



AFGHANISTAN

Quick Facts

Population: 36,643,815 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 652,230 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, other (includes smaller numbers of Baloch, Turkmen, Nuristani, Pamiri, Arab, Gujar, Brahui, Qizilbash, Aimaq, Pashai, and Kyrghyz)

GDP (official exchange rate): \$20.24 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated July 2020)

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan is among the nations most affected by Islamic militancy. A myriad of militant groups that vary in size, tactics, and political objectives perpetrate violent Islamist activity in the country. Key active groups include the Taliban and their splinter factions, of which the Haqqani Network is most prominent, as well as Lashkar-e Taiba, Lashkar-e Jhangvi (LeJ), al-Qaeda (AQ), the Islamic State (IS), and a host of others. The majority of these groups maintain a regional or global focus, and strategic military and political objectives. They either target relevant interests within Afghanistan or utilize the country as a base of operations. The groups generally support both the creation of an ultraconservative Islamic state in the region, the removal of perceived false governments, and the expulsion of U.S. and NATO forces from the region. The Taliban remain the largest and most influential group focusing solely on Afghanistan. Their campaign to remove the government of Afghanistan and enforce ultraconservative policies across the country receives the greatest amount of focus from the international community.

The Taliban emerged in 1994 in response to the Afghan civil war and the corruption of warlords countrywide. They seized Kabul and, by extension, power in Afghanistan in 1996 and continued to defeat warlords and capture territory until 2001, when their regime was ousted by a U.S.-led coalition in response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks perpetrated by al-Qaeda, then headquartered in the country. In the nearly two decades since, the U.S.-led coalition and the Afghan government, under a succession of leaders, have struggled to subdue an insurgency waged by the Taliban and ideological affiliates which have enjoyed sanctuary in, and financial and military support from, neighboring Pakistan.

The ongoing peace process between the Taliban and the U.S. is fraught with hostile negotiations, shifting timelines, and increasing tension. The peace process between the Taliban and the Afghan government faces even steeper odds and harsher demands. While a tentative truce was concluded between the U.S. and the Taliban in February of 2020, enacting it has faced significant challenges in the face of continued Taliban aggression. The majority of other Islamist groups in Afghanistan, meanwhile, have no interest in the current peace process and will likely continue their operations regardless of the outcome.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The Taliban “Religious Students”

The Taliban is a Sunni Islamist fundamentalist militant group founded by Mohammed “Mullah” Omar in 1994, during the Afghan civil war. The Taliban, or “religious students” in Pashto, were primarily *madrassa* students whose education was rooted in the Deobandi reformist school of north India, and who were motivated to restore peace, eliminate corruption, and enforce *sharia* law in Afghanistan. The Deobandi school rejects modern interpretations of Islam and instead focuses on a literal interpretation of the Quran.¹ The Taliban mesh their religious ideology with their own brand of legal jurisprudence that mixes Pashtunwali tribal traditions and conservative *sharia* law. The groups strategic motivations tie directly into these ideological systems in an effort to create an Islamic state in Afghanistan.

The Taliban formed in Kandahar and initiated a military campaign against regional warlords to capture Afghanistan. The movement seized Kandahar in November 1994 and Kabul in September 1996, taking control of the Afghan government in the process. It then began to rely upon foreign extremist groups like al-Qaeda for financial support. Islamist *jihadi* groups gravitated to Afghanistan because of the Taliban’s strict imposition of *sharia* law. Its influence was symbolized by the March 2001 destruction of the Buddhas of Bamyán, Afghanistan’s greatest historical site, because they were deemed by the movement to be “heathen idols.”²

After the September 2001 attacks, the Taliban refused to hand over Osama bin Laden to the United States government because of a strict interpretation of the Pashtun code of hospitality. In response, the U.S. and allied forces invaded Afghanistan and captured Kabul by November 2001, toppling the Taliban regime and leading to the group’s flight to Quetta, Pakistan, where the Quetta Shura was formed. Taliban leadership directed their operations in Afghanistan from Quetta with the strategic goal of removing coalition forces from Afghanistan and the creation of an ultraconservative Islamic state in the country. Nineteen years after the U.S.-led intervention to defeat the Taliban and remove al-Qaeda from Afghanistan, the fight against an active Taliban-led insurgency in the country continues.

Originally, the Taliban would often attack in large groups and would thus lose many fighters in combat. Soon, though, the Taliban incorporated tactics developed by insurgent and *jihadist* groups in Iraq including suicide bombing. These new tactics supported a strategy designed not only to fragment Afghan forces but also to capture more territory. So far it has enabled the group to determine where and when to fight and to target weaknesses through ambushes. 29% of casualties caused by the Taliban are a result of ground engagements, 22% due to IEDs, 20% due to suicide-IEDs, 8% due to targeted killings, and 5% due to unexploded ordinance.³

Before the end of the U.S. combat mission in Afghanistan in 2014, the Afghan government and the Obama administration pushed for a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. In July 2013, the Taliban opened diplomatic offices in Doha, Qatar, with the intention of using the facility as a neutral base from which to enter peace negotiations with the United States and Afghanistan. Peace efforts quickly stalled when the Taliban staged a flag-hoisting ceremony thought by the Afghan government and its Western allies to have been a Taliban government in exile, and after they issued unreasonable preconditions for negotiations. A parallel track of engagement is purportedly being facilitated by Pakistan.

