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The Haqqani Network: A brief profile

Introduction

After the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the international community has been attempting to simultaneously process the recent developments in Afghanistan, the miscalculations of political analysts convinced that the Taliban would not be able to advance at this pace, and the consequences that a Taliban government will have for the country, the region, and the rest of the world.

Assessments about the trajectories of Afghanistan are thereby often solely focused on the Taliban's infringement of human rights and the role that Western countries and the payments of foreign aid play in deciding about the future of around 39 million Afghan citizens in the face of a glooming humanitarian crisis. While these discussions are of utmost importance, only marginal attention has been paid to the silent rise of the Haqqani network within the Taliban leadership.

The Haqqani network is a Pakistani/Afghan Sunni Islamist militant organization that was originally formed in the 1970s as an insurgent group and has grown increasingly powerful within the ranks of the new Afghan government under Taliban rule. The group is feared for being extremely violent and particularly dangerous, with designated terrorists like Sirajuddin Haqqani at the forefront of Haqqani network operations, and now in the Ministries of Afghanistan.

Figure 1: Most Wanted search poster of the United States' Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for the current Interior Minister of Afghanistan and US-designated terrorist Sirajuddin Haqqani.

SEEKING INFORMATION
SIRAJUDDIN HAQQANI

DESCRIPTION

Aliases: Siraj, Khalifa, Mohammad Siraj, Sarajadin, Croddiddin, Seraj, Arkani, Khalifa (Boss) Shahab, Halifa, Ahmed Zia, Sirajuddin Jallalouddine Haqqani, Siraj Haqqani, Sarajuddin Haqqani, Siraj Haqqan, Saraj Haqqani	Place of Birth: Afghanistan/Pakistan
Date(s) of Birth Used: Circa 1973 - 1980	Eyes: Brown or Black
Hair: Black	Weight: 150 pounds
Height: 5'7"	Complexion: Light with wrinkles
Build: Medium	Citizenship: Unknown
Sex: Male	Scars and Marks: None known
Languages: Arabic	

REWARD
The Rewards For Justice Program, United States Department of State, is offering a reward of up to \$10 million for information leading directly to the arrest of Sirajuddin Haqqani.

REMARKS
Haqqani is thought to stay in Pakistan, specifically the Miram Shah, North Waziristan, Pakistan, area. He is reportedly a senior leader of the Haqqani network, and maintains close ties to the Taliban and al Qaeda. Haqqani is a specially designated global terrorist.

DETAILS
Sirajuddin Haqqani is wanted for questioning in connection with the January 2008 attack on a hotel in Kabul, Afghanistan, that killed six people, including an American citizen. He is believed to have coordinated and participated in cross-border attacks against United States and coalition forces in Afghanistan. Haqqani also allegedly was involved in the planning of the assassination attempt on Afghan President Hamid Karzai in 2008.

SHOULD BE CONSIDERED ARMED AND DANGEROUS
If you have any information concerning this person, please contact your local FBI office or the nearest American Embassy or Consulate.
Field Office: Washington D.C.

Source: FBI (n.d.).

But how did a militant network located in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) persist over several decades and ultimately rose to power in Kabul? This article seeks to examine the Haqqani network that has been called the "*most lethal arm of the Taliban*"

(Siddique, 2021) and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the Taliban as a terrorist organization that is fragmented not only in terms of the strategies used but also in its alliances and short-term goals. While the Haqqani network has demonstrated its operational reach and its willingness to use violence to project influence, it is now in charge of bringing peace to a conflict-ridden nation on the verge of starvation (UNHRC, 2022).

