



## The Haqqani Network Blacklisted: From US Asset to Special Foe

**Author :** Thomas Ruttig

**Published:** 20 September 2012

**Downloaded:** 15 October 2018

**Download URL:**

<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-admin/post.php>



Earlier this month, the US government blacklisted the Haqqani network, labelling it a 'foreign terrorist organisation'. Leaving aside the pros and cons of this decision, which have been fairly widely discussed, AAN co-director Thomas Ruttig looks at other questions: why did the blacklisting happen so late and why is the network singled out from the Taliban movement to which it belongs? He sketches the relationship of the Haqqani network with the Taliban movement and how it turned from being an US ally into one of its 'most formidable adversaries' (Financial Times)(1).

On 7 September, under [pressure from Congress](#), the US government put the Haqqani network on its list of 'foreign terrorist organisations' - or FTA. Congress had earlier given the government one month to ponder whether it wanted to accept or reject this declaration and during this month, a number of experts weighed up the pros and cons of the possible blacklisting. Some, like Joshua Foust [in The Atlantic magazine](#), said it was long overdue, given the undoubted role the Haqqani network has been playing in a long series of high-profile terrorist attacks in Kabul and elsewhere in Afghanistan. Others argued tactically, saying blacklisting limited 'future political options' because it makes 'a comprehensive settlement harder to achieve'. This quote is from Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, authors of the essential book 'An Enemy We Created' (about the Taliban al-Qaeda



relationship), from [their op-ed](#) in the *New York Times* on 11 September here (see also point 7 in an earlier [AAN blog](#)).<sup>(2)</sup>

Whether or not the blacklisting is useful or even deserved, there are other questions: why blacklist the Haqqani network now? Why not earlier? And why single out the Haqqani network when the Taleban movement, as a whole – and of which the Haqqani network is a part -, isn't blacklisted?

That the blacklisting has come now seems a function of US election dynamics, the way Congress forced Obama to act and the inadvisability of him appearing to blink on a security issue less than two months before the ballots are cast. Working out why it was not done a long time ago is more difficult, and even more so for the younger Bush's than for the Obama administration. Evidence sufficient to outlaw the Haqqani network has been piling up for years – even if its involvement has not been proven beyond any doubt in every single one of the so-called complex attacks in its area of operation (originally the southeast but increasingly Kabul and the Jalalabad region) – from the 2008 bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul to this year's brutal [attack on the Kargha Lake](#) resort.

Similarly, the Haqqani network's close links with al-Qaeda and its role as, in the words of Don Rassler and Vahid Brown at West Point [in a recent report](#), a 'nexus player [...], an enabler for other groups and [...] fountainhead (*manba*) of local, regional and global militancy' have also been known for a long time. This has been proven again by six newly declassified [US documents released](#) by the US-based National Security Archive (NSA) on 11 September. The first of the six documents that mentions the Haqqanis' dealings with Arab and Kashmiri terrorists is dated 29 March 1995. And a cable from 1999 noted that they also included 'those linked to Bin Laden's group'.

The Bush administration could easily have blacklisted the Haqqani network long ago – it would not have hampered any talks since his administration had refused to 'talk to terrorists' anyway. Obama, in contrast, does not rule out a political settlement including the Taleban (although under a strategy of simultaneously 'talking and fighting'), and blacklisting the Haqqanis might result in a setback for this part of his strategy.

Finally: why single out the Haqqani network, as a distinct entity, for blacklisting? Of course, the Haqqani network is not an invention of the west. It has its distinct roots in Afghanistan's history, geography and tribal genealogy, as a part of a former (and still existing) mujahedin organisation, *Hezb-e Islami Khales*, based on the south-eastern Džadran tribe, as opposed to the 'Kandahari' mainstream Taleban. Haqqani, probably the first Afghan Islamist to take up weapons against a central government in Kabul<sup>(3)</sup>, was one of Hezb-e Islami Khales's two key commanders. (The other was the late Abdul Haq, who in the 1980s operated at the gates of Kabul and was killed by the Taleban in October 2001 when trying to trigger an anti-Taleban movement.) Haqqani was also one of the party's two deputy leaders. (The other was Haji Din Muhammad, recently nominated for the tribes and borders ministry – he was [rejected by parliament](#)).