An unconditional peace agreement proposed by the Afghan government in February 2018 was rejected outright by the Taliban. Subsequently, in July 2018, the U.S. initiated secret negotiations that became public that October. The US, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Afghan government and the Taliban held regular negotiations to solidify the peace agreement over the course of 2018 and 2019; however, that time period was fraught with stalled or canceled negotiations as a result of continued Taliban

combat operations and the deaths of U.S. soldiers. The U.S. and the Taliban signed a tentative peace agreement in February 2020, the terms of which included the immediate departure from Afghanistan of 5,000 of the approximately 13,000 troops previously stationed there, and the removal of all U.S. troops by May 2021. As of this writing, however, the fate of this agreement is in considerable question, with Taliban attacks surging and an intensification of the American military response.⁴ The Taliban maintain an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 fighters in Afghanistan.⁵

The Haqqani Network (HQN)

The Haqqani Network is the Taliban's foremost subordinate network. Jalaluddin Haqqani, the founder of the organization, was originally a member of Hezb-e-Islami Khalis, but broke away with his network during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The Haqqani Network actively fought the Soviets throughout the war. Jalaluddin Haqqani and his network were co-opted into the Taliban in 1996. Haqqani was allowed by Mullah Omar to operate his network as a subordinate under the auspices of the Taliban regime. Jalaluddin pledged allegiance to Mullah Omar, becoming the Minister of Tribal and Border Affairs, the Governor of Paktia, and eventually the Taliban's overall military commander. In 2003, Jalaluddin led the Taliban's strategy for the eastern zone. Jalaluddin handed control of the network to his son Sirajuddin in 2007, and the group has only increased in combat effectiveness since.

HQN is known for conducting extremely high profile and high impact suicide vehicle borne improvised explosive device attacks and raids against U.S., NATO, and Afghan military and government targets as well as economic and media institutions among other civilian targets. They are known for a complex assault on the US Embassy and ISAF Headquarters in September 2011, a June 2012 suicide bombing at FOB Salerno that wounded over 100 people, a May 2017 truck bomb that exploded near the Kabul Green Zone killing over 150 people, and a January 2018 ambulance bomb in Kabul that killed over 100 people.⁶ They also target hotels frequented by Westerners and take hostages for ransom and political bargaining. The group maintains ties to the majority of Islamist groups in the region but is most closely affiliated with the Taliban. As of late 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense assessed that HQN maintained 3,000 to 5,000 members operating in Afghanistan.⁷ HQN remains active as of 2020. In February of 2020, the *New York Times* published an article by Sirajuddin Haqqani listing the demands of the organization to participate in the peace process.⁸ Although the article outlines these conditions, the Haqqani Network will likely continue to operate semi-autonomously from the Taliban in the event a real peace is achieved.

The Afghan government's ongoing peace negotiations with the Taliban present further opportunities for Islamists to expand their political power and influence over policy. Should the Taliban and the government reach a lasting peace agreement, the Taliban will become a legitimate political party, maintain influence throughout the country and will likely be able to win parliament seats. Since 2004, the Taliban have actively attempted to disrupt the Afghan political process, attacking polling centers in 2018 and 2019.⁹ A peace agreement would ideally prevent these attacks, but it would provide the group with a real political platform for the first time since 2001.

Al Qaeda (AQ) "The Base"

Al Qaeda (AQ) is a Salafi-*Jihadi* Sunni Islamist militant group founded by Osama bin Laden in 1988. The organization was formed in Afghanistan with the goal of extending the *jihad* against the Soviets globally to all oppressors of Muslims after the Soviets were defeated. AQ's strategic objectives have since expanded to include removal of U.S. and Western forces from Afghanistan and the wider Muslim world, the destruction of governments friendly to the West, and the creation of an Islamic state that mandates *sharia* law globally.¹⁰ AQ's support for the Taliban stems from a shared desire to create such a state in Afghanistan. In practice, the group generally seeks to disrupt and destroy Western interests. Current AQ leadership is based in southern and northeastern Afghanistan.

AQ returned from Sudan to Afghanistan in 1996 as the Taliban grew more influential in the latter.

While the Taliban and al-Qaeda do not occupy the same ideological space, Taliban commanders regularly comment favorably on al-Qaeda.¹¹ AQ's leadership has reciprocated this familiarity; in August 2015, for instance, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri declared his support for the Taliban as he pledged allegiance to the new (now late) "commander of the faithful," Mullah Mansour.¹² AQ's primary aid to the Taliban comes in the form of shared battlefield tactics as well as the employment of sophisticated Internet and social media propaganda designed to promote and recruit.

Although AQ is globally focused, it conducts attacks in Afghanistan with strategic purpose. Tactically, AQ focuses on high profile suicide and non-suicide bombings, assassinations, and hostage taking.¹³ Outside of the September 2001 attacks, AQ is most well-known for perpetrating bombings against the U.S. Embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salam, Tanzania in 1998 and the *USS Cole* bombing in Aden, Yemen in 2000.¹⁴

Beyond the Taliban, AQ maintains ties with the vast majority of Islamist groups in Afghanistan.¹⁵ The group's regional branch, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), emerged in 2014 as the bulk of the organization decentralized and shifted away from direct attack planning. AQIS is responsible for conducting attacks regionally and within Afghanistan against U.S., NATO and Afghan government targets. AQ and AQIS act largely in an advisory role in the training of Taliban fighters in Afghanistan.¹⁶ The U.S. Department of Defense has assessed that, as of 2020, AQ and AQIS are primarily attempting to survive and build capacity rather than conduct attacks.¹⁷ The leader of AQIS had been killed in a drone strike in Helmand, Afghanistan in September the preceding year.¹⁸ And as of late 2019, US DOD assessed that approximately 300 AQ and AQIS members remain in Afghanistan.¹⁹

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) "Taliban Movement in Pakistan"

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is a coalition of Pakistani Deobani Sunni Islamist militant groups that formed in December 2007 in response to Pakistani military operations in Pakistan's Federally Administrated Tribal Area (FATA) and U.S. military operations across the border in Afghanistan. In keeping with its anti-state philosophy, TTP seeks to evict U.S. and NATO forces from the region and to implement *sharia* law in Pakistan, and maintains no aspirations for peace or political power in either Afghanistan or Pakistan short of the removal of the Pakistani government.²⁰ The coalition includes subordinate groups *Jamaat ul-Ahrar* (JuA), *Lashkar-e-Islam*, *Hafiz Gul Bahadur*, *TTP Hafeez Ullah Kochwan*, *TTP Sanja*, *TTP Punjab*, *Tariq Gidar*, and *Majlis-e-Ahrar*.²¹ However, constant conflict has led to internal fissures; some regional commanders have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, and now have close relations with that group's regional franchise.²² The death of TTP leader Hakimullah Mehsud in November 2013 led to additional internal conflict and the emergence of splinter groups.²³

TTP operates in Kunar, Nangarhar, and Paktika provinces along the Afghan-Pakistan border as well as the FATA region of Pakistan.²⁴ TTP supports Taliban operations in Afghanistan, but largely focuses on conducting high profile suicide bombings, assassinations, and raids against Pakistani government, military, and civilian targets.²⁵ It has attacked Shi'a mosques, schools, hospitals, and military bases in the region. TTP also conducts global missions. Most notably, TTP funded and directed the attempted New York City Time Square bombing in May 2010.²⁶ It is also responsible for an attempt to assassinate the Pakistani Prime Minister in 2007, and a subsequent attack against a school in Peshawar that killed over 140 people - mostly children. TTP remains active as of mid-2020 in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, with an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 members operating between the two countries.²⁷

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)

The Islamic State's Afghanistan branch, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), is a Salafi-*jihadi* militant organization that emerged in Afghanistan in 2015. The Islamic State's existential rationale for its presence in Nangarhar, Kunar, Laghman, and Jowzjan provinces is rooted in its interpretation of Islamic religious texts, which states that an army of true believers will convene in "Khorasan" Province, a historic region

that encompasses Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of Central Asia, before the “apocalypse” or Day of Judgment. ISKP’s strategic objectives include the creation of an Islamic state in Afghanistan and Central Asia, the removal of NATO and U.S. forces from the region, and the destruction of Shi’a Muslims.²⁸ ISKP harbors no aspirations for peace or political power short of the removal of the Afghan government and the implementation of an Islamic state.

Following the Islamic State’s declaration of a *caliphate* in Iraq in June 2014,²⁹ IS began to gain support among *jihadist* groups in the “Khorasan” region, particularly in Pakistan. At the time of ISKP’s emergence, U.S. commanders in Afghanistan said that this represented a rebranding of ‘marginalized or renegade Taliban’³⁰ operating under a different name, flag, and a leader. In 2016, the United States designated ISKP a foreign terrorist organization in its own right.³¹ ISKP regularly fights other Islamist groups, including the Taliban and IMU. ISKP also contends for recruits against other Islamist groups and actively steals their members.

Tactically, ISKP focuses on suicide bombings, assassinations, and kidnappings targeting Afghan and Pakistani government and military targets, Shi’a populations, and seemingly random civilian targets.³² They launch high profile attacks including detonating a 1.5-ton truck bomb in central Kabul in May 2017 that killed over 150 people and another at a hospital in Kabul in March 2018 that left at least 49 people dead.³³ Over the last two years, ISKP was responsible for major attacks in Kabul. These included, among others, a coordinated multiple-suicide bombing targeting Afghan government employees in July 2019,³⁴ a suicide bombing of a wedding in August 2019,³⁵ an attack against a memorial service attended by Afghan government officials in March 2020,³⁶ a raid against a Sikh religious compound in March 2020,³⁷ and a suicide bombing at a hospital and maternity ward in May 2020.³⁸

American, Afghan, and Taliban forces have increasingly targeted ISKP in recent years through both ground offensives and drone strikes. Joint operations have killed almost all of the group’s founding leaders and taken out hundreds of its fighters, restricting ISKP’s ability to operate freely in the country.³⁹ The group maintains an estimated 2,000 to 5,000 fighters in Afghanistan as of late 2019, though the majority have been ousted from Nangarhar by joint operations.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the Islamic State’s presence in Afghanistan is starting to gain global attention as a new vanguard of reinvigorated *jihadism* in the country.

Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), “Army of the Righteous”

Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) is an *Ahle Hadith* Sunni Islamist militant organization.⁴¹ LeT was founded in 1990 as the military arm of Markaz ud Dawa ul-Irshad (MDI), a Sunni Islamist charitable organization founded in 1985 that actively supported the *jihad* against the Soviets in Afghanistan. LeT seeks to overthrow oppressors of Muslims globally, is strongly anti-Christian, anti-Jewish, and anti-Hindu, and has proclaimed the desire to destroy India and reunite the entire subcontinent under Islamic rule. The group seeks no political power, only desiring the removal of the Indian government, and has no interest in the Afghan peace process.

