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Afghanistan's Terrorist Resurgence: Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Beyond

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Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, and other members of this subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to speak about the terrorist groups based in Afghanistan and their continuing threat to U.S. national security.

More than 15 years after the U.S. military invaded Afghanistan to destroy al-Qaeda, the group maintains a persistent and significant presence in the country. Despite the Obama administration's surge of U.S. forces in Afghanistan from 2010 to 2012, the Taliban, which has maintained its close alliance with al-Qaeda, is resurgent and today holds more ground in the country since the U.S. ousted the jihadists in early 2002.

And the threat posed by jihadist groups in Afghanistan has expanded. The Islamic State has established a small, but significant, foothold in the country. Pakistani jihadist groups that are hostile to the U.S. – such as the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Harakat-ul-Muhajideen – operate bases inside Afghanistan as well.

U.S. Estimates on al-Qaeda in Afghanistan Were Incorrect

For nearly seven years, the Obama administration wrote off al-Qaeda as a spent force. The group has been described as “decimated.”¹ After Osama bin Laden was killed in Pakistan, President Obama said the “core of al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan is on a path to defeat.”² The Obama administration pushed this narrative hard, with many counterterrorism analysts adopting the line that al-Qaeda was either defeated or close to it.³

Between 2010 and 2016, Obama administration officials, including CIA Director Leon Panetta, as well as other U.S. military and intelligence officials, characterized al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan as minimal and consistently told the American public that the group has a presence of just 50 to 100 fighters. “I think at most, we're looking at maybe 50 to 100, maybe less. It's in that vicinity. There's no question that the main location of al-Qaeda is in tribal areas of Pakistan,” Panetta said on ABC News This Week.⁴

This assessment, which contradicted the U.S. military's own press releases announcing raids against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan,⁵ was consistently repeated by U.S. intelligence and military officials. In June 2015, the U.S. military claimed in its biannual Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan report that al-Qaeda “has a sustained presence in Afghanistan of probably fewer

¹ Joseph Straw, “Most of Al Qaeda's big names have been either captured or killed, but some remain,” *NY Daily News*, July 21, 2013. (<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/al-qaeda-decimated-not-obliterated-article-1.1405185>)

² Susan Crabtree, “FLASHBACK: Obama: Al Qaeda is on ‘a path to defeat’; calls for resetting terror policy,” *The Washington Times*, May 23, 2013. (<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/may/23/obama-al-qaeda-is-on-a-path-to-defeat/>)

³ For example: Peter Bergen, “Time to declare victory: al Qaeda is defeated,” *CNN's Security Clearance*, June 27, 2012. (<http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/06/27/time-to-declare-victory-al-qaeda-is-defeated-opinion/>)

⁴ Felicia Sonmez and Matt DeLong, “Panetta: 50-100 al-Qaeda remain in Afghanistan,” *The Washington Post*, June 27, 2010. (<http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2010/06/panetta-50-100-al-qaeda-remain.html?wprss=44>)

⁵ Bill Roggio and Patrick Megahan, “ISAF raids against al Qaeda and allies in Afghanistan 2007-2013,” *FDD's Long War Journal*, May 30, 2014. (http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/05/al_qaeda_and_allies.php)

than 100 operatives concentrated largely in Kunar and Nuristan Provinces, where they remain year-round.”⁶ The December 2015 report claimed that al-Qaeda is “primarily concentrated in the east and northeast.”⁷

This estimate of al-Qaeda’s strength, which consistently downplayed al-Qaeda’s presence in Afghanistan, came crashing down in mid-October 2015, when the U.S. military and Afghan forces orchestrated a large-scale operation against two al-Qaeda camps in the Shorabak district in the southern Afghan province of Kandahar.⁸

The scale of al-Qaeda’s presence at the two camps in Shorabak quickly disproved the longstanding 50 to 100 estimate. A U.S. military statement, quoting spokesman Brigadier General Wilson Shoffner, described the raid as “one of the largest joint ground-assault operations we have ever conducted in Afghanistan.”⁹ It took U.S. and Afghan forces more than four days to clear the two camps, with the aid of 63 airstrikes.

