

## Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's geography, complex ethnic makeup, and recent history of conflict, instability, and decentralized government have created space for the activities of a number of regional armed groups. This product outlines major terrorist groups affiliated and allied with Al Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS, ISIL, or by the Arabic acronym *Da'esh*) and the complex, often shifting relations between them and various other state and non-state actors. These dynamics may inform assessments of U.S. policy in Afghanistan in light of ongoing U.S.-Taliban negotiations focused largely on counterterrorism concerns. The Afghan Taliban is not a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), but it relates to the groups below in varying ways that may have ramifications for those negotiations.

### Al Qaeda Core

The top echelon or "core" of AQ leadership remains a primary target of the U.S. in Afghanistan. Also known as Al Qaeda Central, the core is made up of AQ leader Ayman al Zawahiri and his deputies, an advisory council of about ten individuals, and members of various AQ committees such as military operations and finance. AQ leaders are currently thought to be based in the mountainous, tribal-dominated areas of both Afghanistan and Pakistan, often moving between the two countries. In September 2019, the White House announced that Hamza bin Laden, son of AQ founder Osama bin Laden and a rising leader in the group, had been killed in a U.S. counterterrorism operation "in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region."

U.S. officials have maintained that AQ has a reduced presence in Afghanistan, due in part to a number of U.S. raids and airstrikes on AQ targets, including a large training camp discovered in Kandahar province 2015. It is unclear what threat AQ poses in light of this counterterrorism pressure. A November 2019 Department of Defense (DOD) report, citing the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), estimated that there are 300 AQ members in Afghanistan and that they are "almost certainly focused on survival."

In January 2020, the U.N. reported that AQ "is concerned about the current focus of the Taliban leadership on peace talks," but that AQ-Taliban relations "continue to be close and mutually beneficial, with [AQ] supplying resources and training in exchange for protection." In talks with the Taliban, the United States reportedly has pressed the group to disavow AQ, though it is unclear how open the Taliban might be to such a break and how it might be verified.

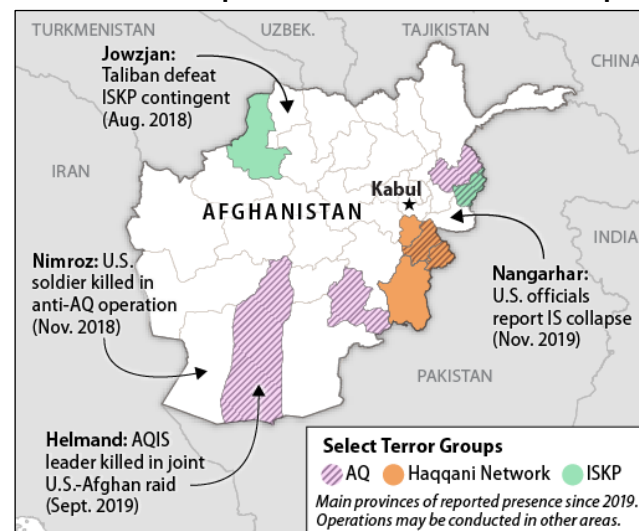
### Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent

In September 2014, Zawahiri announced the creation of a formal, separate Al Qaeda affiliate in South Asia, Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). Because of the relative geographical proximity of AQIS and the AQ core,

differentiating between the two is difficult, but some key distinctions exist. Overall, AQIS represents an attempt by AQ to establish a more durable presence in the region by enhancing links with local actors. Former AQIS leader Asim Umar, who was killed in Helmand province in a joint U.S.-Afghan operation in September 2019, was an Indian national with deep roots in Pakistan; AQ leaders are predominantly Arab (Zawahiri, for example, is Egyptian). The relocation of some AQ leaders to Syria further incentivized Al Qaeda to create a locally sustainable affiliate in Afghanistan and the surrounding region.

While AQIS has reportedly attempted to solidify its presence in Afghanistan by embedding fighters in the Taliban, its operations have mostly been elsewhere: AQIS has claimed a number of attacks in Pakistan and Bangladesh, mostly against security targets and secular activists, respectively. Additionally, the training camp discovered in Afghanistan's Kandahar province in 2015 was reportedly being used by AQIS. However, according to the November 2019 DOD report, DIA assessed that AQIS would need "several years without sustained counterterrorism pressure... to develop the capability to attack outside South Asia." AQIS has "several hundred members" (per the State Department), and was designated as an FTO in June 2016.

### Provinces with Reported Presence of Terror Groups



**Source:** Graphic created by CRS using information from various media and U.S. government reports, 2018-present.

### Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP)

The Islamic State officially announced the formation of its Afghan affiliate in January 2015. ISKP (also known as IS-K or ISIS-K) had been concentrated predominantly in eastern Afghanistan, particularly in Nangarhar province, which borders the region of Pakistan formerly known as the

Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). There, ISKP was mostly made up of former Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants who fled Pakistani army operations in the FATA after mid-2014. In November 2019, a U.S.-supported Afghan government military campaign dislodged ISKP fighters from Nangarhar. These operations took place concurrent with separate Taliban operations against ISKP. ISKP has condemned the Taliban as “apostate,” accusing it of having narrow tribal, ethnic, and/or national interests.

