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# The Trump Administration's Afghanistan Policy

THOMAS JOSCELYN

**Senior Fellow**

*Foundation for Defense of Democracies*

**Senior Editor**

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[www.fdd.org](http://www.fdd.org)

Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, and other members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today concerning the Trump administration's Afghanistan policy.

Until recently, the administration's approach has been centered on the effort to negotiate a deal with the Taliban. President Trump walked away from these talks earlier this month and it appears that they will not be resumed, but that may still be a possibility. My own view is that America's policy with respect to Afghanistan should not hinge on what the Taliban's political delegation says in Doha. The Taliban's actions speak volumes. Even as the U.S. pursued an agreement, the Taliban attacked a non-governmental organization in Kabul, kidnapped and murdered a human rights worker, terrorized schools, released a video justifying the 9/11 hijackings, and dispatched its suicide bombers throughout the country, often killing civilians.

The negotiations also took place on the Taliban's terms. The Taliban demanded that the government of Afghanistan be excluded from formal talks, and the U.S. acquiesced. Some Afghan officials were reportedly allowed to attend sessions in a personal capacity, but not as representatives of Afghanistan's legitimate, internationally recognized government. The Taliban has repeatedly described the Afghan government as a "puppet" of the U.S. and therefore not a truly sovereign entity. The Trump administration's unilateral negotiations with the Taliban bolstered this allegation. Meanwhile, the Taliban used the talks in Doha and Moscow to enhance its own standing. Thus, the administration's approach to these talks undermined our ally while legitimizing the Taliban – that is, the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan – as a political entity. It is difficult to see how this approach could possibly lead to peace.

Indeed, it appears the talks would have resulted in a withdrawal agreement, not a peace accord. Most of the details concerning the draft agreement between the Taliban and the U.S. remain hidden from the public. Therefore, I applaud this committee's effort to perform oversight. But in my testimony today I would like to focus on one aspect of these negotiations that has been reported on in the press, albeit with some noteworthy discrepancies. Namely, my testimony is intended to serve as a rebuttal to the idea that the Taliban could act as a *de facto* counterterrorism partner.

Early on, Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad said he was satisfied with the Taliban's counterterrorism assurances. On March 12, 2019, Khalilzad tweeted: "When the agreement in draft about a withdrawal timeline and effective counterterrorism measures is finalized, the Taliban and other #Afghans, including the government, will begin intra-Afghan negotiations on a political settlement and comprehensive ceasefire."<sup>1</sup> That is, the U.S. was willing to bargain a withdrawal timeline for the Taliban's supposed counterterrorism guarantees before the Taliban had even met with the Afghan government. It is not even clear if the Afghan government would have been recognized as a formal entity in these "intra-Afghan negotiations," and of course the mere prospect of further talks didn't guarantee any real progress toward peace between the warring Afghan parties.

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<sup>1</sup> @US4AfghanPeace, "(3/4) When the agreement in draft about a withdrawal timeline and effective counterterrorism measures is finalized, the Taliban and other #Afghans, including the government, will begin intra-Afghan negotiations on a political settlement and comprehensive ceasefire." *Twitter*, March 12, 2019. <https://twitter.com/US4AfghanPeace/status/1105513781705302016>

Moreover, there is no good reason, as far as I can tell, to think that the Taliban is trustworthy when it comes to restraining international terrorists. The Taliban has openly lied about the presence of al-Qaeda and foreign fighters on Afghan soil for years. They lied before 9/11. They lied after 9/11. It is difficult to imagine what verification measures could be put in place to ensure they are not lying now. This is especially true given that the administration may have been prepared to withdraw all American forces as part of the deal. The U.S. has a difficult time tracking al-Qaeda and the Islamic State with over 14,000 troops in country right now. That mission would only get more difficult with fewer, or zero, troops in Afghanistan. The so-called Haqqani Network was designated as a terrorist organization in 2012 in part because of its close ties to al-Qaeda. As I discuss more below, the Haqqani Network has now consolidated its influence within the Taliban. So a major component of the Taliban is an al-Qaeda allied, designated terrorist organization.

