

A photograph of a young boy in a blue shirt looking up at a soccer ball in the air, with a large, ruined building in the background. The scene is set in a dusty, open area, possibly a schoolyard or a public square. The building in the background is a large, multi-story structure with significant damage, including missing windows and a partially collapsed roof. The sky is clear and blue.

BETWEEN WAR & PEACE

THE AFGHANISTAN ESSAYS

The Haqqani Question

Rahimullah Yusufzai

The Afghanistan Essays

This 2018 short-essay series by the Jinnah Institute (JI) reflects a range of Pakistani thought leadership on Afghanistan and its complex history with Islamabad. With the region in the current crosshairs of a seemingly intractable conflict, these essays attempt to spur old and new thinking on the history of Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan and existing challenges. The essays cover a range of subject matter on Afghanistan-Pakistan including efforts for peace and reconciliation, threats to security, the broader geopolitical dynamic, and the role of civil society and economy.

This essay titled 'The Haqqani Question' situates the genesis and evolution of the Haqqani network within the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. It examines their role in the insurgency and the growing disconnect between Washington and Islamabad.

About the Author

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THE HAQQANI QUESTION

Rahimullah Yusufzai



Background

If there is one issue that can decisively set the course of Pakistan's future relationship with the United States, it is the fate of the Haqqani network. There is serious disagreement between the two former Cold War allies on the issue of the Haqqani network's alleged presence in Pakistan.

The United States will remain dissatisfied until Pakistan takes verifiable action against the Haqqanis, and manages to convince Washington that the network's leadership is no longer using its territory for waging war in neighbouring Afghanistan.

By conceding the Haqqanis' presence on its soil, Pakistan will go against its long stated position, and reinforce the US narrative that the network enjoys close links with Pakistani security agencies. Pakistan had argued that military action could not be taken earlier in North Waziristan due to capacity issues, as its security forces were fighting against militants on multiple fronts, and that all militant groups including the Haqqani network were targeted when Operation Zarb-e-Azb was launched full throttle in June 2014. On that occasion, neither US-led NATO forces, nor the Afghan government, bothered to deploy troops on the Afghan side of the border in a hammer and anvil approach to intercept fleeing militants, despite repeated requests from Islamabad.

The US designated the Haqqani network a foreign terrorist organisation on September 7, 2012. The United Nations Security Council followed suit by blacklisting the Haqqani network in November 2012 and imposing sanctions on its leadership. Pakistan said it would comply with the UN's decision and the Haqqani network was officially outlawed.

The US had been taking a tough position against the organization for a while. Admiral Michael Mullen, then chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, alleged in September 2011 that the Haqqani network was a veritable arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The top US military official went a step further by claiming that the ISI played a direct role in supporting the insurgents, who a week earlier had carried out the deadly attack on the American embassy in Kabul. The US position remains unchanged. It has, in fact, become tougher following President Donald Trump's August 21, 2017 speech outlining the new US policy for Afghanistan and South Asia, and warning Pakistan that it has much to lose by continuing to harbour criminals and terrorists.

An ongoing war of words has led to further bitterness in the uneasy Pak-US relationship. Trump and his aides have been relentlessly levying allegations and hurling threats at Pakistan, prompting Pakistan's civil and military leadership to respond for the first time in an unusually forceful manner to defend the country's policies. US aid to Pakistan is now being withheld and cut, and there is talk of further punitive measures to put pressure on Islamabad to do America's bidding. Pakistan's powerful military has warned the US against any unilateral action directed at Pakistan.

Historical Redux

At the center of this gradual breakdown in the bilateral relationship is the Haqqani network, which has been an active player in the seemingly endless Afghan conflict that began nearly four decades ago, but is still a largely shadowy organisation known for its resilience and capacity to cause violence. As its leaders claim, the network is driven not only by political reasons, but also ideological and religious motivations. The Haqqani family is proud of its sacrifices in the battles both against Soviet occupying forces in the 1980s, and the invading US-led NATO forces in the 2000s. In an interview with this writer in July 2008 on the Pak-Afghan border linking Khost with North Waziristan, the Haqqani network's current head Sirajuddin Haqqani claimed his family has lost over 50 members and was ready to lose even more. Arguably, no other family of Afghans stakeholders in the conflict, whether communist, mujahideen or Taliban, has lost so many members in the Afghan conflict.

As the conflict in Afghanistan mutates and the tactics and weapons being used become more sophisticated and destructive, the Haqqani franchise has effortlessly adjusted itself in an evolving theatre. It has remained an effective and dreaded armed group.

