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Backgrounder

The Taliban in Afghanistan

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Introduction

The Taliban, a Muslim fundamentalist group, took control of Afghanistan's government in 1996 and ruled until the 2001 U.S.-led invasion drove it from power. Despite its ouster, however, remnants of the Taliban have maintained influence in rural regions south and east of Kabul. The group is known for having provided safe haven to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda as well as for its rigid interpretation of Islamic law, under which it publicly executed criminals and outlawed the education of women. Though the group has been out of power for several years, it remains a cultural force in the region that operates parallel governance structures aimed at undermining the U.S.-backed central government. Clashes between Taliban-linked fighters and coalition forces increased in the first half of 2008 and continued in 2009, highlighting the Taliban's resurgence and complicating efforts by NATO and U.S. forces to stabilize the country. The Pakistani army, meanwhile, is tackling its own Taliban insurgency.

Rise of the Taliban

The Taliban was initially a mixture of mujahideen who fought against the Soviet invasion of the 1980s, and a group of Pashtun tribesmen who spent time in Pakistani religious schools, or *madrassas*, and received assistance from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI). The group's leaders practiced Wahhabism, an orthodox form of Sunni Islam similar to that practiced in Saudi Arabia. With the help of government defections, the Taliban emerged as a force in Afghan politics in 1994 in the midst of a civil war between forces in northern and southern Afghanistan. They gained an initial territorial foothold in the southern city of Kandahar, and over the next two years expanded their influence through a mixture of force, negotiation, and payoffs. In 1996, the Taliban captured Kabul, the Afghan capital, and took control of the national government.

Taliban rule was characterized by a strict form of Islamic law, requiring women to wear head-to-toe veils, banning television,

and jailing men whose beards were deemed too short. One act in particular, the destruction of the giant Buddha statues in Bamiyan, seemed to symbolize the intolerance of the regime. The feared Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice authorized the use of force to uphold bans on un-Islamic activities.

Before its ouster by U.S.-led forces in 2001, the Taliban controlled some 90 percent of Afghanistan's territory, although it was never officially recognized by the United Nations. After its toppling, the Taliban has proven resilient. In November 2007, the London-based Senlis Council (renamed the International Council on Security and Development, or ICOS), estimated that the Taliban maintained a permanent presence in 54 percent of Afghanistan (PDF), and continued to exert influence on regions outside the central government's sphere of control, predominantly in southern and eastern provinces. By December 2008, the Taliban had expanded its sphere of influence (PDF) to 72 percent of the country. "Confident in their expansion beyond the rural south," ICOS reported, "the Taliban is at the gates of the capital and infiltrating the city at will."

Western military analysts say it is difficult to gauge the number of Taliban fighters under arms in Afghanistan. In October 2007, the *New York Times* reported the group might field as many as ten thousand fighters, but a much smaller fraction--less than three thousand--are full-time insurgents. Those numbers inched up in June 2008, when coordinated suicide bombings freed roughly four hundred Taliban fighters from a prison in Kandahar. Analysts also note that the Taliban and its core of fighters have become increasingly fragmented, and are driven to battle for a variety of competing reasons.

Early Supporters

Prior to the group's ouster in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the Taliban's main supporters were Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Along with the United Arab Emirates, they were the only countries to recognize Taliban-led Afghanistan. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan cooperated in efforts by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to arm the anti-Communist mujahideen. After the Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan ceased to be a priority for U.S. strategists, but Saudi Arabia and Pakistan continued their support. Involvement in Afghanistan served a strategic interest for Pakistan, which also has a large ethnic Pashtun population, and appealed to the conservative Wahhabi Muslims who hold substantial political clout in Saudi Arabia. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia became partners in the U.S.-led "war on terrorism" and halted their official support of the Taliban.