Four reports submitted to the United Nations Security Council since last year have documented the ongoing alliance between al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The monitoring team that authored these reports has stated: Al-Qaeda is “closely allied” with the Taliban, and the group’s “alliance with the Taliban and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan remains firm”;<sup>2</sup> al-Qaeda’s relationship with the Taliban is “long-standing” and “strong”;<sup>3</sup> al-Qaeda “has grown stronger operating under the Taliban umbrella across Afghanistan and is more active than in recent years”;<sup>4</sup> the Taliban is the “primary partner for all foreign terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan, with the exception of” the Islamic State’s Khorasan branch;<sup>5</sup> al-Qaeda “members continue to function routinely as military and religious instructors for the Taliban”;<sup>6</sup> and al-Qaeda “considers Afghanistan a continuing safe haven for its leadership, relying on its long-standing and strong relationship with the Taliban leadership.”<sup>7</sup>

In August, the UN monitoring team told Melissa Skorka, a former strategic adviser to the commander of International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, the following:

There is no evidence that the Taliban have broken or will in [the] future break their intrinsic relationship with the Haqqani Network and Al-Qaida. Recent reporting would suggest that these connections are actually stronger than at any time in the past 18 years. Calculations over withdrawal from Afghanistan should take account of the risk of

<sup>2</sup> “Twenty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities,” June 27, 2018, pp. 3, 15. (<https://undocs.org/S/2018/705>)

<sup>3</sup> “Twenty-third report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities,” December 27, 2018, p. 16. ([https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/N1846950\\_EN.pdf](https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/N1846950_EN.pdf))

<sup>4</sup> “Tenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2255 (2015) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan,” April 30, 2019, p. 9. (<https://www.undocs.org/S/2019/481>)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “Twenty-fourth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities,” June 27, 2019, pp. 15-16. (<https://undocs.org/S/2019/570>)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

undermining prospects for a durable peace by empowering and emboldening these groups.<sup>8</sup>

Bill Roggio and I have come to the same conclusion repeatedly over the past decade, as we have written at *FDD's Long War Journal* and elsewhere. In my testimony today, I will outline just some of the reasons why.

*The Taliban hasn't accepted responsibility – let alone apologized – for harboring Osama bin Laden and his international terrorist operation prior to 9/11.*

It is difficult to see how the Taliban could be telling the truth about terrorism now, when it has not even come clean about events that occurred 18 years ago. Just this past July, the Taliban released a video justifying the 9/11 hijackings and other attacks in the West. The Taliban did not blame al-Qaeda, the actual perpetrator of the hijackings, or renounce its decision to harbor Osama bin Laden and his men. Instead, the Taliban blamed America. As images of the 9/11 attack were played on screen, the Taliban's narrator said: "This heavy slap on their dark faces was the consequence of their interventionist policies and not our doing."<sup>9</sup> Then, in August, the lead Taliban spokesman in Qatar claimed that we still don't know who carried out the 9/11 hijackings. "Still it is not known who was behind that," Suhail Shaheen said.<sup>10</sup> "If there is proof given to us, we are ready to try (the person responsible)."<sup>11</sup> Shaheen later tried to clarify his remarks on Twitter, but even then he did not offer a forthright admission that al-Qaeda was responsible.<sup>12</sup>

If the Taliban cannot even publicly admit that al-Qaeda was responsible for 9/11, then I do not see how anyone can put much stock in what they say in private. Some history further illuminates the problem.

The Taliban has been allied with al-Qaeda since the mid-1990s. The close-knit relationship between al-Qaeda and the Haqqani Network, which is an integral part of the Taliban, stretches back even further, into the 1980s. Osama bin Laden quickly began working with Taliban leaders upon his return to Afghanistan in 1996. According to the 9/11 Commission, "Pakistani intelligence officers" introduced bin Laden to "Taliban leaders in Kandahar, their main base of power, to aid his reassertion of control over camps near Khowst, out of an apparent hope that he would now expand the camps and make them available for training Kashmiri militants."<sup>13</sup> By late 1996, bin Laden had "cemented his ties with" the Taliban's leadership.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Melissa Skoroka, "Afghanistan Endgame, Part One: Is Sirajuddin Haqqani Ready for Peace?," *Asia Unbound*, a blog maintained by the Council on Foreign Relations, August 14, 2019. (<https://www.cfr.org/blog/afghanistan-endgame-part-one-sirajuddin-haqqani-ready-peace>)

<sup>9</sup> 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>)

<sup>10</sup> *CBS News*, "Taliban says ending the war in Afghanistan is 'very necessary'," August 22, 2019. (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/taliban-say-ending-the-war-in-afghanistan-is-very-necessary/>)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> <https://twitter.com/suhailshaheen1/status/1164630577716350976>

<sup>13</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report, pp. 64-65.

<sup>14</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 65.

Though the Taliban may have had misgivings about bin Laden’s rhetoric at a time when the group was trying to consolidate its control over much of the country, this did not stop the two sides from working together. Bin Laden “eventually enjoyed a strong financial position in Afghanistan,” leveraging his network of “Saudi and other financiers associated with the Golden Chain.”<sup>15</sup> Bin Laden spent “large amounts of money to help the Taliban.”<sup>16</sup> “Through his relationship with Mullah Omar – and the monetary and other benefits that it brought the Taliban – Bin Laden was able to circumvent” any “restrictions” placed on his speech, and he enjoyed a “freedom of movement” in Afghanistan that he was not afforded in his previous safe haven, Sudan.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, “Mullah Omar would stand by” bin Laden “even when other Taliban leaders raised objections.”<sup>18</sup>

Al-Qaeda benefited greatly from the Taliban’s sanctuary in the years leading up to 9/11. “Al Qaeda members could travel freely within the country, enter and exit it without visas or any immigration procedures, purchase and import vehicles and weapons, and enjoy the use of official Afghan Ministry of Defense license plates,” the 9/11 Commission found.<sup>19</sup> Al-Qaeda “also used the Afghan state-owned Ariana Airlines to courier money into the country.”<sup>20</sup> Crucially, the Taliban had an open-door policy for international jihadists. The Taliban’s safe haven allowed al-Qaeda “to train and indoctrinate fighters and terrorists, import weapons, forge ties with other jihad groups and leaders, and plot and staff terrorist schemes.”<sup>21</sup> U.S. intelligence officials have estimated that between 10,000 and 20,000 fighters “underwent instruction in Bin Ladin-supported camps in Afghanistan from 1996 through 9/11.”<sup>22</sup> Not all of those fighters formally joined al-Qaeda. Most were trained in guerrilla warfare, while a smaller set of trainees were selected to take part in high-profile terrorist attacks, such as the 9/11 hijackings.

Using these Taliban-hosted training camps, bin Laden and his men built a rolodex of personnel that would be invaluable for their organization for years to come. The bonds formed in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan are still relevant today. In fact, veterans of these pre-9/11 facilities in Afghanistan continue to hold leadership positions within al-Qaeda around the globe. For instance, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s (AQAP) leadership includes at least several veterans of these camps. Earlier this month, the State Department announced a reward of up to \$5 million for information on the whereabouts of Faruq al-Suri, an al-Qaeda veteran who “was a senior paramilitary trainer ... in Afghanistan in the 1990s.”<sup>23</sup>

Al-Suri’s nom de guerre was likely earned during his time at al-Qaeda’s al-Faruq camp, where he served as a trainer. The “Taliban granted al Qaeda permission to open the al Faruq camp in

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<sup>15</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 66.

<sup>16</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 110.

<sup>17</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 66.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> 9/11 Commission Report, p. 67.

