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The Afghan Peace Process and India's Concerns

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There has been increased speculation since the signing of U.S.-Taliban agreement on 29 February 2020 as to whether the Taliban will break ties with Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups to adhere to the terms of the deal. The deal envisions that the Taliban will not allow Afghan territory to be used for terrorist acts against the United States and its allies in exchange for a gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan.¹ In this context many observers have advocated that India establish communications with the Taliban to keep its options open if and when the Taliban return to power.² India has been cautious in talking to the Taliban given its troubled history with the group, Pakistan's significant influence over the Taliban, and New Delhi's commitment to engage with the elected Afghan regime. For India the way forward in Afghanistan lies in supporting the Afghan government to bring peace in Kabul through its developmental engagement.

The Taliban and its links with Al-Qaeda and anti-India terrorist groups

Even months after the agreement was signed in February the Taliban show no signs of renouncing ties with Al-Qaeda in practice. In fact, on 23 April 2020, on the seventh anniversary of Taliban Emir Mullah Omar's death, the Taliban praised his defense of Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden after 9/11 in a eulogy.³ And if recent reports are to be believed the Taliban are no closer to acting against Al-Qaeda and have rather done the opposite. Presently Al-Qaeda appears to be operating clandestinely both alongside and independent of the Taliban in Afghanistan.⁴

Senior members of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban met at least six times over the past year to discuss mutual support after the Afghan peace process.⁵ Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri met with senior members of the Taliban's semi-autonomous branch the Haqqani Network (based in Miranshah, North Waziristan, Pakistan) in February 2020 and information suggests that Al-

Qaeda agreed to fund a large Haqqani Network force in eastern Afghanistan.⁶ The Haqqani Network has been historically close to Al-Qaeda and to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).⁷

In 2009 and 2008 the Taliban (specifically the Haqqani Network) bombed the Indian Embassy in Kabul with ISI support.⁸ Also the Haqqani's Network's alleged links to the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and its facilitation of the ISKP attack on the Kabul Gurudwara in March 2020 is of added concern for India. Interestingly, after ISKP leader Aslam Farooqi was arrested in April by Afghan forces from Kandahar (a Taliban friendly region) the Taliban sent word that Farooqi surrendered to Afghan forces as he was being hunted by the Taliban. This is part of a narrative backed by the ISI, which wants to portray ISKP as an 'Afghan entity' opposed to the Taliban. The target selection of the Gurudwara and reference to Kashmir, Farooqi's links to Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Pakistan's requests to extradite Farooqi who is a Pakistani citizen further points towards an ISI operation.⁹

Besides the Haqqani Network's links to the ISI there are other reasons for India to be wary: sometime after 2007 Lal Masjid siege in Islamabad a coalition of jihadists led by al-Zawahiri, some members of the Indian Mujahideen (IM) terrorist group and now deceased Kashmiri terrorist Ilyas Kashmiri emerged in Miranshah¹⁰, the headquarters and

stronghold of the Haqqani Network. This Miranshah group might have been linked to the 2010 Pune German Bakery bombing by IM as part of Kashmiri's "Karachi Project" to target India.¹¹ Asim Umar, the now deceased leader of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) from India, was also part of this group.

Umar had travelled to Pakistan in the 1990s from India where he later joined groups like the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) in Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir and later the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan before joining AQIS. In Pakistan he studied at the Jamia Uloom-ul-Islamia madrassa in Karachi in the 1990s which included alumni like Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) leader Masood Azhar, Harkat-ul-Jihadi Islami (HuJI) leader Qari Saifullah Akhtar and HuM leader Fazlur Rahman Khalil.¹² Umar was killed in September 2019 in a joint U.S.-Afghan operation in Afghanistan along with his courier to al-Zawahiri, a district Taliban military commander among several others.¹³ Six of the AQIS terrorists killed hailed from Pakistan. The fact that Umar was killed in a compound in Musa Qala district of Helmand province, a Taliban stronghold, guarded by multiple Taliban fighters makes New Delhi more skeptical of the Taliban's guarantees. Interestingly, the U.S. government has not commented on Umar's death, presumably, to protect its agreement with the Taliban which hinges on delinking Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

AQIS helps the Taliban in its operations, and the Taliban in return helps to solidify the AQIS presence within Afghanistan. The relationship is based on more complex conditions of legitimacy and identity. Their legitimacy depends not only on their governance, popular support, or territory, but on their conformity to their interpretation of Islam.¹⁴

ISI-backed groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed operating along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and often within Afghanistan with Taliban support are a source of concern for India. In 2014 the India consulate in Herat in western Afghanistan was attacked by multiple LeT terrorists.¹⁵ According to Afghan officials LeT and JeM terrorists are embedded with Taliban forces in eastern Afghanistan¹⁶ though the scope of their involvement might be slightly exaggerated.