Shoffner’s description of the al-Qaeda facilities indicated that they had been built long ago. “The first site, a well-established training camp, spanned approximately one square mile. The second site covered nearly 30 square miles,” Shoffner said. “We struck a major al-Qaeda sanctuary in the center of the Taliban’s historic heartland,” he added.¹⁰

Weeks later, General John F. Campbell, then the commander of U.S. Forces - Afghanistan and NATO’s Resolute Support mission, described one of the camps, which was run by al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), al-Qaeda’s branch in South Asia, as “probably the largest training camp-type facility that we have seen in 14 years of war.”¹¹

It has been estimated that at least 150 al-Qaeda fighters were killed during the raids on the two camps in Shorabak. This is 50 more al-Qaeda fighters than the upper end of the Obama administration’s estimate of al-Qaeda’s strength throughout all of Afghanistan. And the al-Qaeda members were killed in southern Afghanistan, not in the northeastern provinces of Kunar and Nuristan, where we have been told they were concentrated.¹²

⁶ Department of Defense, “Report on Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan,” June 2015. (https://news.usni.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/June_1225_Report_Final1.pdf)

⁷ Department of Defense, “Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan,” December 2015. (https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/1225_Report_Dec_2015_-_Final_20151210.pdf)

⁸ Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, “US military strikes large al Qaeda training camps in southern Afghanistan,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, October 13, 2015. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/10/us-military-strikes-large-al-qaeda-training-camps-in-southern-afghanistan.php>)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Nick Paton Walsh, Jason Hanna, and Mark Morgenstein, “Al Qaeda sites in Afghanistan dismantled in joint operation, U.S. military says,” *CNN*, October 13, 2015. (<http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/13/asia/afghanistan-al-qaeda-us/index.html>)

¹¹ Dan Lamothe, “‘Probably the largest’ al-Qaeda training camp ever destroyed in Afghanistan,” *The Washington Post*, October 30, 2015. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/10/30/probably-the-largest-al-qaeda-training-camp-ever-destroyed-in-afghanistan/?utm_term=.ad1c23e34fd1)

¹² Bill Roggio, “US military insists al Qaeda is ‘concentrated’ in Afghan east and northeast,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, December 16, 2015. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/12/us-military-insists-al-qaeda-is-concentrated-in-afghan-east-and-northeast.php>)

The U.S. military was ultimately forced to concede its estimate of al-Qaeda's strength in Afghanistan was wrong. In mid-December 2016, General Nicholson admitted that the U.S. military killed or captured 50 al-Qaeda leaders and an additional 200 operatives during calendar year 2016 in Afghanistan.¹³

In April 2016, Major General Jeff Buchanan, Resolute Support's deputy chief of staff, told CNN that the 50 to 100 estimate was incorrect based on the results of the Shorabak raid. "If you go back to last year, there were a lot of intel estimates that said within Afghanistan al-Qaeda probably has 50 to 100 members, but in this one camp we found more than 150," he said. The estimate of al-Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan was revised upwards to about 300.¹⁴

However, well before the Shorabak raids, it was evident to those of us closely watching the war in Afghanistan that al-Qaeda was stronger in Afghanistan than the official estimates, and was not confined to small areas in the northeast. Al-Qaeda consistently reported on its operations throughout Afghanistan, and the U.S. military, up until the summer of 2013, reported on raids against al-Qaeda cells in multiple provinces.

Surely, there was something seriously wrong with the CIA and the U.S. military's ability to properly report on al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda's footprint inside Afghanistan remains a direct threat to U.S. national security and, with the resurgence of the Taliban, it is a threat that is only growing stronger.

The Enduring Taliban-al-Qaeda Relationship

Al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan has not occurred in a vacuum. It has maintained its strength in the country since the U.S. invasion, launched a new branch, AQIS, and established training camps with the help and support of the Taliban.

When Generals Campbell and Buchanan discussed al-Qaeda in the wake of the Shorabak raid, they described the group as resurgent. Campbell described the Taliban-al-Qaeda relationship as a "renewed partnership," while Buchanan said it "has since 'grown stronger.'"¹⁵

But like the estimate that al-Qaeda maintained a small cadre of 50 to 100 operatives in Afghanistan between 2010 and 2016, the idea that the Taliban and al-Qaeda have only recently reinvigorated their relationship is incorrect. Al-Qaeda would not have been able to maintain a large cadre of fighters and leaders inside Afghanistan, conduct operations in 25 of Afghanistan's

¹³ Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "US military: 250 al Qaeda operatives killed or captured in Afghanistan this year," *FDD's Long War Journal*, December 14, 2016. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/12/us-military-250-al-qaeda-operatives-killed-or-captured-in-afghanistan-this-year.php>)

