

Afghan insurgency leader assassinated in Islamabad

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Nasiruddin Haqqani—reputedly the chief financier of the “Haqqani Network,” a Taliban-allied militia that functions on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border—was gunned down Sunday in the outskirts of Islamabad.

No one has claimed responsibility for the well-organized, professionally executed assassination.

Earlier this month, Hakimullah Mehsud, the head of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a Pakistani offshoot and ally of the Afghan Taliban, was summarily executed in a US drone strike. Islamabad angrily protested the drone attack, saying that not only was it a flagrant violation of international law and Pakistani sovereignty, but that it was clearly aimed at derailing Islamabad’s attempts to bring the TTP to the negotiating table.

The governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan have said next to nothing about Haqqani’s death, except to deny any responsibility for his killing.

The TTP, meanwhile, has charged that the assassination was carried out by Pakistani security forces, most likely the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, on the US’s behalf.

Washington has had a long and complex relationship with the Haqqani Network. It and its Pakistani and Saudi allies were patrons of its founder, Jalaluddin Haqqani, a leading mujahedin commander in the US-sponsored war against the Soviet-backed government in Kabul.

A US drone strike reportedly killed one of Nasiruddin’s brothers, Badruddin Haqqani, in August 2012. Moreover, the US has long been pressing the Pakistani military to mount a military offensive against the Network’s reputed stronghold in North Waziristan.

Washington holds the Haqqani Network responsible for some of the most daring and devastating attacks on US forces in Afghanistan, including the killing of seven CIA agents in a suicide attack in 2009 and a 2011 attack in Kabul that targeted the US embassy and NATO’s main

command center.

Yet as recently as the summer of 2011—and this was subsequently confirmed by then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton—a mid-level US diplomat held exploratory peace talks with a Haqqani Network representative.

The circumstances of Nasiruddin Haqqani’s death lend credence to claims that he served as a go-between between the Network and sections of Pakistan’s security forces.

While lending pivotal support to the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, acquiescing to drone strikes that have wreaked death and fear across Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas, and mounting military operations against the Afghan Taliban’s Pakistani-based Pashtun tribal allies that have displaced millions of people and flattened whole villages, Pakistan’s military-intelligence apparatus has reportedly maintained covert ties with the Taliban and Taliban-allied elements. By so doing Islamabad, which along with Saudi Arabia was the Taliban’s chief foreign sponsor in the 1990s, seeks to ensure that its arch-rival India is never able to supplant it as Kabul’s closest regional partner.

Sections of the US military and intelligence apparatus have charged that relations between the ISI and the Haqqani Network have been especially close.

Nasiruddin Haqqani was assassinated while entering a bakery in Bhara Kahu, a few miles from the US embassy in Islamabad. Gunmen riding motorbikes opened fire at him, then stopped and reportedly checked his pulse to confirm his death before fleeing the scene.

According to the *Express Tribune*, Haqqani’s body had been removed before local police even arrived at the murder scene. A prayer service was reportedly held for him at a secret location in the garrison city of Rawalpindi before his body was transported to Miran Shah, the main town of North Waziristan, situated about 10 miles from the Afghanistan border, for burial.

Nasiruddin Haqqani was apparently living in Pakistan's capital and reportedly continued to travel to the Gulf States to raise funds for the Network from sections of the sheikdoms' wealthy elites. Taliban sources told the *Daily Beast*, that Nasiruddin visited Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates once every four months.

He also reportedly represented the Haqqani Network when a Taliban office was opened in Doha, Qatar in anticipation of peace negotiations with the US. The talks, however, never got off the ground and the office was later closed at the insistence of Hamid Karzai who feared the US, with Pakistani support, was preparing to strike a deal with the Taliban at the expense of his puppet regime.

The assassination of Haqqani is only the latest expression of an extremely volatile situation.

After 12 years of war and occupation that have produced massive social dislocation and tens of thousands of military and civilian casualties, the US is seeking to significantly draw down its military forces in Afghanistan and to reorganize its client government in Kabul.

Yet Washington has thus far failed to sufficiently bloody the Taliban insurgency so as to force it to drop its demand that the US pledge to withdraw from Afghanistan before it will enter formal peace talks.

The US military drawdown is based on the Obama administration's calculation that the US's global strategic interests will be better served by redeploying military firepower and funds elsewhere. Yet it is also determined to maintain a strategic beachhead in Central Asia in the form of US military bases in Afghanistan manned by thousands of US troops.

Washington covets Central Asia's oil and natural gas resources, but even more decisive is Afghanistan's geo-strategic importance. It borders or is in close proximity to three major countries that US imperialism views as threats to its global hegemony—China, Russia and Iran.

The US's Pakistan and Afghan allies, meanwhile, must contend with mass opposition to the war among their populations.

Opposition to the war was a major factor in the crushing defeat suffered by the Pakistan People's Party led-coalition in last May's national election,

Hamid Karzai, who is constitutionally prevented from seeking a third term as Afghan president in elections slated for next April, has made a show of resisting the Obama administration's demand that US troops stationed in Afghanistan after their UN mandate expires next year be given immunity from prosecution in Afghan courts. Karzai has also demanded an end to the brutal night raids

carried out by US special forces.

The volatility has only served to further strain relations between Islamabad and Kabul. The Karzai regime charges that Islamabad is not doing enough to shut down the Taliban's cross-border bases. A recent *New York Times* report revealed that the Afghan government had been trying to establish a partnership with the Pakistani Taliban as a means of exerting pressure on Islamabad. Afghan officials, added the *Times*, believed that sections of the US intelligence apparatus had given a greenlight to this stratagem.

In the wake of Haqqani's assassination, Afghan officials were quick to suggest that no government or state was involved, attributing it to an internal feud within the Haqqani Network.

Pakistan, for its part, is alarmed by the growing partnership between Afghanistan and India, which includes Indian training of Afghan security forces. It is angered that Washington has encouraged closer ties between Kabul and New Delhi, viewing this as yet another instance in which Washington has favored the development of its "global strategic partnership" with India over its decades-long alliance with Pakistan.

When US Secretary of State John Kerry visited New Delhi last June a major concern he had to address was the place occupied by the Haqqani Network in any US peace talks with the Taliban. New Delhi argued that the Haqqani Network, with the complicity of Pakistan's security forces, was targeting Indian interests in Afghanistan, including its diplomatic missions and various construction projects.

Islamabad has leveled the counter charge that India is using its growing presence in Afghanistan to provide support for the separatist insurgency in the Pakistani province of Balochistan.



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