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# THE TENACIOUS, TOXIC HAQQANI NETWORK

MARVIN G. WEINBAUM, MEHER BABBAR



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*While global jihadist franchises al-Qaeda and ISIS compete for the public spotlight, the Haqqani Network has steadily and stealthily acted as a formidable insurgent force in Afghanistan. The group has skillfully established and utilized ties to a wide array of militant groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, while also maintaining close ties to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). In the Haqqani Network's willingness to be submerged within the Afghan Taliban movement, it often draws attention away from itself and allows the mainstream Taliban to take credit for leadership of the insurgency. The ISI's relationship with the Haqqani Network remains a thorn in U.S.-Pakistan relations, and will undoubtedly continue to plague relations with the coming of the next U.S. administration.*

## KEY POINTS

- ◆ The Haqqani Network is the strongest and most disciplined force in the Afghan insurgency
- ◆ The Afghan Taliban is heavily reliant on the Haqqani Network, despite appearances to the contrary
- ◆ 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
- ◆ Pakistan's ISI considers the Haqqani Network an asset to help expand its influence in Afghanistan, as well as counter Indian influence, and is unlikely to alter this policy in the near future, despite U.S. pressure
- ◆ Washington's counterinsurgency strategy has accomplished little in terms of dismantling the Haqqani Network

## INTRODUCTION

Of the several insurgent groups confronting the Afghan state, none have been bolder or more resolute in pursuit of jihad than the Haqqani Network (H.N.). The H.N. is thought to be the strongest and most disciplined force in the Afghan insurgency. Post-9/11, H.N. has executed some of the most carefully planned attacks on Afghan soil, undertaken numerous high-profile kidnappings, and been involved in a wide array of criminal activities. The August 25 attack on the American University in Kabul that killed 16 people, including eight students, and injured 53, was likely carried out by H.N.

Long a semi-autonomous component of the Taliban's Quetta Shura, the group occupies a prominent place in the insurgent movement. Alongside aiming to bring about the collapse of the Afghan government, expel all foreign forces, and restore the Islamic Emirate ousted in 2001, the H.N. has proved itself to be a key promoter of transnational terrorist operations. The recent move by the United States to suspend critical funding to the Pakistan army over its failure to clamp down on the H.N. is testimony to the threat the group is perceived to represent to American interests.

Since its inception in 1994, the H.N. has offered various other insurgent groups and fighters safe haven from which to disseminate their ideas as well as training and funding. It has fostered close ties with numerous terrorist groups including Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (T.T.P.), the Islamic Movement of



Marvin G. Weinbaum is professor emeritus of political science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and served as analyst for Pakistan and Afghanistan in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research from 1999 to 2003. He is currently a scholar-in-residence at the Middle East Institute in Washington DC.

## Meher Babbar



Meher is a research associate at the Middle East Institute.

Uzbekistan (I.M.U.) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). The H.N. aided al-Qaeda in its emergence in Afghanistan after 1996 and has continued to provide the organization tactical assistance post-9/11. Unlike other Taliban factions reluctant to allow foreign fighters into their ranks, the H.N. has since its inception welcomed insurgents from around the world.<sup>1</sup>

Owing to its independent financing, the H.N. remains a remarkably resilient organization. Through the operation of a number of businesses, both licit and illicit in and out of Afghanistan, as well as a steady stream of

donations from various sources in the Arab Gulf, the H.N. has proved itself a capable and self-sustaining terrorist franchise. With no need to bend to the will of other groups and/or agencies, it maintains both itself and, consequently, the global jihad it supports. In addition, the H.N. has enjoyed more than two decades of support from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in exchange for the promotion of the latter's interests in Afghanistan. This ongoing relationship remains a thorn in U.S.-Pakistan relations and stands to impede, if not completely block any chances of a peace process within Afghanistan. If its influence is allowed to expand, the H.N. could become a disruptive force across the region, as well as on the global stage.