¹⁴ Nick Patton Walsh, "Al Qaeda 'very active' in Afghanistan: U.S. Commander," *CNN*, April 13, 2016. (<http://www.cnn.com/2016/04/13/middleeast/afghanistan-al-qaeda/>)

¹⁵ Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "US military admits al Qaeda is stronger in Afghanistan than previously estimated," *FDD's Long War Journal*, April 13, 2016. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/04/us-military-admits-al-qaeda-is-stronger-in-afghanistan-than-previously-estimated.php>)

34 provinces, establish training camps, and relocate high-level leaders from Pakistan's tribal areas to Afghanistan without the Taliban's long-term support.

Al-Qaeda has remained loyal to the Taliban's leader, which it describes as the Amir al-Mumineen, or the "Commander of the Faithful," since the U.S. invaded Afghanistan in 2001. Osama bin Laden maintained his oath of allegiance to Mullah Omar, the Taliban's founder and first emir.¹⁶ When bin Laden died, Ayman al-Zawahiri renewed that oath.¹⁷ And when Mullah Omar's death was announced in 2015, Zawahiri swore *bayat* (an oath of allegiance) to Mullah Mansour, the Taliban's new leader.¹⁸ Mansour publicly accepted Zawahiri's oath.¹⁹

The close relationship between the two jihadist groups is also evident with the assent of the Taliban's new deputy emir, Sirajuddin Haqqani, who leads the powerful Taliban subgroup known as the Haqqani Network. Sirajuddin and the Haqqani Network have maintained close ties to al-Qaeda for years. The relationship is evident in the U.S. government's designations of multiple Haqqani Network leaders. Two documents seized from Osama bin Laden's compound show that Siraj has closely coordinated his operations with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan.²⁰

The Taliban-al-Qaeda relationship remains strong to this day. And with the Taliban gaining control of a significant percentage of Afghanistan's territory, al-Qaeda has more areas to plant its flag.²¹

Rise of the Islamic State

Shortly after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of the caliphate in 2014, announcing the formation of the Islamic State, a small number of disgruntled jihadists from the

¹⁶ Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Al Qaeda attempts to undermine new Islamic State with old video of Osama bin Laden," *FDD's Long War Journal*, July 14, 2014.

(http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/07/osama_bin_laden_disc.php#)

¹⁷ Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda renews its oath of allegiance to Taliban leader Mullah Omar," *FDD's Long War Journal*, July 21, 2014. (http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/07/al_qaeda_renews_its.php)

¹⁸ Thomas Joscelyn, "Ayman al Zawahiri pledges allegiance to the Taliban's new emir," *FDD's Long War Journal*, August 13, 2015. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/08/ayman-al-zawahiri-pledges-allegiance-to-the-talibans-new-emir.php>) (A translation of Zawahiri's statement was provided by the SITE Intelligence Group.)

¹⁹ Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "New Taliban emir accepts al Qaeda's oath of allegiance," *FDD's Long War Journal*, August 14, 2015. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/08/new-taliban-emir-accepts-al-qaedas-oath-of-allegiance.php>)

²⁰ Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "The Taliban's new leadership is allied with al Qaeda," *FDD's Long War Journal*, July 31, 2015. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/07/the-talibans-new-leadership-is-allied-with-al-qaeda.php>); Thomas Joscelyn, "Osama bin Laden's Files: The Pakistani government wanted to negotiate," *FDD's Long War Journal*, March 9, 2015. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/03/osama-bin-ladens-files-the-pakistani-government-wanted-to-negotiate.php>)

²¹ Bill Roggio, "Afghan Taliban lists 'Percent of Country under the control of Mujahideen,'" *FDD's Long War Journal*, March 28, 2017. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/afghan-taliban-lists-percent-of-country-under-the-control-of-mujahideen.php>)

Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, as well as al-Qaeda, discarded their oaths to the Taliban, pledged their fealty to Baghdadi, and established the so-called Khorasan province.²²

While the Islamic State dominates the jihad in Iraq and is a major player in Syria, the group has posed a smaller threat in Afghanistan and Pakistan when compared to the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and their jihadist allies. The U.S. military estimated the group had upwards of 2,000 fighters at the beginning of 2016, but had lost between 25 and 30 percent of its men in the months that followed.²³ While U.S. military estimates of the strength of jihadist groups in Afghanistan must be taken with a grain of salt, this number is likely in the right ballpark.

