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New Wave of Warlords Bedevils U.S.

By Matthew Rosenberg

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In his teen years, Sirajuddin Haqqani was known among friends as a dandy. He cared more about the look of his thick black hair than the battles his father, a mujahideen warlord in the 1980s, was waging with Russia for control of Afghanistan.

The younger Mr. Haqqani is still a stylish sort, say those who know him. But now, approaching middle age and ensconced as the battlefield leader of his father's militant army, he has become ruthless in his own pursuit of an Afghanistan free from foreign influence. This time the enemy is the U.S. and its allies.

From outposts along the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, his Haqqani network is waging a campaign that has made the Afghan insurgency deadlier. He has widened the use of suicide attacks, which became a Taliban mainstay only in the past few years. U.S. officials believe his forces carried out the dramatic Monday gun, grenade and suicide-bomb attack in Kabul on Afghan government ministries and a luxury hotel. The assault claimed five victims plus seven attackers.

Mr. Haqqani also aided the Dec. 30 attack by an al Qaeda operative that killed seven Central Intelligence Agency agents and contractors at a U.S. base in eastern Afghanistan, say militant commanders. And he orchestrated last year's assault on a United Nations guesthouse that killed five U.N. staffers, along with other attacks in the capital.

In a rare interview with The Wall Street Journal conducted by email and telephone last month, Mr. Haqqani declared, "We have managed to besiege the Afghan government.

We sustain very few casualties; we can inflict heavy casualties to the enemy's side."

That message is problematic for a key plank of the U.S. military's Afghan "surge" which is based on a strategy of applying sufficient pressure on some Taliban leaders that they will negotiate for terms acceptable to Washington. On Tuesday, the Obama administration lent cautious support to the Afghan government's new outreach effort to the Taliban—a show of optimism that lower-level militants would reconcile with Kabul even if senior leaders continued fighting.

The rise of Mr. Haqqani, who is in his late 30s or early 40s, is part of a broader changing of the guard in the Afghan militant movement. A younger generation of commanders have helped transform the Taliban from a peasant army that harbored al Qaeda and was routed by the U.S.-led invasion in 2001 into a formidable guerrilla force that killed a record 520 Western troops last year.

Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar and his inner circle—believed to be based in the southwestern Pakistani city of Quetta—still provide overall leadership of the Taliban movement. Osama bin Laden still rallies the al Qaeda faithful. But more than either man, Mr. Haqqani is at the fulcrum of the Afghan rebellion and its twin uprising in Pakistan's northwestern mountains. His base in North Waziristan, on the Pakistani side of the border, has become arguably the most important Islamist militant haven in the region, say U.S. and Pakistani officials. It attracts aspiring jihadis from around the globe, such as the five young Americans arrested last month in Pakistan who were allegedly on their way there.

Mr. Haqqani has emerged as a powerbroker on both sides of the border. He has ties to almost every major faction in the confederation of groups operating under the Taliban umbrella. He has the strongest links to al Qaeda of any major Taliban faction, say U.S. officials and Pakistani experts. While pledging allegiance to Mullah Omar, he operates independently, choosing his own targets and only loosely coordinating with the Taliban's supreme leadership.

Mr. Haqqani showed his sway when the Pakistani Taliban, an offshoot of Afghanistan's Taliban, were on the verge of a bloody struggle following the death of its leader in a U.S. airstrike this summer. He called the major factions to North Waziristan to settle the dispute, telling them they must "follow the path of a great leader....You should save your bullets for your true enemies," said a tribal elder who attended the meeting.

Within days, the Pakistan Taliban's leadership was settled. The group has since repeatedly set off bombs in major cities and sent teams of gunmen to attack symbolic targets, including the headquarters of Pakistan's military.

In Afghanistan, Mr. Haqqani's men have kept up the heat on the government of President Hamid Karzai and U.S. and allied forces with ever-more brazen attacks, including this week's assault on Kabul.

The attack was trademark Haqqani. Teams of gunmen and suicide bombers struck Kabul in broad daylight. It's a strategy the Haqqani network has used repeatedly in the past 12 months to sow fear and chaos in the seat of Afghanistan's weak central government.

The assailants struck on the day that members of the new Afghan cabinet were to be sworn in. They picked a spot that would allow them to hit a number of high-profile targets at once: Pashtunistan Square, which is ringed by the central bank, the entrance to the presidential palace, as well as several ministries, a shopping center and a luxury hotel.

U.S. and Afghan officials believe Mr. Haqqani has cultivated high-level double agents inside the Afghan government—including senior military and police officers, some of whom are suspected of having aided an assassination attempt on President Karzai at a parade in April 2008 in Kabul.

"There is no doubt that some of our countrymen in the army and police are helping us in our fight against the occupiers," Mr. Haqqani said when asked about the parade attack.

The U.S. takes such boasts seriously. "The Haqqanis are the most dangerous," said a senior U.S. military commander in Afghanistan. "They're going all the way to Kabul to carry out major attacks. They've got connections on both sides of the border in a way no one else does. They're dangerous for us and they're dangerous for the Pakistanis."

Pakistan has until now taken a hands-off approach to Mr. Haqqani, arguing he spends most of his time in Afghanistan and is ultimately America's problem. U.S. officials have long alleged that Pakistan tolerates and even aids Mr. Haqqani, so he can be used to maintain its influence in Afghanistan after an eventual American withdrawal.

