



# TALIBAN

## Quick Facts

*Geographical Areas of Operation:* Europe, South Asia

*Numerical Strength (Members):* Approximately 25,000 (estimated 2016)

*Leadership:* Moulavi Haibatullah Akhunzada

*Religious Identification:* Sunni Islam

*Quick Facts Courtesy of the Stanford University's Mapping Militant Organizations*

## INTRODUCTION

*The Taliban are a Sunni fundamentalist militant group, founded by Mullah Mohammad Omar, that emerged in 1994 during Afghanistan's civil war (1992-1996). The Taliban, or "religious students" in Pashto, were 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 Taliban 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 city of Quetta, earning the moniker "the Quetta Shura" from American and Afghan intelligence services. 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 there, the coalition began a new, follow-on mission, called the Resolute Support (RS) on January 1, 2015. As part of Resolute Support, the United States and coalition forces are now engaged in a train, advise, and assist mission to support the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) to maintain security across the country. In September 2014, the United States and Afghanistan's newly-elected National Unity Government signed a 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.*

*In addition to the Resolute Support mission, the United States is also engaged in another complementary mission in Afghanistan, known as Operation Sentinel. As part of this mission, the United States conduct unfettered counterterrorism operations against al Qaeda, its affiliates, and the Afghan offshoot of the Islamic State, or IS-Khorasan (ISK-K).<sup>1</sup> 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 capacity as a counterinsurgent force,<sup>2</sup> the United States delayed the drawdown and committed to maintaining a residual force of 8,400 troops in Afghanistan through the end of the Obama administration.<sup>3</sup> By March 2018, the size of the U.S. military contingent had increased to over 13,000 troops.*

## HISTORY & IDEOLOGY

The Taliban rose to power after Afghanistan's devastating civil war (1992-1996). After assuming power, the group renamed the country the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and embarked upon implementing a strict interpretation of sharia (Islamic law) across the country. The core of the original Taliban movement originated from a clerical andiwal (war comrades) network of Islamic conservatives, made up of madrassa-educated ethnic Pashtun men from poor or lower-class backgrounds. The resiliency of the Taliban can be attributed to three overarching factors: the group began as an efficient, centralized movement; the movement was flexible and diverse, therefore adaptable to local contexts, and; the group was highly pragmatic in its use of narco-resources to finance itself.<sup>4</sup> But the question of just who the Taliban are 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 force, or a pet movement, while still others suggest the Taliban are an umbrella organization of various militant networks and their ideological affiliates, marginalized tribes and clans, as well as criminal gangs. The organizational construct of the Afghan Taliban movement, its offshoots, and its Pakistani extension, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, are presented below.

### *The Quetta Shura Taliban (QST)*

The remnants of the former Taliban government manifested itself as the Quetta Shura in 2002. As the Taliban began to spread their 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 where the group maintained heavy 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 to some extent still is, a confluence of various militant and ideological outfits, including some that maintain relations with terrorist groups.

In April 2013, the Taliban's emir (leader), Mullah Mohammad Omar, died. The news of his death was kept secret for more than two years. After his death, the Taliban continued to release official statements under their former leader's name, to ensure the movement remained cohesive. Furthermore, the group published Omar's biography in April 2015 to mark his 19th year as its supreme leader, stating that the emir "remains in touch" with daily Afghan and world events. This farce continued until July 2015, when Afghan intelligence announced the Taliban leader had died years earlier in a hospital in Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> Later that month, the Taliban themselves confirmed Mullah Omar's death.

Mullah Omar was succeeded by his deputy, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, in a hasty selection process that was disputed by high-ranking leaders of the movement.<sup>6</sup> Soon after Mullah Mansour's accession, fractures began to appear in the movement, as some protested that the late Mullah Omar's son, Mullah Mohammad Yaqub—who asserted that Pakistan had engineered Mullah Mansour's succession—should become leader instead.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> The split soon erupted into infighting between the two sides, with Mansour's side gaining the upper hand.<sup>9</sup> Intense clashes under the leadership of Mullah Mohammad Rasool continued well 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, or Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISK), and had been appointed its deputy commander, after falling out with the Taliban. The following month, however, Alizai was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Helmand province.<sup>10</sup>

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 to acquiesce to Mansour's accession as "commander of the faithful."<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, Abdul Manan Akhund 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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 Baluchistan province, which shares a border with Iran.<sup>14</sup> Mansour was reportedly returning from a scheduled trip in Iran to Pakistan when a hellfire missile struck his vehicle. 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.<sup>15</sup> Akhonzada has effectively 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, who serves as the Taliban's head of operations, and the young Mullah Mohammad Yaqub, the son of Taliban's late emir, Mullah Omar.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

Since assuming power in September 2014, current Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has prioritized reconciling with the Taliban by reaching out to Pakistan to facilitate negotiations. He has also helped establish a Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), which includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, and the United States, in pursuit of a peace settlement with the Taliban. However, the Taliban have continued their offensives and refused to come to the negotiating table and engage in peace talks. As a result, in the first quarter of 2016, Ghani effectively eschewed amnesty and passivity as a policy option toward the insurgency, but continued to welcome those Taliban members who wish to reconcile.<sup>18</sup>

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 a political settlement to the conflict is not a desired option, given that military victory over the Afghan government may be attainable. This view has been strengthened by the movement's recent offensives in more than 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 their key northern stronghold.<sup>19</sup> Afghan security forces subsequently retook both territories, however.