## ORIGINS

The founder of the H.N., Jalaluddin Haqqani, first rose to prominence as a commander within the mujahideen in the 1980s. Following the Soviet invasion, he founded fundraising offices across the Gulf to court donations from wealthy ideological supporters. Jalaluddin recruited sympathetic Arab fighters for the jihad against the So-

viets, whom he saw as the common enemy of not merely Afghans, but all Muslims.<sup>2</sup> By emphasizing early on the transnational nature of the conflict, Jalaluddin helped to set into the motion the birth of the modern day worldwide terrorist syndicate. Establishing bases in Peshawar, Miramshah, and Afghanistan's Loya Paktia, he worked to create a space for the various foreign insurgents comprising the mujahideen—Afghan, Pakistani and Arab—to intermingle. The radicalization in the region owes much to Jalaluddin's jihadist propaganda. He helped to inspire Pakistani fighters to reignite the conflict in Kashmir.<sup>3</sup> One of those nurtured by Jalaluddin, Zakiur Rahman Lakhvi, would later be among the top leaders of Lashkar-e-Taiba, the militant group responsible for the November 2008 attacks in Mumbai, India. In the late 1980s, Jalaluddin funneled weapons to a nascent al-Qaeda in Khost and Paktia, and continued his support for the group even after the latter's departure from Afghanistan. Khost, in particular, was a strategic location for Jalaluddin, who conquered the city in 1991. The city has routes between Pakistan and Afghanistan and is used through to the present day as one of the main routes for smuggling weapons into Haqqani territory.

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Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Jalaluddin called for jihad against the United States, accusing it of colluding with Israel to oppress Muslims worldwide.<sup>4</sup> He pledged

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allegiance to the Taliban’s emirate in 1996, later serving as Minister of Borders and Tribal Affairs under the Mullah

Muhammad Omar-led government. Unlike his ally Osama Bin Laden, whose al-Qaeda was in part focused on the Arabian Peninsula,<sup>5</sup> or his comrades in the Taliban, who zeroed in on Pashtun issues, Jalaluddin advocated for jihad on a global level. As a more immediate goal, however, after 2001, H.N. joined with the Taliban in seeking to regain governance of Afghanistan.

For his efforts, Jalaluddin earned respect and recognition from the ISI, who in turn granted him unprecedented access to the more than \$12 billion funneled to the insurgency during the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> The H.N. was initially heavily dependent on the ISI, with the latter providing everything from shelter and supplies to tactical assistance.<sup>7</sup> Jalaluddin was uncomfortable with this reliance, however, and worked early on to build up the group’s assets, particularly revenue generated from illegal businesses, so as to improve his group’s autonomy. Following the end of the Soviet conflict, Jalaluddin sold scrap metal to fund his jihadist exploits.<sup>8</sup> His sons Sirajuddin and Badruddin maintained close relations with their father’s Gulf supporters, increasing the number of fundraising offices in the region.<sup>9</sup> Careful with their spending, the H.N. also sought new and primarily illicit ways of generating

revenue by expanding into drug trade, import and export businesses, and numerous shady operations. Although H.N. claims its revenue is funneled toward jihad, certain scholars counter that much of it has gone toward war profiteering.<sup>10</sup>

The military and political activities of the H.N. are primarily focused around gaining control of southeastern Afghanistan and forcing the Kabul government into yielding to its demands. By claiming to act under the banner of the Afghan Taliban, the H.N. aims to avoid exposure. A remarkably efficient organization, the H.N.’s leadership is family based. Highly structured and hierarchical at the top, leadership becomes more diffuse and localized below.<sup>11</sup> Fighters, both local and international, are recruited from Pakistani madrassas such as the Darul Uloom Haqqania, referred to by some as the “University of Jihad”<sup>12</sup> for its notable alumni, including Taliban leader Mullah Omar and Jalaluddin himself. H.N. fighters hide within plain sight; mosques, bazaars, and madrassas have all served as areas for covert planning and execution of attacks.<sup>13</sup> The H.N. has operated its own council, the Miramshah Shura, led by Sirajuddin, and coordinates with the Quetta Shura, the Taliban’s main leadership organ. The H.N. has

been called upon as an intermediary between the Quetta Shura and the ISI, as well as the T.T.P.<sup>14</sup>