With this background, Jalaluddin Haqqani's network has been extremely attractive to the Taliban. When they were a rising power in the 1990s, it provided them with an important base in a part of the country, the southeast, where they had no roots. For that reason, they sought to co-opt the Haqqani network into the Islamic Emirate. He initially wanted to resist them when they approached Paktia and Khost, but was persuaded to join the movement by local tribal elders.

Despite its distinct origins and its separate links to the outside world, to sponsors in the Gulf region and old allies in Pakistan, which allowed it to retain a certain autonomy of action, the Haqqani network is an integral part of the Taliban movement and not an entity, or even organisation, apart from it. In the broader Taliban movement which is a network of networks(4), the Haqqanis' is just one its biggest and certainly its most well-known one.

Last but not least, both mainstream Taliban and the Haqqanis also insist that this is the case. The Haqqanis' day-to-day commander, Jalaluddin's son Serajuddin, emphasised this in an interview in 2010.(5) After the recent blacklisting, the Taliban issued a statement that called Jalaluddin Haqqani a member of its leadership council.(6) Even more significantly, both sides have never gone public against each other, and no Haqqani ever issued a statement on behalf of the Taliban, leaving this to the movement's official spokesmen. The Taliban mainstream has never condemned any attack carried out by (or attributed to) the Haqqani network, even when it clearly violated the Taliban's *lahya* (code of conduct), such as the obligation to treat civilians with care. In the consequence, the Taliban often accept responsibility for brutal or outrageous attacks thought to be the work of the Haqqanis.

As so often in Afghanistan, some reason why people behave in a certain way today can be found by looking at history. Here, the NSA documents kick in again. They show how the relationship between the US government and the Haqqani network (although this name is a recent 'neologism' as the last [RUSI report](#) pointed out)(7) has evolved from alliance to enmity.

In a cable written at the US Embassy in Islamabad on 24 May 1999 about a meeting two days previously between a US Political Officer and Jalaluddin Haqqani(8), a US diplomat noted that Haqqani was still 'deeply appreciative for [sic] US assistance during the "jihad" (holy war)' against the Soviets but that he had opened the meeting 'darkly joking that it was "good to meet someone from the country which had destroyed my base, my madrassa, and killed 25 of my mujahideen"', a reference to the US cruise missiles which targeted several of his camps in Khost after al-Qaeda had blown up two US embassies in East Africa. During the 1980s, according to Steve Coll(9), Haqqani had 'the CIA's full support', received payments and supplies, was entrusted with testing new weapon systems and tactics and was a so-called 'unilateral asset' of the agency. The late US Congressman, Charlie Wilson, once called Haqqani '[goodness personified](#)' and slept in the same camp in 1987 that was hit by US missiles eleven years later. On the day when the US government decided to blacklist the Haqqani network, Jere van Dyk, a US journalist, who met Haqqani in 1981, [told the story](#) of how he met a very friendly Haqqani and they 'rode horses together in the mountains', the commander giving him 'tea and honey'.



The cable quoted above also shows that the US did not give up on Haqqani even after he had become a Taleban minister (for border and tribal affairs). It notes that this was the first meeting between a US official and Haqqani for 'more than three years'. In other words, US officials also met him when he held the same office in the mujahedin government (the Islamic State of Afghanistan) before 1996. Early on after the fall of the Taleban regime, in early 2002, [attempts to pull](#) Jalaluddin Haqqani to the Karzai side - apparently by western intelligence agencies and through Pakistan - were reported, but were [turned down](#) by Haqqani.

