American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research

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Statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa
"Assessing the President's Strategy in Afghanistan"

The Afghanistan Conundrum: How Should the US Approach the Rise of Insurgent Groups?

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December 2, 2015

Enemy groups are both multiplying and gaining strength in Afghanistan. The Taliban's successes in temporarily overrunning Kunduz City and regaining territory taken from it in Helmand Province in 2010 demonstrate the growing military power and boldness of that long-time foe. Continued high-profile attacks on Kabul and throughout southeastern Afghanistan show that the Haqqani Network remains a potent force. The Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) has established a new affiliate in Nangarhar, Konar, and Zabul Provinces, however, while the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has shifted its base from Pakistan into Afghanistan. Central Asian, al Qaeda-affiliated extremists such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) continue to operate freely, and some are joining with ISIS or alienated Taliban factions. Al Qaeda itself retains a limited presence not only in the distant mountainous regions of Konar and Nuristan, but also in the more strategically-important provinces of Ghazni and Zabul.[1]

We can expect all of these groups to continue to gain strength and seize territory against Afghan National Security Forces that do not have the wherewithal to push back against them at current levels of American and international support. Enemy expansion will accelerate as that support is further reduced according to President Obama's most recent announcement.[2] The next American president will thus face multiple insurgent groups and a weakening Afghan security force, assuming that Afghanistan survives through the next US presidential election.

American leaders have long debated the magnitude of the threat enemy groups in Afghanistan pose to the US. They have generally accepted that the US can allow groups with only local objectives to persist as long as they do not threaten to overthrow the Afghan government. Debate has then continued about which groups fall into that category. The Taliban clearly does—its stated aims do not include expanding the jihad beyond Afghanistan's borders. Al Qaeda obviously has global objectives, but its footprint in Afghanistan remains small. These factors have hitherto persuaded many American policy-makers that the US can accept considerable risk in allowing the Taliban and the Haqqanis to regain some of the ground taken from them in 2010-2012 without facing the serious threat of attacks on the US homeland.

The successor to former Taliban leader Mullah Omar has not materially affected this calculus. Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, who has taken his position and titles, continues to announce and pursue the same intra-Afghanistan objectives as had Mullah Omar.[3] It is noteworthy that al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri declared his loyalty to Akhtar Mansour as he had to Omar, following in the tradition of Osama bin Laden's swearing of allegiance to Mullah Omar.[4] Zawahiri's pledge should remind us that the prospect of truly separating the Taliban from al Qaeda even after the deaths of the founders of both groups remains dim, although Akhtar Mansour clearly does not intend to move the Taliban closer to al Qaeda either.

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[1] The Institute for the Study of War provides continuous open-source tracking of enemy activities in Afghanistan at www.understandingwar.org. See also "The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security," Report of the Secretary General, United Nations, September 1, 2015, A/70/359-S/2015/684.
[2] President Barack Obama, "Statement by the President on Afghanistan," The White House Office of the Press Secretary, October 15, 2015, https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/15/statement-president-afghanistan
[3] See Borhan Osman, "Toward Fragmentation? Mapping the post-Omar Taleban," *Afghan Analysts Network*, November 24, 2015, for a good discussion of the succession within the Taliban.
[4] "Zawahiri Pledges Allegiance to New Afghan Taliban Leader in Audio Speech," SITE Intelligence Group, August 13, 2015.

The reshuffling of the Taliban's inner circle also clarified the relationship between the Haqqani Network and the Taliban, as Sirajuddin Haqqani, the network's leader and son of its founder, became Mansour's deputy. The Haqqanis are known to be much more closely entwined with al Qaeda, having shared bases with that group in Waziristan and Afghanistan for decades, and Sirajuddin is more radical than was his father, Jalaluddin.[5] Yet Siraj has still retained the Afghan focus of the group and appears intent on retaking Kabul and solidifying his position in a new Taliban state rather than redirecting his efforts against the West at this time.