## COLLABORATIONS

The H.N. has long fostered close ties with ideologically aligned groups in the region and beyond. Al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, and the T.T.P. have been major partners in collaborative attacks within Afghanistan. The H.N.'s closeness to al-Qaeda began during Jalaluddin's service in the mujahideen. But even predating Osama bin Laden's

attacks by the United States against both the H.N. and al-Qaeda over the last decade have only served to solidify ties between the two groups and reaffirmed their shared ideological convictions.<sup>18</sup>

The relationship between the H.N. and the Taliban is complex as the H.N. maintains complete financial autonomy from the Taliban, but readily professes loyalty to the latter's high command. Keen on portraying itself as subordinate to the Quetta Shura council, the H.N. has appeared to some scholars as more in need of the Taliban than vice versa. Yet the reality could not be

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return to Afghanistan in 1996, Jalaluddin was spreading awareness in the Gulf of the anti-Soviet jihad. Unlike his fellow Pashtun commanders, Jalaluddin welcomed Arabs as well as other foreign fighters,<sup>15</sup> and through this policy met bin Laden. At one point he provided bin Laden a cave complex in which to train his fighters.<sup>16</sup>

Following bin Laden's fatwa declaring war on the United States, while the Taliban tended to distance itself from the anti-Western rhetoric of al-Qaeda,<sup>17</sup> Jalaluddin saw al-Qaeda as central to the greater mission of global jihad and maintained his close ties to bin Laden. Even after 9/11, the H.N. continued to arm the jihadists and spread their militant propaganda. The heightened

more different: the Taliban relies heavily on the H.N. to do its bidding in Loya Paktia, the southwest mountainous area long inhabited by the Haqqanis.<sup>19</sup> Beyond Loya Paktia, the H.N. offers the Taliban a platform from which to project its leadership and present a unified face for the insurgent front. The H.N. carries out numerous attacks in the Taliban's name, awarding the latter credit for targeted strikes. This careful policy of ostensibly deferring to the Taliban and avoiding association with terrorist attacks carried out outside Afghanistan by other allies (most notably al-Qaeda) has allowed the Haqqanis to often evade the close scrutiny the group warrants.

Leading up to the U.S. military's 2001 intervention in Afghanistan, efforts by top U.S. officials to persuade Jalaluddin to abandon

his allegiance to the Taliban were wholly unsuccessful.<sup>20</sup> Jalaluddin's long refusal to disengage from the Taliban is carried forward in the rhetoric of his son and successor, Sirajuddin, who flatly proclaimed in 2011, "We would support whatever solution our [Quetta] Shura members suggest for the future of Afghanistan."<sup>21</sup> The following year, he added, "We are one of the fronts of the Islamic Emirate [...] and we obey [...] Emir [Mullah Omar]."<sup>22</sup> Following the announcement of Mullah Omar's death in 2015, Sirajuddin was made deputy *emir* of the Taliban in 2015 and reportedly oversees much of the group's military operations.<sup>23</sup> The H.N.'s alliance with the Taliban works to not only maximize their joint utility, but also sustain their individual bodies. For instance, with the revelation of Omar's death, the Quetta Shura threatened to dissolve into warring factions. The Islamic State in Afghanistan sought to exploit this vulnerability by inviting Taliban dissidents to join forces. The H.N. intervened and eased the transition into Mullah Mansour's leadership, while also helping to stave off armed attacks from the Islamic State against the Taliban.<sup>24</sup> The H.N., al-Qaeda, and the Taliban furthermore jointly expressed their dislike of the Islamic State and their view that the group threatens the unity of the Muslim world and the task of global jihad that was so central to Jalaluddin's original mission.<sup>25</sup>

Contact was first established between the H.N. and Pakistan's future insurgent lead-

ers during the Taliban's military campaign in the late 1990s. Baitullah Mehsud, the late T.T.P. leader, and his successor, Hakimullah Mehsud, fought alongside Jalaluddin in the Shomali Plains north of Kabul.<sup>26</sup> Sources suggest Jalaluddin may have been Baitullah's commander, and thus a close bond developed between the two; Baitullah later worked for the H.N.<sup>27</sup> The T.T.P. has since operated in tandem with the H.N. so as to maximize their output of attacks. The groups share training camps in which they disseminate jihadist propaganda to young

