Weakest Link:

Why the Taliban Isn't So Tough

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Articles & Testimony

In the spring of 2000, I toured Afghanistan in an unusual way: freely. Normally, the Taliban tightly control foreign visitors. Journalists are quarantined in Kabul's former Inter-continental Hotel, forced to use government translators, and escorted by official guides. I was not. I had grown a beard and I can get by in Persian, which most Afghans understand. And one morning I simply checked out of the hotel, hopped in a taxi, and wandered for more than a week by myself, interviewing teachers, policemen, gravediggers, merchants, the unemployed, and the Taliban themselves. And I discovered something unexpected, something often overlooked in the strategizing of recent days: The Taliban are weak. They lack the military muscle, popular support, and internal cohesion to hold up under sustained attack.

Many Americans forget that the Taliban--unlike say, Saddam in 1990 or Milosevic in 1999--don't control their entire country. Despite the September 9 assassination of its leader, Ahmed Shah Massoud, the Northern Alliance--which controls a chunk of northeastern Afghanistan--remains a fierce foe. The Alliance shelled Kabul in the hours after the World Trade Center explosion. And it is common knowledge in Afghanistan that the Alliance--the only military force never to lose a battle to the Soviets--boasts the most experienced, and most loyal, troops in the country. In fact, fear of the Alliance is probably the chief reason the Taliban shelter Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden controls a military brigade of perhaps 700 well-equipped fighters, and unlike most government troops, they can be relied on not to flee in the heat of battle.

One reason the government's troops aren't battle-tested is that, for the most part, the Taliban didn't take Afghanistan by force of arms. The movement did win one early battle, taking Kandahar in 1994, probably with the help of the Pakistani Interservice Intelligence (ISI) agency. But its subsequent victories resulted largely from co-opting the opposition: promising warlords, exhausted by years of fighting, positions in the new government if they turned over their territories without resistance. I was lecturing at Balkh University in Mazar-e Sharif in northern Afghanistan in May 1997 when the Taliban marched on the city. Up until I was evacuated, a few hours ahead of the Taliban troops, no shot had been fired. The Taliban simply bought the support of a neighboring military commander--reportedly promising he could keep his fiefdom so long as he adopted basic Taliban ideology and acknowledged the party's overall supremacy.

One reason the warlords proved so pliant is that the Taliban enjoyed widespread, popular support when they took over. During the civil war, the pitted and potholed road from Jalalabad to Kabul was the scene of extortions, rapes, and murders by more than a dozen warlords. And the Taliban promised to end the anarchy. As one merchant in Ghazni, a large town between Kabul and Kandahar, recalled, "We thought, How bad could a bunch of religious students be?"

But five years later, the Taliban have not ended the civil war, and they have not ensured security. Residents of Kabul told me that members of the Taliban burglarize homes at night and steal residents' life savings. Last year party guards allegedly cleaned out hundreds of thousands of dollars from locked stalls in the money changer's section of

the Kabul bazaar. As a result, support for the movement among ordinary Afghans has waned dramatically.

As political disillusionment has grown, it has fueled ethnic resentment as well. Most of the Taliban are Pushtun, an ethnic group that makes up 38 percent of Afghanistan and which is also well represented in Pakistan. And the party's radical interpretation of Islam is heavily influenced by the Pushtunwali, the austere Pushtun social code. By contrast, most residents of northern and western Afghanistan, as well as Kabul, speak a dialect of Persian. In the capital, the cultural tension is clear. Not only do Persian speakers have greater cultural ties to Iran and its partially pre-Islamic culture, but two centuries of interaction with Europeans have made Kabul a relatively cosmopolitan city. Partly as a result, the Taliban have singled out the capital for harsh treatment. One day while I was drinking tea with friends in a Kabul merchant's shop, the Taliban came roaring down the street in pickup trucks, ordering everyone to mosque. The shopkeeper calmly locked the door, closed the shades, and cursed the "Pakistanis." He explained that the local religious students are not bad--"they know how to respect their elders"--but the Pushtun Taliban are arrogant and hard to deal with.

Even the Taliban themselves are not united. Afghans in Kabul and Kandahar estimate that only 10 percent of the movement are hard-line followers of the group's spiritual leader, Mullah Omar (though this faction, with the dynamiting of the Buddhas at Bamiyan earlier this year, may be resurgent). Perhaps an additional 30 percent believe in Mullah Omar's message--a return to the austere Islam they think was practiced in the time of Mohammad--but realize that its implementation requires compromise, for instance, on the question of women's schooling. The rest of the Taliban, Afghans say, do not strongly support the regime, but have pledged loyalty, and grown beards, to keep their jobs. And that is within the party. The vast majority of Afghans are not members of the Taliban at all.

So it's not terribly surprising that, in the last couple of years, anti-government resistance has grown. In February 2000, well-armed locals rose up near Khost, a town in the southwestern Taliban heartland not far from the August 1998 U.S. cruise missile strike. The locals were upset by the Taliban's decision to appoint a governor who was foreign to the region, and the party quickly appointed a new candidate. Later that year the Taliban narrowly averted a similar uprising in Jalalabad, in eastern Afghanistan, by firing an overbearing governor. Opposition has traditionally been strongest in the north, but last year an opposition commander escaped from a Taliban prison and set up another pocket of resistance, reportedly in the southwestern province of Nimruz, near the Iranian border. When Mullah Omar preached last year in Kandahar that Afghanistan's ruinous drought was God's punishment for too little faith, many Afghans later commented that perhaps the drought was punishment for Mullah Omar.

In fact, much of the reason the Taliban stay afloat is external--in particular, support from Pakistan. In 2000 Afghanistan produced three-quarters of the world's opium, much of which it then exported into neighboring Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Iran. The smuggling of other commodities is also vital to the Taliban economy--for instance, hardwood harvested from northern Pakistan's old growth forests and destined for villas in Saudi Arabia and Dubai. As the wood travels through Afghanistan, the Taliban extract tolls. The Taliban also receive weapons and money from Pakistan's ISI agency, which hopes that by engaging the Taliban it can blunt Afghan support for ethnic separatism in Pakistan's predominantly Pushtun Northwest Frontier Province. Pakistan also fears that if it surrenders its influence in Afghanistan, regional rival Iran may fill the vacuum.

But although the government in Islamabad cannot fully control the ISI, its support for the Taliban looks set to substantially diminish. In the coming weeks, Pakistan will likely open its airspace to the United States, break off its relations with the Taliban, and at least make a show of sealing its border with Afghanistan. (While Pakistan sometimes complains that sealing such a long border is impossible, the country's campaign against wheat smuggling has proved otherwise: Islamabad's 1999 crackdown on the cross-border trade sent bread prices skyrocketing in Kabul, demonstrating that control of the rugged frontier is possible.) Pakistan's moves will weaken the Taliban. And a massive U.S. bombardment could weaken it further--perhaps prompting the Northern Alliance to

march on Kabul and to pressure former Afghan warlords and government officials, now in exile in Iran and Uzbekistan, to reopen new pockets of resistance in other parts of the country. In 1999, when the United States devastated Belgrade and humiliated Milosevic, the Serbs eventually ousted him. In 1991, when the United States devastated Baghdad and humiliated Saddam, the Kurds and Shiites rose up, and might have toppled the regime had the United States not abandoned them. Historical parallels, of course, are never perfect. But the Taliban are no stronger than those two previous U.S. foes; in fact, they are probably weaker. And, needless to say, toppling them would be every bit as worthwhile. ❖

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