However, the network's importance has been portrayed in a way that makes it look bigger and stronger than its actual strength in terms of fighters and area of operations. There is no doubt the Haqqani network is a disciplined and lethal force, and has been responsible for some of the most spectacular attacks in Afghanistan, particularly in Kabul, but this portrayal has often been larger than life.

In the same interview with this writer in July 2008, Sirajuddin said the network had about 2,000 fighters. Subsequently, in September 2011, he was quoted as saying that media reports suggesting the Haqqani network had 10,000 fighters were underreporting its actual strength. Even if one of these widely divergent figures is true, this is not a particularly high number considering the Afghan Taliban claim they can quickly mobilise more than 100,000 men if needed from among active and reserve fighters. Even if the Haqqani network has since been able to recruit more fighters, particularly suicide bombers who were reportedly trained and used by the network for the first time in Afghanistan, the numbers still do not add up to form a dominant percentage of the Afghan Taliban strength.

The network, referred to in Pushto as the Haqqani shabaka, was founded by Maulvi Jalaluddin Haqqani, a Pashtun cleric from Afghanistan's southeastern Khost province who was educated at the Darul Uloom Haqqania seminary in Akora Khattak in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Jalaluddin belongs to the Zadran tribe, but his career as a resourceful and well-known mujahideen commander enabled him to forge links transcending Afghanistan's mosaic of tribal and ethnic groups.

Jalaluddin's career as a mujahideen commander began in real earnest following the communist Saur Revolution in Afghanistan in April 1978. It received further impetus when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979. He was the first commander who established a mujahideen radio station and a proper training camp at his Zhawar base in Khost, close to the Pakistan border. Jalaluddin successfully defended the Zhawar base when Soviet forces, backed by airpower, pummeled it for days. Later in 1991, he led the assault that resulted in the fall of Khost, the first city in Afghanistan captured by the Afghan mujahideen after the February 1989 withdrawal of the Soviet forces. In an interview with this scribe in the liberated city of Khost, Jalaluddin boasted that this was the beginning of the end for President Dr. Najibullah's Kabul regime. He was right: the communist regime collapsed a year later in 1992 and a mujahideen government was installed in its place.

The Zhawar training camp later used by Arab and other non-Afghan fighters, including those led by al-Qaeda founder Osama Bin Laden, was attacked with Tomahawk cruise missiles by the Clinton administration on August 20, 1998 in retaliation to the terrorist strikes on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

Throughout the course of the Afghan war, the CIA was keen to support Jalaluddin. Influential US Congressman Charlie Wilson, who lobbied and received millions of dollars in assistance to the Afghan mujahideen, liked him so much that he described him as "goodness personified." His long, bushy beard and layered turban made him appear distinct and easily recognizable.

Jalaluddin was minister for justice in the mujahideen government, but internal fighting made it weak and vulnerable and paved the way for the Taliban to capture power in 1996. Jalaluddin did not formally join the Taliban until late 1995. He reportedly played a minor role in the September 1996 battle for Kabul, which the Taliban won. He was rewarded with a berth in the cabinet as the minister for borders and tribal affairs, although his supporters believed he deserved a higher position considering his military exploits and experience compared to the Taliban commanders from southwestern Afghanistan, including the Taliban's birthplace Kandahar, who dominated the group.

Along with the late Ahmad Shah Masood, an ethnic Tajik, Jalaluddin was acknowledged as one of the most powerful mujahideen commanders fighting the Soviet Red Army in Afghanistan from 1979-89. In fact, the two men had such a high reputation that they received a higher share of resources, both weapons and money, than other field commanders. There are reports that the CIA, ISI and other state and non-state donors gave Masood and Jalaluddin a share almost equal to that given to their parent parties, the Jamiat-i-Islami and Hezb-i-Islami (Khalis), respectively. Jalaluddin in particular attracted significant donations from wealthy Arabs when his reputation grew as a capable leader ready to train and protect Arabs and other "guest" fighters from different countries. It was during this period that Jalaluddin and his men built a life-long association with non-Afghan jihadis, including Al-Qaeda's founder Osama bin Laden. More foreigners flocked to the Haqqani banner than to the other mujahideen commanders at the time.

Taliban supreme leader Mullah Muhammad Omar appointed Jalaluddin Haqqani as the commander of all Taliban forces in October 2001 when the US invaded Afghanistan, but at the time this meant little given that the Taliban fighters were in disarray and their regime was about to collapse.

