



ANALYZING THE PANDEMONIUM IN KABUL

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



A wave of terrorist attacks has hit the Afghan capital, Kabul, in which hundreds have been killed and many more critically injured. The attacks and escalating violence once again highlight the growing strength and capability of the Taliban's insurgency and the urgent need to put an end to the bloody war through a negotiated settlement.

On January 29, 2018, a fourth major attack was witnessed in Kabul when the Daesh/Islamic State (IS) targeted a military post near the Marshal Fahim military academy, in which 11 soldiers were killed and 6 injured.¹ Prior to this, on January 27, 2018, more than 100 people lost their lives and more than 235 were wounded, in what is being termed as the worst attack in Kabul since the truck bomb explosion near the German embassy that killed 150 people in May 2017. The attack took place when an ambulance laden with explosives managed to drive past a police checkpoint in an allegedly highly secure zone which is home to government offices, foreign embassies (including the office of the European Union), a hospital and a shopping zone known as Chicken Street.²

Claiming responsibility for the attack, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid stated that, "The Islamic Emirate has a clear message for Trump and his hand kissers that if you go ahead with a policy

¹ Martin Farrer and agencies, "Afghanistan: gunmen attack army post at Kabul military academy," *The Guardian*, January 29, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/29/explosions-kabul-military-academy-afghanistan>

² Mujib Mashal and Jawad Sukhanyar, " 'It's a Massacre': Blast in Kabul Deepens Toll of a Long War," *New York Times*, January 27, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/27/world/asia/afghanistan-kabul-attack.html>

of aggression and speak from the barrel of a gun, don't expect Afghans to grow flowers in response."³

Prior to this incident, an attack by the Islamic State on the office of Save the Children in Jalalabad on January 24, 2018 took another six lives,⁴ four days before which 30 people including 14 foreigners lost their lives when the Taliban attacked the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul on January 20, 2018. Although the Afghan Taliban claimed responsibility, the Afghan government blamed the Haqqani network for the bloodshed. Interestingly, while US condemned the attack, at the same time, the US State Department stated that, "there is no proof that the Taliban were behind the attack."⁵

The Haqqani network, which was founded by Jalaluddin Haqqani, an Afghan warlord, and now is being run by his son Sirajuddin Haqqani, is considered to be amongst the deadliest and most formidable insurgent groups in Afghanistan. The group has been widely accused by both the Afghan and US governments for the spiking violence, as well as some of the deadliest attacks in Afghanistan including attacks on embassies in Kabul, the Afghan parliament building, US military bases, as well as the most recent attacks in January 2018. For quite some time, US has been putting pressure on Pakistan (which it accuses of supporting and providing safe havens for the group) to take action against the network which it believes operates along the Pakistan-Afghan border.

The Haqqani network has been a bone of contention between Pakistan, US, and Afghanistan. In September 2011, Admiral Michael Mullen, then chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, alleged that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) played a direct role in supporting the group, which he believed was a veritable arm of the ISI.⁶ The following year, in September 2012, the US declared the Haqqani network a foreign terrorist organization, and by November, the group was blacklisted by the United Nations Security Council and sanctions were imposed on its leadership.⁷

³ Mirwais Harooni and Hamid Shalizi, "Eleven Afghan soldiers killed in latest attack in Kabul," *Reuters*, January 29, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-blast/eleven-afghan-soldiers-killed-in-latest-attack-in-kabul-idUSKBN1FI07M>

⁴ Michael Safi, "Isis claims attack on Save the Children office in Afghanistan," *The Guardian*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/24/explosion-attack-save-the-children-office-jalalabad-afghanistan>

⁵ Lalit K Jha, "No proof of Taliban's link to attack on Kabul hotel: US," *Pajhwok*, January 24, 2018 <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:af5Gw1PShgIJ:https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2018/01/24/no-proof-taliban%25E2%2580%2599s-link-attack-kabul-hotel-us+%&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=pk>

⁶ Elisabeth Bumiller and Jane Perlez, "Pakistan's Spy Agency Is Tied to Attack on U.S. Embassy," *New York Times*, September 22, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/23/world/asia/mullen-asserts-pakistani-role-in-attack-on-us-embassy.html>

⁷ Waslat Hasrat-Nazimi, "UN imposes sanctions on Haqqani network," *Deutsche Welle*, November 7, 2012, <http://www.dw.com/en/un-imposes-sanctions-on-haqqani-network/a-16360849>

Since the Trump administration came into power, a number of drone strikes specifically targeting the Haqqani network have been taking place. The most recent attack took place on January 24, 2018, in which a mid-level Haqqani network commander, Ehsan, also known as Khawari, and two of his companions were killed during a twin drone strike along the Pakistan-Afghan border.⁸ Prior to this, other top commanders of the network that have been targeted by US drones include Juma Din, Naser Haqqani, Badar Haqqani, Muhamad Haqqani, Sangeen Zadran, Haji Ahmad Jan,⁹ Moulvi Jamiuddin,¹⁰ and Abubakar.¹¹

