

Senate Committee on Armed Services

To Receive Testimony on Afghanistan

THOMAS JOSCELYN

Senior Fellow

Foundation for Defense of Democracies

Senior Editor

FDD's Long War Journal

Washington, DC
September 30, 2021

Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Inhofe, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. My written testimony is focused on the terrorism threats emanating from Afghanistan and how to understand them.

Below, I first offer my general points. I then take a closer look at the Taliban and the so-called Haqqani Network, which is al-Qaeda's closest ally and an integral part of the Taliban. I look forward to answering your questions.

Al-Qaeda's senior leadership has praised the Taliban's "historic victory" in Afghanistan.¹ Indeed, the decades-long brotherhood between the Taliban and al-Qaeda remains unbroken. Al-Qaeda fought alongside the Taliban for nearly 20 years to defeat the U.S.-backed government. Al-Qaeda groups across Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia are trumpeting the Taliban's victory as a boon for the global jihadist cause. Al-Qaeda's branches, such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Shabaab in Somalia, and groups in Syria, view the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as a model for their own nascent jihadist states. In fact, key al-Qaeda leaders around the globe began their careers during the reign of the Taliban's first emirate. And al-Qaeda's global leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has an unbroken pledge of allegiance to the Taliban's "Emir of the Faithful," Haibatullah Akhundzada.

Al-Qaeda retained a significant footprint in Afghanistan throughout the war. At *FDD's Long War Journal*, my colleague Bill Roggio and I have documented this footprint for more than a dozen years. Other sources have recently recognized al-Qaeda's current network inside the country. For example, a team of experts working for the UN Security Council reported earlier this year that al-Qaeda has an active presence in at least 15 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.² This assessment is broadly consistent with al-Qaeda's own reporting, via its Arabic newsletter *Thabat*, as well as with reporting by other sources.³ The U.S. Treasury Department warned in January that al-Qaeda has been "gaining strength in Afghanistan while continuing to operate with the Taliban under the Taliban's protection." Al-Qaeda has a "network of mentors and advisers who are embedded with the Taliban, providing advice, guidance, and financial support."⁴ Much of al-Qaeda's focus inside Afghanistan has been on winning the war. Now that the war has been won, al-Qaeda's personnel in Afghanistan will have the resources to devote to other missions, both throughout the region and globally.

¹ Al-Qaeda's General Command, "Congratulations to the Islamic Ummah on the victory granted by Allah in Afghanistan!" *As Sahab*, August 31, 2021. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/21-08-31-Al-Qaeda-congratulates-Islamic-Ummah-on-Taliban-victory.jpg>)

² U.N. Security Council, "Twelfth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2557 (2020) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan," April 28, 2021, page 12. (<https://www.undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/S/2021/486>)

³ Bill Roggio, "Analysis: Al Qaeda continues to operate throughout Afghanistan," *FDD's Long War Journal*, April 8, 2021. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2021/04/analysis-al-qaeda-continues-to-operate-throughout-afghanistan.php>)

⁴ U.S. Department of the Treasury, Memorandum for Department of Defense Lead Inspector General, "Operation Inherent Resolve - Summary of Work Performed by the Department of the Treasury Related to Terrorist Financing, ISIS, and Anti-Money Laundering for First Quarter Fiscal Year 2021," January 4, 2021. (<https://oig.treasury.gov/sites/oig/files/2021-01/OIG-CA-21-012.pdf>)

The Islamic State’s Khorasan Province (ISKP, also known as ISIS-K) retains a presence in Afghanistan. Some argue that America should work with the Taliban against ISKP, because the latter remains opposed to the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and is a distinct threat. But the enemy of my enemy is sometimes just my enemy — not a friend. Baked into this argument is a fundamental misunderstanding of the Taliban and its unbroken, decades-long relationship with al-Qaeda. ISKP has battled not only the Taliban, but also al-Qaeda, which remains fundamentally hostile to the United States and its interests and allies.

ISKP continues to pose a threat throughout the region. ISKP’s network extends into Pakistan, where it has conducted a string of attacks. The group has also demonstrated some capability to strike in the Central Asian nations. In July 2018, a team of Islamic State terrorists ran over American and European cyclists in Tajikistan, killing four people.⁵ ISKP has also recruited members from throughout Central Asia who could potentially return to their home countries to conduct attacks.

ISKP poses some degree of threat outside of Central and South Asia as well. In the summer of 2016, three men allegedly conspired to carry out terrorist attacks in New York City on behalf of the Islamic State.⁶ American investigators discovered that the trio had at least some contact with ISKP’s jihadists. In April 2020, German authorities broke up a cell of four Tajik nationals who were allegedly preparing to attack U.S. and NATO military facilities.⁷ Given ISKP’s open hostility to the United States, as demonstrated by the August 26 suicide bombing outside the airport in Kabul, military and intelligence officials will have to continue monitoring the group.

