



Risk Mitigation Consulting Inc.

Intelligence and Analysis Division

WHITE PAPER SERIES

Afghanistan Situation Update: Terror Threats

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INTENT

This white paper is designed to provide analysis of relevant, publicly available information on threat and hazard events/trends and their potential impacts to the interests of the United States, both at home and abroad. This product is not intended to be an all-encompassing assessment of the subject.



Afghanistan Situation Update: Terror Threats

Scope Note: This paper does not intend to provide specific most likely or most deadly end states concerning the future of Afghanistan in the coming months and years. Rather, it intends to provide the reader with a basic understanding of the terrorism environment and an assessment of the major actors involved, as well as their various capabilities, intents, and histories of terrorist activity.

Introduction

The recent U.S. withdrawal of military forces from Afghanistan and subsequent Taliban takeover of the country has created an environment in which terrorist groups have a permissive territory from which they can operate. The current environment in Afghanistan is reminiscent of the pre-9/11 era when the Taliban also held power in the country and may indicate the beginning of a new era of transnational terrorism. Additionally, the recent events in Afghanistan may motivate homegrown violent extremists (HVEs) in the U.S., while domestic terrorists (largely motivated by racial issues) may seek to commit attacks against Afghan refugees resettled throughout the U.S.

Background

The Taliban (which translates to “students” in the Pashto language) are a fundamentalist Islamist insurgent group that formed in the early 1990s, after Soviet forces withdrew from their occupation of the country.¹ In 1996, the Taliban took over most of Afghanistan, following several years of civil war. The Taliban maintained a close relationship with the terrorist group al-Qaeda (AQ), which utilized Afghanistan as a base of operations, to include the planning of the 9/11 attacks on the U.S.²

Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, a U.S. military invasion into Afghanistan was launched to seek reprisal for the 9/11 attacks and diminish terrorists’ capabilities to operate in the country’s safe haven. Additionally, the U.S. and its international partners established a democratic government, as well as various security forces, to include the Afghan National Army (ANA). However, indigenous security forces generally lacked the capability to maintain Afghanistan’s internal security without international assistance.³

The U.S. military presence (along with an international coalition) continued in some form until 31 August 2021, when the final withdrawal of troops and evacuation of personnel/refugees occurred based on an agreed-upon timeline coordinated with Taliban leaders.⁴ The Taliban had been making steady advances as the U.S. slowly withdrew, punctuated by the U.S. evacuation from Bagram Airfield (a key U.S. base during the war) in the middle of the night in July 2021.⁵ In early September 2021, the Taliban announced its interim government (consisting of a number of hardened militants), formalizing its de facto control over the country.⁶



Though the current environment in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal and Taliban takeover remains dynamic, current reporting indicates that the Taliban has effectively taken control of the country. The current situation in Afghanistan is further complicated by the presence of the Islamic State's Khorasan branch, known as IS-K. While IS-K was present and active in Afghanistan in recent years under the previous Afghan government, they remained in conflict with the Taliban.

Transnational Terrorism Environment

The Taliban's takeover of the country is still in its early stages, and a complete assessment of the resulting threat environment is complicated by a number of factors, to include the presence of rival group IS-K. Still, groups such as al-Qaeda and the Haqqani Network (both allied with the Taliban) will likely be able to operate at an increased level under a permissive, Taliban-led Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda

The Taliban's long-standing ties with al-Qaeda have renewed fears that AQ could reconstitute in Afghanistan and pose a potential terror threat to the U.S. homeland. The director of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) recently stated publicly that "the current assessment probably conservatively is one to two years for al-Qaeda to build some capability to at least threaten the homeland." Other U.S. officials have publicly expressed similar estimated timelines for such capabilities.⁷ In late September 2021, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff told the Senate Armed Services Committee that Taliban is harboring al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.⁸

U.S. counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan (to include the killing of AQ leader Osama Bin Laden in 2011) had seriously degraded AQ's centralized leadership. This forced the group to adopt a decentralized, branch-based model which included affiliates in a number of countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa.⁹ Following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, this branch-based model could potentially be replaced by a more centralized leadership model, which could allow AQ to better coordinate activities and attacks amongst its various branches, to include the targeting of the U.S. homeland and U.S. assets abroad.