<sup>23</sup> See the Rewards for Justice page for Faruq al-Suri: [https://rewardsforjustice.net/english/faruq\\_al\\_suri.html](https://rewardsforjustice.net/english/faruq_al_suri.html). Al-Suri’s role as a trainer at al-Qaeda’s Al Faruq camp has been confirmed in official jihadist biographies. See, for example: Thomas Joscelyn, “Al Nusrah Front video features veteran al Qaeda military leader,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, March 24, 2014. ([https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/03/works\\_for\\_top\\_al.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/03/works_for_top_al.php))

Kandahar,” according to the 9/11 Commission.<sup>24</sup> New recruits began their introductory instruction there. Al-Qaeda’s leadership identified Hani Hanjour as a “trained pilot” during his time at al-Faruq, and he was then given specialized training for his role in the 9/11 hijackings.<sup>25</sup> Hanjour was not the only hijacker who started down the path to 9/11 at al-Faruq. “At least seven of the Saudi muscle hijackers took this basic training regime at the al Faruq camp near Kandahar.”<sup>26</sup> The 9/11 Commission found that al-Faruq “appears to have been the preferred location for vetting and training the potential muscle hijackers because of its proximity to” bin Laden and “senior al Qaeda leadership.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Bin Laden visited al-Faruq often. During one speech at the camp, he “exhorted trainees to pray for the success of an attack involving 20 martyrs.”<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the pre-9/11 period, the U.S. government repeatedly attempted to convince the Taliban to sever its relationship with al-Qaeda. The 9/11 Commission later explored these attempts, which it described as a “hopeless effort to persuade the Taliban regime in Afghanistan to deport” Bin Laden.<sup>29</sup> In April 1998, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Bill Richardson, visited South Asia. Ambassador Richardson “asked the Taliban to expel” bin Laden. The Taliban’s representatives “answered that they did not know [bin Laden’s] whereabouts” and, in any event, bin Laden “was not a threat to the United States.”<sup>30</sup> This was an obvious lie. Bin Laden had declared his war on the West repeatedly, including just two months prior, in February 1998. And al-Qaeda struck the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania four months later, in August 1998. Saudi Arabia’s Prince Turki met with Mullah Omar and “received a commitment that Bin Laden would be expelled, but Mullah Omar did not make good on his promise.”<sup>31</sup> That is, the Taliban had lied again.<sup>32</sup>

The Clinton administration sought other avenues to pressure the Taliban, but “Mullah Omar’s position showed no sign of softening.”<sup>33</sup> In fact, one U.S. intelligence report “quoted Bin Laden as saying that Mullah Omar had given him a completely free hand to act in any country, though asking that he not claim responsibility for attacks in Pakistan or Saudi Arabia.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> 9/11 Commission Report, p. 157.

<sup>25</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 226.

<sup>26</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 234.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Three other hijackers received training at the Khaldan camp, which was “another large basic training facility located near Kabul.”

<sup>28</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 251.

<sup>29</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 93.

<sup>30</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 111.

<sup>31</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 115.

<sup>32</sup> See also: The 9/11 Commission Report, pp. 121-122. In retaliation for the U.S. Embassy bombings, the Clinton administration conducted airstrikes in Afghanistan. On August 22, Mullah Omar reportedly “told a working-level State Department official that the strikes were counterproductive but added that he would be open to dialogue with the United States on Bin Laden’s presence Afghanistan.” During a meeting with the U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan, William Milam, “Taliban delegates said it was against their culture to expel someone seeking sanctuary but asked what would happen to Bin Laden should he be sent to Saudi Arabia.” However, when Prince Turki asked Mullah Omar in September 1998 “whether he would keep his earlier promise to expel Bin Laden, the Taliban leader said no.” This led to a shouting match between the two, Mullah Omar denounced the Saudi government, and “Riyadh then suspended its diplomatic relations with the Taliban regime.”