LeT is based in Pakistan but has focused on targets in Afghanistan and India. The organization’s strategic objectives have evolved over time, but center on undermining Indian control of Jammu and Kashmir and reuniting the area with Pakistan.⁴² The organization has also stated the intent to remove U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan. LeT is most well-known for conducting a terror attack in November 2008 in Mumbai, India that killed over 160 people.⁴³

LeT utilizes the conflict in Afghanistan as a platform to train fighters and to conduct attacks against Indian, U.S., and NATO targets. LeT maintains strong ties to the Taliban and supports its efforts to remove U.S. and NATO forces from the country. It also maintains connections with AQ, TTP, and other Islamist groups in the region. LeT supports trafficking arms and fighters from Pakistan to Afghanistan.⁴⁴ It is also responsible for assassinating Afghan and Indian government officials and attacking government buildings. It operates primarily in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces, but has conducted attacks country wide. As of 2020, the group remains active and maintains an estimated 300 fighters in Afghanistan.⁴⁵

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) “Army of Jhangvi”

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) is a Deobandi Sunni Islamist militant organization. LeJ was founded in 1996 as the military arm of Sipah-e-Sabaha, a Sunni Islamist organization focused on preventing Shi’a expansion in Pakistan.⁴⁶ LeJ operates in Afghanistan and Pakistan with a primary focus similar to that of its former parent organization – the establishment of a Sunni state in the latter country.⁴⁷ It also seeks to remove U.S. and NATO forces from the region. Over time, LeJ developed a subordinate faction, Al Alami, that has shifted toward attacking non-Sunni religious groups.⁴⁸

LeJ is most well-known for attempting to assassinate the Pakistani Prime Minister in 1999 and 2007, an attempt on the life of the Pakistani President in 2003, and attacking Indian Parliament in 2001 alongside JeM.⁴⁹ The group provides logistical support – including safe houses, supplies and protection – to Afghan groups, including the Taliban, in Pakistan.⁵⁰ LeJ maintains strong ties to TTP, JEM, and SSP in Pakistan and ISKP in Afghanistan, other Islamist groups in the region, and remains active as of June 2020. LeJ maintains an unknown number of fighters in Afghanistan.⁵¹

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)

Founded in 1998 with the goal of overthrowing the President of Uzbekistan, the IMU is a Salafi-jihadi militant organization. The IMU is based in Afghanistan and operates out of Badakhshan, Jowzjan, Kunduz, and Faryab provinces.⁵² It is regionally focused and conducts operations in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The organization’s strategic objectives include the overthrow of the Uzbek government, the creation of an Islamic state in Central Asia, governance by *sharia* law, as well as the removal of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan. It has no interest in supporting the peace process in Afghanistan or seeking political power.

Tactically, the IMU primarily conducts bombings against targets in Uzbekistan, NATO and U.S. military forces in Afghanistan, and has, on several occasions, attempted to attack U.S. embassies in the region.⁵³ The IMU also takes hostages for ransom purposes. The group maintains connections with ISKP and AQ.⁵⁴ IMU operations have slowed in Afghanistan since 2015, with a shift toward lone wolf attacks that require minimal resources and supporting ISKP objectives.⁵⁵ The IMU maintains a presence of approximately 300 fighters across Afghanistan.⁵⁶

Islamic Jihad Union (IJU)

The Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) is a Salafi-Jihadi Islamist militant organization founded in 2002 as a globally focused offshoot of the regionally oriented IMU.⁵⁷ The IJU is based in Paktika and Nangarhar, Afghanistan but conducts operations in Central Asian states and is expanding operations globally to include the wider Middle East and Europe.⁵⁸ The organization’s strategic objectives are the removal of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan, overthrow of the government of Uzbekistan, the creation of an Islamic state in that country, and the targeting of Western interests globally.⁵⁹ The IJU exhibits no desire for political power in Afghanistan, and does not support the peace process there.

The IJU was responsible for the 2004 bombings of the U.S. and Israeli Embassies in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. It conducts attacks against Afghan, U.S. and NATO forces and also regularly supports the Taliban in their efforts to do the same.⁶⁰ Tactically, the majority of IJU attacks are suicide or non-suicide bombings.⁶¹ The IJU conducted several large ambushes and bombings in Afghanistan throughout 2016 and 2017, but has since shifted efforts to Syria in support of al-Nusra in 2019 and 2020.⁶² The IJU maintains connections with the Taliban, AQ, and the IMU. As of this writing, the IJU has not conducted an attack in Afghanistan in 2020, but is estimated to maintain 100 to 200 members in the country.⁶³

Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) “Army of Mohammed”

JeM is a Deobandi Sunni Islamist militant organization. JeM was founded in 1999 and initiated offensive operations in early 2000, focusing on Afghan and Indian government targets in both countries, including

the Indian Consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif in 2016.⁶⁴ It is based in Peshawar, Pakistan, but operates in Afghanistan and India.⁶⁵ The organization's strategic objectives are securing Pakistani control of Jammu and Kashmir, destroying Indian interests globally, and the removal of the U.S. and NATO presence from Afghanistan.⁶⁶ The organization is strongly anti-Indian and anti-Western in orientation. JeM is most well-known for attacking the Indian Parliament in 2001, an assault it carried out in coordination with LeJ.⁶⁷ They have also attacked the Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly.

