



THE TALIBAN QUESTION

As U.S. Forces Wind Down a Long War, the Militant Islamic Movement
is Far From Being Defeated

By Zahid Hussain

The fighting season of the summer of 2014 was presumably the last one with American-led combat troops still deployed in Afghanistan. The war that began in 2001 immediately after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States overthrew the Taliban regime in power at the time but has failed to crush the movement. Short of declaring victory, President Barack Obama announced he was ready to “turn the page” on America’s longest war. Although security and combat responsibility will be transferred completely to the Afghan government by the end of the year, the presence of a sizeable residual force, after the signing of a bilateral security agreement by the new administration of President Ashraf Ghani in Kabul, will keep U.S. forces involved in the Afghan conflict somewhat beyond 2014.

It is unlikely that a limited U.S. presence can guarantee the stability that more than 140,000 U.S.-led coalition troops at one point could not achieve. U.S. strategy seems as confused as it was during the course of the war. Expectations that a weak administration in Kabul could have transformed Afghanistan into a stable state by 2014 and take over border and internal security responsibility is unrealistic at best. With no political reconciliation involving the Taliban insurgents in place, long-term stability in Afghanistan remains a question as the country goes through a landmark political transition.

Among various post-2014 scenarios the least likely one is the eventual return of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. The group took power in the mid-1990s after the Soviet withdrawal left a power vacuum in the country with the vision of creating an Islamic state. A combination of mujahadeen fighters and Pashtun religious students, the Taliban gained favor among the population for providing stability and security. The Taliban provided Al-Qaeda a safe haven during its reign, having formed strong relations with Osama bin Laden during the civil war in the 1980s—a relationship that eventually led to the Taliban’s downfall.

◁ Taliban fighter, Kunar province, April 6, 2011.
Larry Towell/Magnum

A more likely scenario is a protracted conflict, in which the insurgent militia could gain control over a large swath of the predominantly Pashtun region after the cessation of active combat operations by the coalition forces. This would not only seriously test the mettle of the Afghan national security forces, but also threaten the stability of Pakistan across the border facing its own problem of Taliban insurgency in the semi-autonomous tribal regions.

Having failed to disrupt the Afghan presidential election in 2014, the Taliban stepped up attacks on coalition forces during its summer offensive. In August, for the first time since the Vietnam War, a U.S. army general was killed in a foreign war when an Afghan soldier, apparently a Taliban infiltrator, shot him at a training facility. The killing of General Harold Greene—the highest ranking member of the U.S.-led coalition killed in the Afghanistan war—underscored the challenge facing coalition forces as they try to wind down their involvement in the thirteen-year-old conflict. Far from vanquished, the Taliban have widened their operations, particularly in the eastern and southern region of Afghanistan where the security transition has completely taxed Afghan forces.

Indeed, for the Taliban, the withdrawal of U.S.-led combat troops is a victory for their resistance. The traditional Eid message of Taliban supreme leader Mullah Omar this year blended tones of triumph with an offer of reconciliation. While claiming victories on the battlefield, he called for the establishment of an inclusive government protecting the interests of all ethnic factions after the withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan.

Mullah Omar seems buoyed by the release of five senior Taliban leaders by the United States from Guantanamo prison in exchange for an American soldier, Army Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, captured by the group several years ago. Mullah Omar described the deal as a success for the Taliban's political negotiations in that it constituted a recognition at the international level of the "Islamic Emirate as a political reality." The deal had been on the negotiating table for more than two years, and the issue was directly linked with the start of a formal negotiation process between the Afghan Taliban and the United States on the future of Afghanistan. The United States changed tactics in 2011, when it believed it had made enough progress against the Taliban to start talks with the group about ending the war. The talks materialized last year, after the Taliban opened an office in Doha, Qatar and the Afghan army officially took over the country's security.

Apart from other factors, the initial U.S. refusal to release the Taliban prisoners was a major reason that the Doha talks never progressed. Mullah Omar intended for all five detainees to be part of the Taliban negotiating team. The Bowe Bergdahl deal may have come too late. There was no indication in Mullah Omar's Eid message about any prospects for a resumption of direct talks.

