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Assessing the Terror Threat Landscape in South and Central Asia and Examining Opportunities for Cooperation

BY

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I. Introduction

Chairman Huizenga, Ranking Member Kamlager-Dove, distinguished members of the subcommittee:

My name is Lisa Curtis. I am the director of the Indo-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS). The views I express in this testimony are my own and should not be construed as representing any official position of CNAS.

The terrorism threat landscape in South and Central Asia is complex and dangerous and requires the focused attention of the United States to monitor and contain threats that impact the security of the U.S. homeland. In addition to protecting U.S. citizens against terrorist threats, it is in the U.S. national security interest to work with partners in the region to contain terrorist threats and target terrorist leadership, financing, technical and online capabilities, and training facilities to both stop the spread of Islamist extremist ideologies and prevent broader conflict in the region. While Islamist terrorism is one of many national security threats the United States faces—and the threat is less acute now than in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States—U.S. officials ignore the ongoing activities and attacks being carried out by terrorist groups in the region, especially the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), at their peril. My testimony provides background and updates on the current terrorism threat picture in Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Pakistan (with a view on India-Pakistan tensions), the implications for the United States, and policy recommendations for managing these threats.

Afghanistan

The presence of ISIS-K in Afghanistan has become an increasingly global concern, especially since it claimed two major attacks last year—the March 22 attack on a concert hall in Moscow that killed at least 140 people and the January 4 suicide bombing in the city of Kerman, Iran, that killed 95 people on the death anniversary of the former commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force, Major General Qasem Soleimani.¹ ISIS-K operatives plotting attacks in the West have been arrested in Europe and the United States in recent years, and U.S. officials have raised concerns about ISIS-K's capabilities and intent to continue to target the United States.² In October 2024, an Afghan national, acting on behalf of ISIS, was arrested in Oklahoma for planning an attack to take place on U.S. election day.³ The Taliban opposes ISIS-K and has been fighting the group and eliminating its senior operatives, including the perpetrator of the August 26, 2021, suicide bombing in Kabul that killed 13 U.S. service members and 170 Afghans.⁴ ISIS-K opposes Pashtun-dominated Taliban rule and considers the Taliban ideology as not sufficiently hardline.

While U.S. and Taliban interests converge on the need to eliminate the ISIS-K scourge, the two sides differ considerably on how to contain the overall terrorist threat in the region, as well as on human rights and women's issues, which limits the extent to which the Taliban could or should be viewed as a counterterrorism partner of the United States. The Taliban remains allied with al Qaida (AQ)—with whom it fought side by side for 30 years—and AQ members hold leadership roles within the Taliban regime.⁵ The February 6, 2025, United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Report said the Taliban “maintained a permissive environment allowing al-Qaida to consolidate, with the presence of safe houses and training camps scattered across Afghanistan.”⁶ Al Qaida continues to be motivated to attack the United States and retains close links to other terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan; however, there are no signs that it is currently planning attacks against the United States from Afghanistan, perhaps in line with Taliban directives.

It may be necessary to engage in information and intelligence sharing with the Taliban to target ISIS-K, but this limited counterterrorism cooperation should not impact U.S. policies toward the Taliban's egregious human rights record, especially regarding women and girls. The Taliban has increasingly cracked down on the rights of women and

girls since they took control of the country in August 2021.⁷ Afghanistan is the only nation in the world that forbids education for girls over the age of 12 and has shut its universities to women. Women are generally not allowed to work outside the home or move around freely without a male companion, and last year, the Taliban banned women from speaking or baring their faces in public.⁸

If the United States cuts its remaining education programs for Afghan women and girls, including online education and scholarships for them to study abroad, it will not only have a significant human cost, but will facilitate the Taliban's efforts to radicalize society and foster a socioeconomic environment conducive to the growth of extremism and terrorism. Unfortunately, the future of the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) online education programs for nearly 1,000 undergraduate and master's degree students (70 percent women) and university scholarships for over 200 Afghan women to attend the AUAF Doha campus starting this fall are in limbo following large-scale cuts to U.S. foreign assistance.⁹ AUAF's Transition to Success Program serving 1,300 high school students with online education in Afghanistan was terminated earlier this year as part of the aid cuts. Ending U.S. support for education programs for Afghan women and girls will only facilitate the Taliban's efforts to severely repress women and feed extremism in a country where dozens of international terrorist groups already operate.¹⁰