Politics around the first international Afghanistan conference in Bonn in late 2001 contributed to his decision. There, Amanullah D Zadran, the brother of the Haqqanis' main rival in south-eastern Afghanistan, commander Pacha Khan D Zadran who belongs to the same tribe (but a different sub-tribe) as the Haqqanis, was given the ministry Haqqani had held under the mujahedin and Taleban governments. While this was an attempt to placate one of the few armed supporters of the Rome group, which supported a role for the former Afghan king in post-Taleban Afghanistan, Haqqani – who had already been put out by the lack of invitation to Bonn – saw this as an affront.

In contrast to Haqqani, Pacha Khan had early on made the right choice: even before 9/11, he had approached the UN and several western embassies in Islamabad with the proposal to organise an uprising in south-eastern Afghanistan that would bring the former king home and establish an alternative government on Afghan soil in Khost from where a tribal movement would march on Kabul and push the Taleban out. (The Taleban regime had already developed some cracks after unacceptable heavy-handedness and forced recruitments in the tribal areas of southern and south-eastern Afghanistan.) While Pacha Khan's 'silly' idea was turned down at the time, after 9/11, people remembered and he became one of the few Pashtun 'assets' of the US in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks, giving him an advantage over Haqqani in their home region.

Another opportunity to establish a channel with the Haqqani network was missed when Jalaluddin Haqqani's brother, Ibrahim Omari (often but wrongly called Ibrahim Haqqani), surrendered<sup>(10)</sup> during Operation Anaconda in 2002 in Shahikot in Paktia. He was kept in a guesthouse of a close ally of the then defence minister, General Fahim, in Logar but no attempts were made by the US side to utilise his presence. (This author followed these events closely while working as the then head of the UNAMA regional office.) After a couple of years, he was allowed to walk away, later to re-emerge in Pakistan.

In more recent years, as the Haqqani network has become more active in the insurgency, its base across the border in Miran Shah has consistently been pounded by US drones. Jalaluddin Haqqani has lost many close family members, including women and children and recently one of his sons, Badruddin<sup>(11)</sup>, in these attacks.

The persistent use of the term 'Haqqani Network', with the capital 'N' indicating an official organisation different from the Taleban, by many international experts on terrorism or the Taleban seems to be part of the attempt to drive a wedge into the Taleban movement. It is



based on the (I think, failed) assumption that the Taliban can be defeated, or at least weakened, by splitting them. The same approach constitutes the basis for other core elements of Western ‘Taliban policy’ like the reintegration programme that aims to persuade – again far from successfully (see for example [this report](#)) – individual insurgent groups or fighters to break with the movement and lay down weapons in exchange for financial incentives and, more recently, incorporation into the Afghan armed forces, particularly the ALP.

If one believes that negotiations with the Taliban can contribute to a political settlement in Afghanistan (to avoid misunderstandings: we have argued at various times that bilateral talks only are insufficient and a much more inclusive approach needs to be taken), trying to split the Taliban is not desirable and goes in the wrong direction. In any negotiation, it is more desirable to talk with one adversary led by a unified command. This provides the opportunity to hold it accountable for any violations if an agreement is reached. Dissenting groups might spin-off early enough, and it would be better if all sides involved – including the adversary – are interested in controlling the dissenters, not least so safeguard the political gains linked to a possible agreement.

In one important humanitarian aspect, the selective blacklisting of the Haqqani network could even turn out as a US own goal. The Haqqanis seem to hold the only US soldier captured in Afghanistan, Bowe Bergdahl. He has reportedly been subject of the initial round of the US-Taliban talks in Qatar, in attempt to exchange him for a number of high-ranking Taliban inmates of Guantanamo as a measure to build up some mutual trust. If this would have worked out, the Taliban would have shown that the Haqqanis are part of the deal – a this would have set a precedence for follow-up discussions. It has been suggested repeatedly – for example [by Ahmed Rashid](#) - that confidence building measures ‘to reduce the violence’ should be pursued that could include a Taliban commitment to stop attacking civilians or stop targeted killing of government officials. Such a step could have taken the Haqqani network out of some of its action much more effectively than the blacklisting.

*Also read:*

Hafizullah Gardesh, [‘Scepticism as US Blacklists Afghan Insurgent Group’](#), IWPR, 13 Sept 2012, with reactions of Afghan analysts and politicians.