Pakistani officials deny that charge. Mr. Haqqani's central role in the insurgencies and his clear embrace of al Qaeda and the Pakistan Taliban have now prompted Pakistan's military and its spy service to consider taking action against his North Waziristan sanctuary, say Pakistani officials. Some U.S. officials, too, believe Pakistan is reconsidering its relationship with the Haqqanis.

The tone surrounding discussions about Mr. Haqqani has changed markedly in the past year. Officials in Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI, have gone from calling him a potential "force for peace" in Afghanistan to telling journalists that they lost nearly three dozen agents and informers in North Waziristan last year. Most were caught spying and killed by Mr. Haqqani's fighters and their Pakistan Taliban allies, the officials say.

"It's clear to all that the Haqqanis' interests and our interests, over the long term, they're not the same," said a senior Pakistani civilian official.

Any move by the Pakistanis against Mr. Haqqani appears to be months away, at the soonest. It would mark a reversal of Pakistani policy that U.S. officials say could greatly increase the chances of stabilizing the region.

Others in the younger generation of Taliban commanders include Abdullah Ghulam Rasoul, known as Mullah Zakir, who is in his mid-30s and one of the main Taliban commanders in southern Afghanistan. His five-year stint as a prisoner in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, has given him "rock-star status" in the Taliban, said Brig. Gen. John Nicholson, the former top American commander in southern Afghanistan. (Mr. Rasoul was released in 2007 into Afghan custody.)

In Pakistan, the most powerful Taliban faction leader is Hakimullah Mehsud, 31, who is considered brutal even by other militants, say tribal elders and militants.

After three decades of almost continuous conflict in Afghanistan and more than a decade of upheaval in Pakistan's tribal areas, all these young men have little memory of life without war, said Rustam Shah Mohmand, a former Pakistani official.

But while an older generation of Afghan warlords, including Mr. Haqqani's father, had a deep pragmatic streak, the younger commanders may be much more resistant to a settlement.

"Peace talks are about bringing people into the political power structure," said Mr. Mohmand, who served as Islamabad's envoy in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2005. "I don't think this younger generation has any idea of politics or any desire to take part in them....All they've grown up around is war and fighting."

Sirajuddin Haqqani grew up amid the struggle for Afghanistan. His father, Jalaluddin, rose to prominence in the early 1980s battling the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. He was a favorite of the U.S., which was pouring millions of dollars into the insurgency. He also was courted by Pakistan, where he established his base and developed close ties to the country's spy agency, Inter-Services Intelligence.

But "the child didn't take to war," said Brig. Amir Sultan Tarar, a retired ISI officer known as Col. Imam, of the young Mr. Haqqani. It wasn't until his early 20s—sometime around 1990—that the younger Mr. Haqqani "became an active participant in our struggles," said Brig. Tarar.

Friends who grew up with Mr. Haqqani say a religious awakening spurred his transformation.

"He saw the Arabs and their devotion and admired it," said Gul Khan, a businessman in North Waziristan who went to school with Mr. Haqqani. Some of the Arabs then fighting the Soviets, including Osama bin Laden, would go on to form the core of al Qaeda.

Those who know Sirajuddin Haqqani say he shares his father's battlefield acumen, which propelled him ahead of other siblings to assume day-to-day leadership of the militant faction in the past two or three years. His father remains titular chief.

Under Sirajuddin Haqqani, the faction has strengthened its dominance over the territory

carved out by his father in the 1980s—Khost, Paktika and Paktia provinces of eastern Afghanistan. His men also have moved deeper into Afghanistan, according to U.S. military assessments.

As his stature has risen, he has begun to see himself in grandiose religious terms, according to U.S. and Pakistani officials and tribesmen in the border region. He now styles himself "Khalifa"—a title for a leader who rules Muslims in accordance with Islamic law.

In his public rhetoric, he distances himself from his father's past ties to the U.S. while claiming the same mantle of Islamic resistance to occupiers.

"My father was fighting the Russians...I am following his footprints," he said in the Journal interview. "Like today, during the Soviet era the mujahideen were fighting an occupying force and believed that foreign forces are the only obstacle which prevents peace and stability in Afghanistan."

But, he added, "My father didn't have a personal relationship with the Americans," who along with Saudi Arabia provided most of the financing for the mujahideen.

Financial aid to the mujahideen also came from wealthy Muslim donors. Those connections remain, and have provided the Haqqanis with much of the cash needed to bankroll their fight, say U.S. officials and experts.

As for Pakistan, once his father's staunchest supporter, the relationship with the son appears increasingly strained.

Pakistan has been pursuing a military campaign in South Waziristan, a tribal region bordering North Waziristan that was also a safe haven for al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban. Already, Mr. Haqqani is beginning to feel the pressure in his rear flank in North Waziristan, say tribal elders and militants in the region.

Residents of Miran Shah, the main city in North Waziristan, say that a number of Islamic seminaries used by the Haqqanis have been largely abandoned in the past two weeks, except for a skeleton staff of guards. The Haqqani loyalists moved out partly because they feared retaliatory U.S. strikes following the CIA attack, said Gul Khan, the tribal elder.

But "they see that there are soldiers in South Waziristan and everywhere else," he said, referring to the most recent offensive against the Pakistan Taliban, which is taking place on Mr. Haqqani's doorstep. "They're all underground now. It's a very dangerous time." — Anand Gopal in Kabul and Yochi J. Dreazen in Kandahar, Afghanistan, contributed to this article.