "in a reorganization phase, establishing new training centers" in eastern Afghanistan; U.S. 2023 intelligence assessments in contrast described AQ as "at its historical nadir in Afghanistan and Pakistan" and unlikely to revitalize. A January 2024 report from U.N. sanctions monitors perhaps split the difference, reporting that Al Qaeda operates training camps, madrasas, and safe houses in Afghanistan but assessing that "the group cannot at present project sophisticated attacks at long range."

Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent

In 2014, Zawahiri announced the creation of a separate Al Qaeda affiliate in South Asia, Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS, designated as an FTO in 2016). AQIS represents an attempt by AQ to establish a more durable presence in the region by enhancing links with local actors (particularly the TTP), prompted in part by the relocation of some AQ leaders (who are predominantly Arab) to Syria. Former AQIS leader Asim Umar, an Indian national who was being "sheltered" by Taliban forces when he was killed in a joint U.S.-Afghan operation in Afghanistan in September 2019, had roots in Pakistan; his successor Osama Mahmood is Pakistani. The State Department designated Mahmood and two of his deputies as Specially Designated Global Terrorists in December 2022.

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 the late Jalaluddin Haqqani, a leading anti-Soviet Islamist commander who became a prominent Taliban official and a key leader in the post-2001 insurgency. The Haqqani Network was 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 been described as close to Pakistan's intelligence agency.

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, and Zawahiri was reportedly killed in a Haqqani-linked safe house. The Department of State has for years offered a reward of up to \$10 million for information leading to Haqqani's arrest. Since September 2021, Sirajuddin has been the acting Interior Minister in the Taliban government, the highest ranking of several Haqqani Network-aligned individuals to hold cabinet posts, and in February 2023 voiced discontent with other Taliban leaders.

U.N. sanctions monitors reported in June 2023 that the Haqqanis are "increasingly involved in the production and trafficking of methamphetamine and synthetic drugs."

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

The TTP, also known as the Pakistani Taliban, has "distinctive anti-Pakistan objectives," per U.N. sanctions monitors, but also fought alongside the Afghan Taliban inside Afghanistan. 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 in 2014, when some TTP members pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. Reunification between TTP and some former splinter groups (possibly facilitated by AQ) since 2020 has swelled the group's ranks in Afghanistan to 4,000-6,000 fighters.

TTP attacks in Pakistan have increased considerably since 2021, including a January 2023 attack targeting a police compound that killed over 100 Pakistanis, prompting Pakistan to carry out airstrikes in Afghanistan and force Afghan refugees to leave Pakistan. U.N. sanctions monitors report that TTP draws support both from Al Qaeda and the Taliban (described as "generally sympathetic to TTP aims") and has increasingly focused on recruiting Afghans.

Other Groups

Designated an FTO in 2000, the **Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)** was once a prominent ally of AQ. Formed by Uzbeks who fought alongside 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 the IMU, along with other Central Asian terrorist groups, has "greater freedom of movement" in Afghanistan under the Taliban government.

The **Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (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. ETIM was designated as an FTO in 2002 and delisted in 2020, when the State Department said in that "for more than a decade, there has been no credible evidence that ETIM continues to exist," and the group is not mentioned in the most recent *Country Reports on Terrorism*. U.N. sanctions monitors reported in January 2024 that ETIM is "headquartered" in northwestern Afghanistan and has been "restrained by the Taliban," who reportedly moved ETIM militants away from the Afghan-Chinese border in response to Chinese government concerns.

Issues For Congress

All of the groups above (except ETIM) face U.S. sanctions as designated FTOs. Congress may consider additional sanctions measures related to terrorism in Afghanistan (e.g., S. 1768) and examine the Administration's application of existing sanctions authorities. U.S. counterterrorism strategy is another potential oversight opportunity; some Members have expressed concern with the U.S. ability to conduct "over-the-horizon" counterterrorism operations. Actions by ISKP or others beyond Afghanistan's borders may heighten many of these issues.

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