Additionally, Osama bin Laden had also reportedly attended an “extraordinary planning meeting” on the 26/11 Mumbai attacks in Manshera, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan in 2008 with the ISI and LeT chief Hafeez Saeed.¹⁷ Sajid Majid, head of LeT’s India Wing and one of the 26/11 plotters, is a close associate of Asim Umar.¹⁸ Investigations have revealed that multiple LeT leaders visited AQIS headquarters in South Waziristan, Pakistan.¹⁹

Furthermore, arrested AQIS India head, Mohammed Asif, had told Indian investigators that he had stayed with Umar in Peshawar near a

Pakistan Army establishment²⁰ thus giving further credence to the allegations of ISI support for AQIS. Members of AQIS travel to Afghanistan/Pakistan via Turkey or Iran (mostly). From Tehran (Iran) they make the border crossing into Balochistan, (Pakistan) via Zahedan and then onto Quetta from where they enter Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa via Ghazni province of Afghanistan²¹ to give the impression that AQIS members are infiltrating into Pakistan from Afghanistan and not the other way around.

Conclusion

Even if the premise is accepted, that the Taliban have changed their antagonistic view of India to one of reconciliation and accommodation it still presents Indian policymakers with difficult options. The Taliban cannot sever ties with Al-Qaeda, which is a primary target for the U.S. in Afghanistan, without significant risks and difficulties.²² Therefore it is premature to assume that the Taliban will cut links with the ISI-backed groups just because India is willing to talk as Pakistan has provided the Taliban with sanctuary and support since its emergence in the 1990s.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ U.S. Department of State, Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America, 29 February 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp->

content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf, accessed on 11 July 2020.

² It is understood that doing so would be a major policy reversal for India regarding the Taliban which it still considers as a terrorist group with strong ties to Pakistan

³ Bill Roggio, "Taliban lauds Mullah Omar for defending Osama bin Laden after 9/11", FDD's Long War Journal, 24 April 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/04/taliban-lauds-mullah-omar-for-defending-osama-bin-laden-after-9-11.php>, accessed on 11 July 2020.

⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, Enhancing Stability and Security in Afghanistan, June 2020, pp. 28, https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jul/01/2002348001/-1/-1/1/ENHANCING_SECURITY_AND_STABILITY_IN_AFGHANISTAN.PDF, accessed on 15 July 2020.

⁵ UN Security Council, Eleventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2501 (2019) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan, 27 May 2020, pp. 11-13.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, Location and activities of the training centers affiliated with the Haqqani Network, Taliban, and Al-Qaeda in Northern Waziristan and future plans and activities of Sirajuddin ((Haqqani)), October 2004, <https://www.dia.mil/FOIA/FOIA-Electronic-Reading-Room/FOIA-Reading-Room-Other-Available-Records/FileId/155424/>, accessed on 11 July 2020.

⁸ *New York Times*, "17 Die in Kabul Bomb Attack", 8 October 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/09/world/asia/09afghan.html>, accessed on 11 July 2020.

⁹ *The Print*, "From Kashmir to Kabul — why Pakistan wants extradition of ISKP leader caught in Afghanistan", 13 April 2020, <https://theprint.in/opinion/from-kashmir-to-kabul-why-pakistan-wants-extradition-of-iskp-leader-caught-in-afghanistan/400779/>, accessed on 12 July 2020.

¹⁰ *Firstpost*, "Inside Al-Qaeda's Indian homecoming: New Delhi must prepare for Ayman al-Zawahiri's complex and dangerous war", 15 July 2019, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/inside-al-qaedas-indian-homecoming-new-delhi-must-prepare-for-ayman-al-zawahiris-complex-and-dangerous-war-6997861.html>, accessed on 11 July 2020.

¹¹ *The Hindu*, "New jihadist group claims responsibility for Pune attack", 16 February 2010, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/New-jihadist-group-claims-responsibility-for-Pune-attack/article16815090.ece>, accessed on 11 July 2020.

¹² N. 10.

¹³ N. 5.

¹⁴ Barbara Elias, "Know Thine Enemy: Why the Taliban Cannot Be Flipped", National Security Archive, 2 November 2009, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/news/20091102/index.htm>, accessed on 11 July 2020.

¹⁵ *The Hindu*, "LeT responsible for attack at Indian consulate in Herat: US", 17 December 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/world/LeT-responsible-for-attack-at-Indian-consulate-in-Herat-US/article11633067.ece>, accessed on 11 July 2020.

¹⁶ N. 5.

¹⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, Intelligence in Public Media: *The Exile: The Stunning Inside Story of Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda in Flight* by Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark (Bloomsbury, 2017), <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol-62-no-2/the-exile.html>, accessed on 11 July 2020.

¹⁸ Soufan Center, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: The Nucleus of Jihad in South Asia, January 2019, p. 14.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 14.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 30.

²¹ Ibid, p. 22.

²² N. 5.