Building the Haqqani Network

The origins of the Haqqani network go back to the 1970s, when Jalaluddin Haqqani, a Pashtun tribesman who was born as the son of a trader in Afghanistan's Paktia Province, graduated from the Darul-ul-Uloom Haqqania Madrassa in Akhora Khattak, Pakistan, where he studied to become an Islamic scholar. Founded in 1947, the madrassa is one of Pakistan's oldest and largest Deobandi Islamic seminaries and is also called the "*University of Jihad*" due to its infamous alumni that include former Taliban leader Akhtar Mansoor and several other leading figures of the Taliban and the Haqqani Network, the latter one even owing its name to the madrassa. Jalaluddin had begun to establish connections with the Persian Gulf and Afghan Islamist party leaders like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Ahmad Shah Massoud and became "*one of the earliest militant Islamists to emerge in Afghanistan*" (Peters, 2012a, p. 14). Years before the Soviet Invasion, after Mohammad Daud Khan's coup unseated Afghan monarch Zahir Shah in 1973, Jalaluddin Haqqani and other Afghan Islamists traveled to Miran Shah in the North Waziristan Agency of the FATA for training and support by Pakistani State agencies in order to combat the new pro-Soviet Afghan regime that worried Islamabad (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018; Peters, 2012a). This indicates that from the beginning, Pakistan's role was crucial in providing a safe haven for individuals who would go on to become prominent Mujahideen commanders in the 1980s. From the mid-1970s, the Haqqani network's operational influence over the Southeastern Afghan provinces of Khost, Paktia and Paktika (together known as Loya Paktia) and Pakistan's North Waziristan continued to grow. Ressler and Brown point out that,

"This mountainous region, which straddles the Durand Line and has long been a center for political resistance against Afghan regimes, is host to a number of militant networks and has served as the group's primary area of operation and its key region of refuge and political interest" (Ressler & Brown, 2011, p. 8).

Figure 2. Main areas of Haqqani influence.



Source: Ahmed (2013).

The Haqqani network first rose to dubious prominence as a resistance movement against the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989 due to its “*sufficient military infrastructure, political ties, and resource links in Pakistan to effectively conduct a sustained campaign against the Soviet-backed Afghan regime*” (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018). In his position as a valuable CIA asset and crucial proxy for the US and Pakistan and their intelligence agencies, Jalaluddin became a prominent guerilla commander who was lauded by the US for repelling Soviet forces and used as a middleman to send money and material to the Mujahideen (The Economist, 2011). Meanwhile, he also forged close alliances with al-Qaeda’s Osama bin Laden, other foreign Islamic militant groups like the Pakistani Taliban and Saudi intelligence agencies (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018). Furthermore, Jalaluddin served as a senior member of the anti-Soviet and anti-Daud resistance movement Hizb-i-Islami and played an important role in al-Qaeda’s growth throughout the 1980’s (Ressler & Brown, 2011).

Early signs of a strong ability to connect various Islamist militants in order to expand their influence have paved the way for a silent but steady expansion of the network’s power and explain why we speak of the Haqqani *network*. By means of an informal, family and tribal-based structure that the organization maintained throughout the 1980’s, the Haqqani network has remained a semi-autonomous part of the Taliban’s Quetta Shura, despite initially being

opposed to the group (Smith, 2021), while other Jihadi groups did not recognize the Haqqani network as distinct entity until around 1994 (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018). By that time, Jalaluddin had also assisted the Afghan Taliban to emerge from a network of madrassas to a “*formidable force*” (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018, p. 2) and pledged to help it seize the country for the first time. As a reward, Jalaluddin Haqqani became Minister for Border and Tribal Affairs under the very first Taliban regime from 1996 through 2001.

After the events of 9/11 and the US-invasion that collapsed the Taliban government, Jalaluddin relocated to North Waziristan and became an “*integral part of the insurgency against US-led NATO forces*” (Raghavan, 2021) after he refused to turn on the Taliban in talks with American and Pakistani officials (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018). He has further been a key figure in helping al-Qaeda operatives escape into Pakistan (Smith, 2021). In return for their loyalty to the Taliban leadership, the Haqqanis were granted “*official decision-making powers and access to the group’s finances*” (Clarke & Sayed, 2021), which effectively made the network a functional part under the umbrella Taliban organization. Despite this cooperation and partial conversion, the Haqqani network has built a distinct brand and particularly cruel reputation synonymous with some of the largest and deadliest attacks in Afghanistan while it has further expanded its network of Jihadi groups.