Some experts, however, believe the Taliban is still receiving support from the ISI. "In Pakistan, the military always hedges its bets," says Kathy Gannon, the former Associated Press bureau chief for Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistani officials have repeatedly denied offering support to the Taliban and point to a buildup of tens of thousands of forces on their border with Afghanistan as proof of their commitment to stopping infiltrations. In 2008, cooperation by NATO and Pakistani troops in hunting pro-Taliban militants hinted at a new phase in the regional fight against the group (RFE/RL). Pakistan redoubled its campaign against Taliban militants in its tribal regions in early 2009.

Beyond Pakistan, U.S. officials have accused Iran of abetting the Taliban by supplying militants with Iranian-made weapons--including deadly roadside bombs that have killed a disproportionate number of American service members. Experts disagree on the extent of Iranian involvement. CFR International Affairs Fellow George Gavrilis argues that while senior U.S. military officials have accused Iran of arming the Taliban, there is scant evidence to support such claims.

Leadership and Structure

It's unclear who currently leads the Taliban. Mohammed Omar, a cleric, or *mullah*, led the group during their rise to power. Omar is also a military leader, and he lost his right eye fighting the Soviets. From 1996 to 2001 he ruled Afghanistan with the title "Commander of the Faithful." He remains at large with a U.S.-sponsored bounty on his head (media reports suggest he is living in the Pakistani city of Quetta), though some experts doubt he plays a significant role in current Taliban operations. Waliullah Rahmani, executive director of the Kabul Center for Strategic Studies, says some within the organization are vying for a change of leadership. "Disputes about the direction of the movement have begun to emerge within Mullah Omar's mujahideen," Rahmani wrote in Jamestown's *Terrorism Focus* in July 2008. "Small clashes inside the insurgency have been

followed by deep divides within the Taliban." In July 2009, meanwhile, *Newsweek* reported that Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a top Taliban commander, has essentially assumed overall command of Taliban operations in Afghanistan.

U.S. and NATO forces have had success killing or capturing Taliban leaders since the start of the war. Mullah Omar's chief of security, Naqibullah Khan, was arrested in December 2004, and spokesman Latifullah Hakimi was apprehended ten months later. A U.S. air strike in December 2006 killed Mullah Akhtar Usmani, a top commander. In May 2007, coalition forces killed the leader of the Taliban insurgency in the south, Mullah Dadullah, during an operation in Helmand Province. And Mullah Ismail, a key Taliban figure in Kunar Province, was apprehended in April 2008. Even Afghan security forces have successfully targeted top Taliban leaders; in May 2009 Mullah Salam Noorzai was killed during a raid in Helmand Province. But numerous Taliban commanders continue to evade capture. In addition to Mullah Omar, they include Jalaluddin Haqqani; his son, Siraj; and spokesman Qari Yousef Ahmadi.

Despite the fall of senior leaders, the movement continues to exert enormous influence on the populace, lobbying Afghans to take up their cause. In the western province of Farah, for instance, the Taliban has been accused of co-opting local police units in organized crime and narcotrafficking schemes, according to the United Nations. The Taliban movement has also shown glimpses of its former centralized government structure. In early 2007, the Taliban took control of Musa Qala in the north of Helmand Province, where the UN says the group established its own post-2001 administration and judiciary. The district has since been retaken by the Afghan army, but tensions remain high.

The Pakistani Taliban, organizationally distinct from the Afghan group, rose up in 2002 in response to the Pakistani army's incursions into that country's tribal areas to hunt down militants. In 2008, Pakistani security forces clashed with pro-Taliban militants in the tribal area near Peshawar, jeopardizing peace talks between the militants and the government. The clashes continued in early 2009, expanding into the Swat Valley.

Afghan Public Opinion of the Taliban

Public reaction to the Taliban's rule was not wholly negative. While the rigid social standards fostered resentment, the Taliban cracked down on the corruption that had run rampant through the government for years. The new leaders also brought stability to Afghanistan, greatly reducing the infighting between warlords that had devastated the civilian population. Seven years after their ouster, the Taliban continues to provide a semblance of stability in regions where coalition and government officials have been unable to restore order and provide basic services. Kenneth Katzman, a specialist in Middle Eastern affairs for the Congressional Research Service, said in July 2008 that intolerance for a sustained U.S. troop presence is translating into "a little more permissiveness in some areas for the Taliban. That is a worrisome trend."