JeM utilizes training camps in Afghanistan and smuggles goods from Pakistan into Afghanistan in support of local groups.⁶⁸ JeM also conducts attacks within Afghanistan targeting Indian interests, as well as occasionally carrying out attacks against U.S. and NATO forces there.⁶⁹ JeM maintains ties to AQ, the Taliban, LeJ, TTP, and SSP. They remain active as of 2020 though approximate numbers within Afghanistan are unknown.⁷⁰ JeM's focus remains conducting attacks in Jammu and Kashmir.⁷¹

Political parties

Islamist groups compete for control within the Afghan political system. Since the inception of the modern Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, a variety of Islamist political parties have operated legally within the country, including Hezb-i Islami (Islamic Party), Jamiat-e Islami (Islamic Society), Harakat-e Islami (Islamic Movement), Tanzim-e Dahwat-e Islami (Islamic Dawah Organization), and Etalaf-e Milli (National Coalition of Afghanistan).⁷² While there is no outright legal ban on Islamist parties or Islamism in general, the Afghan Constitution does restrict political parties, mandating that they cannot contradict Islam or the constitution in principle, cannot have military branches or goals, cannot have connections to foreign entities, cannot be operated in biased manner in relation to tribe or language, cannot be operated in a sectarian manner, and must maintain transparent finances.⁷³ The constitution also protects the rights to free speech, individual human rights, and the equality of all people. The constitution likewise forces Islamist parties to renounce violence and military branches in order to participate politically. The majority of Islamist political parties are former insurgent groups that have followed these guidelines in an effort to pursue Islamist policies through peaceful political change. Hezb-i Islami and Jamiat-e Islami remain the most influential Islamist political parties as of 2020.

Jamiat-e Islami (“Islamic Society”)

Jamiat-e Islami was founded in the 1970s by Burhanuddin Rabbani, originally as a Tajik political organization that became a militant organization before gradually transitioning back into a political one. Founded by university students opposing the progressive modernization of the Daoud regime and the expansion of communist ideology in Afghanistan,⁷⁴ it was driven to militancy by the subsequent Soviet occupation. Jamiat-e Islami subsequently served as a critical mujahedeen group in the fight against the Soviets.⁷⁵ It renounced violence after the occupation, and shifted back to pursuing peaceful political power in Afghanistan.

Jamiat-e Islami has contested every major election in the modern history of the current Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and has actively participated in peace talks with the Taliban.⁷⁶ Politically, the party is focused on directing change across Afghan society to implement ultraconservative Islamic principles.⁷⁷ Jamiat-e Islami draws its ideology from Abul A'la Maududi, the founder of Jamaat-e Islami, the Indian precursor to the Afghan political party.⁷⁸ That ideology consists of literal interpretation and implementation of the Quran and the use of (preferably non-violent) *jihad* to expand the Muslim world.⁷⁹ Economically, it seeks to implement an Islamist economic system, combining capitalism and socialism under *sharia* law with minimal government intervention and an expansion of citizens' economic rights.⁸⁰ Socially, it advocates an extremely conservative social framework, including the banning of music and alcohol.⁸¹

Hezb-i Islami “Party of Islam”

Hezb-i Islami is predominantly Pashtun breakaway from Jamiat-e Islami and is a political party and Sunni

Islamist militant organization. It was founded in 1976 by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in Kunduz in response to Afghan leftist movements within government. The organization actively fought the Soviets throughout their occupation of Afghanistan and cooperated with other Afghan mujahideen groups.

During Hekmatyar's brief but controversial stint as Afghanistan's prime minister during the Afghan civil war in 1990s, Hizb-i Islami was accused of atrocities and war crimes.⁸² He later fled to Iran in order to escape the Taliban once the group assumed power in 1996. His base of support within Afghanistan collapsed, and although he returned to Afghanistan in 2002, he has not been able to mobilize mass support among Afghans for the movement. Most of the fighters that belonged to HI operated in the northeastern parts of the country, close to the border with Pakistan, and many hailed from the Pashtun ethnic group. In February 2003, the U.S. Department of State declared Gulbuddin Hekmatyar a Specially Designated Foreign Terrorist (SDGT) for participating in and supporting acts of terror committed by al-Qaeda and the Taliban.⁸³ HI has never had a prominent battlefield presence and primarily conducted high profile assassinations and suicide bombings.⁸⁴