ISKP also clashed with the Taliban in several largely Turkic-populated northern provinces of Afghanistan as well, highlighting ISKP’s potential reach in areas beyond the predominantly Pashtun-populated south and east. However, a series of defeats at the hands of Taliban fighters in August 2018 reduced the ISKP presence in the area. Despite these defeats in the north and east, U.S. officials caution that ISKP remains a threat, though there reportedly is disagreement within the U.S. government about its nature. Some raise the prospect of Taliban hardliners defecting to ISKP in the event of a settlement with the United States. Before recent setbacks, ISKP strength was estimated at 2,500 fighters

In addition to complex attacks against government targets, ISKP has claimed numerous large scale bombings against civilians, particularly targeting members of Afghanistan’s Shia minority (about 15% of the population). Sectarian conflict has not been a hallmark of the war in Afghanistan, but ISKP attempts to encourage it, following the example of the Islamic State elsewhere, could further destabilize the country. The Obama Administration designated ISKP as an FTO in January 2016. ISKP leader Hafiz Saeed Khan, a former TTP member, was killed in a U.S. strike in July 2016; three successors have since been killed.

## The Haqqani Network

The Haqqani Network is an official, semi-autonomous component of the Afghan Taliban and an ally of AQ. It was founded by Jalaluddin Haqqani, a leading member of the anti-Soviet jihad (1979-1989) who became a prominent Taliban official and eventually a key leader in the post-2001 insurgency. The Taliban confirmed his death from natural causes in September 2018. 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, with which the Haqqanis have close ties going back to the anti-Soviet jihad. The Haqqani Network was designated as an FTO in September 2012 in part due to its close ties with Al Qaeda, though the current relationship is less clear. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen described the Haqqanis in 2011 as a “veritable arm” of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency.

The Haqqanis are blamed for some of the deadliest attacks of the war in Afghanistan. In 2012, then-Chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Senator Dianne Feinstein claimed the network was responsible for the death or injury of over 1,300 U.S. troops. Additionally, the Haqqanis have held Americans captive, including a university professor who was kidnapped in Kabul in 2016. He and an Australian captive were freed in November 2019 in exchange for the

release by the Government of Afghanistan of three high-profile Taliban prisoners, including Sirajuddin’s brother Anas Haqqani. In 2012, the group kidnapped an American backpacker and her Canadian husband. That couple, and their three children born in captivity, were freed by a Pakistani Army operation in October 2017.

## Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

The TTP, also known as the Pakistani Taliban, conducts most of its attacks within Pakistan (though much reduced in recent years), and reportedly maintains safe havens along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border where AQ has also operated. An umbrella organization for a number of Pakistan-based extremist groups that came into conflict with the Pakistani state after 2007, the TTP began to splinter following the 2013 death of leader Hakimullah Mehsud. In 2014, some TTP members pledged allegiance to IS and subsequently relocated to eastern Afghanistan as part of ISKP. Mehsud’s successor Mullah Fazlullah was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Afghanistan’s Kunar province in June 2018. TTP leaders have pledged to strike within the United States, though it is unclear whether TTP has such capacity: the last such incident for which they claimed responsibility was a 2010 bombing attempt in New York City, carried out by a Pakistani-American who reportedly received training from TTP militants in the FATA.

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“[T]he terrorist threat posed by the ability of international terrorist groups to operate in Afghanistan remains significant.”

Acting Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia  
Alice Wells, September 19, 2019

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## Smaller Groups

**Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).** Designated an FTO in 2000, the IMU was once a prominent ally of AQ. Formed by Uzbeks who fought with Islamist forces in Tajikistan’s 1990s civil war, the IMU allied with the Taliban, and launched attacks into other Central Asian states. After the U.S. invasion in 2001, the group’s focus was in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Former IMU leader Usman Ghazi pledged allegiance to IS in July 2015, but the U.N. reported in January 2020 that IMU “has ultimately lost its independent status and is now integrated into Taliban forces.”

**Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM).** ETIM has advocated for the establishment of an independent Islamic state for the Uyghurs, a Muslim-majority, Turkic-speaking people in western China. The U.S. government designated ETIM as a terrorist organization under Executive Order 13224 in 2002, citing the group’s ties to AQ; it has launched airstrikes against EIM targets, most recently in February 2018 against camps in northern Afghanistan used by ETIM. However, the State Department’s Country Reports on Terrorism for 2018 (released October 2019) says there is “a lack of independent evidence that a group by that name [ETIM] is still active.”

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Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs

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