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recruits.<sup>28</sup> These recruits are often shuffled between the groups—the T.T.P., for example, is known to send suicide bombers by way of Loya Paktia.<sup>29</sup> The H.N. does not actively participate in the T.T.P.'s attacks, nor does it openly collaborate with the group. It does, however, facilitate the execution of the T.T.P.'s jihad. This would seem to put H.N. in an awkward position, as the T.T.P.'s main adversary is Pakistan's army, which also offers the H.N. protection. The H.N., has managed, however, to distance itself from the anti-Pakistan jihad of the T.T.P. and has reportedly compelled the latter to refrain from specifically attacking the military's ISI.<sup>30</sup>

## ISI AND THE U.S.

The partnership between the ISI and the H.N. is mutually beneficial. The H.N.'s influence in Afghanistan is of key strategic importance to Pakistan as it helps assure Pakistan's influence across the border and serves as a proxy for defending the state's interests in tribal conflicts.<sup>31</sup> In Pakistan, the H.N. has also aided the ISI to strengthen its grip on the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). With Pakistan's fears regarding a two-front war with India and Afghanistan dominating its regional strategic thinking, through groups like the H.N., the ISI hopes to neutralize any Indo-Afghan military alliance and create a bulwark against Indian political and economic interests in Afghanistan. In its most notable terrorist strike on Pakistan's behalf, the H.N. targeted the Indian embassy in Kabul, setting off a car bomb that killed 54 people at the site in 2008.

In return, the ISI has aided H.N. to expand its penetration and maintain its influence in southeast Afghanistan. The H.N. has enjoyed the ISI's protection when planning its attacks from North Waziristan and recuperating from armed operations in Afghanistan.<sup>32</sup> Whether Pakistan's interests

are served by a weak Afghan state may be debatable. Not arguable is that the H.N.'s attacks have sorely tested the Afghan security forces' ability to provide for their country's security and have contributed to undermining the confidence of Afghans in their government.

The ties between the H.N. and the ISI have long put a strain on U.S.-Pakistan relations. The ISI's enduring loyalty toward the Haqqanis, in spite of their brazenly anti-American activities, has frustrated U.S. officials. The United States has been slow to directly confront Pakistan over the ISI's well-evidenced sponsorship and shielding of H.N. and other terrorist organizations. Despite repeated complaints by Washington, Pakistan refused to remove H.N. sanctuaries, claiming that either none existed or that if pursued the group's fighters could join with those forces attacking the Pakistani state.<sup>33</sup> In September 2011, in addressing Pakistan's ties with the H.N., the soon retiring Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, directly accused the H.N. of being "a veritable arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency."<sup>34</sup> But Washington, still concerned about already strained U.S.-Pakistan relations, backed off as President Barack Obama effectively refuted Mullen's statement in arguing that no clear connection between the two had been found.<sup>35</sup> Although as Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton repeatedly called on Pakistan to take action

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against the Haqqanis, she also sought to calm waters by disavowing any American intention to undertake cross-border raids against the H.N. without Islamabad’s consent.<sup>36</sup>

It was not until September 2012 that the H.N. was designated by the Department of State as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. A large-scale attack by the H.N. in 2011 on the U.S. embassy in Kabul and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)<sup>37</sup> finally catalyzed a shift in attitudes within the U.S. government. During 2012, the U.S. began air and ground strikes against the H.N. inside Afghanistan.<sup>38</sup> In 2014, a special military unit in Kabul was founded solely in order to combat the H.N.<sup>39</sup>