In January 2010, Hekmatyar and the Karzai administration initiated reconciliation talks in Kabul, followed by an HI delegation's attendance at *Loya Jirga* ("grand assembly"), the tribally-appointed consultative body that ratified the Afghan constitution.⁸⁵ The two sides also met on two separate occasions in 2012.⁸⁶ In May 2016, the Afghan National Unity Government and Hekmatyar came close to finalizing a 25-point peace agreement; it was signed four months later, after the group agreed to cease hostilities in return for official recognition.⁸⁷ The United Nations Security Council Sanctions Committee subsequently removed Hekmatyar's name from its sanctions list in February 2017⁸⁸ and Hekmatyar was hosted at the Afghan presidential palace by President Ghani, alongside hundreds of his supporters and other political and *jihadi* leaders.⁸⁹ The deal reached between the Afghan government and HI is widely regarded as a model for future peace deals between authorities and other insurgent groups – although the agreement is still fragile and easily reversible.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Islamism in Afghanistan has origins in Islamist education systems abroad. Groups of Afghan students returning from educational opportunities abroad in the 1950s, primarily in Egypt, brought back Islamist ideas that spread widely throughout the country.⁹⁰ Returned students created groups like Jamiat-e Islami that remained non-violent while rejecting modernization and the dueling political ideologies of socialism and liberal democracy⁹¹ and participating in the public discourse regarding the future of politics in the country. The communist People's Democratic Party in Afghanistan (PDPA) exacerbated tensions with Islamist groups after it seized power in 1978 and removed all political parties, leading to Islamist rebellion.⁹² The PDPA's oppression of Islamists and the Soviet occupation directly led to a drastic expansion of Islamism in the country, and the creation of an array of militant Islamist groups.

The country remains deeply religious in nature. As of 2019, the Asia Foundation's annual "Survey of the Afghan People" found that over 57% of respondents believe religious leaders should be consulted on political matters. Support for violent Islamism, however, is far sparser. While nearly 90% of those polled supported Afghan government efforts to negotiate with the Taliban, 85.1% held absolutely no sympathy for the Islamist group. Indeed, the Taliban is seen by the Afghan population to be the greatest threat to security and stability in the country, with nearly 69% of respondents categorizing it as such (as compared to just 12.4% who said the same about ISIS).⁹³

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The central Afghan government's support for political Islam is reflected in Chapter 1, Article 2 of the Afghan Constitution, which reads: "The religion of the state of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is the sacred religion of Islam."⁹⁴ Traditional tribal support is reflected in the institution of the *loya jirga*.

In general, Islamists sought to portray the Mohammed Karzai government's 13 year reign (2001-2014) as reflecting subservience to the wishes of the United States and its Western allies, as well as being corrupt and un-Islamic.⁹⁵ Taliban propaganda, for example, routinely referred to President Karzai as the "new Shah Shuja," a reference to the Afghan king put on the throne by British invaders in the 19th century.

As part of the peace and reconciliation campaign, current President Ashraf Ghani's government established a Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), which includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the United States. The QCG planned to meet several times in the spring of 2016, in hopes that Pakistan will end its "undeclared war" against Afghanistan and sincerely bring the Taliban to the negotiating table.⁹⁶ However, the Taliban delegation did not attend, causing such frustration among the Afghan delegation that it demanded the Taliban be declared irreconcilable.⁹⁷ In April 2016 - after a suicide attack outside Afghanistan's intelligence headquarters, the National Directorate of Security (NDS), claimed 64 lives and wounded almost 350 others⁹⁸ - President Ghani addressed the nation with the boldest declaration since the 1990s, stating that Afghanistan no longer wants Pakistan to facilitate negotiations with the Taliban. Ghani also declared that amnesty and a lenient approach would no longer define Afghan policy toward militancy, but that Afghanistan's doors would remain open to those who wish to lay down their weapons and reconcile.

In February 2018, President Ghani extended an unconditional invitation to negotiate to the Taliban. In his peace proposal, Ghani offered the Taliban generous peace terms, including recognizing the Taliban as a political group, providing them immunity, political office, security guarantees for Taliban fighters and their families, and removing Taliban leaders from blacklists. In response, the Taliban not only ignored Ghani's offer but instead announced their spring offensive. In June 2018, Ghani extended another olive branch to the Taliban by announcing a ceasefire opportunity during annual Eid celebrations. Accordingly, Ghani announced a unilateral ceasefire for eight days (from the 27th day of Ramadan to the 5th day of Eid) and ordered Afghan security forces to not conduct any offensive operations against the Taliban for the duration. In response, the Taliban also announced a 3-day ceasefire. The ceasefire proved successful and is likely to play an important role in building trust between the two warring parties.

The U.S., the Taliban, and the Afghan government spent the remainder of 2018 and 2019 in fitful negotiations, eventually resulting in a U.S.-Taliban "truce" signed in February of 2020 and aimed at forcing an eventual peace agreement between Kabul and the Taliban, and the inclusion of the group in the Afghan government. However, despite continued peace negotiations, violence involving the Taliban continues unabated, and civilian casualties remain an endemic problem.

ENDNOTES

1. "Deoband School" Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d., <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Deoband-school>
2. Barry Bearak, "Afghan Says Destruction of Buddhas is Complete," *New York Times*, March 12, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/12/world/afghan-says-destruction-of-buddhas-is-complete.html>.
3. "Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict" United Nations, February 2020, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan_protection_of_civilians_annual_report_2019_-_22_february.pdf.
4. "U.S. forces conduct airstrikes on Taliban in Afghanistan" Reuters, June 2020, <https://www>.