The emergence of ISIS in Afghanistan is thus the most immediately-concerning development that might affect Afghanistan's significance for the security of the American and European homelands, particularly in light of the recent attacks in Paris and threats in Brussels. The strength of ISIS in Afghanistan is a matter of considerable debate, and one must be careful neither to overestimate nor to underestimate it. Afghans have learned that labeling a group ISIS attracts the attention of the US as fast (or perhaps even faster than) as labeling it al Qaeda—so we must be careful not to take all the claims of ISIS presence at face value. There is ample evidence, however, including from recent journalistic forays into ISIS-held areas, that ISIS has a meaningful presence in Nangarhar Province with hundreds of fighters at its command.[6]

Most ISIS fighters attached to Wilayet Khorasan, as ISIS styles its Afghanistan territories, were likely members of the Taliban or of other local fighting groups before joining the Islamic State.[7] They were in many cases the more radical members of those groups who chafed under the constraints imposed by a Taliban leadership concerned about alienating a population it wished to govern. ISIS prefers terror and oppression to enlisting popular sympathy, a preference that appeals to furious and unbalanced young men who wish to slash and burn all opponents. ISIS in Afghanistan has thus already demonstrated its greater brutality through the well-publicized grisly murders of Hazara civilians and opponents of its rule.

It would be a mistake to conclude, however, that ISIS members in Afghanistan are just more brutal Talibs with little meaningful connection to the ISIS narrative of global jihad. An interview with an ISIS fighter by Najibullah Quraishi, released in a recent PBS Frontline documentary, is chilling in this regard.[8] Quraishi asked if the man had been in the Taliban before joining ISIS. He responded: "Yes, we were fighting holy war as Taliban. Our holy war was just because there was no caliphate then. But God says when there is a caliphate, you must join the caliphate. There is a caliphate now, so we've left the Taliban. We're fighting holy war under caliph's leadership." Quraishi then asked what was the aim of this holy war. The response: "We want the Islamic system all over the world, and we will fight for it." These are not the words of a Taliban leader, whose discourse would normally have been aimed at internal Afghan

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[5] See Vahid Brown and Don Rassler, *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973-2012* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) for a superb and detailed history of the Haqqani Network.
[6] Najibullah Quraishi, "ISIS in Afghanistan," PBS Frontline, November 17, 2015, available at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/isis-in-afghanistan/transcript/ (accessed December 1, 2015) offers a chilling and important insight into ISIS in Afghanistan today.
[7] Hannah Byrne, John Krzyzaniak, Qasim Khan, "The Death of Mullah Omar and the Rise of ISIS in Afghanistan," Institute for the Study of War, August 17, 2015, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Mullah%20Omar%20Backgrounder.pdf (accessed December 1, 2015). See also "The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security," United Nations.
[8] "ISIS in Afghanistan," PBS Frontline.

opponents or, at most, Pakistanis. Even if the Talib in question is simply saying what his new paymasters want to hear, it is a marked departure from what most Afghans have been willing to say to receive the benefits of al Qaeda, for example. Al Qaeda never required or even expected the Taliban to support the global jihad publicly and was content to have the Taliban focus both rhetorically and militarily exclusively on Afghanistan.

The rest of the Frontline documentary is even more chilling in this regard, as it shows ISIS indoctrinating young children—a phenomenon that we have observed throughout ISIS-controlled territory, particularly in Iraq and Syria. The adult Talib may be placating ISIS, although there is no particular reason to think so, but the young children will grow up to believe ISIS's teachings and worldview if the group is allowed to control their lives for several years. The implantation of an ISIS group drumming global jihad into Afghan children at the village level poses a severe threat to the United States and Europe in the timeframe of a decade or less.