A notable shift in Pakistan’s willingness to combat terrorist networks occurred following the T.T.P.’s June 2014 attack on Jinnah International Airport. The Pakistani government vowed to wipe out all militants, including the long-favored H.N., through Operation *Zarb-e Azb*. And then, in response to a T.T.P. faction’s December 2014 massacre at Peshawar Army Public School, Pakistan outlawed the H.N.<sup>40</sup> Regarding the decision, a senior government official added, “Pakistan no longer believes in separating the ‘good’ Taliban from the ‘bad.’”<sup>41</sup> The United States praised efforts made by the Pakistan Armed Forces against the H.N. in particular, with Lieutenant General Jo-

seph Anderson proclaiming that the operation “[has] very much disrupted their [the H.N.’s] efforts [...] and has caused them [the H.N.] to be less effective.”<sup>42</sup>

Yet from the beginning of the Zarb-e-Azb operation, doubts existed over the seriousness of Pakistan’s policy change toward the H.N. Multiple reports claimed that the H.N. had been warned in advance by the ISI about the coming military campaign so as to afford the group time to flee across the border.<sup>43</sup> There was also concern raised that H.N. might be allowed to return to its safe haven in North Waziristan. In May 2016, the U.S. Congress proposed a \$300 million cutoff of the U.S. Coalition Support Fund if the Haqqani network’s “safe haven and freedom of movement” were not “significantly disrupted.”<sup>44</sup> Two months later, American defense secretary Ash Carter refused to certify that Pakistan had taken sufficient action against the H.N. and other terrorist groups, and reimbursement intended for the Pakistan military’s counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations were suspended.

## A GROWING THREAT

The resilience of the H.N. is perhaps its most discernable and troubling feature. The shift in leadership from Jalaluddin to his sons does not appear to have slowed down the network. In his time at the helm, Sirajuddin has expanded territory and diversified sources of revenue, while successfully withstanding the dislocations of Pakistan's military operations. The past several years have seen the group's stronghold extend to both southern and northern Afghanistan and, critically, encircle Kabul. The H.N.'s strengthened alliances with the Taliban, al-Qaeda, T.T.P., I.M.U., and LeT have allowed it to further bolster its funding of global jihad and widen its operations. The H.N.'s desire to seize power in Kabul and its ambitions that transcend Afghanistan's borders are critical to predicting the group's direction going forward.

In the transformative landscape of conflict, they are undeniable winners. An unfettered hold on leadership has brought the family and associated H.N. commanders both money and power. Observers often point to the ISI as being the primary rea-

son for the H.N.'s longevity, but this ignores the self-sufficiency of the group. Pakistan's protection is only useful insofar as it offers the jihadists a safe haven; the strategic utilization of this space, as supported by their budget and tactical expertise, is what empowers the group.<sup>45</sup>

Pakistan's counterinsurgency campaign has had an indirect effect on the H.N. Its intensified monitoring of allied domestic terrorist groups has likely reduced recruitment and fundraising in madrassas and mosques.<sup>46</sup> But the unwillingness by Pakistan to directly target the H.N. through Operation Zarb-e Azb suggests that Pakistan continues to view the group as an asset. And even were H.N. more constrained, though it might affect its command structure and mobilization networks, the group's operations would probably not be severely disrupted. The United States could further increase pressure on Pakistan to oust the H.N., but it seems doubtful that Washington will impose strong sanctions and retract all or most of the country's aid. The bilateral relations serve other purposes not likely to be discarded over differences about the Haqqanis.

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The Afghan National Directorate of Security has been making small strides in Afghanistan toward disarming the group by

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conducting raids, arresting senior commanders,<sup>47</sup> and foiling, most recently, a plot in Khost during Ramadan.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, the U.S.’s counterinsurgency strategy has apparently accomplished little in terms of dismantling the H.N. Despite some successes of American drone strategy, the loss of key leaders has not slowed the oligarchic H.N. down. Unlike the Taliban, the H.N. has sustained itself without pause in the decade since 9/11.<sup>49</sup>

Those who had expected Sirajuddin—a controversial figure lacking his father’s reputation for political skills—might pale next to his illustrative father have been proven wrong. As leader, Sirajuddin has outdone Jalaluddin to become the Taliban movement’s second-in-command as well as its de facto military leader. His ascendance diminishes prospects that pragmatists will lead the Taliban toward agreeing to a political compromise with the Kabul government. Sirajuddin has expressed his opposition to peace talks unless “they are held in line with *sharia* and if the international community agrees to this.”<sup>50</sup> Under his command, the Taliban insurgency is almost certain to push vigorously for a military victory.