The Taliban’s new regime is, in many ways, just its old regime. Many of the Taliban’s cabinet ministers are veterans of the Taliban’s first Islamic Emirate from 1996 through 2001.⁸ More than one dozen of them have already been sanctioned by the United Nations, including for their ties to terrorism. All five of the former Guantanamo detainees who were exchanged for Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl in 2014 now serve the Taliban in senior leadership roles. Four of the five are Taliban cabinet ministers, while the fifth is the governor of Khost province.

Over-the-horizon counterterrorism strikes will be difficult. U.S. officials cite “over-the-horizon” strikes in places such as Somalia, Syria, and Yemen as a model for Afghanistan. But those airstrikes are sporadic and have only a limited effect. It is true that some senior terrorist personnel have been killed in such airstrikes, but many remain in the fight. Afghanistan is also

⁵ Thomas Joscelyn, “Assailants in Tajikistan swore allegiance to Baghdadi before attack,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, July 31, 2018. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/07/assailants-in-tajikistan-swore-allegiance-to-baghdadi-before-attack.php>)

⁶ U.S. Department of Justice, Press Release, “Charges Unsealed Against Three Men for Plotting to Carry out Terrorist Attacks in New York City for ISIS in the Summer of 2016,” October 6, 2017. (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/charges-unsealed-against-three-men-plotting-carry-out-terrorist-attacks-new-york-city-isis>)

⁷ Nodirbek Soliev, “The April 2020 Islamic State Terror Plot Against U.S. and NATO Military Bases in Germany: The Tajik Connection,” *CTC Sentinel*, January 2021, Volume 14, Issue 1. (<https://ctc.usma.edu/the-april-2020-islamic-state-terror-plot-against-u-s-and-nato-military-bases-in-germany-the-tajik-connection>)

⁸ For brief profiles of 24 of the Taliban’s leaders, see: Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, “Taliban’s government includes designated terrorists, ex-Guantanamo detainees,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, September 8, 2021. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2021/09/talibans-government-includes-designated-terrorists-ex-guantanamo-detainees.php>)

different. It is a landlocked nation. The United States is reportedly still trying to secure basing rights in neighboring countries. Pakistan, which harbored the Taliban's senior leadership for the past 20 years, could reject American requests to use its airspace. Pakistani officials could also warn terrorists that airstrikes are incoming. The United States had significant blind spots even when thousands of troops were stationed inside the country. And as the August 29 drone strike in Kabul shows, the risks of errant strikes are real.

The Taliban is using the February 29, 2020, Doha Agreement to protect terrorists. After the Department of Defense implied that members of the al-Qaeda-allied Haqqani Network could be targeted in the future, the Taliban responded by arguing that this would be a "violation" of the Doha accord.⁹ Thus, it is problematic for the U.S. government to argue that the agreement is still binding. The Taliban is using it to impede America's ability to defend itself, while the Taliban itself has not complied with any of the supposed counterterrorism assurances within it. Part of my written testimony below is devoted to providing an outline of the close working relationship between the Haqqanis and al-Qaeda.

The United States needs to finally reassess its relationship with Pakistan. During the first years of the war, the Pakistani government did provide counterterrorism assistance to the United States by helping to track down some al-Qaeda members on Pakistani soil. And Pakistan allowed the United States to use its airspace for the mission in Afghanistan. Overall, however, Pakistan provided key assistance to the Taliban in its war against the government in Kabul and helped the jihadists win the war against the United States. The Taliban's sanctuaries inside Pakistan proved to be invaluable, as the group's key leaders, allied with al-Qaeda, were often allowed to operate with impunity. The Pakistani military and intelligence establishment sits on what I call a "wheel of jihad" — it has sponsored and sheltered the Afghan Taliban, including the Haqqani Network, which is closely allied with al-Qaeda and Tehrik e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The TTP, in turn, threatens parts of the Pakistani state. No leader in Pakistan has broken this wheel, which will continue to cause problems for Pakistanis for years to come. In fact, leading Pakistani jihadists are emboldened by the Taliban's victory and undoubtedly want to impose a similar regime inside Pakistan itself.

Below, I take a closer look at the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and al-Qaeda.

The Taliban still blames America for the 9/11 hijackings.