<sup>33</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 123.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Other measures, including UN sanctions, were tried. But “none of the outside pressure had any visible effect on Mullah Omar, who was unconcerned about commerce with the outside world.”<sup>35</sup> The U.S. “learned that at the end of 1999, the Taliban Council of Ministers unanimously reaffirmed that their regime would stick by Bin Laden.”<sup>36</sup> Even though relations “were sometimes tense” between the two sides, the “foundation was deep and personal.”<sup>37</sup> Mullah Omar even “executed at least one subordinate who opposed his pro-Bin Laden policy.”<sup>38</sup> Similarly, an arms embargo that took effect in December 2000 “had no visible effect on Omar.”<sup>39</sup>

After the 9/11 hijackings, the Bush administration demanded that Mullah Omar and the Taliban turn Bin Laden over. Of course, they refused. And Omar was especially obstinate.

Shortly after 9/11, an interviewer with *Voice of America* asked Omar why he did not just expel bin Laden. Mullah Omar responded: “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.”<sup>40</sup> Omar explained that he trusted the promises of Allah over those of President Bush:

I am considering two promises. One is the promise of God, the other is that of 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.<sup>41</sup>

The Taliban founder argued that America deserved to be struck on 9/11:

... Americans will not be able to prevent such acts like the one that has just occurred because America has taken Islam hostage. If you look at Islamic countries, the people are in despair. They are complaining that Islam is gone. But people remain firm in their Islamic beliefs. In their pain and frustration, some of them commit suicide acts. They feel they have nothing to lose.

... America controls the governments of the Islamic countries. The people ask to follow Islam, but the governments do not listen because they are in the grip of the United States. If someone follows the path of Islam, the government arrests him, tortures him or kills him. This is the doing of America. If it stops supporting those governments and lets the people deal with them, then such things won't happen. America has created the evil that is attacking it. The evil will not disappear even if I die and Osama dies and others die. The

<sup>35</sup> 9/11 Commission Report, p. 125.

<sup>36</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 125.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 126.

<sup>40</sup> *Voice of America*, “Mullah Omar – in his own words,” September 26, 2001. A transcript is available via *The Guardian* at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/26/afghanistan.features11>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

US should step back and review its policy. It should stop trying to impose its empire on the rest of the world, especially on Islamic countries.<sup>42</sup>

Of course, this is exactly the same rationale Osama bin Laden offered for attacking America. Bin Laden argued that America controlled governments throughout the Muslim-majority world and, therefore, the jihadists needed to strike the “head of the snake.” And just as Omar blamed America’s “policy” in September 2001, the Taliban continues to blame America’s “policies” for 9/11 today. As I noted above, this is exactly the message contained in the Taliban’s July 2019 video. This does not inspire confidence in any commitments made by the Taliban’s political office in Doha.

Mullah Omar remained defiant well after losing his Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan. In May 2002, a Saudi-owned newspaper quoted Omar as saying that America faced “fire, hell and total defeat” in Afghanistan.<sup>43</sup> Omar reiterated his justification for 9/11, saying there “were reasons behind these great deeds” and the U.S. should “seek to remove these reasons,” meaning its policies.<sup>44</sup> Omar added: “Sheikh Osama is, thanks be to God, still alive, to the horror of Bush.”<sup>45</sup>

It is no wonder that al-Qaeda continues to honor Mullah Omar to this day.

*The head of al-Qaeda has sworn a blood oath to the Taliban’s leader. The Taliban has not rejected his fealty.*

