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After Bin Laden: Confronting the Haqqani Network in Kurram

by Reza Jan

Information gleaned after the killing of Osama bin Laden seems to indicate that bin Laden was much more centrally involved in running al Qaeda. Even so, his death is not a decisive blow to the network and it would be wrong to hail it as such. In fact, al Qaeda's enduring links to other militant Islamist groups in the region and the expansion of the al Qaeda-linked Haqqani Network's operational territory inside Pakistan serve to broaden the group's room to maneuver and increase its survivability.

Al Qaeda operatives, due to their status as "outsiders," require the patronage of local host organizations to survive in the region. Al Qaeda has, over the years, intertwined itself intimately with, among other groups, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, regional Uzbek terrorist groups, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and other "Punjabi Taliban" groups, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and perhaps most prominently, the Haqqani network. Al Qaeda operatives embedded within these organizations have worked almost like consultants, providing experience and expertise, advanced training, financial assistance and other support.

The current operational leader of the Haqqani Network, Sirajuddin Haqqani, grew up having close contacts with foreign Islamist extremists and al Qaeda operatives, and is exceedingly close with them, as a result. The links between the Haqqani network and al Qaeda are well documented and appear to be enduring. News that the Haqqanis are beginning to expand their sanctuaries and area of operations would be, therefore, doubly unsettling because it would mean increased space within which al Qaeda operatives could shelter, move and plan attacks.

A new report on the presence of the Haqqani Network in Kurram agency by AEI's Critical Threats Project and the Institute for the Study of War documents and analyzes this shift. For months, the Haqqani network had been working to expand its safe havens outside of North Waziristan in order to escape the constant drone attacks on its compounds, direct action raids by U.S. forces in Afghanistan, and to gain fresh means of access into Afghanistan, and particularly to Kabul. The Haqqanis were able to achieve this by helping to broker a peace deal between warring Sunni and Shia tribes in Pakistan's restive Kurram tribal agency in February 2011. By doing so, the Haqqanis received permission to shelter in Kurram and use it to transit into and out of Afghanistan. This gave the Haqqanis access to the shortest route to Kabul from anywhere in Pakistan as well as new inroads into eastern Afghanistan. Although some Pakistani Taliban spoiler groups have periodically launched attacks in the region that have called the peace deal into question, the deal for the moment still stands and the Haqqanis do not appear to have lost any of their newly-gained access in Kurram.

Unfortunately, this newfound space in Kurram agency, on the northern border of North Waziristan, means that those groups that often operate alongside or in coordination with the Haqqanis in Afghanistan will also be able to take advantage of the breathing room. The most obvious candidate is al Qaeda. The group will be especially pleased by the developments as they afford them a way out of North Waziristan. Al Qaeda has long been the target of U.S. drone strikes there and suffered particularly heavily in late 2010 following reports of an imminent terrorist plot in Europe linked to al Qaeda in North Waziristan. The opening in Kurram will have provided a valve to relieve the pressure on the organization in its traditional strongholds.

The key lesson here is that the al Qaeda network, even without bin Laden, is still virulent. Its operatives continue to live among, and plot attacks with, their ideological and operational allies in other groups. The war does not end with bin Laden, or even with al Qaeda's core group in Pakistan. Its infection is now carried by numerous other groups just like the Haqqani Network, Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Pakistani Taliban and their ilk, who continue to preach, plot and act against the U.S. homeland, its forces in Afghanistan, its allies in the West, and the Pakistani state. The expansion of the Haqqani Network into Kurram is a strategic boon to al Qaeda just as much as it is to the Haqqanis, and the death of bin Laden, however satisfying, should not mask the fact that there is much work left to be done and many dangers that are yet to be tackled.

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