Earlier this month, just two weeks after the jihadists completed their conquest of Afghanistan, the Taliban aired a conspicuous video on Afghan national television. The video, titled "Victorious Force 3," celebrated the Taliban's victory, while also praising the group's suicide operatives for their role in deposing the U.S.-backed government in Kabul.¹⁰

Most importantly, the video's editors taunted America, saying the 9/11 hijackings were well-deserved. The 9/11 "attacks were the result of the United States' policy of aggression against the

⁹ The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, "Latest US position regarding blacklist is a violation of Doha Agreement," September 9, 2021. (<https://justpaste.it/8b8fb>)

¹⁰ The video can be viewed on the Twitter feed for Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA). See: <https://twitter.com/rtapashto/status/1433360435835723776>

Muslim world,” the narrator of “Victorious Force 3” said. Reenactments and archival footage of the 9/11 hijackings were shown on screen as the narrator faults America and the West for al-Qaeda’s deadliest day. The Taliban’s narrator described the United States as the true “terrorist” state and blamed America for the war, arguing that the West’s real goal was to deprive Afghans of an “Islamic system.”¹¹

In another video, posted online in July 2019, the Taliban crowed that the 9/11 hijackings were a “heavy slap on their [i.e., the Americans’] dark faces,” adding it “was the consequence of their interventionist policies and not our doing.”¹²

This has been the Taliban’s theme for the past 20 years. The Taliban has never accepted responsibility for harboring Osama bin Laden and working with al-Qaeda prior to 9/11. Instead, the group has always denied any wrong-doing and blamed America.

Mullah Omar, the Taliban’s first “Emir of the “Faithful,” blamed American “policy” for the 9/11 attacks in an interview with *Voice of America* (VOA) in late September 2001. “America has created the evil that is attacking it,” Omar said, adding that this “evil will not disappear even if I die and Osama [bin Laden] dies and others die.” Omar parroted al-Qaeda’s conspiratorial talking points, claiming that “America controls the governments of the Islamic countries,”¹³ referring to U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia.

Some have claimed that the Taliban’s spokesmen made a legitimate offer to try bin Laden in late 2001. This is rubbish. Mullah Omar, the actual decision maker, steadfastly refused to turn bin Laden over. Omar would not even assign al-Qaeda any share of the blame for the deadliest terrorist attack in history. The idea that the Taliban would have arranged a trial for bin Laden in a third country is ludicrous on its face.

Twenty years later, the Taliban’s spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, still claims there is “no proof” that bin Laden was involved in 9/11.¹⁴ Mujahid makes this claim even though, contrary to what conspiracy theorists want to believe, there is no real dispute over al-Qaeda’s culpability. Osama bin Laden’s and Ayman al-Zawahiri’s men have repeatedly documented their responsibility.

After the jihadists’ victory in mid-August, both the Taliban and al-Qaeda celebrated Mullah Omar’s obstinance, praising him for refusing to give in to American pressure. In fact, between 1996 and the summer of 2001, the Taliban refused more than 30 U.S. demands to turn bin Laden over.¹⁵ The Taliban also rejected ultimatums issued by the United Nations prior to 9/11. For

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, “Taliban justifies 9/11 attack, blaming America’s ‘interventionist policies,’” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, July 23, 2019. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/07/taliban-justifies-9-11-attack-blaming-americas-interventionist-policies.php>)

¹³ A transcript of the VOA interview can be found at: “Mullah Omar - in his own words,” *The Guardian* (UK), September 26, 2001. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/26/afghanistan.features11>)

¹⁴ Rachel Pannett, “Taliban spokesman says ‘no proof’ bin Laden was responsible for 9/11 attacks,” *The Washington Post*, August 26, 2021. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/26/taliban-bin-laden>)

¹⁵ “Taliban File Update: U.S. Pressed Taliban to Expel Usama bin Laden Over 30 Times, Only Three Approaches in First Year of Bush Administration,” *George Washington University’s National Security Archive*, January 30, 2004. (<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB97/index3.htm>)

instance, after the August 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, the United Nations threatened to sanction the Taliban if it didn't hand over bin Laden. Hassan Akhund, who was then the Taliban's foreign minister, dismissed the UN demand. "We will never give up Osama at any price," Akhund said.¹⁶

Today, Akhund has been named as the Taliban's "head of state," or "prime minister."¹⁷

In his late September 2001 VOA interview, Mullah Omar once again refused to betray bin Laden. Asked if he would "expel" the al-Qaeda founder, Omar replied: "This is not an issue of Osama bin Laden. It is an issue of Islam. Islam's prestige is at stake. So is Afghanistan's tradition." When pressed on the matter by the interviewer, who wanted to know if the Taliban could be convinced to give bin Laden up, Omar replied:

No. We cannot do that. If we did, it means we are not Muslims... that Islam is finished. If we were afraid of attack, we could have surrendered him the last time we were threatened and attacked. So America can hit us again, and this time we don't even have a friend.¹⁸

Mullah Omar also vowed to fight on, famously declaring that he was "considering two promises." Omar explained:

One is the promise of God, the other is that of [President George W.] Bush. The promise of God is that my land is vast. If you start a journey on God's path, you can reside anywhere on this earth and will be protected... The promise of Bush is that there is no place on earth where you can hide that I cannot find you. We will see which one of these two promises is fulfilled.¹⁹

Today, the Taliban and al-Qaeda both argue that the promise of Allah has been "fulfilled" with the resurrection of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. In recent weeks, the jihadists have posted a side-by-side image of President Bush and Mullah Omar, claiming that the latter was the true victor.