While it is very convenient for both US and Afghan governments to shift the responsibility on Pakistan, in what is a clear and apparent effort to divert attention from their failures in Afghanistan, it is pertinent to highlight that Jalaluddin Haqqani was held in high esteem by US during the Soviet jihad for the role the group played in the resistance. Jalaluddin even visited the White House, where he met the then US President Ronald Reagan.¹² In fact, former US Congressman Charlie Wilson, who raised finances for the Afghan resistance, referred to Jalaluddin as “goodness personified”.¹³

There is no doubt that the Haqqani network has played an instrumental role in the Taliban insurgency against western, and now Afghan forces, which has spanned over more than 16 years. The Haqqani network has been responsible for some of the deadliest violence in Afghanistan. However, the group's role, strength and capability has been highly exaggerated to the point that there is wide consensus amongst US and Afghan playmakers that the insurgency in Afghanistan is solely led or fuelled by the Haqqani network, and that if decisive action is taken against the group, the insurgency in Afghanistan will come to an end. Unfortunately, this is not only naive, but wishful thinking.

At the end of the day, the group does not operate in isolation, but is in fact a part of the Afghan Taliban. In the current setup of the Taliban, Siarjuddin Haqqani is a deputy to the Taliban leader

⁸ Haqqani Network Commander Killed in North Waziristan Drone Strike, Tolo News, <http://www.tolonews.com/world/haqqani-network-commander-killed-north-waziristan-drone-strike/> Pakistan condemns drone strike in Kurram Agency, The News, January 24, 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/272504-pakistan-condemns-drone-strike-in-kurram-agency>

⁹ Sami Yousafzai, January 8, 2018, <https://twitter.com/Samiyousafzai/status/950395932687962114>

¹⁰ Dilawar Hussain & Jibrán Ahmad, " Suspected U.S. drone kills militants on Pakistan-Afghan border," *Reuters*, December 26, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-drones/suspected-u-s-drone-kills-militants-on-pakistan-afghan-border-idUSKBN1EK0VH>

¹¹ Ali Akbar, " Drone strike kills Haqqani network commander in Hangu," *Dawn*, June 13, 2017 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1339293>

¹² Michael Georgy, "A: Haqqani: From White House guest to staunch U.S. enemy," *Reuters*, May 31, 2011 , <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-waziristan-haqqani/qa-haqqani-from-white-house-guest-to-staunch-u-s-enemy-idUSTRE74U0S520110531>

¹³ Missy Ryan and Mark Hosenball, "Insight: As Afghan exit looms, U.S. debate rages over Haqqani militants," *Reuters*, June 5, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-pakistan-haqqani/insight-as-afghan-exit-looms-u-s-debate-rages-over-haqqani-militants-idUSBRE85312E20120604>

Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada. The Haqqanis association with the Taliban dates back to 1995, when Jalaluddin Haqqani swore allegiance to the then Taliban leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar.¹⁴ Since then the group has been a key component of the Taliban. In 1996, the network helped the Taliban capture Kabul, and later during the rule of the Taliban, Jalaluddin was appointed as the group's minister of tribal affairs. Hence, to view the Haqqanis as independent of the Taliban and the sole reason for unrest in Afghanistan is frivolous, to say the least.

The fact of the matter is that despite 16 years of international presence, promises of 'liberating Afghanistan' and the fact that more than \$80 billion have been spent on the country,¹⁵ Afghanistan is worse off today than it was before 2001.¹⁶ The country continues to be confronted by violence, insecurity, weak and ineffective governance, corruption, a flourishing drug trade, and a growing Taliban insurgency which continues to escalate. Apart from internal challenges, the presence of at least 21 international terrorist groups including the Daesh/the Islamic State (IS) which has claimed responsibility for the recent attacks on a military post in Kabul and on the office of Save the Children in Jalalabad, is yet another alarming development and a visible indication of how unsuccessful the US war has been.¹⁷

The Trump administration's new strategy, which is highly militaristic, aims to target Taliban leaders through force in the hope that it will compel the group to make a compromise and enter into talks. Although the US ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, has expressed confidence, "that the strategy was working and pushing the insurgents closer to peace talks".¹⁸ However, the approach that US is adopting is certainly flawed, since the Taliban have been gaining ground and have clearly stated that they will only agree to talks when international forces leave Afghanistan.¹⁹ The Taliban have dismissed any suggestion that they have been weakened by the US approach, and in fact are stronger than before, as is evident from the fact that they continue to gain territory, as well as spread their influence throughout the country. In fact, the group has taken more territory in 2016-17

¹⁴ Noor Zahid and Madeeha Anwar, "What Is the Haqqani Network?" *VOA*, June 01, 2017 <https://www.voanews.com/a/what-haqqani-network/3883271.html>,

¹⁵ Jeanne Sahadi, "The financial cost of 16 years in Afghanistan," *CNNMoney*, August 22, 2017, <http://money.cnn.com/2017/08/21/news/economy/war-costs-afghanistan/index.html>

