

The Taliban and Terrorism:

Report from Afghanistan

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Brief Analysis

Since their rise to power in 1994 and their capture of Kabul two years later, the Taliban have based their legitimacy on the promise of both stability and an end to the war. At the time, people enthusiastically saw a force who disarmed bandits and brought order. Many also hoped that with calm, the economy would improve. But the honeymoon period is ending. Across Kabul, where the situation is noticeably more tense than in the other cities, people complain (without prompting) of an increase in home invasions at night perpetuated by Talibs. There is also growing anger at the Taliban's arrogance. Talib patrols in souped-up pick-up trucks speed through Kabul, scattering pedestrians. One widow said her husband, the sole bread-winner in the family, had been killed by a speeding Talib vehicle that did not even bother to stop after the accident. There have also been signs of trouble in some provinces: Following a recent uprising in Khost, the governor of Paktia (its province) was replaced, and there have also been tensions caused by Kandaharis supplanting native officials in other provinces. (In the days since March 28, there have also been disturbances in Jalalabad). Furthermore, in more than 100 interviews conducted in Kabul, Ghazni, Jalalabad, and Kandahar, no one expressed any optimism that peace would come, viewing both the Taliban and the Northern Alliance as incapable of ending the war.

Few among the local population consider Pakistan a friend. American policymakers should perhaps draw a parallel between Syria's slow absorption of power in Lebanon, and Pakistan's ongoing activities in Afghanistan. Pakistan's interference in Afghanistani affairs is treated as an open secret, although officials are less direct than are people on the street. While those in Kabul said that the number of Pakistani "volunteers" visible on the streets had actually declined from the previous year, their population currently seems to be on the increase.

Usama bin Ladin. Afghans on the street do not think that Usama bin Ladin is as cut-off from the outside world as the Taliban claim. People speak openly about his houses in Jalalabad or his recent presence in Kandahar. Although Bin Ladin probably does not stay in the same house twice, the fact that local Afghans feel they can pinpoint his whereabouts indicates that he may not be as isolated and incommunicado as Taliban officials claim. For these Afghans, however, the primary concern regarding Bin Ladin is not whether he is a hero or a terrorist, but rather that he has become the principal obstacle to U.S. aid.

"Afghan Arabs." It is clear by language, appearance, manner, and street gossip that there is a significant presence of foreigners in Afghanistan-known colloquially as "Afghan Arabs" even though they are not necessarily Afghan or Arab-who are there for jihad. In this regard, locals in Kabul point to Pakistanis and Filipinos as well as Arabs. In the latter case, however, they can pinpoint exact residences; money changers in Kandahar, Kabul to some extent, and especially Jalalabad, also mention significant trade in Saudi and United Arab Emirates currency. While the Afghan Arabs are primarily used in the fight against the North, news and intelligence service accounts also reveal that some apply their training on the battlefield to acts of anti-Western terrorism. The most caustic Talibs are non-Dari speaking and appear to be Pakistanis, who also seem much more anti-Western and anti-Semitic than most Afghans-whether secular or Taliban. Rish Khor, on the outskirts of Kabul, is still believed by locals to be an active training

camp for Harakat al-Mujahidin, a Pakistani-dominated group allegedly responsible for the December 1999 Air India hijacking.

Afghan Views of the United States. Both the Taliban and local civilians are unhappy about U.S. policy toward Afghanistan. Taliban officials complain that the United States keeps Afghanistan weak and divided by always supporting the opposition. One foreign ministry official explained that when communists were in power, the United States supported the factions that later became the United Front; when the United Front took over Kabul, Washington supported the Taliban; now that the Taliban are in Kabul, they allege that the United States is supporting the Northern Alliance. Locals on the street accuse the American government of abandoning Afghanistan after the Soviets left, and blame local hardships on U.S. sanctions even when not related. For example, when Pakistan embargoed grain sales to Afghanistan in order to protect the local Pakistani market, Afghans blamed the United States for doubling the price of bread. Furthermore, some regard the differing tones between Voice of America's Dari and Pashto services as a purposeful plot to sow further division within the country.

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Since the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, terrorism has moved from being a tactical U.S. national security threat to a more enduring strategic threat. Compared to the past, terrorists today are much more religiously motivated with an apocalyptic hue. Such groups also seek to acquire weapons of mass destruction, and some would not hesitate to use them. The groups currently headquartered in Afghanistan with Taliban acquiescence are among the most dangerous religiously motivated terrorists. The Afghan Arabs are considered to be the hardline fighters. Although Usama bin Ladin is the most well known among this group, he is not the only one; if Bin Ladin disappeared, many others could take his place.

The United States has several policy alternatives regarding the terrorist presence in Afghanistan, although none provides a clear resolution:

Promote a stable Afghanistan under Taliban control. Settling the Afghan conflict is the most ambitious solution, but perhaps the best long-term hope. Certainly, the Afghan people deserve better than what they have experienced. Ending the war, however, may not be feasible. It would require greater American diplomatic resources, investment, and engagement by the United States than may be possible. Furthermore, the Taliban may not be cooperative. They lack sophistication, even if their understanding of how to carry on international relations has improved in recent years. The United States has tried to deal with the Taliban, but so far its efforts have been without success. Mullah Muhammad Omar appears to be the greatest supporter of Bin Ladin and the Afghan Arabs, but if he were to leave the leadership, others in the Taliban might take a more reasonable stance.

Work through Pakistan. The Taliban depend heavily on support from Pakistan, although it is not clear whether that support is from the entire Pakistani government or just from the Interservices Intelligence (ISI) acting quasi-independently. Pakistan is a troubled country with deep divisions in its government. In this context, it is unclear how effective a Pakistani solution would be. Perhaps Islamabad could be persuaded to exercise its influence on the Taliban to bring them in conformity with international norms by closing down the terrorist camps and delivering Bin Ladin to justice authorities. Not only would this pave the way toward a better relationship between Afghanistan and the United States, but it would also remove an enormous problem between the United States and Pakistan.

Prepare for non-Taliban alternatives in Afghanistan. Many expect another round of fighting soon. Supporting the Northern Alliance would not be any more effective than supporting the Taliban: it seems unlikely that either can achieve complete victory. In any case, few would support a deep U.S. engagement in Afghan fighting. There is also the possibility that Taliban authority will break down, and Afghanistan will become even more of a failed state. Without an effective government in Afghanistan, the United States will face another Somalia-but one which appears

more ready to shelter those engaged in international terror.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Rania al-Shirawi.

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