Mullah Omar remained defiant in the weeks and months following his VOA interview. "Every Muslim having a strong faith should resolutely act against the egoistic power [America]," Omar said in mid-October 2001. "They should extend any help and support they can to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan."²⁰ During America's intense bombardment, Omar vowed to fight on. "I order you to completely obey your commanders," Omar instructed his fighters in mid-November

¹⁶ "Taliban Rejects U.N. Demand, Won't Surrender Bin Laden 'at Any Price,'" *Los Angeles Times*, October 17, 1999. (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1999-oct-17-mn-23280-story.html>)

¹⁷ TOLONews, "Taliban announces Head of State, Acting Ministers," September 7, 2021. (<https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-174556>)

¹⁸ "Mullah Omar - in his own words," *The Guardian* (UK), September 26, 2001.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "U.S. pounds Taliban; Mullah calls for Muslim help," *Reuters*, October 10, 2001. (<https://badgerherald.com/news/2001/10/10/us-pounds-taliban-mu>)

2001, warning that anyone who deserts “is like a slaughtered chicken which falls and dies.” The Taliban emir added: “You should regroup yourselves, resist and fight.”²¹

During an interview aired by BBC World Service radio on November 15, 2001, Omar threatened the United States, claiming that the “current situation in Afghanistan is related to a bigger cause — that is the destruction of America.” Omar rejected the notion that his Taliban would join a new Afghan government. “The struggle for a broad-based government has been going on for the last 20 years, but nothing came of it,” Omar said. He added: “We will not accept a government of wrong-doers. We prefer death than to be a part of an evil government.”²² Omar remained defiant. “Stick to your positions and fight to the death,” Mullah Omar radioed to his fighters on Nov. 28, 2001. The Taliban founder blustered: “We are ready to face these Americans. We are happy that they have landed here and we will teach them a lesson.”²³

In the spring of 2002, several months after his regime was toppled, Mullah Omar boasted that bin Laden was still alive, and promised to continue the Taliban’s jihad. “Sheikh Osama is still alive, praise God, and this is causing anguish to Bush who promised his people to kill Osama, not knowing that lives are in the hands of God,” Omar said in an interview published in May 2002. Omar added: “We don’t consider the battle ended in Afghanistan... [T]he battle has begun and its fires are picking up. These fires will reach the White House, because it is the center of injustice and tyranny for its war on Islam.”²⁴

Some may argue that this is ancient history, but I disagree. Omar’s defiance is being celebrated throughout Afghanistan today. The Taliban has never renounced al-Qaeda. The Taliban’s spokesmen continue to lie about al-Qaeda, claiming that the group does not even exist inside Afghanistan. And no one should trust any of the Taliban’s supposed counterterrorism assurances.

The Haqqani Network is an integral part of the Taliban and closely allied with al-Qaeda.

Throughout much of the war, the United States targeted members of the so-called Haqqani Network. Yet some misconceptions about the Haqqanis linger. For example, some U.S. officials have suggested that the Haqqani Network is really an independent entity and not truly a part of the Taliban. That is false. The Haqqanis are an integral part of the Taliban, holding key positions throughout the group’s hierarchy and running the Taliban’s most lethal special forces. Indeed, the “Haqqani Network,” a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization, is partly an American construct. This concept obscured the U.S. government’s understanding of how the Taliban is really organized.

²¹ “Taliban leader urges fighters to regroup,” *CNN*, November 14, 2001.

(<http://edition.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/central/11/14/ret.taliban.broadcast>)

²² “Text of BBC World Service Interview With Taliban Leader,” *Agence France-Presse*, November 15, 2001.

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/15/international/text-of-bbc-world-service-interview-with-taliban-leader.html>)

²³ “Taliban urged to fight on,” *CNN*, November 28, 2001.

(<https://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/central/11/28/ret.afghan.omar/index.html>)

²⁴ Jeevan Vasagar, “Mullah Omar says Bin Laden is alive, according to newspaper,” *The Guardian* (UK), May 17, 2002. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/may/18/afghanistan.jeevanvasagar>)

The patriarch of the Haqqani family, Jalaluddin, was Osama bin Laden's most important benefactor and ally. According to bin Laden's bodyguard, Jalaluddin helped bin Laden escape in late 2001. The first generation of al-Qaeda's leadership was incubated in Jalaluddin's camps in eastern Afghanistan. During the 1980s, Jalaluddin worked with the CIA against the Soviets, becoming one of the most effective so-called mujahideen commanders.