Central Asia

While Central Asian countries have experienced few terrorist attacks inside their borders, the region has seen a disproportionate number of its citizens serving as foreign fighters in conflicts in Iraq and Syria and supporting and participating in ISIS attacks worldwide. Tajikistan is the poorest country in Central Asia, with a GDP per capita of \$1,280, and high unemployment and corruption. The country faced a civil war in the 1990s which involved armed Islamist opposition groups, and in 2015, Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon banned the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan.¹¹ Tajikistan citizens in the United States, Europe, and Russia have been arrested or deported for their involvement in ISIS activity and attacks, most prominently following the March 2024 attack on Crocus City Hall in Moscow.¹² In late February, a man from Tajikistan, Mansuri Manuchekhri, was arrested in New York and charged with conspiracy to provide material support to ISIS-K, as well as illegal possession of firearms and immigration fraud.¹³ Last June, the U.S. authorities arrested eight Tajikistan nationals for alleged ties to ISIS and apparently later deported them back to Tajikistan.¹⁴ In January 2024, a Tajikistani migrant was arrested in Germany for allegedly planning attacks on religious sites in Germany and Austria.¹⁵

ISIS-K has called for the overthrow of Central Asian governments and threatened to assassinate the leaders of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.¹⁶ ISIS-K propaganda simultaneously criticizes the Taliban's relationships with Central Asian governments and the fact that it is a Pashtun-centered movement that does not include ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have developed different approaches to dealing with the Taliban, even as both countries are equally concerned about the threat posed by ISIS-K.

For its part, Uzbekistan has welcomed Taliban leaders to Tashkent and pursued various economic projects with the group, including signing an agreement for a railway project that includes Pakistan.¹⁷ The Uzbek Special Representative for Afghanistan Ismatulla Irgashev has been actively seeking to build consensus among a host of countries for engaging the Taliban. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan has downplayed Taliban repression of women and girls and other human rights concerns.

Tajikistan, on the other hand, has shunned engagement with the Taliban and instead plays host to the National Resistance Front, an anti-Taliban resistance force led by Ahmed Masoud, son of the now-deceased leader of the former Northern Alliance. Tajikistani President Emomali Rahmon has said his government would not recognize the Taliban unless they include Afghan Tajiks in an inclusive government.¹⁸ Like Uzbekistan, the Tajikistani authorities are concerned about militants stationed in the border areas and have enhanced their troop presence along the Tajikistan-

Afghan frontier. In the summer of 2022, reports emerged about a new militant group, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Tajikistan (or “Tajik Taliban”) forming in northern Afghanistan.

Reporting on Central Asia from the congressionally funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), especially its Tajik service, has provided valuable coverage on issues related to the radicalization of Central Asian migrants in Russia and Europe. It has also published in-depth investigations into several ISIS-related terrorist attacks involving Tajikistani citizens, as well as explored the social and economic factors that give rise to youth radicalization in Tajikistan.¹⁹ RFE/RL is the only international broadcaster producing content in all five languages of Central Asia, as well as the region’s common language Russian, providing fact-based, uncensored information on local developments and seeking to blunt the influence of Islamist extremist groups. For instance, following the March 2024 terrorist attack on the Crocus City Hall in Moscow, RFE/RL’s Tajik service was one of the first media outlets to seek out information from family members about the alleged perpetrators.²⁰ Investigations by RFE/RL’s Tajik service also identified Tajikistani foreign fighters who have taken new roles in Syria’s government, exposing transnational extremist networks.²¹

