

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Clarify U.S. Policy on Afghanistan: Designate Haqqani Network Terrorists

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For the past two years, the Obama Administration has pursued on-again, off-again reconciliation talks with Taliban leaders in an effort to bring an end to the Afghan war. As part of this process, it has wrestled with how to handle the Haqqani network, a Taliban affiliate organization headquartered in Pakistan's tribal border areas that has extensive influence in eastern Afghanistan and is responsible for some of the most vicious attacks against coalition forces.

Congress recently passed legislation, which President Obama signed into law on August 10, requiring the Administration to determine within 30 days whether the Haqqani network should officially be classified as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) and, if not, to explain its rationale. The decision will be watched closely in the region and will

signal—to Afghans, Pakistanis, and terrorist leaders alike—the degree of U.S. commitment to uprooting terrorism from the region.

The U.S. should stand by its counterterrorism principles and identify this deadly terrorist organization for what it is. This would reduce Pakistani space for further delaying military operations against the group and assist the U.S. in attacking the group's financial network.

**Designation Supports U.S. Strategy.** There is an active debate within the U.S. Administration about whether the Haqqani network will be part of a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan. Some in the Administration argue that designating the group as a terrorist organization would preclude the U.S. from being able to negotiate with its members. A related argument holds that because of their extensive influence and deep tribal networks in eastern Afghanistan, the Haqqanis will eventually have to be part of a negotiated settlement.

The power and influence of the Haqqani network should not be the determining factor in deciding whether the U.S. declares it an FTO. Instead, the Administration should understand that an FTO designation

would help the U.S. achieve its objectives in the region in the following ways:

- It would publicly stigmatize the organization, which can assist in garnering cooperation from foreign governments, including Pakistan.
- It would bring clarity and precision to the interagency process for implementing policies that weaken the group and shut down its ability to conduct attacks.
- It would help pressure the group financially, particularly regarding its fundraising activities in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The U.S. has already sanctioned nine Haqqani leaders, but designating the entire network could help tighten the noose on the organization. A recent report by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point details how the Haqqani network has evolved into a “sophisticated, diverse, and transnational crime network.” The report notes that the Haqqanis have never faced a sustained campaign against their financial networks.

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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib3705>

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**Need for Consistency and Clarity.** Failing to designate the Haqqani network as a terrorist organization, especially following such high-profile attention on the issue, would demoralize Afghans who are fighting for a better future for their country and look to the U.S. to help them achieve it. The U.S. needs to clarify its goals in Afghanistan and be more consistent in its messaging to Pakistan. Islamabad points to inconsistent U.S. policies toward the Taliban and Haqqani network to justify its own continued ambiguous policies toward these groups waging war against the U.S.

Not designating the Haqqani network as an FTO would also give the Pakistani government an excuse for continuing to delay military operations against the group's sanctuary on its territory, which is necessary to weaken the organization. According to U.S. media reports, after the June 1 attack against Camp Salerno, an important U.S. base in Khost province, Pakistani Chief of the Army Ashfaq Kayani told U.S. officials that

he would launch a military operation against the Haqqanis over the next year. If General Kayani perceives that the U.S. is backing away from a confrontational approach toward the Haqqani network, he will likely feel less compelled to follow through on his pledge.

The Haqqani network has had ample chance to demonstrate willingness to negotiate. The Administration should weigh the likelihood of engaging in productive talks with the group against the mortal threat that it remains to U.S. troops and civilians in Afghanistan. Indeed, the Administration should have designated the Haqqani network as a terrorist organization immediately following the September 13, 2011, attack on the U.S. embassy in Kabul to signal that it would not countenance attacks on U.S. civilians.

The Haqqani network would likely be more willing to engage in negotiations if weakened on the battlefield in Afghanistan and within its sanctuary inside Pakistan. Thus, the

U.S. should put military and other pressure on the Haqqanis to convince them that they stand to gain more by participating in peace talks than by fighting coalition and Afghan forces. Failing to designate the group as a terrorist organization would be unlikely to motivate the leadership to join negotiations and would almost certainly discourage the Pakistanis from squeezing the group militarily.

**End the Waffling.** Designating the Haqqani network as an FTO would help U.S. efforts to counter the group by improving interagency efforts to block its access to financing. It would also help convince the Pakistanis to target the organization militarily on their territory. Continuing to delay a decision on the issue will only undermine confidence in U.S. strategy and create confusion about overall U.S. objectives in the region.

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1. Audrey Kurth Cronin, "The 'FTO List' and Congress: Sanctioning Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations," Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, October 21, 2003, <http://www.fas.org/irp/crs/RL32120.pdf> (accessed August 20, 2012).
  2. Gretchen Peters, "Haqqani Network Financing: The Evolution of an Industry," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, July 2012, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/haqqani-network-financing> (accessed August 20, 2012).