Network Financing and State Sponsorship

The opportunism that the Haqqani network has pursued with regard to its early alliances also plays an important part in the networks’ financing processes. As indicated above, especially in the early days the Haqqani network relied almost entirely on the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) that funneled \$12 billion to the 1980s insurgency (Weinbaum & Babbar, 2016). In the 1990s, the network began to “*diversify*” its funding and sought to also appeal to donors from Gulf countries as well as engage in both licit and illicit economies in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Peters, 2012b, 2012c). Moreover, Jalaluddin appears to have built and used the crucial image of the Haqqani network as business model in order to raise funds and attract foreign fighters. Early media efforts, including the first Jihadi radio station and promotional magazines, have helped the network to target a wider audience and donors (Peters, 2012c), and the association with the Taliban allowed the Haqqanis to also access Taliban funds (Clarke & Sayed, 2021).

However, the connection to the ISI has never been suspended. In 2011 Mike Mullen, Chairman of America's Joint Chiefs of Staff, famously called the Haqqani network the most “*veritable arm of the Pakistani ISI*” (The Economist, 2011) and this connection to the Haqqani network continues to strain the relationship between Pakistan and the US. Despite the fact that Pakistan has outlawed the Haqqani network in 2015, Afghan and Western intelligence have seen no end to the alleged support by Islamabad (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018).

Peters (2012b) has broken down the Haqqanis financial activities in seven categories:

1. Extortion business in Southeast Afghanistan and Pakistan’s FATA
2. Kidnap-for-ransom schemes
3. Protection and taxation of smuggling rings
4. Real estate holdings

5. Ownership takes in construction, import-export and transport businesses
6. Funds from ideological supporters across the Gulf and Pakistan
7. Money-laundering operations

These activities make the Haqqani network an example of the crime-terror nexus (Makarenko, 2004) in which ideological commitments and business interests become increasingly intertwined and in which neither the characterization as Islamist militant nor as criminal group paints an adequate picture of the organization.

Tactics and targets

Several features make the Haqqani network a particularly troubling group. The relatively small size and tribal ties have allowed for centralized decision-making and flexible structures that have proven resilient in times of clampdowns against more famous groups like al-Qaeda. Jalaluddin's reputation as war hero during the Soviet invasion has given him long-lasting credibility amongst Afghan Jihadists, and the network's adaptability to transnational conflict has turned the group into a resourceful and particularly resilient network (Partlow, 2011). Two specific features of the network that deserve closer attention are its cooperation with other jihadist groups and the distinct focus on suicide bombings.

Cooperation with other Jihadist groups

A recent United Nations Security Council (UNSC) report describes the Haqqani network as partially separate group with close alignments to other Islamist fundamentalist groups. The report further states that “[t]he Haqqani Network remains a hub for outreach and cooperation with regional foreign terrorist groups and is the primary liaison between the Taliban and Al-Qaida” (UNSC, 2021).

Particular about the Haqqani network is its approach towards foreign fighters that is based on cooperation and networking. Different from other Taliban factions, the group has actively welcomed foreign fighters and integrated them into their ranks based on shared enemies. Thereby, Jalaluddin has paved the way for globally operating terrorist syndicates and adapted to the transnational nature of conflict. By means of this tactic, the Haqqani network “has woven a web of alliances with fellow jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Lashkar-e-Taiba” (Weinbaum & Babbar, 2016, p. 1). This distinct feature can be seen as one of the factors that have allowed the group to sustain itself and to persist throughout the years. Moreover, these groups mutually influence their respective operational tactics, whereby the Haqqani network has ultimately fostered an *extremist triad* of the Haqqani network, Taliban and al-Qaeda. The particularly strong stance of the Haqqani network against the United States is thereby said to have influenced al-Qaeda in making the United States the primary target of global Jihadi operations, while the Haqqani network itself remained focused on local operations (Clarke & Sayed, 2021; Ressler & Brown, 2011).

Suicide bombings

One of the tactics that the Haqqani network is most feared for is its preferred use of suicide attacks (Ahmadzai, 2021). As an Islamist militia with a long history of fighting foreign troops in Afghanistan, the Haqqani network has adapted its tactics and increasingly turned to suicide bombings, which the network is believed to have pioneered in Afghanistan in 2004 (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018). Whereas the use of suicide bombers by the Taliban is particularly attributed to the influence of the Haqqani network, the tactic can in turn be traced back to the influence of al-Qaeda on the Haqqani network (Clarke & Sayed, 2021), and must therefore be seen as a result from the extremist triad that the Haqqanis helped create.