Ayman al-Zawahiri, the head of al-Qaeda’s global enterprise, has sworn his allegiance to the Taliban’s top leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada. There is no public indication that Akhundzada was prepared to disavow Zawahiri and his blood oath as part of any deal between the U.S. and the Taliban. The importance of this oath was recognized by Ambassador Khalilzad during a July 2016 hearing held by this same committee. Ambassador Khalilzad noted that “even recently the leader of al-Qaeda, Zawahiri, pledged allegiance to the new leader of the Taliban.”<sup>46</sup> Khalilzad added: “So the relationship continues.”<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, it does. Zawahiri, it should be noted, did not express any alarm throughout the entirety of the talks between the U.S. and the Taliban. To the contrary, the al-Qaeda chieftain portrayed the negotiations as a sign of America’s weakness. “The Islamic Emirate dealt severe blows to America,” Zawahiri said during his 9/11 anniversary address earlier this month. “This is why the Americans showed keenness to negotiate with them a withdrawal from Afghanistan.” Of course, we do not know what Zawahiri had to say about the talks behind closed doors. But there is no public indication that al-Qaeda’s oath to the Taliban was in jeopardy. And this *bayat* (or pledge of fealty) is an underestimated part of al-Qaeda’s organizational scheme.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> *BBC News*, “Mullah Omar ‘gives interview,’” May 17, 2002. ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/1993137.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1993137.stm))

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114hhrg20742/html/CHRG-114hhrg20742.htm>

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



Al-Qaeda's top leaders have been loyal to the Taliban's emir since well before 9/11. In al-Qaeda's view, the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was the only religiously legitimate state in the world at the time of the hijackings. Al-Qaeda deemed Mullah Omar to be the Amir al-Mu'minin, or the "Emir of the Faithful," an honorific usually reserved for the Muslim caliph. (ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi adopted the same title in 2014, after the Islamic State declared its caliphate in Iraq and Syria.) As a result, bin Laden swore his fealty to Omar and encouraged other Muslims around the world to do the same.

Bin Laden was killed in 2011. Mullah Omar is thought to have passed away sometime in 2013. The Taliban essentially played "Weekend at Bernie's" with Omar, pretending that he was alive for the next two years. The Taliban's political arm in Doha did not tell the State Department that Omar was dead, even as the U.S. was preparing a statement in his name in mid-2013. Nor did the Taliban tell many other jihadists. This is another outward sign of the Taliban's deceitful behavior.

Al-Qaeda continued to market its loyalty to Mullah Omar until 2015, when the Taliban finally admitted that its founder had passed away two years earlier. Osama's son and heir, Hamza bin Laden, reiterated his own oath to Omar in his first public address in August 2015. By then, the Taliban had named Mullah Mansour, a powerful figure who considered al-Qaeda's men to be the "heroes of the current jihadist era," as its leader. Bin Laden's successor, Zawahiri, quickly swore his fealty to Mansour, and Mansour publicly accepted Zawahiri's allegiance. After Mansour was killed in a U.S. drone strike in May 2016, the Taliban named Akhundzada as its emir. Zawahiri fell in line once again – publicly declaring that Akhundzada was the new "Emir of the Faithful."<sup>48</sup>

At least some of al-Qaeda's branches outside of Central and South Asia have recognized Akhundzada as the "Emir of the Faithful" as well. Earlier this year, Ali Mahmoud Rage, who serves as a spokesman for al-Shabaab in Somalia, honored Akhundzada in a speech delivered on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr. "At the outset, I send my salutations and greetings to the Ummah of Islam everywhere, on top of them the Emir of the Believers Maulvi Haibatullah (may Allah preserve him and protect him) and our Emir Sheikh Ayman al Zawahiri (may Allah preserve him), and the emirs of the jihadi fronts, and Muslims in general everywhere," Rage said.

In early 2017, al-Qaeda stood up a new group in West Africa known as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), or the "Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims." The head of JNIM, a veteran Tuareg jihadist named Iyad Ag Ghaly, issued a statement in which he said: "On this blessed occasion, we renew our pledge of allegiance [*bayat*] to our honorable emirs and sheikhs: Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud, our beloved and wise sheikh Ayman al Zawahiri and ... the emir of the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan Mullah Haibatullah, may Allah protect them and support them."

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<sup>48</sup> Passages in this paragraph and elsewhere throughout this testimony were adapted from a piece I co-authored earlier this year. See: Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "Trump's Bad Deal with the Taliban," *Politico*, March 18, 2019. (<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/03/18/donald-trump-afghanistan-zalmay-khalilzad-225815>)

Other al-Qaeda groups continue to honor the Taliban, too. For instance, AQAP's Khalid Batarfi described Mullah Omar as the "Emir of the Faithful" in a video released by the Taliban in Dec. 2016. In that same production, Batarfi praised Omar for sheltering bin Laden and other jihadist figures. An al-Qaeda group in Syria, Tanzim Hurras al-Din, has similarly held up the Taliban as a model for all jihadists.

All of this is an indication that Zawahiri's pledge of allegiance to Akhundzada is an important matter for the jihadists. This is even more true in the context of the competition between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's men describe him as the one true caliph, the "Emir of the Faithful." For al-Qaeda, only Akhundzada deserves that title. Zawahiri has also declared that the Taliban's Islamic Emirate will be the "nucleus" of a new global caliphate, which al-Qaeda's men are fighting to reestablish. There are also hints that, from an ideological perspective, al-Qaeda relies on the Taliban emir's tacit endorsement of its global operations.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, if Akhundzada formally rejected Zawahiri's blood oath and denounced al-Qaeda's global operations, then it would undermine al-Qaeda's foundational mythology. It is important to learn whether such a disavowal was part of the deal envisioned by the State Department. I suspect it was not. But I have not seen the draft text of the agreement, so I cannot say for certain. I do, however, think it is doubtful that Akhundzada, who sacrificed his own son in a suicide bombing, would be willing to renounce al-Qaeda's terrorism.

*Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Taliban's top deputy emir (or #2 leader), is a longtime al-Qaeda ally. There is no public indication that Haqqani or his network are prepared to truly renounce al-Qaeda.*

While al-Qaeda has an ideological commitment (at a minimum) to the Taliban's top leader, it has an operational relationship with the Taliban's #2: Sirajuddin Haqqani. I very much doubt that the decades-long partnership between al-Qaeda and the Haqqani Network will be severed. The Haqqani Network is core part of the Taliban and has conducted many of the worst terrorist attacks inside Afghanistan.

Sirajuddin is the son of Jalaluddin Haqqani, a powerbroker along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border who was one of bin Laden's earliest allies. Jalaluddin's eponymous network welcomed the first generation of Arab foreign fighters to the region during the 1980s jihad against the Soviets. Some of al-Qaeda's initial leaders were trained in the Haqqanis' camps.<sup>50</sup> The Haqqani Network has maintained close relations with al-Qaeda in the decades since.

For instance, a key document recovered in Osama bin Laden's compound shows that al-Qaeda's men continued to cooperate with Sirajuddin in Afghanistan years after the U.S.-led war began.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "Well-connected jihadist tweets, then deletes, explanation of al-Qaeda's oath to Mullah Omar," *FDD's Long War Journal*, July 30, 2014. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/07/well-connected-jihad.php>)

<sup>50</sup> For a discussion of these historical ties and more, see: Vahid Brown and Don Rassler, *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973-2012* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

<sup>51</sup> 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>)

In December 2016, the Haqqanis' media arm released a lengthy video celebrating the unbroken bond between the Taliban and al-Qaeda. After the Taliban announced Jalaluddin's death in September 2018, al-Qaeda issued a glowing eulogy, emphasizing the elderly Haqqani's brotherhood with bin Laden. Al-Qaeda's central leadership said it took "solace in the fact" that Sirajuddin was now "deputy of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's Emir of the Faithful," describing both Sirajuddin and Akhundzada as "our emirs."

In May of this year, Zawahiri eulogized Jalaluddin in a lengthy video, describing the senior Haqqani as a "hero" and the "eminent sheikh." Zawahiri also offered his condolences on behalf of the entire al-Qaeda organization to the "Emir of the Faithful" Haibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban's highest shura (or consultative) council, all of the Islamic Emirate's "officials and mujahideen," as well as Haqqani's family. The al-Qaeda leader specifically prayed that Sirajuddin, whom Zawahiri honored as his "eminence," would enjoy comfort and "patience."