The Islamic State has a much smaller presence in Afghanistan when compared to the Taliban. While the Taliban controls or contests more than 200 of Afghanistan's 400 districts, the Islamic State only controls terrain in several districts in the eastern province of Nangarhar. The group also reportedly has a presence in the Afghan north.

The Islamic State's Khorasan province has remained entrenched in Nangarhar and has withstood multiple U.S.-backed offensives over the past two years. The U.S. military has had success in killing key leaders, but the group has proven resilient.

Still, the so-called caliphate's Khorasan province has remained on the margins of the Afghan war. It has conducted a limited number of suicide attacks and other operations in the Afghan capital of Kabul and elsewhere,²⁴ but has not come close to matching the Taliban's operational tempo.

Khorasan province has had a difficult time gaining traction throughout much of Afghanistan and Pakistan, as it is unwilling to cooperate with other, long-entrenched jihadist groups. In fact, the Taliban crushed the Khorasan province's forces in Helmand, Farah, and Zabul after they demanded that the Taliban's fighters swear allegiance to Baghdadi.

Pakistani Jihadist Groups Operating in Afghanistan

In addition to the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State, numerous Pakistan-based jihadist groups are known to operate in Afghanistan. For the most part, these organizations remain in the Taliban and al-Qaeda sphere, and leaders of the groups often backfill leadership positions when al-Qaeda commanders are killed in U.S. airstrikes.

²² Thomas Joscelyn, "Previously obscure al Qaeda leader responds to dissenters," *FDD's Long War Journal*, May 30, 2014. (http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/05/post_7-3.php); LWJ Staff, "Pakistani Taliban splinter group again pledges allegiance to Islamic State," *FDD's Long War Journal*, January 13, 2015. (http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/01/video_pakistani_tali_2.php)

²³ Thomas Joscelyn, "American soldier killed fighting Islamic State in Afghanistan," *FDD's Long War Journal*, April 8, 2017. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/04/american-soldier-killed-fighting-islamic-state-in-afghanistan.php>)

²⁴ For example: Bill Roggio, "Islamic State claims suicide attack outside Afghanistan's supreme court," *FDD's Long War Journal*, February 8, 2017. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/02/islamic-state-claims-suicide-attack-outside-afghanistans-supreme-court.php>)

The three largest Pakistani groups operating in Afghanistan are the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Harakat-ul-Mujahideen.

The Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan (TTP) is largely made up of Taliban groups from Pakistan's tribal areas. It is closely allied with the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda. In 2010, the TTP organized the Times Square bombing plot.²⁵

The TTP has taken advantage of the turbulent and ungoverned Afghan-Pakistani border to shift its base of operations when the Pakistani military targets it in offensives. The U.S. has killed several TTP leaders in airstrikes in Afghanistan.

Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) is a dangerous jihadist group that is backed by Pakistan's military and Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate. The LeT is known to operate training camps in Afghanistan and attacked the Indian Consulate in Herat in 2014.²⁶ The U.S. has killed several senior LeT operatives in airstrikes in northeastern Afghanistan over the years. The U.S. has also listed several senior LeT operatives, including Hafiz Saeed, the group's emir, as Specially Designated Global Terrorists.

Harakat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) is another Pakistani jihadist group that is known, as of August 2014, to operate training camps in Afghanistan.²⁷ HuM has been involved in numerous acts of terror in the region, including hijacking an Indian airplane, attacking the U.S. Consulate in Karachi, and murdering *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl.²⁸

²⁵ Anne E. Kornblut and Karin Brulliard, "U.S. blames Pakistani Taliban for Times Square bomb plot," *The Washington Post*, May 10, 2010. (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/09/AR2010050901143.html>)

²⁶ Bill Roggio, "LeT designation notes group's recent attack in western Afghanistan," *FDD's Long War Journal*, June 25, 2014. (http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/06/let_designation_notes_groups_r.php)

²⁷ Bill Roggio, "Harakat-ul-Mujahideen 'operates terrorist training camps in eastern Afghanistan,'" *FDD's Long War Journal*, August 8, 2014. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/08/harakat-ul-mujahidee.php>)

²⁸ Thomas Joscelyn, "New investigation into murder of Daniel Pearl released," *FDD's Long War Journal*, January 21, 2011. (http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/01/new_investigation_in.php)