Around 2005, Jalaluddin's eldest son Sirajuddin assumed responsibility within the network and expanded its criminal activities and its fearful reputation due to an increase in terrifying attacks (Clarke & Sayed, 2021; Peters, 2012b). This has yielded in the normalization of terrorist attacks on Afghan civilians, foreign troops and diplomats. Among these attacks is the unsuccessful assassination attempt on former Afghan President Hamid Karzai in April 2008, during which eight people were killed and the July 2008 car bombing targeting the Indian Embassy in Kabul that killed 54 people. According to American intelligence, the latter attack had been supported by Pakistan's ISI, indicating that the network remains an important Pakistani proxy.

Moreover, the Haqqanis have been linked to several attacks on US and NATO targets, including a 20-hour attack on the US Embassy in Kabul and NATO headquarters in September 2011 which subsequently earned the Haqqanis the designation of Foreign Terrorist Organization by the US State Department (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018). Various other high-casualty attacks like the January 2018 suicide bombing in Kabul in which a bomb planted in an ambulance exploded near the German Embassy killing more than 100 people have complemented to the brutal portfolio of a merciless terrorist connection that is able to impact the security dynamics in the wider region. Although the Taliban has claimed responsibility for some of the attacks, Afghan and international intelligence services suspect the Haqqani network and ISI funding behind the most brutal terrorist activities in Afghanistan (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018).

The Haqqani Network in power

Six months after the takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban has to establish itself as a government, explore its alliances and also encounter its enemies. The Haqqani network, with its operational experiences and fearful reputation constitutes a powerful fraction within the broader Taliban 'entity' that has the potential to exert a significant influence on the near-future developments in the country. Khalil-ur-Rehman Haqqani, designated terrorist since 2011, is the new Minister for Refugees and Sirajuddin Haqqani, leader of the Haqqani network after the announcement of Jalaluddin's death in 2018 and designated terrorist since 2007, is Afghanistan's current acting Interior Minister. He is therefore in charge of the Afghan police, intelligence agencies and other security services. This appointment is indicative of a logic within the Taliban, in which the Haqqani network is a guarantor for security (Raghavan, 2021). Thus, a group that is responsible for some of the most horrifying attacks now has to rethink its tactics, and it remains questionable whether the Haqqani's are able to do so. On the contrary, the high position of senior leadership figures of the Haqqani network within the Taliban's

operational structure poses distinct security risks and might even escalate the potential for conflict on three different levels.

1) Tensions within the ranks of the Taliban

Rumors of a split within the Taliban ranks, which have always been denied to the outside world, continue to emerge. One case in point is the alleged rivalry between Sirajuddin Haqqani and Mohammad Yaqoob, son of Taliban's founder Mohammad Omar and Afghanistan's acting Defense Minister (Raghavan, 2021). Furthermore, there have been rumors about a physical fight between Sirajuddin's uncle Khalil-ur-Rehman Haqqani and Taliban co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. Alleged divisions over who should be taking credit for the victory in Afghanistan have even caused Baradar to leave Kabul and travel to Kandahar following the dispute (Nasar, 2021). This indicates that despite the integration of the Haqqani network into the Taliban, both groups remain separated by "*geography and identity*" (Smith, 2021) and the Haqqani's remain to some extent autonomous.