After the fall of the Taliban regime in December 2001 as a result of the US invasion prompted by the 9/11 attacks, there were reports that the Haqqanis were approached and appeared willing to cut a

deal with President Hamid Karzai's government. However, no breakthrough could be achieved and a series of airstrikes by the US air force on houses, a madrassa, and other places associated with Jalaluddin convinced him that the Americans wanted to eliminate him on the instigation of his tribal rival, Badshah Khan Zadran. His brother Ibrahim Omari, too, had been arrested and tortured. It was also unlikely that a proud fighter like him would put down his arms. Before long, he was regrouping and mobilising his men to begin a new phase of the war in which his former ally, the US, was to be his primary enemy.

According to Jalaluddin's chosen successor Sirajuddin, the organisation took up arms with about a dozen fighters by their side at a time when Taliban leaders were no longer identifying themselves as Taliban. As the insurgency spread to the traditional Haqqani strongholds of Loya Paktia, which is the old name given to Paktia, Paktika and Khost provinces, and beyond to Logar, Ghazni, Wardak and Kabul, the US launched drone strikes on hideouts, particularly Danday Darpakhel near Miranshah which was hit a number of times killing some militants and many more civilians, including women and children belonging to the Haqqani family. It is said one of the motives for the Haqqanis to fight the US is to avenge those deaths, though the network's members argue that their goals under the concept of jihad are much higher.

The Haqqanis' mosque-madrassa complex, Manba al-Ulum (translation: the Source of Knowledge), in Danday Darpakhel was raided and searched in the mid-2000s by joint contingents of Pakistani and US forces. One abiding memory of one raid shared by Haqqani family members with this writer was that the American soldiers entered the imposing mosque with their boots and started throwing everything they found. However, the raid did not yield anything useful and no wanted militant was captured from among the young students living in the madrassa. Danday Darpakhel was the only identifiable target associated with the Haqqanis in Pakistan, and it became a deserted place when military Operation Zarb-e-Azb was launched in 2014. As this was supposed to be the nerve-centre of the Haqqani network, Pakistan allowed the Americans to search the place to ensure nothing was kept hidden from them.

The last time the world heard from Jalaluddin was November 13, 2013 when he issued a written message to "the valiant Afghan nation" on the death of his eldest son Naseeruddin Haqqani. The introduction said Jalaluddin was a member of the Taliban-led Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's Rahbari Shura (Leadership Council) and a scholar and mujahid. For the family the occasion was a huge tragedy, but the wily Jalaluddin made a calculated effort to turn the death into an occasion to lift the spirits of the Taliban and their supporters. He began his message by congratulating himself, the Taliban Amir-ul-Momineen (commander of the faithful) Mullah Omar and the mujahideen on the martyrdom of his son. Jalaluddin noted that the courageous Afghans, in their battle against foreign occupiers, had turned their homeland into a historic battlefield where their enemies, despite their military and technological advantages, were at a loss as to how to avoid defeat. Saying he was overcome by the desire of martyrdom whenever he heard about the extreme sacrifice offered by the mujahideen, Jalaluddin claimed his entire family was dedicated to jihad for defending their beloved nation and enabling the Taliban-led Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to achieve victory: "The martyrdom of our mujahideen in their fight against the aggressors is a sign of victory and not of our defeat. Indeed the signs of defeat will be our deviation from this path," he declared.

Thirty-six year old Naseeruddin, commonly known as Doctor Khan among the Taliban because he had been trained as a dispenser, was shot dead by unknown gunmen on November 11, 2013 in Bara Kahu, a suburb of Pakistan's federal capital, Islamabad. He didn't have a role in Haqqani

network's military planning and operations and was known more as its fundraiser, but the US declared him a global terrorist in June 2010. It is said he often visited the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to meet his stepmother, an Arab woman who was Jalaluddin's second wife, and her two sons. Naseeruddin's two younger brothers, Badruddin and Mohammad, were also assassinated in US drone strikes.

A few years before his assassination, he had been arrested by Pakistan's security agencies along with one of his uncles, but his family members claimed he had managed to keep his interrogators in the dark about his identity. Around that time in July 2007, he, his uncle and dozens of Afghan and Pakistani militants were released by the government in a prisoner swap dictated by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) founder Baitullah Mehsud, who had captured more than 250 Pakistani soldiers in an ambush in South Waziristan.