¹⁶ Mark Thompson, "The True Cost of the Afghanistan War May Surprise You," *Time Magazine*, <http://time.com/3651697/afghanistan-war-cost/January 1, 2015>

¹⁷ Lara Logan, "Kabul under siege while America's longest war rages on," January 14, 2018, *CBS News*, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/kabul-afghanistan-capital-under-siege-while-americas-longest-war-rages-on/>

¹⁸ "U.S. Says Kabul Closer To Holding Peace Talks With Taliban," *RFE/RL*, January 18, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-nikki-haley-un-security-council-afghanistan-closer-holding-peace-talks-taliban-/28982011.html>

¹⁹ Akram Walizada, "Shock gives way to despair in Kabul after ambulance bomb," January 27, 2018, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-blast/shock-gives-way-to-despair-in-kabul-after-ambulance-bomb-idUSKBN1FG086>

than at any other time in their 16 year war and have had major military successes in Laskhar Gah, Kunduz, and Tarinkot to name a few.²⁰ Since February 2017, the Taliban have increased the amount of territory under their influence or control by 3%, thus in total, 43% of Afghanistan's districts are either under Taliban control or being contested.²¹

Similarly, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) continue to struggle which staggering fatalities and are certainly no match for the Afghan Taliban which is obviously a far more stronger adversary. From January -April 2017, the ANSF suffered more than 2,500 deaths and over 4,000 injuries alone. In fact, according to a report by the Special Inspector-General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), since January 2017, the casualty and attrition rates of the ANSF have been so high that both the US and Afghan government have withheld figures, refusing to give numbers.²² The fact that the US military itself cannot drive two miles from Kabul international airport to its base due to security risks and instead flies the 2 mile distance is a clear indication of how successful the Taliban are and where the war is heading. It is also demonstrative of the fact that the US is in essence 'surrendering the terrain'²³ to the Afghan Taliban. Hence, the only way forward in Afghanistan is through a peace and reconciliation process with the Taliban.

While both US and Afghanistan continue to blame Pakistan for their failures, they must also realize that Pakistan is responsible for preventing and curbing the activities of extremist elements within its territory alone and not beyond its borders. Despite Kabul's opposition, Islamabad has taken decisive and concrete measures on its side of the border through various border management initiatives, to the point that its tribal region is free from terrorist elements. However, the fact that more than 21 terrorist groups operate in Afghanistan, by the admission of President Ghani himself, clearly shows where the fault lies.

Unless and until the Taliban are not recognized, taken on board and involved in constructive engagement and dialogue, hopes for peace and stability would remain elusive. A political engagement with the Afghan Taliban is the only solution to end the Afghan crisis, which cannot be achieved without bringing them onboard. It is time for Kabul to move beyond giving statements and

²⁰ Taimoor Shah & Rod Nordland, "Taliban Gain Ground in Afghanistan as Soldiers Surrender Their Posts," *New York Times*, October 30, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/31/world/asia/talibanafghanistan-army.htm>

²¹ Idrees Ali, "Taliban increases influence, territory in Afghanistan: U.S. watchdog," *Reuters* " October 31, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghanistan-militants/taliban-increases-influence-territory-in-afghanistan-u-s-watchdog-idUSKBN1D026N>

²² "U.S. No Longer Releasing Data On Afghan Casualties Amid Uptick In Violence," *Reuters*, November 1, 2017, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-army-casualties-data/28828849.html>

²³ Lara Logan, "Kabul under siege while America's longest war rages on," January 14, 2018, *CBS News*, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/kabul-afghanistan-capital-under-siege-while-americas-longest-war-rages-on/>

instead focus on galvanizing domestic support from forces opposed to the peace process. It not only has to convince the Taliban to enter into talks, but must also accommodate them in the political process through a holistic and viable national reintegration program that is acceptable to all.

At the same time, the Afghan Taliban too, must put an end to its bloody offensive against the state. While the group continues to justify its violence, "to liberate Afghanistan from foreign control"²⁴ it is no longer prudent for them to do so as they are no longer fighting a 'foreign enemy'.²⁵ With changing regional dynamics and the growing threat of the Islamic State, neither the Afghan government nor the Afghan Taliban can afford to do without dialogue, as force cannot be the solution. Although the Afghan Taliban have not shown their willingness to talk, the group knows that they cannot operate in complete isolation, and therefore, they will have to eventually reach a political compromise with the government. The real challenge for the government and the Taliban, is to find a solution that eliminates violence and promotes peace and reconciliation.

For years, the same slogan that Pakistan must 'do more' has been chanted by Kabul and Washington as the way to achieve peace in Afghanistan. But if one looks at the state of affairs in Afghanistan since 2001 and the growing strength of the Taliban, it seems that the war against the group has clearly failed to produce the desired results. It is time for Kabul and Washington to take ownership and to do more than expected from Pakistan.

²⁴ "Good Islamic ethics, the sign of the sacred Azm (Determination) of Mujahideen," *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*, May 28, 2015, <http://shahamatenglish.com/good-islamic-ethics-the-sign-of-the-sacred-azm-determination-ofmujahideen/>

²⁵ Ibid.