Continued warfare in Afghanistan has served to reaffirm the H.N.’s credibility as an insurgent force. The presence of the United States and its military allies fits the H.N.’s recruitment-fueling narrative that it

is fighting occupying foreign forces. A beleaguered Afghan public is told by H.N. propaganda that for peace and order to return to the country, it must be rid of meddling foreign powers. The H.N. is savvy enough to know that winning the support of the people they aim to govern is as important as militarily defeating the government they wish to depose. Thus, they offer social services in areas of control, providing education (primarily religious) and healthcare.<sup>51</sup> The group actively promotes its image as a stabilizing force, with the Haqqani family working as mediator to resolve tribal disputes and enforce rulings and agreements.<sup>52</sup>

The psychological impact of the H.N.’s attacks is equally significant. Zabihullah Mujahid, the public persona used by the H.N. and Taliban, has stated that the group’s attacks are, “not aimed at controlling [Kabul] physically but ... captur[ing] it psychologically,” by making more grave “the political and financial costs of doing business for foreign forces and diplomatic missions located in Kabul.”<sup>53</sup> The H.N. purposefully crafts its attacks to demonstrate its capacity to strike at high value military and civilian targets. Consistent focusing on foreign targets and prolonging the onslaught so as to maximize publicity contributes to the perception that Afghanistan is under siege. The group’s use

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Sirajuddin’s leadership.<sup>57</sup> The public image of H.N. under Sirajuddin blurs to some extent the difference

of improvised explosive devices, suicide vests, and fighters able to penetrate the capital of Kabul’s security perimeter generates considerable media coverage and cements the notion that the Afghan government is incapable of defending the nation.<sup>54</sup> The H.N. was the first group to consistently use suicide bombers in its attacks in Afghanistan, indicating a preference for spreading fear as much as actual destruction through asymmetric warfare.<sup>55</sup> The prevalence of suicide bombers increases paranoia and uncertainty amongst the populace.

The Afghan public’s loss of confidence in the national unity government serves to benefit the H.N. as it relentlessly works to undermine the state’s ability to protect its citizens and deliver justice. At the same time, it also targets sites of development—roads, schools, businesses—that could raise people’s hopes for an economy that promises a better life.<sup>56</sup> For the H.N., a war of attrition can be winnable if it leads the public and the international community to abandon faith in the country’s future.

Despite the H.N.’s gains, some pushback has occurred owing to the increasingly violent nature of their attacks, and especially for the civilian lives lost. The legitimacy the group has brought to the insurgency has also been tarnished by the H.N.’s illicit activities, many of which have originated under

between the group as freedom fighters and mere criminals. His dabbling in criminal activities, in particular kidnappings for ransom, draws unfavorable comparisons with his father. Jalaluddin’s reputation as a mujahideen leader earned him the respect of his colleagues and others. Sirajuddin appears to value most the cause of jihad, even if it stands the risk of alienating some elements of the Afghan public.

The H.N. has emerged as an even more critical player in the Afghan insurgency. It has been allowed to expand and strengthen its role in Afghanistan, while also increase its appetite for the proliferation of worldwide jihad. The United States, with its greatly reduced ground presence in the Afghan theater, is limited in what it can do militarily toward thwarting an H.N. that has become more difficult to strike with drones. The play remains in Pakistan’s hands. To get Pakistan’s ISI to sever its ties to H.N. would require a broad reassessment by Pakistan of its interests in Afghanistan. This remains a dim possibility; if anything, events are conspiring to make it less likely. The further souring of Afghan-Pakistani relations, the growing fragility of the Afghan unity government, India’s increased activity in Afghanistan and, most of all, the Taliban’s recent military gains serve the argument instead that Pakistan’s Afghan policy will go unchanged and the H.N. unchecked.



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