After the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, Jalaluddin vowed to wage "a never-ending war to free Afghanistan again from invaders," saying his men were prepared to conduct "a long guerrilla war to reclaim our pure land from infidels and free our country again like we did against the Soviets."²⁵

Jalaluddin, who was the top Taliban military commander in late 2001, steadfastly refused to break with bin Laden and al-Qaeda. "We don't think in terms of nationalities like Arab, Indian or Pakistani," Jalaluddin said in a response to a question about al-Qaeda. He elaborated: "All with us are Afghans. Whoever migrates to Afghanistan in the name of Islam, we consider them Afghans be they from Saudi Arabia, Britain, Chechnya, Pakistan, India or any other country of the world. And yes, we are all fighting this war together." "We are all fighting together," Jalaluddin stressed, adding that bin Laden was free to come or go from Afghanistan as he wished, and that no one was forcing the al-Qaeda founder out.²⁶

Jalaluddin Haqqani outright rejected any new government in Afghanistan. "No one from the Taliban will be part of such an unacceptable government, which will be filled with American, Russian and Indian stooges," Jalaluddin said. Press reporting noted that he spoke these words from "a house in Islamabad belonging to Pakistan's military intelligence agency."²⁷

The Taliban announced Jalaluddin's death in 2018, and he has been eulogized by al-Qaeda's overall leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Before I examine the current role played by his family members, I want to look briefly at the Darul Uloom Haqqania seminary in Pakistan. Jalaluddin took this religious institute's name as his own.

Samiul-Haq, the longtime chancellor of Darul Uloom Haqqania, was killed in a knife attack in 2018. Both the Taliban and the Pakistani military mourned him.²⁸ By the time of Haq's death, it is likely that tens of thousands of students had passed through Haqqania's doors. Haq has been nicknamed the "Father of the Taliban," and his influence on the organization cannot be overstated.²⁹

²⁵ Aslam Khan, "Taliban leader warns of long guerrilla war," *Gulf News* (UAE), October 21, 2001. (<https://gulfnews.com/uae/taliban-leader-warns-of-long-guerrilla-war-1.427860>)

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ John F. Burns, "A Nation Challenged: The Aftermath; Taliban Army Chief Scoffs At Report of Peace Talks," *The New York Times*, October 21, 2001. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/21/world/nation-challenged-aftermath-taliban-army-chief-scoffs-report-peace-talks.html>)

²⁸ Thomas Joscelyn, "Taliban, Pakistani military mourn death of extremist cleric," *FDD's Long War Journal*, November 3, 2018. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/11/taliban-pakistani-military-mourn-death-of-extremist-cleric.php>)

²⁹ Maria Golovnina and Sheree Sardar, "Pakistani 'Father of Taliban' keeps watch over loyal disciples," *Reuters*, September 15, 2013. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/pakistan-taliban/pakistani-father-of-taliban-keeps-watch-over-loyal-disciples-idINDEE98E03320130915>)

Haq never hid his admiration for bin Laden and al-Qaeda. In 1998, Haq hung a poster from the “Crush America Forum” in his office. The poster held up bin Laden as a hero, warning that “any action against him will be considered an action against the whole Muslim world.” “Each and every person in this institution wants to be like Osama bin Laden,” Haq explained.³⁰

Multiple leaders in the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate are graduates of Haqqania, and some of al-Qaeda’s leaders have been educated there as well. Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban’s longtime spokesman, recently explained that he is “a native of Paktia Province,” a Haqqani stronghold, as well as a “graduate in Islamic jurisprudence from the well-known Darul Uloom Haqqania madrasa in Pakistan.”³¹ Asim Umar, the first emir of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), was reportedly educated at Haqqania.³² Umar was killed during a September 2019 counterterrorism raid in Musa Qala, Helmand, a Taliban stronghold.

Active members of the so-called Haqqani Network

Sirajuddin Haqqani has been appointed as the Taliban’s interior minister, a position that will presumably grant him the power to oversee the regime’s security and police forces. Sirajuddin has been the Taliban’s deputy emir since 2015, meaning he has been one of the top two or three leaders within the organization for the past six-plus years. Sirajuddin’s close working relationship with al-Qaeda is well-known. Both the United States and United Nations have designated him as a terrorist, in part because of his bond with al-Qaeda.³³ The State Department has also offered a reward of up to \$10 million for information on Sirajuddin’s whereabouts, noting that his network is “allied with” al-Qaeda.³⁴

In the spring of 2010, Sirajuddin gave an interview in which he explained that he was a member of the Taliban’s shura council. The interviewer asked Sirajuddin about the “mujahideen who emigrate to the land of the Khorasan,” meaning foreign fighters in Afghanistan, and whether they “form any obstacle or burden on the Afghan people.” Sirajuddin responded that the foreign mujahideen “enlighten the road for us and they resist against the cross worshippers by

³⁰ Andrew Maykuth, “Islamic Seminary Has Strong Ties to Bin Laden,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 30, 1998.

³¹ Matthieu Aikins and Jim Huylebroek, “The Taliban wants to forget the past, a leader tells The Times, but there will be some restrictions,” *The New York Times*, August 25, 2021.

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/25/world/asia/taliban-spokesman-interview.html>)

³² Asim Tanveer and Maria Golovkina, “Al Qaeda’s shadowy new ‘emir’ in South Asia handed tough job,” *Reuters*, September 9, 2014. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southasia-alqaeda-insight/al-qaedas-shadowy-new-emir-in-south-asia-handed-tough-job-idUSKBN0H42DN20140909>)

³³ The United Nations reported that Sirajuddin “is one of the most prominent, influential, charismatic and experienced leaders within the Haqqani Network ... a group of fighters with a close association with both the Taliban and Al-Qaida.” The United Nations added that Sirajuddin “derives much of his power and authority from his father, Jalaluddin Haqqani,” who “established very close links with Al-Qaida.” See: UN Security Council, “Sirajuddin Jallaloudine Haqqani,” September 13, 2007.

(<https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1988/materials/summaries/individual/sirajuddin-jallaloudine-haqqani>)

³⁴ U.S. Department of State, Rewards for Justice, “Sirajuddin Haqqani,” accessed September 28, 2021.

(https://rewardsforjustice.net/english/sirajuddin_haqqani.html)

cooperating with us and us with them in one trench.” Sirajuddin also stressed that cooperation between the foreign fighters and the Taliban “is at the highest limits.”³⁵

Files recovered in Osama bin Laden’s compound show that Sirajuddin Haqqani was indeed cooperating with the foreign mujahideen “at the highest” levels when spoke those words. And he clearly meant bin Laden’s lieutenants. In fact, the Abbottabad files show Sirajuddin worked closely with al-Qaeda to carry out attacks against the United States and its partners inside Afghanistan. For example, one memo sent to bin Laden in June 2010 summarized some of the “special operations” al-Qaeda was conducting inside Afghanistan at the time.³⁶ Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, the author of the memo, explained that bin Laden’s men “cooperated with Siraj Haqqani and another commander” to plan and carry out the May 19, 2010, suicide assault on Bagram Air Base. In that same memorandum, Atiyah explained that al-Qaeda had “very strong military activity” across at least eight Afghan provinces and had fielded “the same” fighting groups “every season for many years now.”³⁷ At the time, the U.S. government was downplaying the extent of al-Qaeda’s footprint inside Afghanistan. But Atiyah’s memo, as well as other evidence, showed that America’s assessment was deeply flawed.

In another memo, written in July 2010, Atiyah explained how al-Qaeda was working with Sirajuddin Haqqani and other jihadists to coerce the Pakistani government into a ceasefire at the time. Under pressure from the U.S. government, the Pakistani military had launched operations in northern Pakistan that threatened the Haqqanis’ strongholds, where al-Qaeda was also sheltering. Atiyah wrote to bin Laden:

We let slip (through Siraj Haqqani, with the help of the brothers in Mas’ud and others; through their communications) information indicating that al-Qaeda and Tehrik e-Taliban [Pakistan] have big, earth shaking operations in Pakistan, but that their leaders had halted those operations in an attempt to calm things down and relieve the American pressure.³⁸

Not long after, bin Laden replied that he approved of truce talks between al-Qaeda, the Haqqanis, and Tehrik e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) on one side and the Pakistani government on the other. “In

³⁵ Bill Roggio, “Taliban cooperation with al Qaeda ‘is at the highest limits,’” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, April 15, 2010. (https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/04/taliban_cooperation.php)

³⁶ Memo from Atiyah Abd al-Rahman to Abu Abdallah (Osama bin Laden), dated June 19, 2010. The U.S. government’s translation of the memo can be found at: <https://www.longwarjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/EXHIBIT-421-ENG-TRANS-EX-420-76C5764D-1.pdf>

³⁷ For more, see: Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, “Osama bin Laden’s Files: ‘Very Strong Military Activity in Afghanistan,’” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, February 27, 2015. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/02/osama-bin-ladens-files-very-strong-military-activity-in-afghanistan.php>)