That threat is exacerbated by the growing tide of emigrants and refugees fleeing what they believe to be Afghanistan's next descent into full-scale ethnic war. Afghan refugees make up a substantial part of the overall refugee flow into Europe today, and that flow will likely increase.[9] Iran is mobilizing Afghan Shi'a and also dragooning Afghan Sunnis into fighting on behalf of Bashar al Assad in Syria, while ISIS and al Qaeda seek to mobilize them on the other side. The fear pushing Afghans to leave their homeland again will combine with the search by the belligerents in the Middle East's sectarian war for new recruits to spread ISIS ideology in Afghanistan and then spread a partially-radicalized Afghan diaspora into the Middle East and the West. The threat of ISIS in Afghanistan is probably not imminent—it is certainly not as urgent as the threat from ISIS in Syria/Iraq, Sinai, or Libya. But it has the potential to rival those in scale and in the difficulty of resolving the underlying conflicts that create fertile ground and recruits for them.

ISIS is a direct threat to the US and Europe, as is al Qaeda. The TTP, IMU, and other groups have been driven from bases in Waziristan by a Pakistani military operation that occurred only after US forces had been withdrawn, leaving the Afghan border open to allow Islamabad's enemies, friends, and frenemies simply to move to the other side of the Durand Line.[10] These groups also pursue global jihadi aims (the TTP sponsored the failed attack on Times Square in 2010, for example), and will likely pose a greater threat to the US in Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan than in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Islamabad generally moderated the FATA as if it were a nuclear reactor's core, usually preventing the groups hosted there from engaging in attacks against the US that might have provoked military responses beyond what the Pakistani military was prepared to live with. No such constraints apply to terrorist groups in Afghanistan. Yet all of these groups still control very limited territory, population, and resources in Afghanistan and pose little immediate threat to the survival of the Afghan state. The Taliban and the Haqqanis, however, are becoming an existential threat to that state and,

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[9] "Germany to start sending back migrants from Afghanistan, according to reports," *The Telegraph*, October 26, 2015, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/11956007/Germany-to-start-sending-back-migrants-from-Afghanistan-according-to-reports.html.
[10] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Blood and Hope in Afghanistan: A June 2015 Update," Brooking Institution, May 26, 2015, http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/05/26-isis-taliban-afghanistan-felbabbrown (accessed 12 December 2015).

with it, to the governance structures and security forces the US desperately needs to fight the groups that threaten us. How should the US approach this conundrum?

The US must provide the Afghan government and security forces with the resources they need to re-defeat the Taliban and the Haqqani network even while attempting to contain and ultimately defeat ISIS, the TTP, IMU, and other international jihadi groups. No prescience is required to see that Afghanistan will unquestionably go the way of Iraq if US forces are withdrawn and even, perhaps, if they remain at current inadequate levels with severely constrained authorities. We must stop logic-chopping about which enemies our forces can and cannot attack. The Taliban's lack of global ambition is irrelevant if it facilitates the overthrow of the government we need to fight ISIS.

Supporting the Afghan government requires more US troops and expanded authorities for those that are there, in addition to various non-military requirements. The US should therefore immediately reconsider its current force posture in Afghanistan and allow its forces to engage all enemy groups regardless of their relationship to ISIS or al Qaeda. The most limited force requirement simply to operate freely in the difficult terrain of Afghanistan is between 20,000 and 30,000 troops, according to assessments conducted in 2012 and 2013 whose core assumptions and conclusions remain valid.[11] The mid-term threat from ISIS is sufficiently clear and great to justify further engagement.

[11] Frederick W. Kagan and Kimberly Kagan, "Why U.S. Troops Must Stay in Afghanistan," *The Washington Post,* 23 November 23, 2012, available at http://www.criticalthreats.org/afghanistan/kagan-why-us-troops-must-stay-afghanistan-november-23-2012 (accessed December 1, 2015). See also Frederick W. Kagan and Christopher Harmer, "Forces Required for One U.S. Base in Afghanistan after 2014," Critical Threats Project and the Institute for the Study of War, January 17, 2013, http://www.criticalthreats.org/afghanistan/forces-required-one-us-base-afghanistan-2014-january-17-2013 (accessed December 1, 2015). Both assessments are based primarily on requirements dictated by terrain and military necessity as well as enemy situations that have, sadly, not improved in the intervening three years.