Haqqani Network

The Taliban's new government is closely aligned with the Haqqani Network, a designated terrorist organization which has been involved in a number of attacks targeting U.S. forces and other Westerners in Afghanistan. The Haqqani Network also maintains close ties to AQ, and has previously cooperated with IS-K.¹⁰ Members of the Haqqani Network have already been placed into high-profile internal security roles in the new Taliban Government.¹⁰

Though the Haqqani Network has engaged in a number of attacks within Afghanistan, they are primarily facilitators of other groups' operations, to include providing safe haven, logistics, training, and other services. The Haqqani Network also maintains relationship with less prominent regional militant and terrorist groups, to include the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, and Lashkar-e-Taiba.¹¹



IS-K

Additionally, Afghanistan is home to the Islamic State-Khorasan branch (IS-K). As mentioned, IS-K has previously cooperated with the Haqqani Network, although it is generally a rival group to the Taliban and AQ.¹² IS-K may seek to exploit the relatively weak governance in Afghanistan to gain territory, resources, and members in pursuit of their own goals. This would support the broader IS goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate across the region (and ultimately the world).

On 26 August 2021, IS-K conducted a complex attack (including multiple VBIEDs) at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, resulting in over 180 deaths and over 200 injuries, to include the death of 13 U.S. servicemembers and injury of 18 others. A number of Taliban members are also believed to have been killed/wounded in the attack.¹³ The attack occurred amidst U.S. troop withdrawal and evacuation efforts at the airport.

Domestic Terrorism/HVE Environment

The resurgence of the Taliban could potentially embolden HVEs espousing a radical Islamic ideology, while the mass evacuation of Afghan nationals to the U.S. could potentially inspire attacks by racially motivated violent extremists.

HVEs

HVEs motivated by a radical Islamic ideology may be emboldened by the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan.¹⁴ The Taliban's symbolic victory may reassure adherents of radical Islamic ideologies that their cause remains viable. Furthermore, an al-Qaeda resurgence in Afghanistan would provide additional propaganda opportunities for the group to motivate HVEs. IS-K's presence in Afghanistan (and their conflict with the Taliban) may provide additional opportunities for propaganda and radicalization. Both al-Qaeda and IS utilize extensive online propaganda operations with the goal of inciting lone wolves to commit violent acts. Often, these individuals will pledge allegiance to a terror group prior to the attack, which allows the group to claim credit

In late August 2021, it was reported that one (1) Afghan refugee was detained in Qatar en route to the U.S. when vetting revealed potential IS ties, and approximately 100 Afghan visa recipients were flagged as potential matches to U.S. terror watchlists. This highlights the potential HVE threat from individuals granted lawful access to the U.S. via refugee/visa programs.¹⁵

Domestic Terrorists

Separately, far right/white nationalist/white supremacist individuals or groups may seek to commit racially motivated attacks against the thousands of Afghan refugees and Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders entering the U.S. from Afghanistan.¹⁶ U.S. officials and other observers have noted increased "chatter" (particularly online) to this effect, including a threat against a non-profit organization involved in refugee resettlement.¹⁷

Conversely, some white supremacist groups have praised the Taliban for reasons to include "[the Taliban's] anti-Semitism, homophobia, and severe restrictions on women's freedom." These groups tend to be "accelerationist" in nature, espousing views that accelerate social, political, and racial conflict.¹⁶ Extreme Neo-Nazi groups such as Atomwaffen Division have recently expressed



admiration for some jihadist terrorists (to include Osama Bin Laden) and utilized similar propaganda approaches.¹⁸

Conclusion

The transnational terrorism environment in Afghanistan remains dynamic, and U.S. leaders have publicly assessed that groups such as al-Qaeda will seek to reconstitute in Afghanistan in the coming months and years with the ultimate goal of rebuilding the capability to strike the U.S. homeland. A permissive environment (bolstered by facilitators and allies such as the Taliban and the Haqqani Network) may accelerate this process. Conversely, U.S./allied counterterrorism operations and conflicts with rival groups such as IS-K may slow said process. Moreover, the ensuing threat environment in the U.S. (from HVEs and domestic terrorists alike) should not be discounted. RMC's Intelligence & Analysis Division will continue to monitor the situation in Afghanistan and any terrorist threats that may emanate from it.