³⁸ Memo from Atiyah Abd al-Rahman to Abu Abdallah (Osama bin Laden), dated July 17, 2010. The U.S. government’s translation of the memo can be found at: <https://www.longwarjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/EXHIBIT-423-ENG-TRANS-EX-422-56202CC8-.pdf>. For more on the contents of this memo, see: Thomas Joscelyn, “Osama bin Laden’s Files: The Pakistani government wanted to negotiate,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, March 9, 2015. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/03/osama-bin-ladens-files-the-pakistani-government-wanted-to-negotiate.php>)

regards to the truce with the Pakistani government,” bin Laden wrote to Atiyah, “continuing the negotiations in the way you described is in the interest of the Mujahideen at this time.”³⁹

The TTP, which is discussed in the memos to bin Laden, is an al-Qaeda-affiliated group. The TTP is also closely allied with the Haqqanis and continues to threaten parts of the Pakistani state. The TTP has expressed its reverence for Sirajuddin Haqqani in its media, while also eulogizing his father, Jalaluddin.

In 2011, according to an account published by *Newsweek*, the Haqqanis distributed 10,000 copies of a 144-page book by Sirajuddin in which he justifies suicide bombings and encourages aspiring jihadists to mimic al-Qaeda’s ways. Sirajuddin praised al-Qaeda because it “terrifies” its foes, arguing that those drawn to al-Qaeda’s cause should “stay and live among people who are against our faith and ideology, like those militants operating in Europe and the U.S.” Aspiring terrorists in the West should “[b]lend in, shave, wear Western dress, be patient.” The book offers travel advice for would-be terrorists and also endorses attacks on civilian targets. “You should attack the enemy’s weaker points, such as economic targets like the World Trade Center and diplomatic targets like the U.S. embassies in Africa,” Sirajuddin reportedly wrote.⁴⁰

Naturally, Sirajuddin’s men have also been some of al-Qaeda’s closest comrades. After Sirajuddin was appointed as the Taliban’s interior minister in August, *The Wall Street Journal* cited “U.S. intelligence” sources who said he “had close relations with a prominent al Qaeda commander, Abdul Rauf Zakir, who was responsible for protecting Osama bin Laden’s son Hamza.”⁴¹ Abdul Rauf Zakir, also known by the honorific Qari Zakir, was the chief of the Haqqani Network’s suicide operations.⁴² Indeed, when the State Department designated Zakir as a terrorist in 2012, it noted that he was a “trusted associate and confidant of Sirajuddin” Haqqani and had helped the Haqqani Network expand its operations into northern Afghanistan.⁴³ It appears that Qari Zakir was killed alongside Osama bin Laden’s son Hamza in a U.S. strike, though the government has never confirmed the precise details of how either man was killed.

Regardless, let this basic fact sink in: Sirajuddin Haqqani’s right-hand man protected Hamza bin Laden, just as Sirajuddin’s father protected Osama bin Laden himself.

One of the billboards erected by the Taliban after it took control of Afghanistan in mid-August shows Sangeen Zadran alongside Bowe Bergdahl, the former American soldier who was held by the Haqqanis. The billboard was raised in Khost province, a longtime Haqqani stronghold.

³⁹ Memo from “Zamuray” (Osama bin Laden) to “Sheikh Mahmud” (Atiyah Abd al-Rahman), dated August 7, 2010. The U.S. government’s translation of the memo can be found at: <https://www.longwarjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/EXHIBIT-425-ENG-TRANS-EX-424-AC52C7B7-.pdf>

⁴⁰ Ron Moreau, “Afghanistan: Haqqani’s Jihad Manual & the Secret Taliban Letter,” *Newsweek*, November 14, 2011. (<https://www.newsweek.com/afghanistan-haqqanis-jihad-manual-secret-taliban-letter-66379>)

⁴¹ Sune Engel Rasmussen and Nancy A. Youssef, “In Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan, Al Qaeda-Linked Haqqani Network Rises to Power,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 2021. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-taliban-ruled-afghanistan-al-qaeda-linked-haqqani-network-rises-to-power-11629990056>)

⁴² Bill Roggio, “US adds Haqqani Network suicide operations chief to list of global terrorists,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, November 5, 2012. (https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/11/us_adds_haqqani_netw_2.php)

⁴³ U.S. Department of State, Media Note, “Designation of Haqqani Network Chief of Suicide Operations Qari Zakir,” November 5, 2012. (<https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/11/200165.htm>)

Zadran, a senior aid to Sirajuddin Haqqani, was designated as a terrorist by the U.S. State Department in 2011. State reported that Zadran was “believed to have planned and coordinated the movement of hundreds of foreign fighters into Afghanistan,” including al-Qaeda members.⁴⁴ Zadran was a high priority target for the U.S. intelligence community and military, as he served as the Taliban’s military commander and then as the group’s shadow governor for Afghanistan’s Paktika province, another Haqqani stronghold. Zadran was killed in a drone strike in North Waziristan on September 5, 2013.

While serving under Sirajuddin, Sangeen Zadran was proudly one of al-Qaeda’s “brothers.” In September 2009, al-Qaeda’s central media arm, As Sahab, released an interview with Sangeen. When asked about his relationship with al-Qaeda, Sangeen responded:

All praise is for Allah, Al-Qaeda and Taliban all are Muslims and we are united by the brotherhood of Islam. We do not see any difference between Taliban and Al-Qaeda, for we all belong to the religion of Islam. Sheikh Usama has pledged allegiance to Amir Al-Mumineen (Mulla Muhammad Umar) and has reassured his leadership again and again. There is no difference between us, for we are united by Islam and the Sharia governs us.⁴⁵

Khalil Haqqani is one of Jalaluddin’s brothers and one of Sirajuddin’s uncles. Khalil has been named the Taliban’s minister of refugees, a position that may give him the power to protect al-Qaeda figures, as some are likely considered “refugees” in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Khalil’s relationship with al-Qaeda has long been known. The U.S. Treasury Department designated Khalil Haqqani as a terrorist in 2011, describing him as “among the Haqqani Network’s most important figures and fundraisers.” Treasury reported that in addition to fundraising for the Taliban, overseeing “the detention of enemy prisoners,” and taking operational orders from his nephew (Sirajuddin), Khalil worked with al-Qaeda. Khalil has “acted on behalf of al-Qaeda and has been linked to al-Qaeda military operations.” Khalil supported al-Qaeda at crucial moments in the group’s history. In 2002, when the United States was hunting al-Qaeda fighters in eastern Afghanistan, Khalil deployed “men to reinforce al-Qaeda elements in Paktia Province, Afghanistan.” As of 2011, Khalil had raised funds in China, Dubai, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, according to Treasury.⁴⁶

Ibrahim Haqqani is another brother of Jalaluddin and uncle of Sirajuddin. Ibrahim has made prominent appearances in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. It appears that he has played a diplomatic role of sorts, meeting with former Afghan President Hamid Karzai and possibly other former Afghan officials as well. A memorandum recovered in Osama bin Laden’s compound shows that Ibrahim and other members of the so-called Haqqani Network acted as “guarantors”

⁴⁴ Bill Roggio, “US State Department adds Mullah Sangeen to terrorist list,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, August 16, 2011. (https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/08/us_state_department_1.php)

⁴⁵ Bill Roggio, “An interview with Mullah Sangeen,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, September 17, 2009. (https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/09/an_interview_with_mullah_sange.php)

⁴⁶ U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, “Treasury Targets the Financial And Support Networks of Al Qaeda and the Taliban, Haqqani Network Leadership,” February 9, 2011. (<https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1055.aspx>). Another jihadist, Said Jan ‘Abd al-Salam, was designated alongside Khalil Haqqani. Treasury reported that ‘Abd Al-Salam served as the “primary assistant” to an al-Qaeda commander and also worked with the Taliban.

for a ransom payment made by the Afghan government to al-Qaeda.⁴⁷ The \$5 million ransom was paid to secure the release of an Afghan ambassador held by bin Laden's men.⁴⁸

Yahya Haqqani is Sirajuddin's brother-in-law and a U.S.-designated terrorist. The U.S. Treasury Department has explained that Yahya is so senior within the Haqqani Network that he has "acted as de facto head of the group when" other senior leaders, such as Sirajuddin and Khalil, are "absent." Yahya has been "closely involved" in the Haqqani Network's "military, financial, and propaganda activities," often working with Sirajuddin. Like his brother-in-law, Yahya works with al-Qaeda. Treasury explained that Yahya "sometimes serves as a liaison between the" Haqqani Network and al-Qaeda and "has maintained ties with [al-Qaeda] since at least mid-2009." Yahya has "provided money to [al-Qaeda] members in the region for their personal expenses" and "acted as the [Haqqani Network's] primary liaison with foreign fighters, including Arabs, Uzbeks, and Chechens."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Memo from Atiyah Abd al-Rahman ("Sheikh Mahmud") to Osama bin Laden ("Abu Abdallah"), dated November 23, 2010. The U.S. government's translation of the memo can be found at: <https://www.longwarjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/EXHIBIT-429-ENG-TRANS-EX-428-4AA63D2B-.pdf>.

⁴⁸ For more on the ransom payment, see: Matthew Rosenberg, "C.I.A. Cash Ended Up in Coffers of Al Qaeda," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2015. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/15/world/asia/cia-funds-found-their-way-into-al-qaeda-coffers.html>)

⁴⁹ U.S. Department of the Treasury Press Center, "Treasury Department Targets Key Haqqani Network Leaders." February 5, 2014. (<https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2284.aspx>)