- [reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghanistan-taliban/u-s-forces-conduct-airstrikes-on-taliban-in-afghanistan-idUSKBN23C27W](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghanistan-taliban/u-s-forces-conduct-airstrikes-on-taliban-in-afghanistan-idUSKBN23C27W).
5. U.S. Department of Defense, "OPERATION FREEDOM'S SENTINEL LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS," November 2019, https://media.defense.gov/2019/Nov/20/2002214020/-1/-1/1/Q4FY2019_LEADIG_OFS_REPORT.PDF
 6. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*, June 2020, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/>.
 7. U.S. Department of Defense, "OPERATION FREEDOM'S SENTINEL LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS."
 8. Sirajuddin Haqqani, "What We, the Taliban, Want," *New York Times*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/opinion/taliban-afghanistan-war-haqqani.html>
 9. U.S. Department of Defense, "OPERATION FREEDOM'S SENTINEL LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS."
 10. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*.
 11. Former Taliban leader Mullah Dadullah famously explained: "We like the al-Qaeda organization. We consider it a friendly and brotherly organization, which shares our ideology and concepts. We have close ties and constant contacts with it. Our cooperation is ideal." See Brian Glyn Williams, "Suicide Bombings in Afghanistan," *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*, September 2007, <http://www.brianglynwilliams.com/IAA%20suicide.pdf>.
 12. Noah Browning, Sami Aboudi and Mark Heinrich, "Al Qaeda Leader Zawahiri Pledges Allegiance to New Taliban Chief: Websites," Reuters, August 13, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban-qaeda-idUSKCN0QI1FO20150813>.
 13. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*.
 14. United Nations, "Al-Qaida," n.d., https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/qa_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/al-qaida.
 15. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*.
 16. "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent," The Soufan Center, January 2019, <https://thesoufan-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Al-Qaeda-in-the-Indian-Subcontinent-AQIS.pdf>
 17. U.S. Department of Defense, "OPERATION FREEDOM'S SENTINEL LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS."
 18. "Al-Qaeda's South Asia Chief 'Killed in Afghanistan'" *BBC*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49970353>
 19. U.S. Department of Defense, "OPERATION FREEDOM'S SENTINEL LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS."
 20. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*.
 21. United Nations, "UN Security Council Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Report," May 2020, <https://www.undocs.org/S/2020/415>.
 22. Matt Bradley, "ISIS Declares New Islamist Caliphate." *Wall Street Journal*, June 29, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/isis-declares-new-islamist-caliphate-1404065263>.
 23. "Hakimullah Meshud Killed by Drone," *BBC*, November 2, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-24776363>
 24. United Nations, "UN Security Council Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Report."
 25. "Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan" United Nations, n.d., https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/qa_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/tehrrik-e-taliban-pakistan-%28http%29.
 26. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*.
 27. U.S. Department of Defense, "OPERATION FREEDOM'S SENTINEL LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS."
 28. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*.
 29. Bradley, "ISIS Declares New Islamist Caliphate."

30. Jamie Crawford, "Congress hears Afghanistan troop plans amid ISIS fears," *CNN*, February 12, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/12/politics/isis-afghanistan-u-s-fears/>.
31. Douglas Schorzman, "U.S. Lists Afghan Branch of ISIS as Terrorist Group," *New York Times*, January 15, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/15/world/asia/us-lists-afghan-branch-of-isis-as-terrorist-group.html?_r=0.
32. "ISIL-K" United Nations, n.d., <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/islamic-state-iraq-and-levant-khorasan-isis-k>
33. Josh Smith, "Kabul truck-bomb toll rises to more than 150 killed: Afghan president," Reuters, June 6, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-blast/kabul-truck-bomb-toll-rises-to-more-than-150-killed-afghan-president-idUSKBN18X0FU>.
34. Abdul Qadir Sediqi and Rupam Jaim "Bombs in Kabul Kill at least 11 as US steps up diplomacy in effort to end war" Reuters, July 25, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-blast/bombs-in-kabul-kill-at-least-11-as-u-s-steps-up-diplomacy-in-effort-to-end-war-idUSKCN1UK0BB>
35. Rahim Faiez and Cara Anna, "Islamic State Claims Bombing at Kabul Wedding that killed 63" Associated Press, August 18, 2019, <https://apnews.com/b5ceb0cfb33d4d73aaaad-f5eee19fe9d>
36. "Islamic State Claims Responsibility after gunmen kill 32 at Memorial Ceremony" *Market Watch*, March 6, 2020, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/islamic-state-claims-responsibility-after-gunmen-kill-32-at-memorial-ceremony-in-afghan-capital-2020-03-06>
37. Abdul Qadir Sediqi, "Gunmen in Afghanistan kill 25 at Sikh Complex, Islamic State Claims Responsibility" Reuters, March 25, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-attack/gunmen-in-afghanistan-kill-25-at-sikh-complex-islamic-state-claims-responsibility-idUSKBN21C0IF>
38. "US Says Islamic State Conducted Attack on Kabul Hospital" Reuters, May 14, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-attacks-usa/us-says-islamic-state-conducted-attack-on-kabul-hospital-idUSKBN22Q3QU>
39. United Nations, "UN Security Council Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Report."
40. U.S. Department of Defense, "OPERATION FREEDOM'S SENTINEL LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS."
41. Jasmin Lorch, "Trajectories of Political Salafism: Insights from the Ahle Hadith Movement in Pakistan and Bangladesh" Middle East Institute, October 30, 2018, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/trajectories-political-salafism-insights-ahle-hadith-movement-pakistan-and-bangladesh>
42. Sheikh Mushtaq, "Violence not only answer to Kashmir - Lashkar-e-Taiba," Reuters, January 19, 2009, <https://in.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-37536220090119>
43. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*.
44. United Nations, "UN Security Council Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Report."
45. U.S. Department of Defense, "OPERATION FREEDOM'S SENTINEL LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS."
46. Asif Farooqi, "Profile: Lashkar-e-Jhangvi" *BBC*, January 11, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-20982987>.
47. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*.
48. "Lashkar-e-Jhangvi" United Nations, n.d., https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/lashkar-i-jhangvi-%28lj%29
49. Sanjeev Miglani, "12 die in Indian parliament attack" *Guardian* (London), December 14, 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/dec/14/kashmir.india>.
50. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*.
51. U.S. Department of Defense, "OPERATION FREEDOM'S SENTINEL LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS."