Pakistan-India

Pakistan has long been a hotbed for terrorist groups that attack India and has backed groups like the Haqqani Network that conducted some of the most brutal attacks against U.S. forces stationed in Afghanistan. However, this support for terrorist groups as a regional policy tool has recently backfired on Pakistan. Even though Pakistan provided haven for the Taliban leadership and their fighters during the entirety of the 20-year U.S. mission in the country, tensions have recently flared between the Pakistan military and the Afghan Taliban over its support for the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which conducts regular terrorist attacks inside Pakistan and seeks to overturn the Pakistani state. In fact, TTP attacks on Pakistan have grown by 73 percent in the last four years. The tensions between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban have escalated to the extent that Pakistan has conducted air strikes on suspected terrorist hideouts inside Afghanistan’s territory.²² Pakistan accuses the Afghan Taliban of supporting and using the TTP as proxies against the Pakistani state.

In addition to the threat from the TTP, Pakistan has experienced a surge in violence from the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), which is waging a campaign of attacks against military and civilian targets in the province with the aim of gaining independence from the Pakistani state. In March, the BLA hijacked a train traveling from Quetta, Balochistan to Peshawar in the Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that was carrying nearly 400 passengers. Following a 30-hour ordeal, the Pakistan military freed most of the passengers, except for 21 civilians who were killed during the siege. Pakistan says that the BLA is a proxy for India, although Pakistani officials have not offered concrete evidence to substantiate the accusation.

Despite U.S. frustration over Pakistani support for groups that attacked U.S. forces and undermined the U.S.-led mission in Afghanistan for all those years, recent signs indicate improvement of U.S.-Pakistan counterterrorism cooperation. For instance, during his March 4, 2025, address to the joint session of the U.S. Congress, President Donald Trump thanked Pakistan for its cooperation in apprehending and extraditing one of the ISIS-K perpetrators behind the August 26, 2021, suicide bombing in Kabul.

This emerging U.S.-Pakistan cooperation may be strained, however, by the recent India-Pakistan conflict, which was precipitated by the April 22 terrorist attack in Indian-administered Kashmir that India blamed on the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT). New Delhi will expect Washington to use its influence to press Pakistan to crack down on the LeT, as well as other Pakistan-based groups that target India, like the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM).

On April 22, 2025, a group calling itself the Resistance Front (TRF) took responsibility (and then later withdrew the claim) for killing 26 civilians, mostly Indian tourists, in Pahalgam, located in Indian-administered Kashmir.²³ India

claimed that the TRF was merely a front organization for the U.S.-designated LeT and retaliated on May 7 by striking the LeT headquarters in Muridke in the Punjab province of Pakistan. India also struck eight other sites in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir and the Punjab that it labeled as “terrorist infrastructure.” Supporting India’s claim of targeting terrorists, one of those killed in India’s retaliatory strikes was Abdul Rauf Azhar, a U.S. Specially Designated Global Terrorist involved in the 1999 hijacking of India Airlines flight 814.

What transpired after India’s May 7 military response was arguably the most serious conflict between India and Pakistan since their 1971 war. Following four days of Indian and Pakistani barrages of missile and drone strikes on each other’s military installations, U.S. officials intervened to broker a ceasefire on May 10. The ceasefire is tenuous, however, and tensions remain high between the nuclear-armed adversaries.

Implications and Policy Recommendations

The overall terrorist threat landscape in South and Central Asia is complicated and does not lend itself to simple or straight forward solutions. It requires tailored policies toward each nation in the region that emphasize intelligence and information sharing, technical cooperation, counterterrorism training, and sometimes lethal action. As in the case of India-Pakistan, terrorist attacks can provoke military intervention, with potentially disastrous results for the region and world. The United States needs to maintain steady engagement in South and Central Asia to ensure it has strong intelligence networks to monitor and target, when necessary, emerging terrorist threats. Without a U.S. force presence in Afghanistan, Washington’s relationships with other regional nations have taken on greater importance. To manage terrorist challenges, the United States should:

- **Assist Central Asian states, especially Tajikistan, in building counterterrorism capacity.** The increasing number of Central Asian citizens susceptible to ISIS-K recruitment, especially from Tajikistan, requires Washington to prioritize developing closer counterterrorism partnerships with these countries. With the opening of tens of thousands of new madrasas (religious schools) in Afghanistan intended to inculcate a new generation of young men in the Taliban’s extremist ideology, the entire region will face increasing terrorist threats. Central Asian states are currently and rightly worried primarily about ISIS-K, but the terrorism threat is likely to broaden and will require the Central Asian governments to increasingly rely on U.S. intelligence and information sharing, training, and technical assistance to thwart its growth.
- **Enhance counterterrorism cooperation with Pakistan on mutual threats, while pressing Islamabad to crack down on U.S.-designated terrorist groups like LeT and JeM.** While the United States can benefit by sharing intelligence and working on joint operations with Pakistan on mutual terrorist threats stemming from groups like ISIS-K and the TTP, Washington must be clear with Pakistani officials that it cannot tolerate support for U.S.-designated terrorist groups. This will require U.S. policymakers to delicately balance a mixed policy approach that relies on both carrots and sticks and makes careful distinctions between helpful and harmful Pakistani actions regarding terrorism.
- **Avoid getting drawn into trying to mediate a solution between Pakistan and India of the decades-old territorial dispute over Kashmir.** While the United States played an indispensable role in getting a ceasefire between Pakistan and India and preventing the two nuclear-armed nations from engaging in all-out war, any attempt by Washington to mediate a long-term solution to the vexed Kashmir dispute would be counterproductive. New Delhi strongly opposes outside involvement in the Kashmir issue, and further efforts by President Trump to insert himself on the matter risk sacrificing Indian trust and confidence. Moreover, any hints of outside mediation on the dispute could encourage unrealistic expectations in Pakistan and fuel support for more violence in India-administered Kashmir.

- **Do not sacrifice support for Afghan women and girls for cooperation with the Taliban on ISIS-K.** Washington must maintain the Biden administration's policy to refuse concessions to the Taliban, like diplomatic recognition, unfreezing of Afghan assets, or lifting of sanctions on Taliban leaders, until the Taliban improve rights for women and girls, especially when it comes to education. The first Trump administration also prioritized support for Afghan women and girls, such as in 2017 when former White House Senior Advisor Ivanka Trump facilitated the visit of an all-girls Afghan robotics team to the United States to participate in an international robotics competition. In 2018, while speaking at a conference on women's empowerment held in Kazakhstan, Ivanka Trump said, "Supporting women's empowerment is therefore fundamental to the future direction of Afghanistan. The status and disposition of women will determine whether or not Afghanistan will be a civilized member of the community of nations or will dissolve back into an oppressive and brutal society like that which we saw during the (previous) Taliban rule."²⁴
- **Continue U.S. assistance for online education and scholarships to study abroad for Afghan women and girls.** It is in the U.S. national security interest to support educational opportunities, such as online learning or scholarships to study abroad, for Afghan women and girls. The more Afghan women and girls can access educational opportunities, the lesser the chance that extremist trends in Afghan society that fuel terrorism will flourish and grow.
- **Congress should continue to fund RFE/RL, whose uncensored and fact-based reporting is contributing to fighting terrorist and extremist threats in South and Central Asia.** RFE/RL local services continue to reach large audiences in Central and South Asia, including in Afghanistan, where more than half of Afghanistan's adult population accesses RFE/RL content through Radio Azadi every week. Without RFE/RL's continued service, the U.S. government will lose valuable insight and reporting in areas where terrorist threats are emanating. In addition, RFE/RL's Radio Azadi is one of the few local broadcasters in Afghanistan that consistently reports on the hardships women face under the Taliban regime, as well as their efforts to resist the Taliban's extremist agenda. Radio Azadi also hosts call-in programs that provide a unique opportunity for Afghan women to share their perspectives and make their voices heard. If RFE/RL is no longer able to spotlight Afghan women and hold up their voices, extremist perspectives and ideologies will gain ground and fuel terrorist movements.

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