Since the optics of a negotiated political settlement seem elusive at the moment, the Afghan conflict is

likely to remain in a “stalemate.”<sup>20</sup> In August 2017, the Trump administration announced a new Afghanistan/South Asia strategy. The strategy reaffirms the U.S.’s commitment to Afghanistan, including loosening the rules of engagement for U.S. war commanders in Afghanistan and shifting from a calendar-based approach to one driven by the conditions on the ground. The strategy also takes a harsher stand on Pakistan, mainly to address its duplicitous behavior in fighting terrorism, and calls on India to assume a large role in Afghanistan’s development. More importantly, the new strategy keeps the door open for negotiations with the Taliban without abandoning the ongoing military efforts against the group. The Taliban has not responded well to the new U.S. strategy, and has increased their attacks on urban areas in Afghanistan, inflicting a large number of civilian casualties. The Taliban’s objectives are to stoke fear, humiliate the Afghan government, erode public confidence, and foment tensions within the Afghan political class.

On February 14, 2018, the Taliban released a ten-page open letter addressed to the United States, in which the group rambles about its recent battlefield gains, underscores the U.S.’s decisive role in the Afghan conflict, and insists that it would only engage in direct peace negotiations with the United States, not with the Afghan government. The United States, however, insists that the Taliban should talk directly with the government in Kabul. On February 28, President Ashraf Ghani made an overture to the Taliban by outlining a bold peace proposal during the Kabul Process conference in front of a large crowd of high-level international representatives from 25 countries. Ghani’s peace proposal invited the conciliatory Taliban members to enter peace talks without any preconditions. In return, the Taliban would be recognized as a legitimate political group. The peace proposal also states that the Afghan government will allow the Taliban to open a political office in Kabul, as well as issue Taliban members and their families Afghan passports for travel, release Taliban prisoners, remove Taliban leaders from various international sanctions and blacklists, and provide amnesty, security, and financial guarantees to Taliban members to resettle in Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> As of March 2018, the Taliban have not responded to Ghani’s peace proposal.

### *Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan*

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is an umbrella front of rogue resistance organizations like Lashkar-e Jhangvi, Jaish-e Muhammad, Sipah-e Sahaba Pakistan, and possibly some banned Kashmiri groups, like Harakat ul-Mujahedin.<sup>22</sup> After the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in October 2001, Taliban supporters in Pakistan’s western tribal areas quickly provided additional manpower and resources to help the Afghan Taliban resistance. The flow of Taliban fighters into Pakistan’s tribal belt became a tidal wave following the collapse of the Taliban regime in Kandahar. Hundreds of fleeing Arab and foreign fighters linked to al-Qaeda came along with the Taliban fighters, many of whom settled among their Pashtun sympathizers in North and South Waziristan.<sup>23</sup> TTP was officially formed in 2007.

Baitullah Mehsud soon emerged as a Pakistani version of Mullah Omar. Baitullah hailed from the Mehsud tribe and gained prominence in February 2005 when he signed a “peace accord” with the Pakistani government.<sup>24</sup> Baitullah pledged not to support al-Qaeda and restricted his forces from attacking Pakistani 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.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup>

In 2007, Baitullah Mehsud was appointed the emir of the TTP’s forty-man shura.<sup>27</sup> The TTP eventually consolidated its aims into: enforcing sharia throughout the tribal areas, uniting with the Afghan Taliban against NATO forces, seeking to remove Pakistani military checkpoints from the tribal region, and vowing to protect the Swat district and Waziristan from future Pakistani military operations.<sup>28</sup> Following the Pakistani government’s siege of the Red Mosque in Islamabad in July 2007,<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> Subsequently, the December 2007 assassination of Pakistan's former two-time Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, drew considerable attention to the deteriorating security situation in the country.

Disagreements among rival commanders in the TPP undermined the organization's unity throughout 2008. 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. In August 2009, a U.S. drone 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, amid a power struggle within the TTP for the top leadership position, the group acknowledged Mehsud's passing 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.<sup>31</sup>

Fractures in the TTP led to speculation about a weakening of the group. However, the organization's activities have intensified in recent years. In June 2014, TTP militants killed 20 people in Pakistan's Jinnah International Airport in Karachi.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup>

In September 2016, General Asim Bajwa claimed Operation *Zarb-e-Azb* had succeeded in defeating terrorists and all but declared the operation over.<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup>

Most regional commanders of the 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 indicate that TTP's end is not yet in sight.<sup>40</sup>

### *The Haqqani Network*

The Haqqani Network is based out of a Taliban stronghold in neighboring Pakistan. 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 the 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.

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 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.<sup>41</sup>

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.<sup>42</sup> Pakistani intelligence and the leader's relatives reportedly confirmed his death; however, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid rejected reports of Haqqani's demise.<sup>43</sup>

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.<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> The Taliban claimed responsibility, but Afghan intelligence alleged that the *Haqqani Network* was responsible, backed by Pakistan's intelligence services, the ISI.<sup>48</sup>

The network has engendered a global response. In 2011, the then-Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen, identified the Haqqani Network "as a veritable arm" of ISI in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee.<sup>49</sup> In early 2015, the Pakistani government officially outlawed the Haqqani Network, mainly in response to the military public school attack and pressure from the U.S. to stop differentiating between "good" and "bad" militants.<sup>50</sup> 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."<sup>51</sup> Two months later, reimbursements allocated for Pakistan's counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations were suspended, following then-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.<sup>52</sup> In January 2018, the Trump administration withheld \$255 million in security aid to Pakistan after President Donald Trump chastised Pakistan for being too soft on terrorism. The freeze on U.S. aid to Pakistan has not been lifted yet.

*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 (HIG) 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, shaped *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.<sup>53</sup> 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 declared Gulbuddin Hekmatyar a Specially Designated Foreign Terrorist (SDGT) for having participated in and supported terrorist acts committed by al-Qaeda and the Taliban.<sup>54</sup>

HIG has never had a prominent battlefield presence like the Taliban. Its onslaughts have primarily been high-profile attacks, such as a September 2012 suicide bombing in Kabul – carried out in retaliation for a film mocking Prophet Mohammad – which killed 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).<sup>55</sup> The attack was carried out as a reaction to talks of 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.<sup>56</sup> 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.<sup>57</sup>

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.<sup>58</sup> On September 22, 2016, the Afghan government signed a draft of the long-awaited peace deal with HIG.<sup>59</sup> 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.<sup>60</sup> 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.”<sup>61</sup> The U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan issued a statement, lauding the accord and welcoming it as “an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process.”<sup>62</sup> Additionally, the deal entails the arrangement of Hekmatyar and his political apparatus to resettle in Afghanistan but does not entail power sharing.<sup>63</sup> 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. After concluding the deal, Hekmatyar has returned to Kabul and has engaged in political affairs.

## 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.<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup> In June 2015, Mullah Mansour sent a letter to ISIS's 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.<sup>66</sup>

The TTP, by contrast, 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 even threatened to launch attacks against international targets, including the White House. 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. 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, the TTP's top commander, Qari Hussain, who trained suicide bombers (calling them "the atomic weapons of Muslims") and plotted operations against the West, was determined to have orchestrated the attack.<sup>67</sup> He was subsequently reported killed in 2012 by a U.S. drone strike in North Waziristan.<sup>68</sup>

## 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), 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.<sup>69</sup>

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) estimates that, in the first half of 2013 alone, over 1,300 Afghan civilians were killed.<sup>70</sup> In 2014, the estimated civilian casualties were 10,548, including 3,699 civilian deaths, and 6,849 injuries—a staggering 22 percent rise.<sup>71</sup>

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.<sup>72</sup> 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.<sup>73</sup> The vicious trend continued into 2016, with 11,418 civilians recorded killed or maimed in that year.<sup>74</sup> 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).<sup>75</sup>

Meanwhile, in 2013 and 2014, Afghan security forces – which had assumed primary responsibility



for security from American and coalition forces – endured a staggering number of casualties.<sup>76</sup> The Afghan Ministry of Defense estimated that almost 1,400 soldiers lost their lives in 2013 alone fighting the insurgency.<sup>77</sup> 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.<sup>78</sup> 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.<sup>79</sup> 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.<sup>80</sup> 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.<sup>81</sup> In 2017, an estimated 10,453 Afghan civilians had been wounded or killed in Afghanistan, according to a UN report. The casualties, reportedly a record high, saw a significant increase in the number of deaths of women and children, mainly due to the use of use of large-scale attacks by the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, the Islamic State and their affiliates in urban areas and their use of homemade bombs. One such large-scale attack occurred in May 2017 when a truck bomb carrying over 1.5-ton explosives detonated in central Kabul, killing over 150 people and wounding over 200 civilians. In 2017, child casualties grew by an estimated 9 percent to 436, compared with the same period in 2016, and at least 1,141 children were injured. Female deaths saw a 23 percent increase, with an estimated 174 women killed and another 462 injured.

#### ENDNOTES

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