Today the US is focused on locating and targeting Haqqani network members and certain Afghan Taliban leaders in Pakistan in a bid to establish their alleged presence in the country and as a means to pressure Islamabad to take concrete action against them. In recent months the CIA has conducted a number of drone strikes in Kurram Agency, one of the seven tribal agencies in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Fata), due to the US belief that Haqqani network fighters have shifted there after being displaced from North Waziristan as result of Pakistan's military operations. There is no evidence yet of an organised presence of the network in Kurram Agency, or any other place after being displaced from Danday Darpakhel in North Waziristan.

Despite occasional media reports suggesting Jalaluddin's death, his family has maintained that he is alive. When he reportedly suffered a stroke several years ago and became bedridden, he passed on the network's leadership to his second son, Sirajuddin, also known as Khalifa, now in his late 30s. The US initially announced a \$50,000 reward for information leading to Sirajuddin's capture, but the bounty was increased to \$5 million in 2009 and later to \$10 million. Sirajuddin was appointed deputy leader of the Taliban movement, along with Mullah Omar's eldest son Muhammad Yaqoob, when Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansoor was killed in a US drone strike in Balochistan in May 2015. Sirajuddin was also given command of Taliban military operations for almost half of Afghanistan. The US also placed head-money on Sirajuddin's brothers, including his influential younger brother Abdul Aziz Haqqani, for whose capture it announced a reward of \$5 million.

The new Taliban supreme leader Shaikh Haibatullah Akhundzada and Sirajuddin are presently prime US targets. They could be attacked if the US obtains actionable intelligence of their presence in Pakistan. Certain quarters in Pakistan have expressed concern that the US military could carry out cross-border raids, or undertake a discreet operation similar to the one conducted in Abbottabad in May 2011 to take out bin Laden. America's obsession with the Haqqanis is so intense that it is ready to sacrifice its relationship with Pakistan unless Islamabad offers cooperation to destroy the network.

Between War, Peace & Strategic Disconnect

There are reasons for the US, its NATO allies and Afghanistan to consider the Haqqani network a significant national security threat. Although al-Qaeda and the TTP claimed responsibility for organising the December 30, 2009 suicide bombing at the CIA's Camp Chapman base in Khost by a Jordanian militant, Dr. Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi, the US believed the Haqqani network played a role in the attack and reacted by carrying out several drone strikes targeting the

Haqqani members in North Waziristan. The Camp Chapman attack was the biggest loss for the CIA in 25 years, with the Agency losing seven of its senior agents, along with Jordanian and Afghan intelligence officers. The network has also been blamed for staging attacks in Kabul on the Indian embassy in 2008 and US embassy in 2011, carrying out assassination attempts on President Hamid Karzai, bombing Kabul's Serena Hotel in 2008, and planning the huge May 31, 2017 truck bombing near the German embassy in Kabul that killed 150. The Haqqani network had claimed responsibility for a few of these attacks before it decided to stay quiet and work under the discipline of the Taliban-led Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. It was also involved in the 2008 kidnapping of American journalist David Rohde and British journalist-documentary-maker Sean Langan.

Apart from suicide bombings, the Haqqani network is known to have carried out roadside bombings, assassinations, kidnappings for ransom and extortion. It has been able to prepare a steady number of young men willing to commit suicide bombings. It works on creating fear and undertaking spectacular signature attacks. If Sirajuddin is to be believed, his group has infiltrated the Afghan government enabling it to organise insider attacks and complex assaults on high-profile targets in Kabul and other places.

On a few occasions, US military officials expressed satisfaction with Pakistan's military campaign in North Waziristan in the wake of Operation Zarb-e-Azb, which disrupted Haqqani network activities. Lt. General Joseph Anderson, a senior US official in Afghanistan, said on November 5, 2014 that Pakistani actions had been effective in disrupting Haqqani network operations in Afghanistan. He said the Haqqani network has been fractured like the Afghan Taliban, and it was now less effective in its ability to pull off attacks targeting Kabul.

Subsequently, the US again started haranguing Pakistan to do more against the Haqqani network. Such demands tend to increase whenever a major terrorist attack takes place in Afghanistan, more so if NATO soldiers are harmed and US interests are threatened. US policy became more aggressive after President Donald Trump's election and his decision, despite almost 17 years of the military stalemate in Afghanistan, to try once again to defeat the Taliban and Haqqani network. Pakistan has been advocating a political settlement through talks with the Taliban, as the military option has clearly failed.

