

# Inside Afghanistan and Pakistan

by [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Oct 4, 2001

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.



## Brief Analysis

The Taliban's main concerns are domestic. They have accepted Osama bin Ladin because he is important to their ability to stay in power. They have used bin Ladin's brigade because it was the most capable brigade in countering Ahmed Shah Massoud, the former leader of the Northern Alliance. The Northern Alliance controls the area from Tajikistan down to within 40-50 miles of Kabul. It is doubtful that the United States can rely on the Northern Alliance. The alliance is marked by fiercely independent rival officials that resent working with each other, and Afghans are hostile to being ruled by outsiders -- that is, anyone who is not from their immediate region or city.

Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence agency (ISI) supports the Taliban because the Taliban provide a means for Pushtun control over Afghanistan without appealing to Pushtun ethnic identity. Most Pushtuns live in Afghanistan, comprising roughly 38 percent of the country, but Pushtuns also predominate the northwest frontier province of Pakistan. In the early 1970s, the monarchy in Afghanistan spoke of a "greater Pushtunistan." Pakistan has to worry about ethnic separatism; it is a failing nation that desperately tries to bring together diverse ethnic groups under an Islamic state. However, Islam has not proven sufficient to bind Pakistan together, as shown in 1971 when Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) split off. ISI made a strategic decision to support an Islamic-based movement in Afghanistan rather than risk having an ethnically based regime there. ISI feared a Pushtun nationalist regime that might want to take the northwest frontier province of Pakistan.

While Pakistani president General Musharraf's stated commitment to work with the United States is heartening, the Pakistani government has not previously been able to control the ISI, and there is no guarantee it will be able to do so for a prolonged period in this case. A window of opportunity exists for quick action. However, if the United States needed to engage in a prolonged operation against Afghanistan, Pakistan could be torn apart at its seams by populist and Islamic politics.

DAVID ISBEY

Defining clear objectives in Afghanistan will be difficult. Removal of Taliban leader Mullah Omar has been suggested as an objective, but it is not clear how much that will accomplish. After all, the Afghan resistance that fought the Soviets was headless, with no command structure, despite the political leadership in Peshawr and Pakistani advisors.

Another goal may be to have a new Afghan government. If so, the United States will have to find a more effective way of replacing the existing government and then sustaining a new one than the methods used by the Soviets or British within the last century -- both had trouble despite the continuing use of armed force.

As for military objectives, the Afghans have already destroyed most of what is of military value in their country. Nevertheless, U.S. action against military targets could make a substantial difference. Most of the Taliban military is committed to the civil war in the north, and they lack large numbers of heavy military equipment. While Pakistani military support for the Taliban has been limited and covert up until this time, Pakistan does provide the Taliban's main supply of fuel, which could be a source of vulnerability. By contrast, strikes against training camps, such as the August 1998 U.S. cruise missile strike, have limited physical impact, though they may kill some people associated with terrorist actions.

If the United States uses overwhelming force, avoiding collateral damage and the appearance of occupation will be a problem, especially since the Taliban will seek to maximize collateral damage caused by U.S. strikes. Furthermore, the Taliban will play on their mythology that the Afghan resistance triumphed over a great power (the Soviet Union) due to the strength of its particular view of Islam. One way for the United States to address this problem is by providing humanitarian aid while military operations are underway.

The Soviet experience in Afghanistan teaches that hitting main targets is the best route to success. In the initial invasion, the Soviets took out the head of state and the government, and in doing so prevented the Afghan state from being used against them in resistance. Things got worse as the war dragged on, and as the Soviets tried to take out smaller targets; indeed, targeting specific caravans and individuals proved limited in success. Even though the Soviets had good human intelligence networks, Afghans can ultimately only be "rented," not "bought." While the Soviets did effectively penetrate guerilla groups, they were unable to attain the real-time information needed to hit a moving target. In the absence of extensive human intelligence, it will be difficult for the U.S. military to find Osama bin Ladin.

The potential effectiveness of the Afghan opposition has been greatly diminished by the recent assassination of their military leader Ahmed Shah Massoud. This was probably seen as a necessary precursive measure to the September 11 attack. The Northern Alliance is just that, an alliance. As a government, they are unlikely to do much better at feeding the country than the Taliban has done. As an alternative, the United States may look to people within the Taliban -- especially those at the lower level. Using local or tribal loyalties and patronage, the United States could put together those who split away from Taliban leader Mullah Omar.

MICHAEL EISENSTADT

Military operations will most likely not involve a major ground movement like Operation Desert Storm, but rather air power and special operations forces. If the Taliban amasses forces in order to deal with an offensive by the Northern Alliance, it would leave them vulnerable to U.S. air power. If they choose not to react to a Northern Alliance offensive, they would be forced to cede ground. From an operational security standpoint it would be best to avoid launching special operations or air strikes through Pakistani air space because of the threat that early warning may reach bin Ladin -- if not directly from Pakistani officials then from sympathizers on the ground.

The United States must use every lever, not just military but economic and political as well. Experience has proven the value of a comprehensive approach. The hijackings of the late 1960s and 1970s did not abate until airline security measures were improved, combined with the refusal of several countries that had been destinations for hijacked airplanes -- Algeria for example -- to be used as safe havens. Similarly, sanctions and political pressure seem to have been effective at ending terrorism carried out by Syrian and Libyan security forces. This is the lesson from the pressures applied against Syria after the April 1986 attempt to bomb an El Al plane, and against Libya after

the December 1989 bombing of Pan Am 103. Another effective instrument has been the closing of embassies; shuttering Iraqi embassies in 1990 made it difficult for the Iraqis to use those embassies as they had before -- as conduits for the shipment of arms to various surrogates.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Jacqueline Kaufman.

Policy #564

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,  
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

## TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)