The Taliban has repeatedly honored Jalaluddin. One of Taliban's own video eulogies featured commentary from jihadists in Syria, including an al-Qaeda-linked cleric from Saudi Arabia who has been designated as a terrorist by the U.S.

Sirajuddin is an internationally wanted terrorist, with a \$10 million bounty on his head. The U.S. and the United Nations have sanctioned the Haqqani Network and multiple members of the group. These legal measures are backed by abundant evidence. Not only have the Haqqanis conducted some of the most devastating terrorist attacks in Kabul and elsewhere in Afghanistan, they have also harbored al-Qaeda's internationally-focused operatives along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The U.S. and its allies traced a series of global terror plots to the Haqqanis' strongholds in northern Pakistan.

I am not aware of any evidence showing that Sirajuddin Haqqani or his men are willing to renounce al-Qaeda.

*Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) is fighting to resurrect the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.*

In 2014, Zawahiri announced the formation of al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), which operates throughout South Asia. AQIS brought together various al-Qaeda-allied groups, or parts of them, under its banner. AQIS's first major terrorist plot was an attempted hijacking of two Pakistani frigates. The jihadists intended to fire the ships' missiles at Indian and American naval vessels, possibly sparking an even more deadly international conflict. The plot was thwarted by Pakistani officials, but only after AQIS came close to taking control of the ships.

While AQIS' audacious terror schemes remain a concern, the group's primary mission is to help the Taliban resurrect its Islamic Emirate. AQIS has made this clear in its "code of conduct," which stresses AQIS's loyalty first to Zawahiri and then to Akhundzada. AQIS retains a significant footprint in Afghanistan. In 2015, for instance, American and Afghan forces

raided two large AQIS training camps in the Shorabak district of the southern Kandahar province. U.S. military officials revealed that one of the camps was nearly 30 square miles in size, making it probably the largest al-Qaeda training facility discovered post-9/11.<sup>52</sup> The Shorabak camps were hosted by the Taliban and intelligence recovered in the facilities showed that AQIS's tentacles stretch from Afghanistan into other nearby countries, including Bangladesh. Many al-Qaeda and AQIS members belong to both the Taliban and al-Qaeda, making it difficult to know how many al-Qaeda fighters there really are in Afghanistan. This problem was reflected in a recent report submitted to Congress. The report's authors noted "many al-Qaeda members belong to both groups simultaneously," meaning both the Taliban and al-Qaeda.<sup>53</sup> In addition, with respect to the Taliban, "al Qaeda runs training camps, helps plan and fund attacks, and creates and disseminates propaganda highlighting attacks by other groups."<sup>54</sup>

AQIS's first leader, Asim Umar, has already declared that America's defeat in Afghanistan is imminent. In a tract released in April 2017, Umar argued that Trump's "America First" policy really meant that the U.S. would "give up the leadership of the world." Umar exaggerated America's weakness, but he clearly saw a retreat from Afghanistan as a victory for al-Qaeda.

Commented [JH1]: Source?

*Other al-Qaeda-linked jihadists, including Central Asian, Uighur and Pakistani groups, are fighting on behalf of the Taliban as well.*

The UN Security Council reports I mentioned above outline the presence of various other al-Qaeda-linked groups in Afghanistan. I am not aware of any evidence indicating that the Taliban is going to renounce any of them.

<sup>52</sup> Dan Lamothe, "'Probably the largest' al-Qaeda training camp ever destroyed in Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, October 30, 2015. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/10/30/probably-the-largest-al-qaeda-training-camp-ever-destroyed-in-afghanistan/>)

<sup>53</sup> Operation Freedom's Sentinel, "Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress," January 1, 2019 – March 31, 2019, p. 26. ([https://media.defense.gov/2019/Aug/05/2002166644/-1/-/1/1/Q2FY2019\\_LEADIG\\_OFS\\_REPORT.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2019/Aug/05/2002166644/-1/-/1/1/Q2FY2019_LEADIG_OFS_REPORT.PDF))

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.