

Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, and the Challenge of State Sponsors

[*Michael Rubin*](#)

Policy #555

September 14, 2001

Three days after the horrific attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, investigators are concentrating on al-Qaida, the terrorist network of Saudi financier Osama bin Laden. But as President Bush warned, focusing on the perpetrators must not detract from focusing on those that make his operation possible.

The Relationship between Osama bin Laden and Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden fled Sudan in 1996 and sought refuge in Afghanistan. Although the Taliban have been repeatedly frustrated by their international isolation, they have welcomed bin Laden with open arms. In the final analysis, the Taliban believe that they gain more from bin Laden's presence and assistance than they lose from remaining an international pariah.

For the Taliban, the chief concern is domestic, particularly their ongoing war against Northern Alliance military commander Ahmad Shah Masud (whose status remains uncertain following a September 10 assassination attempt). Bin Laden's military brigade, which numbers perhaps only 700, is the only force that is capable of both night fighting and balancing Masud's forces which, while small, are highly trained. Indeed, Masud was the only mujahadin commander who remained undefeated during the fight against Soviet occupation. A report in the pan-Arabic daily al-Hayat on September 11 suggested that bin Laden provided assistance in the attack on Masud a day earlier.

The Taliban are also far from monolithic. According to interviews in Kabul and Qandahar, approximately 10 percent of the Taliban authorities are uncompromising followers of Mullah Omar, the spiritual leader of the group who claims to have received divine inspiration. An additional 30 percent believe in Mullah Omar's interpretation of sharia (Islamic law), but believe that compromise should be made in its implementation. The rest of the population, Afghans say, do not strongly support the regime, but have superficially pledged loyalty in order to keep their jobs.

While the Taliban claim that Osama bin Laden is quarantined without communication, this is likely false and, at any rate, does little to stop personal contact. This understanding is confirmed by the court documents from the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in East Africa. One of those indicted in this outrage -- a resident of Herndon, Virginia -- admitted to delivering a replacement battery for a satellite telephone to bin Laden during a visit to Afghanistan in May 1998.

Bin Laden Is Not Alone. Osama bin Laden is not alone operationally. Rather, he is just one of many terrorist figures who have found refuge in Taliban -- controlled Afghanistan. Over the years, Afghanistan has provided sanctuary to other top terrorist leaders, most prominently Egyptian Islamic Jihad leader Ayman Zawahiri. Last year, residents of Kabul and those residing near the (now relocated) terrorist training camp at Rish Khor talked openly of seeing Philipinos and other foreigners "here for jihad." This is not surprising. In the early 1990s, bin Laden assisted in the establishment of the Philipino Islamist terrorist organization Abu Sayyaf. Likewise, Afghan analyst Julie Sirrs photographed Yemeni and Chinese Uighur followers of the Taliban in one of Masud's prisoner-of-war camps. Foreign-exchange kiosks in Jalalabad, near other training camps, are awash in Saudi and Emirati currency.

State Sponsorship. It appears that bin Laden controls a loose network of operatives who act more in his name and according to his generally advertised belief system than under his direct operational command. If past bin Laden operations are any indication, he also receives a good bit of assistance from states. Indeed, one week before the bombing, a U.S. intelligence source confided that there was growing coordination among terror groups -- Palestinian, Iranian, Iraqi, and others. Terror operatives involved in this bombing would have needed not only financial support (in which bin Laden excels), but also diplomatic support, including passports and other supplies.

It is entirely possible -- if not likely -- that both the Iraqi government and elements within the Iranian government provided support for the latest attack. The official Iraqi media gloated over the attack. And while Iranian president Muhammad Khatami offered condemnation, the Iranian hardliners who hold the real power in Iran did not. For example, the September 12 headline of the official Tehran Times proclaimed that the United States was "Paying the price for its blind support of [the] racist regime." Indeed, what Khatami says does not matter, since five years into his reign, he has failed to either implement substantive reforms or crack down on terrorism, either inside or outside Iran.

The Taliban rose to power in 90 percent of Afghanistan not so much by fighting, but by coopting their opponents.

Part of their success in consolidating power is attributable to the significant tactical and supply support they have received from Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI). The ISI is a major power center within the failing Pakistani state, and it is believed that ISI support to the Taliban is both a means of asserting Pakistani control and ensuring the Taliban's continued assistance to the Harakat ul-Mujahadin, a Pakistani-backed Kashmiri separatist group. Even if General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's chief executive, agrees to lend his support, there is no guarantee that the ISI or of some of Pakistan's Islamist or populist political parties will be compliant. Although political considerations kept Pakistan off the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism during the Clinton administration, the events of September 11 -- barring any change in Pakistani behavior -- will make it increasingly more difficult for the Bush administration to do so.

What Next? In order to successfully prosecute this war against terrorism, U.S. policy must move forward with equal vigor against both outlaw groups and the states that sponsor, assist, and harbor them. Sanctions, such as those governing relations with states currently on the terrorism list, have gone stale and are viewed in the region as woefully ineffective. This is true in both Iran and Iraq, as well as Syria. What's more, diplomacy designed to prevent the development of weapons-of-mass-destruction programs in states such as Iran and Iraq is no longer adequate. When the time for military action arises, Osama bin Laden and the Taliban may receive the opening salvos, but victory in this war will be won only over a wider front.

Michael Rubin, a Washington Institute visiting scholar, has traveled widely in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq.