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Haqqani insurgent group proves resilient foe in Afghan war

By Joshua Partlow,

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The United States knows where to find the most feared insurgent family in the Afghanistan war.

Troops can point to the downtown Khost mansion owned by its patriarch, Jalaluddin Haqqani; the million-dollar blue-tile mosque he built for the city's residents; and his base of operations 20 miles away in Pakistan. They are aware of his trucking and warehouse businesses, his sons who command about 3,000 fighters, and their sophisticated training camps that conduct courses in withstanding interrogation and firing rockets across borders.

Defeating the Haqqanis is another matter.

“Haqqani is the most resilient enemy network out there,” said [Col. Christopher Toner](#), commander of the U.S. military brigade in [this eastern Afghan province](#).

Outnumbered by the Taliban and less famous than al-Qaeda, [the Haqqani network](#) nevertheless poses an intractable problem for U.S. troops, particularly as the focus of the war shifts toward the Pakistani border.

After an intensive focus on fighting Mohammad Omar's Taliban in southern Afghanistan in 2010, the Obama administration is in talks, mediated by Germany and Qatar, with an Omar

deputy. But a political deal with the Taliban — still a distant prospect — would not necessarily end the war in the east: the Haqqani network is seen as the least reconcilable of the Afghanistan war's motley crew of insurgent factions.

The Haqqani family, protected from all threats save for the [occasional U.S. drone strike](#) in its Pakistani sanctuary of North Waziristan, has carved out a lucrative niche by exploiting the porous border with smuggling rings and bribery.

The Haqqanis rely on their Pashtun tribal connections and their patrons in Pakistan's intelligence service, according to U.S. military officials.

The Haqqanis hew to the relatively narrow goal of ruling a three-province swath of eastern Afghanistan that was once their exclusive domain but is now shared with thousands of American troops.

“They want power, wealth, money and a seat at the table when this thing is over,” Toner said.

The Haqqani fighters cooperate with the Taliban but are “not fully subordinate” to Omar and sometimes extract tolls from Taliban fighters who transit their territory, said a U.S. military intelligence official, who, like others, spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the matter for the record.

Resourceful network

Haqqani's fighters slip into Afghanistan along mountain passes and historic trade routes, including several illegal border crossings used by hundreds of cargo trucks each day. The men generally fight in Afghanistan for many weeks before returning to Pakistan for a break of several months, U.S. officials say.

When in Afghanistan, the fighters move from village to village, never spending more than one night in the same house. They rarely use cellphones or radios, because the communications can be picked up by U.S. surveillance technology, and know to exploit the “red zone” — the one-kilometer-wide buffer zone near the border that U.S. troops do not enter without clearance from their commanders.

Even as U.S. troops work to deplete the ranks of Haqqani fighters — about 150 of them are killed or captured every month in Khost — the group regenerates. The Haqqanis dip into a seemingly endless supply of Afghan refugees and young men and boys schooled at conservative Islamic madrassas in Pakistan's tribal areas. U.S. soldiers recently arrested a 15-year-old who they suspect is an insurgent cell leader.

To avoid detection, Haqqani fighters sometimes take elaborate precautions. U.S. troops noted how several people will convene at an Afghan safe house, each with a different bomb component — batteries, wire, clothespins and homemade explosives.

The fighters report to leaders in Pakistan and often do not know their comrades. Even if one is arrested, “he can’t give you the other six dudes,” said Capt. Daniel Leard, the company commander in the border district of Terezayi. “Even if you take out one arm, you can’t take out the whole network.”

‘The shadow government’

The titular head of the organization, Jalaluddin Haqqani, has been a militia leader for three decades, and he received money and weapons from the United States during the war against the Soviets. Then-U.S. Rep. Charlie Wilson (D-Tex.), who championed the rebel cause, famously described Haqqani as “goodness personified.” Haqqani exacted a heavy toll on Soviet troops by besieging his home town of Khost. His status as a war hero gave him a credibility among Afghans that lasts to this day.

Now in failing health, Haqqani plays more of a symbolic role in the organization, which has been run for the past few years by his son Sirajuddin and, to a lesser extent, a second son, Badruddin. Sirajuddin is known for his business savvy, earning money from trucking, extortion and racketeering. The fighters conduct kidnappings, collect illegal taxes and shake down Afghan shopkeepers for protection fees.

“They’re trying to position themselves as the shadow government that will take over as the official government if they can win the war,” said Lt. Col. Jesse Pearson, a battalion commander in Khost. “That’s what their motivation is. I do not see them as ideologically based.”

Haqqani fighters receive extensive training in Pakistan, U.S. troops said. They have “live fire training that is every bit as realistic and funded and supported as anything we do in the States,” Leard said.

Two U.S. soldiers were killed last month on Forward Operating Base Salerno in Khost in separate rocket attacks; at least one is suspected to have been staged from Pakistan.

The level of expertise in [the Haqqani network](#) has helped the group strike targets far from its base, including in the Afghan capital, Kabul. A suicide bombing this month inside an Afghan military hospital, as well as several other assaults on hotels, embassies and shopping malls, have been attributed to Haqqani fighters.

Last month, Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, openly accused Pakistan’s main intelligence agency of supporting the Haqqani network. To Afghan officials, there has long been little doubt of ties between the group and Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency. “They are an element of the ISI. The whole world knows that,” said Lt. Col. Atiqullah Torzan, an Afghan border police commander in Khost. “They get 100 percent support.”

Pakistan denies the allegation. Pakistani officials have long pledged a military operation in North Waziristan to target the insurgents hiding there but have not delivered.

Weak links along border

To combat the Haqqani network, the United States has sent more troops to eastern Afghanistan: A 5,000-man brigade operates in Khost and in part of neighboring Paktia province. The Haqqanis are also a leading target of U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan.

The military pressure has taken its toll not only in the number of killed and captured insurgents, but also in less tangible ways. U.S. military officials said the greater presence of troops at border checkpoints has slowed illegal truck traffic and diverted it to other parts of the border, increasing the costs of bringing weapons into battle. Insurgents have complained in intercepted communications of wanting to attack but not having the money, bombs or people to do it. Pearson, the battalion commander, says he thinks Haqqani's men are in "full defense mode" and are "hiding and trying to stay alive."

"Frankly, we're bringing terror to the terrorists," he said.

But the Afghan security forces along the border remain a weak link in the fight. In Terezayi district, along the Pakistan border, there are just seven policemen on any given shift to patrol an area with a population of more than 100,000.

The border police have more men on the payroll, about 300, but only a third are present for duty at any one time. Those who serve are notoriously susceptible to bribes, which helps the Haqqani fighters slip through. The price the policemen charge, about \$4 per vehicle, rises to about \$40 for more important insurgent cargo, U.S. military officials said.

"We're talking illegal imports of up to 200 trucks a day, semitrailers," Leard said. "That's enough to feed the insurgency in all of Khost."