52. United Nations, “UN Security Council Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Report.”
53. “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan” United Nations, n.d., https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/islamic-movement-of-uzbekistan.
54. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*.
55. “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan,” CISAC, August 2018, https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/islamic-movement-uzbekistan#_ftn11
56. U.S. Department of Defense, “OPERATION FREEDOM’S SENTINEL LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS.”
57. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*.
58. United Nations, “UN Security Council Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Report.”
59. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*.
60. Ibid.
61. “Islamic Jihad Group” United Nations, n.d., https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/islamic-jihad-group.
62. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*.
63. Ibid.
64. Bashir Ansari, “Afghan forces end siege near Indian consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif,” Reuters, January 4, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-attack-india/afghan-forces-end-siege-near-indian-consulate-in-mazar-i-sharif-idUSKBN0UIOC020160104>.
65. “Jaish-e-Mohammad” United Nations, n.d., https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/jaish-i-mohammed
66. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*.
67. Miglani, “12 die in Indian parliament attack.”
68. United Nations, “UN Security Council Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Report.”
69. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM),” September 2013, <https://www.dni.gov/nctc/groups/jem.html>
70. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*.
71. Pradeep Dutta, “Jammu Now on Terror Radar, Jaish-e-Mohammed and ISI Planning Attack in the Region” *Times Now*, June 20, 2020, <https://www.timesnownews.com/india/article/jammu-now-on-terror-radar-jaish-e-mohammed-and-isi-planning-attack-in-the-region/609422>
72. “Registered Political Parties” Afghan Ministry of Justice, n.d., <https://moj.gov.af/index.php/en/registered-political-parties>
73. [73] “Afghanistan’s Constitution of 2004” Constitute Project, n.d., https://www.constitute-project.org/constitution/Afghanistan_2004.pdf?lang=en
74. Himan Rights Watch, “Blood-Stained Hands Past Atrocities in Kabul and Afghanistan’s Legacy of Impunity,” June 2013, <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2013/06/14/afghanistan0605.pdf>
75. Husain Haqqani, “Afghanistan’s Islamist Groups,” Hudson Institute, June 2007, <https://www.hudson.org/research/9772-afghanistan-s-islamist-groups#footNote10>
76. Haseeba Atakpal, “Jamit-e-Islami Prepares Peace Plan with Taliban,” *Tolo News*, December 9, 2018, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/jamiat-e-islami-prepares-peace-plan-taliban>
77. Haqqani, “Afghanistan’s Islamist Groups.”
78. Ibid.
79. “Maulana Maududi Economic System of Islam” Australian Islamic Library, n.d., <https://archive.org/stream/MaulanaMaududiEconomicSystemOfIslam#page/n203/mode/2up>
80. Ibid.
81. Ibidem.
82. Greg Myre, “The ‘Butcher Of Kabul’ Is Welcomed Back In Kabul,” *NPR*, May 4, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/05/04/526866525/the-butcher-of-kabul-is-wel>

- comed-back-in-kabul.
83. U.S. Department of State, "Designation of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar as a Terrorist," February 19, 2003, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2003/17799.htm>
 84. Kenneth Katzman, "Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, June 2016, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30588.pdf>
 85. Bill Roggio, "Hekmatyar's Peace Plan Calls for NATO Withdrawal by 2011," *Long War Journal*, March 22, 2010, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/03/hekmatyars_peace_pla.php
 86. Katzman, "Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy."
 87. Rod Nordland, "Afghanistan Signs Draft Peace Deal With Faction Led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar," *New York Times*, September 23, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/23/world/asia/afghanistan-peace-deal-hezb-i-islami.html>
 88. United Nations, "Security Council ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Removes One Entry from Its Sanctions List," February 3, 2017, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc12705.doc.htm>
 89. "Afghan warlord Hekmatyar returns to Kabul after peace deal," BBC, May 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39802833>.
 90. Arian Sharif, "Islamist Groups in Afghanistan and the Strategic Choice of Violence" U.S. Institute for Peace, November 2016, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2016/11/islamist-groups-afghanistan-and-strategic-choice-violence>
 91. Ibid.
 92. Ibidem.
 93. Tabasum Askeer and John Rieger, eds., *Afghanistan in 2019: A Survey of the Afghan People* (The Asia Foundation, December 2019), https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2019_Afghan_Survey_Full-Report.pdf
 94. "The Constitution of Afghanistan" The Constitute Project, May 2020, https://www.constitute-project.org/constitution/Afghanistan_2004.pdf?lang=en
 95. "Taliban: Winning the War of Words?" International Crisis Group, July 24, 2008, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=5589&l=1>.
 96. Ibid.
 97. Ibidem.
 98. Samimullah Arif, "Ashraf Ghani's New Plan to Win Afghanistan's Long War Against the Taliban," *The Diplomat*, April 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/04/ashraf-ghanis-new-plan-to-win-afghanistans-long-war-against-the-taliban/>