Opposition, Then and Now

Western governments and anti-Taliban elements inside Afghanistan have countered the group through varying tactics since 2001. Factions opposed to the Taliban's policies in northern Afghanistan coalesced around their mutual disdain for the fundamentalists, and formed the so-called Northern Alliance. Made up predominantly of Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazara Shiites, the alliance opposed the Taliban after its formation and assisted U.S. forces in routing the group after 9/11. The Northern Alliance suffered a blow on September 9, 2001, however, when top commander Ahmed Shah Massoud was assassinated. Intelligence officials immediately suspected the killing of the so-called Lion of Panjshir was carried out by supporters of bin Laden, who feared Massoud threatened their sanctuary in Afghanistan.

Prior to September 11, 2001, Western dealings with the Taliban involved a mix of diplomacy and soft power. In its final years the Taliban became increasingly isolated and faced severe UN Security Council sanctions. The administration of U.S. President Bill Clinton held direct talks with the group, though Washington never recognized the Taliban as the official government of Afghanistan. A series of UN Security Council resolutions urged the Taliban to end its abusive treatment of women, and in August 1997, the U.S. State Department ordered the Afghan embassy in Washington closed. In October 1999, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, freezing funds and restricting travel of the groups' members. The

sanctions have been updated seven times since, most recently with [Resolution 1822](#) adopted in June 2008. Domestically, Afghan President Hamid Karzai has taken a more diplomatic tact by reaching out to Pashtuns, many of whom were members of the Taliban. CFR Senior Fellow Stephen Biddle says this type of targeted reconciliation might be possible because the Taliban has evolved into a disparate network of factions driven by competing motivations--from ideology to quests for power or money. "Because [the Taliban] in Afghanistan is so heterogeneous," Biddle says, "there are opportunities to try and drive wedges between elements of that coalition and split it, and peel [off] particular factions, or particular warlords, or particular leaders."

The Road Ahead

The whereabouts of Afghanistan's exiled Taliban leaders are not fully known. Some have been captured and detained by U.S. forces as enemy combatants in the "war on terror." Experts say many of the Taliban were able to melt back into predominantly Pashtun areas of Afghanistan in the south and east; they have occasionally linked up with others to mount attacks, and some are working to overthrow the current government. Many others have reassembled in neighboring Pakistan, where the Taliban movement was born, and launch attacks from there. Beginning in mid-2006, the Afghan Taliban stepped up its attacks on coalition forces, with fighters adapting Iraq-like suicide and roadside bombing tactics. Uruzgan, Helmand, Kandahar, and Zabol Provinces in the east and south--regions that NATO forces have been responsible for securing since July 31, 2006--saw some of the fiercest clashes. Katzman writes in a June 2009 report that the resurgence in fighting has sparked debate (PDF) about whether it was driven by frustration with the Karzai government or Taliban intimidation. For its part, the Afghan government asserts the spike in attacks is the result of Pakistan providing the Taliban safe haven across the border. In an interview, Katzman said one unintended consequence of knocking out senior Taliban leaders has been the rapid rise of inexperienced younger leaders, some of whom have been radicalized by al-Qaeda.

Yet not all former Taliban members have joined this fight. Many heeded a call by President Karzai to disarm and have assumed normal lives as members of Afghan society. Some even won seats in Afghanistan's 2005 parliamentary election, including the former Taliban governor of Bamiyan Province, who was in office when the Bamiyan Buddhas were destroyed. Leaders who remain engaged militarily are also intent on repairing a tattered image. In mid-2009 the Taliban released a manual on the proper treatment of prisoners, and issued guidance on limiting civilian casualties when attacking coalition forces. Analysts say the manual is meant to help renew popular support among the Afghan public while legitimizing its often brutal tactics. "This is part of their strategic thinking," Yonah Alexander, a specialist on counterterrorism with the Potomac Institute, told the *Washington Times*. "This is an old trick to play both ends of the stick and to gain time."

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