

# The Taliban's Fragile House of Cards

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Articles & Testimony

Few understand why the Taliban are so insistent on harbouring a man involved in the deaths of thousands over the past decade. After all, the Taliban complain frequently of their international isolation - only Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, and the breakaway Chechen government recognise them. One CNN journalist told the world on Friday that the Taliban harbour bin Laden because of Afghanistan's tradition of hospitality.

This is simplistic nonsense. In 1842, Afghans killed 17,000 British men, women and children who were trying to leave Kabul. I enjoyed great hospitality when I visited Kabul and Kandahar last year, but the Taliban would not have hesitated to kill me if it was in their interest.

Simply put, the Taliban have calculated that sheltering bin Laden was in their interest. The Taliban have gained more from bin Laden's assistance than they have lost by remaining an international pariah.

The Taliban's chief concern is domestic: the fight against the Northern Alliance formerly commanded by Ahmad Shah Massoud, assassinated last week. Osama bin Laden's military brigade, which numbers only perhaps 700, is the only force that is capable both of night fighting and countering Massoud's small, but highly trained, forces.

Massoud was the only mujahideen commander undefeated during the decade-long fight against Soviet occupation. Indeed, the Taliban has won few battles, instead rolling into power by sheer momentum and an ability to co-opt opponents.

I was in Mazar-i Sharif in northern Afghanistan when the Taliban marched on the city. The sudden attack was not a result of military savvy, but rather because of subterfuge by a nearby Afghan commander. The Taliban have also been shored up because of the support by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, the ISI.

Nevertheless, the Taliban control a house of cards that could come tumbling down with the right push. The Taliban do have major weaknesses. They are far from monolithic. Afghans describe perhaps 10 per cent of the movement as uncompromising followers of Mullah Omar. This small faction is the one that was behind the dynamiting of the Buddhas in Bamiyan.

Perhaps an additional 30 per cent of the Taliban believe in Mullah Omar's message, but realise that compromise is needed in implementation. These are the officials whom international aid workers turn to when stymied by the radical fringe. Afghans say the rest do not strongly support the regime, but have superficially pledged loyalty and grown beards in order to keep their jobs.

As the Taliban marched on Kabul in 1996, the Afghan ambassador in Riyadh stayed loyal to the old government; his deputy suddenly switched to the Taliban. The former ambassador is now in a refugee camp; his deputy is an ambassador.

There are also ethnic divisions. Most of the Taliban are ethnic Pushtun, and combine a radical interpretation of Islam with the Pushtun social code. Most Afghans in the north and west, including Kabul, speak Dari or other Persian languages, and tend to dislike Pushtuns. This is partly why the Taliban have singled out Kabul for special, harsh

treatment.

While I was drinking tea with friends in a Kabul merchant's shop, the Taliban came roaring down the street in pick-up trucks ordering everyone to mosque. The shopkeeper calmly locked the door, closed the shades, and cursed the Pushtuns and Pakistanis.

So why hasn't the Taliban collapsed? The primary reason is Pakistani support. The pledge by the Pakistani president, General Musharraf, to give Pakistan's full support to the United States is no guarantee of a change in Pakistani behaviour. The Pakistani government has never before been able to control its powerful intelligence services which mastermind the support for the Taliban. Pakistan is a failing state; government often means little.

Others support the Taliban because they make money from the status quo. Driving from the Khyber Pass to Kabul, an eight-hour drive through mountain passes and alongside fields of flowering opium poppies, I passed more than 30 trucks loaded with hardwood harvested from northern Pakistan's old growth forests.

At every checkpoint, the Taliban would extract tolls from the carriers. The wood was destined to build villas in Saudi Arabia and Dubai. The opium crop has been another cash cow.

While the past two years' drought has severely limited opium production, in 1999 Afghanistan produced three-quarters of the world's supply. Many Afghans also initially welcomed the Taliban.

Men in Jalalabad, Ghazna and Kandahar each told me they had been willing to put up with the Taliban's excesses against women and human rights, so long as the Taliban ended the war and brought security to the country.

Increasingly, though, ordinary Afghans - teachers, merchants, taxi drivers, grave diggers and even policemen - say the honeymoon is ending.

When I visited Kabul, I witnessed young Taliban zooming through Kabul in fancy pick-up trucks. I met one woman whose husband had been killed when struck by a Taliban vehicle which never bothered to stop. Other Afghans claimed that the Taliban were increasingly involved in home invasions, where they walk off with a family's life savings.

The Taliban - especially those imported from Pakistan - treat ordinary Afghans with contempt.

Even those who support the Taliban - and many who identify themselves as Taliban followers - did not think the current regime capable of ending the war. The chinks have already appeared in the Taliban armour. In February 2000, there was an uprising in Khost, in the Taliban heartland, the area that was struck by American missiles in August 1998. This resulted in the sacking of a Taliban governor.

Likewise, an uprising was narrowly avoided last year in Jalalabad and one actually took place in the south-eastern Nimruz province. While the wobbly-kneed among British and American policy-makers and academics may argue that after two decades of war, the Afghans are immune to bombing, the Taliban are not.

Taliban ministries, schools and the well-guarded estates of high officials like Mullah Omar or Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakkil can be targeted. So long as it does not result in an occupation, ordinary Afghans will welcome American and British assistance in freeing them from a terrorist regime.

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