More documents about the Taliban from the National Security Archive [here](#).

(1) Matthew Green, [‘A Lethal Legion’](#), *Financial Times*, 30 October 2011.

(2) The Taliban stated [in a reaction](#) to the blacklisting that ‘no black or white lists’ would effect their operations.

(3) In 1975, or even earlier (there is no written record I know of, and a number of interviews in the region came up with different years), a group of fighters led by Jalaluddin Haqqani carried out an ambush in Ziruk district on a local governor who belonged to the communist People’s



Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). It is unclear whether this attack was a part of the failed countrywide Islamist uprising on 22 July 1975 against the coalition government of President Muhammad Daud and the PDPA in which Ahmad Shah Massud and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar also participated.

(4) For more details, see my chapter 'Loya Paktia's Insurgency: The Haqqani Network as an Autonomous Entity', in: Antonio Giustozzi (ed.), *Decoding the New Taliban*, Hurst 2009.

(5) It has been published by NEFA (hard copy with the author). He says:

*'The Haqqani Group or the Haqqani Network Group is not an official name or a name we chose. This name is used by the enemies in order to divide the Mujahideen. We are under the highly capable Emirate of the Amir of the Faithful Mullah Umar, may Allah protect him, and we wage Jihad in the path of Allah. The name of Islamic Emirate is the official name for us and all the Mujahideen in Afghanistan.'*

(6) Here is the full paragraph, quoted from the Taleban's [Shahamat website](#):

*'The honorable Mawlawi Jalaluddin Haqqani is a member of the Leadership Council of Islamic Emirate and is a close, loyal and trusted associate of the esteemed Amir-ul-Mumineen and those Mujahideen entrusted under the command of his sons are in fact the heroic Mujahideen of Islamic Emirate who like other Mujahideen strictly obey the esteemed Amir-ul-Mumineen and wage Jihad against the invaders throughout the country.'*

(7) I also have not found the use of a Dari or Pashto equivalent of it (likes *shabaka-ye Haqqani*) in Afghanistan.

(8) According to the cable, the meeting was arranged by Amin Mujaddedi who is characterised there as a 'Naqshbansi Sufi leader' and who formally headed the post-Taleban regime *Khuddam ul-Furqan* party (more on this group [here](#)) established in Islamabad as a 'moderate Taleban' party. Mojaddedi, the cable explains, also acted as translator in the meeting.

(9) Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, New York: Penguin Press, 2004, pp 157, 167, 202; Steve Coll, 'The Bin Ladens', quoted in Karen DeYoung, 'Missiles for Afghanistan, Bin Laden took part in 1986 arms deal, book says', *Washington Post*, 1 April 2008, p A12.

(10) According to the *Wall Street Journal* [report](#) already quoted above, he was arrested by US forces.

(11) The Pakistani *Daily Times* [quoted](#) Pakistani intelligence officials saying that their 'informers' had told them that Badruddin Haqqani had been killed. The Taleban, though, [denied](#) that he has been killed as 'enemy propaganda'.

The top US military officer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen, directly accused Pakistan's intelligence service on Thursday of supporting the Haqqani network's attack on the US embassy in Kabul, a truck bombing on a NATO outpost and a June attack on Kabul's InterContinental hotel. Sangeen Zadran, Sirajuddin and Badruddin Haqqani have been designated by the State Department, while the Treasury has targeted four other Haqqani leaders: Nasiruddin Haqqani, Khalil Haqqani, Ahmed Jan Wazir and Fazl Rabi. "Certainly FTO (foreign terrorist organization) designation is something The US has decided to blacklist as a terrorist group the Haqqani network, perhaps the most ruthless and feared branch of the Afghan insurgency, the New York Times has reported. For many, the surprise was not the decision itself, but how long it has taken. The group is believed to have been behind most of the spectacular attacks in Kabul in recent years, including a rocket assault on the US embassy, as well as deadly suicide bombings of US troops. But there have been concerns that targeting the group will worsen already difficult relations with Pakistan, long suspected of supporting the group t