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South Asia: New Refuge for Middle East–Style Radical Terrorists

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The two recent plane hijackings in South Asia highlighted the growth there of terrorism and radical Islam. Whereas for decades Islamist and radical terrorism came out of the Middle East, the locus of such operations is shifting to South Asia. The most obvious problem is Afghanistan, a country unwilling and perhaps too weak to uproot the radicals. But the big question is the role of Pakistan, which seems unwilling to assist in the fight against terror. The debate about whether President Bill Clinton should bypass Pakistan when he visits South Asia next month (on the first presidential visit there since 1978) indicates the growing sensitivity of U.S. policymakers about South Asian terrorism.

"Afghan Arabs." Afghanistan is home to a few thousand "Afghan Arabs" from across the Muslim world (not just Arab countries) who have come to fight for the radical Islamist cause in Afghanistan. Whereas once the volunteers fought the Soviet invaders of Afghanistan, these days they fight on behalf of the Taliban movement, which arose in 1994 out of Pakistani religious schools--strongly supported by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)--and seized the Afghan capital city of Kabul in 1996, imposing their strict interpretation of Sunni Islam and the social code of the Pushtun ethnic group (which makes up 40 percent of Afghanistan's population). In the Taliban's on-going fight against the Northern Alliance supported by Iran and Russia, the most valuable fighters may well be Usama Bin Laden's well-trained brigade of perhaps 700 men and the fighters from the Pakistani/Kashmiri Harakat ul-Mujahidin group. Besides these two groups, there are perhaps 2,000 other "Afghan Arabs," including members of Egypt's Islamic Jihad and Gama'at al-Islamiyya who also find shelter in Afghanistan. It would be difficult for the Taliban to forego the services of these fighters, who constitute a significant part of their forces. In short, radical Islamist terrorists have found a new refuge, undermining the U.S. success in driving them from the Middle East.

Usama Bin Laden. The most famous terrorist living in Afghanistan is Usama Bin Laden, the son of a wealthy Saudi construction magnate. He and the al-Qaida ("The Base") organization he founded in 1990 have a longstanding enmity toward America. In 1996, shortly after arriving in Afghanistan from exile in Sudan, he issued a "Declaration of Jihad" against Americans in Saudi Arabia. In February 1998, he declared that Muslims should kill Americans anywhere they could, and in July that year, his operatives bombed the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The Taliban refuses to extradite him, but their claim that Bin Laden is isolated and without access to the outside world looks implausible given the recent episodes tied to him. In mid-December, Jordanian authorities arrested thirteen operatives linked to Bin Laden that were planning attacks on Americans, and there have been suggestions that Bin Laden was the moving spirit behind the ring of Algerian nationals who were caught preparing for terrorist attacks in the United States around the New Year.

As a result of the Taliban's refusal to extradite Bin Laden, the October 1999 UN Security Council Resolution 1267 imposed sanctions in the form of both a ban on flights to or from Afghanistan, and a freeze on Taliban assets. These sanctions, upon implementation, resulted in a wave of anti-American violence in Afghanistan and Pakistan, though the effects will be limited by a lack of any significant licit industry in Afghanistan. The opium trade is what the Taliban rely upon to fund its war effort and perhaps export its revolution. In October 1999, the United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention reported that Afghanistan now accounts for three-quarters of world opium production.

Harakat ul-Mujahidin (HUM). Bin Laden is hardly the only international terrorist operating out of Afghanistan. Another group is the HUM, known as Harakat ul-Ansar until October 1997 (it changed its name as soon as it was officially listed by the State Department as a foreign terrorist organization, ineligible to raise funds in the United States). HUM appears to be linked to the al-Faran group which in 1995 kidnapped and later killed five Western tourists in Kashmir. While the HUM's main mission is to battle Indian rule in Kashmir, HUM leader Fazlur Rahman Khalil signed Bin Laden's February 1998 fatwa calling for attacks on American targets, and also vowed revenge on the United States for the U.S. Navy's August 1998 cruise missile strike on a HUM training camp in Afghanistan following the embassy bombings. The HUM was responsible for the December 1999 hijacking of an Air India flight from Nepal, which was diverted to Afghanistan. There the hostages were released after seven days while the HUM hijackers were allowed to escape, probably to Pakistan.

Will Pakistan Join the Terrorist Camp? So far, the only country prepared to openly give refuge to radical Islamist terrorists has been Afghanistan. But the big question is the attitude of Pakistan. Were Pakistan to go the route of Afghanistan, the problem of Islamist terrorism would be multiplied many fold: Not only is Pakistan a country with at least five times Afghanistan's population and with millions of its citizens living in the Gulf and the West, but also

it is a country with nuclear weapons. The signs are troubling. Pakistan is increasingly saddled with huge economic problems and domestic discord which reduce the willingness (and ability) of its government to crack down on the influential hard-line Islamist groups. Some of those groups concentrate on terrorism in Indian-ruled Kashmir; others concentrate on attacking the local Christian and Shi'i population as well as Iran; yet others foment anti-Western terrorism; and some do all three.

Some U.S. officials believe that Pakistan's military provided HUM support for the recent Air India hijacking by the HUM. The U.S. government is debating whether to add Pakistan to its list of state-sponsors of terrorism, joining five Middle Eastern states (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, and Syria), Cuba, and North Korea. In January, Assistant Secretary of State Karl Inderfurth went to Pakistan to meet its ruler General Pervez Musharraf, who overthrew the elected government in October 1999. Musharraf gave no commitment to crackdown on the HUM, though he did later promise to cooperate with U.S. concerns about Bin Laden (details unspecified). U.S. leverage over Pakistan has declined with the phase-down of aid to a mere $6.8 million in 1998, compared to a decade ago when Pakistan was the third-largest recipient of American foreign aid (after Israel and Egypt).

Ironically, as the spillover of South Asian Islamist terrorism increases in the Middle East, there are bureaucratic impediments to a coordinated policy within the U.S. government. In 1994, the U.S. Congress divided the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian affairs into two separate bureaus. This division between the Middle East on one side, and Afghanistan and Pakistan on the other, has complicated the coordination of U.S. policy toward Islamist terrorism. The U.S. Defense Department's Central Command, however, maintains the Pakistan/India border as the dividing line between the Middle East and Asia-Pacific spheres, perhaps a better division given political realities.

Conclusion. The attention of the American media on Bin Laden masks the fact that he is only a symbol of a much deeper problem. Islamist radicalism has found an effective base in South Asia from which it is capable of striking Western targets. The inability and unwillingness of Afghanistan and Pakistan to do anything about Islamist radicalism ensures that the problem will only grow, even if there is a complete resolution to the Arab–Israeli conflict.

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