2) Tensions on a regional level with other terrorist groups

While it is anticipated that the rise of the Haqqani's opens the gates for al-Qaeda to reestablish itself in Afghanistan (Raghavan, 2021), Taliban enemies will also be looking to developing their capabilities and reconstituting in war-ridden Afghanistan. The Afghan branch of the Islamic State (IS-K) has an interest in using the political turmoil in the country to add new members to their core group of 1,500 to 2,200 fighters (UNSC, 2021). While the IS-K is assessed to be the 'mortal enemy' of the Taliban by Pentagon Officials, the Afghan Ministry of Defense has claimed that at least one attack for which IS-K has asserted responsibility was in fact carried out by the Haqqani network (Doxsee et al., 2021; Ibrahimi & Akbarzadeh, 2020). Claims of collaboration between IS-K and the Haqqani network have been refuted by experts in the field (Clarke & Sayed, 2021), however, limited local coordination has allegedly taken place on some occasions (Ibrahimi & Akbarzadeh, 2020). Additionally, the appointment of Shahbab al-Muhajir, an alleged former mid-level commander in the Haqqani network, as IS-K's new Emir in June 2020 has fueled suspicion about the extent of local intra-jihadist cooperation (Doxsee et al., 2021). Other experts have stressed that "*the Haqqanis have the deepest links with IS-K of any faction within the Taliban*" (Farrell et al., 2019).

It remains to be seen how the Haqqani network's flexible alliances will develop in the near future. What is certain is that with the Haqqanis pulling the strings in Kabul, and growing animosity between the Taliban and IS-K, more violent attacks are likely to follow. Afghanistan has increasingly become a sanctuary for militant groups and will continue to be so if leading figures from the Haqqani network continue to shape military strategy and expand their radical rule. Analysts thereby posit that "*the Taliban will inevitably grow more radical over time*" (Clarke & Sayed, 2021).

3) Tensions with the international community

Internationally, the fact that senior Haqqani Network commanders are part of the Taliban caretaker cabinet creates tensions and limits the possibility for cooperation. The Taliban

demand that members of its caretaker cabinet to be removed from sanctions lists on the basis of the 2020 Doha agreement (Raghavan, 2021), while the fact that especially Sirajuddin Haqqani features prominently on UN sanctions lists, puts the international community in a difficult situation in which it must build relationships with sanctioned terrorists who have multi-million dollar bounties on their heads.

Whereas the Haqqani networks' participation in the caretaker cabinet can potentially be helpful for the Taliban in countering security threats posed by IS-K, it at the same time curtails the possibilities for a US-Taliban cooperation against IS-K and could prove disruptive for the internal tensions within the Taliban. Since the Taliban has repeatedly stated that security is its top priority, the success of the Haqqani network in government ironically depends largely on the extent to which Sirajuddin Haqqani, as Interior Minister, succeeds in preventing attacks in the cities.

Haqqani network and Taliban – two sides of the same coin?

This finally leads to the question to what extent the Taliban and the Haqqani network, linked by longstanding connections and a fundamentalist religious ideology, must be considered a united entity.

As discussed above, leading figures of both the Taliban and the Haqqani network have studied at the same Islamic Seminary in Pakistan and have far-reaching overlaps in their basic ideological convictions. Moreover, the Haqqanis have been part of both Taliban-led governments. Jalaluddin Haqqani served as provincial governor and Minister for Border and Tribal Affairs in the first Taliban-administered Afghan government, and Sirajuddin Haqqani follows into the footsteps of his father as Interior Minister of the second Taliban-led administration.

However, the Haqqani network has built its own unique brand and connections to other Jihadists and has maintained a high degree of autonomy and control over certain areas. During the 1990s, the Taliban and the Haqqani network managed to co-exist despite disagreements, competition and rivalry, and the Haqqanis were able to negotiate autonomy over their power base in the highlands of Loya Paktia (Ressler & Brown, 2011). Further analysis posits that “[t]he Haqqani and the Taliban are operationally separate, with the first handling eastern Afghanistan and the second focusing on the South. But the Haqqani network appears to recognize the Taliban leadership [...] as the authority guiding the insurgency” (The Economist, 2011). When Mullah Mohammed Omar, previous leader of the Taliban in Afghanistan (and as such head of State of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001) died in 2013, Mullah Mansour became his successor. As one of Mansour's two deputies, Sirajuddin Haqqani rose in rank and was able to install his uncle, Khalil-ur-Rahman Haqqani as leader of the Peshawar Shura (Clarke & Sayed, 2021). After the current Taliban leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada assumed office following Mullah Mansour's killing in a US drone strike in Pakistan in 2016, Sirajuddin became deputy to Akhundzada and in charge of the Taliban's operations in twenty Afghan provinces. Clarke and Sayed (2021) point out that the lack of battlefield experience of both Mansour and Akhundzada cleared the way for a military strategy and operations that were largely controlled by Sirajuddin Haqqani, which marks another step in the steady rise of the Haqqanis in the shadow of the Taliban. Moreover, Sirajuddin has far-reaching influence as a mediator between the Pakistani ISI and the Pakistani

branch of the Taliban, as “[t]he Haqqani Network’s relationship with the Pakistani state is older, deeper, and less contentious than the Taliban’s” (Smith, 2021).

This means that despite the increasing cooperation and coordination between the two groups over the past decade, the Haqqani Network is by no means equivalent to the Taliban, but rather operates as semi-autonomous but largely influential group under the Taliban umbrella with increasing power.

Conclusion and outlook

Challenges at various levels and glooming humanitarian crisis make it difficult to get a clear view of Afghanistan's future. What is clear, however, is that the Haqqanis want to play an influential role in that future and appear more interested in expanding their power within the Taliban and within Afghanistan than in broadening the fight and waging Jihad globally. To this end, the Haqqani network has adopted a strategy of extreme pragmatism which has allowed the group to work “as the fountainhead [...] of local, regional and global militancy” (Rassler & Brown, 2011, p. 3) on the one hand, and as criminal organization on the other. This strategy and the widespread alliances with other Islamist militant groups and the Pakistani ISI have made the Haqqani network particularly resilient and feared nearly 50 years after its first recorded activity (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018).

Despite the regional focus of the Haqqani network, the struggle for international recognition will concern the new Afghan government in the near future. In February 2020, before the takeover of the country, Sirajuddin Haqqani acknowledged that “[t]he support of the international community will be crucial to stabilizing and developing Afghanistan” (Haqqani, 2020). The role that China can play in building the country thereby needs to be evaluated particularly closely. While Beijing has not (yet) officially recognized the Taliban government, it has been quick in stepping up diplomatic efforts and pragmatic engagement in Afghanistan after the takeover in order to contain security threats in the region (Calabrese, 2021). In return for recognition and engagement, mostly in the form of aid and investments, China wants to prevent Uyghur organizations from finding a safe haven in Afghanistan and has identified the Haqqanis as important players and partners for negotiation. Nevertheless, the first major attack in Afghanistan after the Taliban took power sows doubts about the strength of the relationship between the Taliban and Beijing, as IS-K has specified that its October 2021 suicide attack was carried out by a Muslim Uyghur. Engagement with the Taliban thus remains a double-edged sword for China, with security paradoxically motivating and inhibiting closer cooperation.

The Haqqani network has played a crucial and often overlooked role in enabling the dire humanitarian situation in Afghanistan today. Now, a Haqqani is responsible for determining the direction of Afghan security policy. Sirajuddin Haqqani has quietly extended the power of the Haqqani network to the highest circles by perpetrating the most horrific attacks, giving the network a particularly violent image. However, it remains to be seen to what extent the new Afghan Interior Minister can help to transform the Taliban from an insurgency to a government and control the approximately 10,000 Jihadis linked to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda that have poured into Afghanistan from Central Asia, the North Caucasus region of Russia, Pakistan and the Xinjiang region in western China within recent months (UNSC, 2021). This acid test will also show the extent to which the Haqqani network actually maintains links with IS-K (Schmitt, 2021). Meanwhile, Sirajuddin Haqqani is praising suicide attacks in a gathering for the families of suicide bombers organized at a luxury hotel in Kabul in October 2021, in which he promised

the families land and money (Siddique, 2021). This clearly indicates that with new security dynamics evolving in the region, Afghanistan has once again become a hub for radicals and extremists looking to fight, and it looks unlikely that the Haqqani network will deviate from its extremely violent stance.

A nuanced assessment is needed of the new government in Kabul, which represents not the Afghan people but the region's most violent Jihadist factions, while the people of Afghanistan are denied their basic human rights. The little remaining leverage of the international community must be used to ensure that these people are helped quickly and unbureaucratically. The Haqqani network and its particularly crude strategy require special attention, just as their connections to the Gulf States and Pakistan.

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