When a four-member Taliban delegation met six members of the Afghan government at the first formal peace talks between the two sides in Murree on July 7, 2015, as a result of Pakistani mediation, two persons with links to the Haqqani network were also present along with former Health Minister Mullah Muhammad Abbas and another Taliban figure Abdul Latif Mansoor. These persons were Ibrahim Omari, one of the four Haqqani brothers and uncle of Sirajuddin, and their close relative Yahya Haqqani, a wanted man because the US believed he was the network's fundraiser. The Afghan government delegation did not object to the presence of Ibrahim or Yahya in the meeting. The delegation, led by Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai, told the media upon return to Kabul that they had met the right people authorised by the Taliban leadership including the Haqqani network.

US officials had met Ibrahim earlier also in Islamabad. Commenting on the meeting, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton confirmed that the US was reaching out to the Haqqani network to gauge its willingness to engage in the peace process. However, Sirajuddin said on record that though he respected his uncles, neither Ibrahim nor his other uncle Khalil Haqqani were authorised to represent the Haqqani network in any capacity.

It is also noteworthy that in private and at closed-door sessions, US officials have made it clear that they aren't opposed to peace talks with the Haqqani network, even though Washington has declared it a terrorist organisation. The US has not made this public for obvious reasons, because such a move could have political repercussions at home and abroad. It has dealt differently with the Taliban by not labelling the group as terrorist, and by making every effort to persuade it to join the peace process. The US even made a prisoner-swap agreement with the Taliban when it released five important Taliban prisoners from Guantanamo Bay in 2015 in exchange for US soldier Bowe Bergdahl, who had been in the Haqqanis' custody for five years. Though the agreement was made possible thanks to Qatari mediation (Qatar had been hosting a Taliban political commission since 2011), it demonstrated that the US was willing to make deals if they served American interests.

By all accounts, it is difficult to ignore the Haqqani network. It found mention towards the end of 2017 when the Pakistan Army claimed to have rescued a five-member Canadian-American family, which had been in the Haqqani network's custody for five years. Joshua Boyle from Canada, his American wife Caitlan Coleman and their three children were recovered from Kurram Agency on October 1, 2017 on the basis of CIA intelligence passed on by the US Ambassador to Pakistan. The Haqqani network had never formally claimed responsibility for the abduction of the Canadian-American couple, and made no demands publicly. The couple was reportedly seized by Haqqani fighters while it was backpacking in Afghanistan's Wardak province, close to Kabul, on October 12, 2012. The demands conveyed through different channels to the US and Canadian governments and Boyle's parents in Canada included the freedom for about ten Taliban members in Afghan custody, and \$15 million in ransom. In particular, the Haqqanis wanted the release of three men – Jalaluddin's youngest son Anas Haqqani, maternal uncle Haji Mali Khan, and Qari Rasheed. Anas and Qari Rasheed had been apprehended by American authorities in Bahrain in October 2014 while returning from a visit to Qatar where they had travelled to meet the five Taliban leaders freed in exchange for Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl.

As Anas was sentenced to death by a court in Kabul, Taliban warned of a severe backlash and revenge attacks in case the execution was carried out. The network apparently seeks to secure freedom for Anas, Mali Khan and Qari Rasheed in exchange for American University, Kabul teachers Kevin King, an American, and Australian Timothy Weeks, who are in its custody since August 2016. The Haqqanis consider their network to be part and parcel of the Taliban movement, even if it sometimes operates independently. In his rare media interviews, Sirajuddin made it clear that the network obeyed Mullah Omar and his successors. When the Haqqani network was designated by the US as terrorist in 2012, the Taliban issued a statement that there was no separate entity or network by the name of Haqqani and that Jalaluddin was a member of the Taliban's highest decision-making Rahbari Shura. Unlike the past, the Haqqani network stopped claiming responsibility for attacks in Afghanistan and let the official Taliban spokesmen issue necessary statements. However, this has not stopped the Afghan government from blaming the network for big terrorist attacks, and the US from endorsing Kabul's claims. At times, putting the blame immediately on the Haqqanis without proper investigation appears to be a deliberate attempt to link Pakistan to the attacks owing to the Haqqani network's perceived linkages with the ISI.

Today it is doubtful the Haqqani network, or for that matter the mainstream Taliban movement, will surrender or suffer a complete defeat, even if their perceived connections to Pakistan are severed. There is also no way the network's leadership will be offered an amnesty. Any credible peace process would have to involve the Taliban movement as a whole, including the Haqqani network. Excluding the Haqqanis from any deal is unlikely to work.