¹ BBC. (2021, August 18). Who are the Taliban? BBC News. Retrieved October 1, 2021, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11451718>.

² AL QAEDA AIMS AT THE AMERICAN HOMELAND. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. (2004, August 21). Retrieved October 1, 2021, from https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report_Ch5.htm.

³ Whitlock, C. (2019, December 9). In confidential documents, U.S. military trainers describe Afghan security forces as incompetent, unmotivated and rife with deserters. The Washington Post. Retrieved October 1, 2021, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-army-police/>.

⁴ Losey, S., & Beynon, S. (2021, August 31). Final troops withdraw from Afghanistan, ending evacuation -- and the War. Military.com. Retrieved October 1, 2021, from <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/08/30/final-troops-withdraw-afghanistan-ending-evacuation-and-war.html>.

⁵ BBC. (2021, July 6). US left Bagram Airbase at night with no notice, Afghan commander says. BBC News. Retrieved October 1, 2021, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57682290>.

⁶ Gannon, K. (2021, September 7). Taliban form all-male Afghan government of old guard members. ABC News. Retrieved October 1, 2021, from <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/taliban-fire-air-disperse-protesters-arrest-reporters-79871457>.

⁷ Barnes, J. E. (2021, September 14). Al Qaeda could rebuild in Afghanistan in a year or two, U.S. officials say. The New York Times. Retrieved September 14, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/14/us/politics/al-qaeda-afghanistan.html>.

⁸ Garamone, J. (2021, September 29). Taliban remains dangerous, harbors al-Qaida, Joint Chiefs chairman says. U.S. Department of Defense. Retrieved October 4, 2021, from <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2793387/taliban-remains-dangerous-harbors-al-qaida-joint-chiefs-chairman-says/>.



⁹ Ohlheiser, A. (2014, April 30). The State Department warns of an 'evolved,' decentralized Al Qaeda. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved October 1, 2021, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/04/the-state-department-warns-of-an-evolved-decentralized-al-qaeda/361452/>.

¹⁰ Dettmer, J. (2021, August 19). Hardline Haqqani network put in charge of Kabul Security. *Voice of America*. Retrieved September 14, 2021, from <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/hardline-haqqani-network-put-charge-kabul-security>.

¹¹ Stanford University. (2017, November 8). Haqqani Network. Mapping Militant Organizations. Retrieved October 1, 2021, from https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/print_view/363.

¹² Doxsee, C., Thompson, J., & Hwang, G. (2021, September 8). Examining Extremism: Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Center for Strategic and International Studies. Retrieved September 14, 2021, from <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-khorasan-province-iskp>.

¹³ Svokos, A., & Deliso, M. (2021, August 27). What we know about the Kabul airport attack that killed US troops. *ABC News*. Retrieved September 14, 2021, from <https://abcnews.go.com/International/kabul-airport-attack-killed-us-troops/story?id=79662465>.

¹⁴ Sands, G. (2021, September 3). DHS, FBI expect foreign terrorist messaging to exploit 9/11 anniversary and Afghanistan withdrawal, intel bulletin says. *CNN*. Retrieved September 14, 2021, from <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/03/politics/dhs-fbi-foreign-terrorist-messaging/index.html>.

¹⁵ Copp, T. (2021, August 25). Kabul evacuee with potential ISIS Ties detained at Qatar Base. *Defense One*. Retrieved September 14, 2021, from <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2021/08/kabul-evacuee-potential-isis-ties-detained-qatar-base/184811/>.

¹⁶ Sands, G. (2021, September 1). White supremacist praise of the Taliban Takeover concerns US officials. *CNN*. Retrieved September 14, 2021, from <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/01/politics/far-right-groups-praise-taliban-takeover/index.html>.

¹⁷ Sganga, N. (2021, September 11). DHS bulletin warns of potential threat of domestic violent extremists to Afghan evacuees, immigrant communities. *CBS News*. Retrieved September 14, 2021, from <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/violent-extremists-afghan-evacuees-immigrant-communities-dhs-bulletin/>.

¹⁸ Makuch, B., & Lamoureux, M. (2019, September 17). Neo-nazis are glorifying Osama bin Laden. *VICE*. Retrieved October 1, 2021, from <https://www.vice.com/en/article/bjwv4a/neo-nazis-are-glorifying-osama-bin-laden>.