

US designates Haqqani Network in Pakistan as terrorist group

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On September 7, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton signed an order designating the Haqqani Network militia a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). She said it would also be classified as a “Specially Designated Global Terrorist” entity.

The Haqqani Network is one of several organizations in Pakistan—another being the top leadership group of Afghanistan’s former Taliban government—that helps organise armed resistance to the NATO occupation of Afghanistan.

This designation aims to force the group to halt its attacks on occupation forces in Afghanistan and to pressure Pakistan to launch military offensives in neighboring North Waziristan, where the Haqqani Network is reportedly based. It could also be the prelude to a ground attack by US forces in Afghanistan across the Afghan-Pakistani border. The US already routinely violates Pakistani sovereignty, carrying out drone strikes on Pakistani soil.

Washington claimed the Haqqani Network was behind many attacks in Afghanistan, including last September’s high-profile assault on the heavily-guarded US embassy and NATO’s main command centre in Kabul. It was also blamed for the attack this April in Kabul targeting NATO and Afghan government facilities.

The Obama administration and the US Congress have debated designating the Haqqani Network as a terrorist organisation for two years. The Pentagon and the Congress pushed the State Department hard to take this decision.

A reason for the delay in this announcement was its impact on Washington’s already tense relationship with Pakistan. A senior US official said that the State Department spoke to the “civilian and military leadership in Pakistan” before announcing the

designation. He added that “they did not express concern” and “remain committed to battling extremism.” He noted increased Pakistan-US collaboration since the reopening of NATO supply lanes across the country.

Playing down the US move, Pakistani Ambassador to the US Sherry Rehman said: “This is an internal matter for the United States. It’s not our business.”

Behind the diplomatic language lies bitterness between the two countries. US officials accuse Pakistan’s main intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), of backing the Haqqani Network. After Washington organised the operation to murder Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and killed 24 Pakistani soldiers in an outpost along the Afghan border last November, tensions between the two countries were heightened.

In July, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta threatened attacks on Haqqani forces inside Pakistan if the Pakistani government failed to attack the group on its own.

Despite criticism from Islamabad, the CIA is continuing drone attacks in tribal areas on the Pakistan-Afghan border. Last month US officials said that a drone strike had killed a prominent Haqqani network leader, Badruddin Haqqani. Though ISI also confirmed the death, the Taliban denied it.

After Clinton announced the blacklisting of the Haqqanis, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari and chief of staff of the army General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani discussed the issue. The Pakistani daily *The Nation* reported that they agreed that “no external pressure would be accepted regarding North Waziristan operations.”

Islamabad has not said anything about the ban, however, as it is a highly sensitive issue. Earlier reports

indicate that the army brass has planned an offensive in North Waziristan against the Haqqani group. However, Zardari and Kayani are cautious not to make it appear that the operation is being carried out under pressure from Washington, fearing popular opposition in Pakistan.

Previous offensives by the Pakistani army in the Swat Valley, Buner, and Lower Dir regions of Pakistan in 2009 forced millions of people from their homes. (See: Millions displaced as Pakistani military extends its offensive).

The Pentagon fully backed the move against the Haqqanis. Pentagon press secretary George Little said the Haqqani Network represents “a significant threat to the US national security,” and that the US will continue to attack it.

The Taliban responded to the ban by launching a suicide attack in Kabul on Saturday near NATO headquarters, killing eight people. Kabul said the dead were civilians, but the Taliban said they were “five top-level CIA agents.” A pro-Taliban web site characterised the anti-Haqqani ban as “criminal,” adding that its “negative consequences ... will fall squarely on the shoulders of the deceitful America.”

A senior Taliban leader told the Associated Press that the Haqqani Network is discussing new attacks on US and NATO forces with Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar.

Backing the Obama administration’s decision to blacklist the Haqqani Network, US-based *Foreign Policy* magazine’s National Security Channel argued that if Washington wants “Pakistan’s military and intelligence agency to change course, the United States needs to change course as well.” It argued for “discussions about declaring Pakistan to be a state that supports terrorism.” Its piece was titled “State of Terror: Why Obama should blacklist Pakistan—not just the Haqqanis.”

The piece discussed the dilemma of Pakistan in attacking the Haqqani Network. It pointed out that Pakistan fears its strategic interests in Afghanistan are in danger: “Pakistan believes that India has exploited the US security umbrella and is poised to harm Pakistan’s interests in Afghanistan and in Pakistan.”

The *New York Times* noted differences in Washington, “including several in the White House” who “expressed deep reservations that blacklisting the

group could further damage badly frayed relations with Pakistan, undercutting peace talks with the Taliban.”

The *Times* ran an op-ed piece on September 11 questioning the decision. It wrote that the US has placed the Haqqani group “alongside Hamas and Al Qaeda. But to what end?” It added, “To brand a group a foreign terrorist organization is not only a firm declaration that it is an enemy; it also limits America’s future political options.”

These are simply tactical difference on how to manipulate these groups to advance the strategic ends of US imperialism.

The Pakistani English daily *Dawn* reported four days ago that the Obama administration is seeking to continue talks with the Taliban. It said that the “Obama administration hopes to stay engaged with the Taliban, including the Haqqani Network, even though it has designated the group a foreign terrorist organisation.”

Against the backdrop of Obama’s promised withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in 2014, Washington is desperate to bloody the Taliban and the Haqqani Network while negotiating a deal at the same time. Its aim is to keep the tottering regime of Afghan President Hamid Karzai in power and maintain Afghanistan as a base of US operations in Central Asia.

The hypocrisy of US foreign policy as it advances its strategic interests knows no bounds. The Haqqani network itself descends from US-backed *mujahedin* militias that fought the Soviet-backed government in Kabul in the late 1970s and 1980s. The CIA provided them with money and weapons via the ISI.

Now, however, the Haqqani Network has fallen afoul of the US State Department, even as Washington debates how best to continue negotiations with it.



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