Over the years the Taliban insurgency has grown in intensity, spreading to even non-Pashtun Afghan territories. While the Taliban have consolidated their war gains

in Pashtun-dominated south and eastern Afghanistan, attacks in northern regions have intensified in the recent years. The Taliban demonstrated their growing strength in the north by launching regular attacks in the provinces of Takhar and Badakhshan, which have been among the country's most peaceful, and in the provinces of Balkh and Samangan. The Taliban have managed to consolidate their war gains by tapping into widespread discontent with the incompetence and corruption so deeply entrenched among Afghan government officials. In many areas the Taliban have effectively supplanted the official authorities, running local administrations and courts, and conscripting recruits.

In a protracted conflict between the Kabul government and the Taliban, relatively low, but still significant, levels of violence would seriously affect Afghan stabilization and reconstruction. Another consequence of the continued violence and political instability could be a de facto partition of Afghanistan arising from a steady increase in Taliban control in the Pashtun-majority areas in the southern and eastern provinces.

Leadership of Mullah Omar

The revival of the Taliban as a powerful insurgent force having been routed in 2001 should not come as a surprise. In fact, the radical group was never really defeated. Its fighters melted into the population or took sanctuary across the border in Pakistan among their Pashtun brethren. Afghan refugee camps and radical *madrasahs*—established after the Soviet invasion in 1979—became a haven for the Taliban fighters. Most of the leadership had survived the offensive and also moved to Pakistan.

In that initial period, senior leaders were fragmented and disunited over what they should do. The shock and trauma of the fall of their regime had paralyzed the leadership. The organization had crumbled. There was no structure with which to regroup and revive. While some were determined to fight, others were more inclined toward exploring negotiated political options. Their isolation had increased as their support among Afghan people declined. Occasional statements and threats from senior leaders condemning the occupation found little response among the Afghans.

In the last period of its power, the Taliban had lost a significant mass support base with its regressive social policies, which included forcing women to wear burqas, banning music and television, and implementing harsh criminal punishments for petty offenses. Initially Afghans at large seemed content and hoped for a better future under the new order installed by the occupation army. A new political paradigm was in play and the Taliban did not hold much appeal for the war-weary Afghan population. There was no serious effort to organize a resistance.

It took more than two years for the Taliban leadership to recover and rebuild its structure. In June 2003, a ten-member leadership shura council was formed and given responsibility to formulate a political and military strategy for the resistance. Led by

Mullah Omar, the council, later known as the Quetta Shura, mostly comprised the old guard that had formed the core of the former Taliban regime.

Meanwhile, the Taliban began an organized recruitment effort in the *madrasahs*—in Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Karachi. The Quetta Shura won implicit support from the Pakistani security establishment, which was deeply concerned by the unfriendly government in Kabul (which, in turn, accused Pakistan of supporting the Taliban). The new Afghan government was installed after the Bonn Agreement of 2001, signed at a conference hosted by the United Nations; various anti-Taliban Afghan representatives and international actors adopted measures for Afghanistan's political transition, including the creation of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). In that early period of revival, the Taliban leadership had not fully developed a clear political or military strategy and merely reacted to circumstances.

The period from 2003 to 2005 was a turning point as the Taliban consolidated their organizational structure and expanded its activities. It was also the time when Afghanistan enacted its new constitution with a highly centralized presidential form of government. Public support for the new political dispensation began eroding as security remained weak, and reports of fraud and corruption increased. Meanwhile, the Taliban's resurgence was also aided by the strategic mistake by the United States to re-empower former strongmen and warlords, which reprised old ethnic and tribal tensions.

The alienation was greatest in the eastern and southern part of the country populated by Pashtuns, who felt politically sidelined and targeted by the coalition forces and the new authorities in Kabul. This was the bastion of the ousted Taliban regime, and in a repeat of 1994 when the Taliban restored order amid criminal activity and fighting in southern Afghanistan, the local population started contacting the Taliban. People willingly gave shelter to the insurgents. It was a dramatic change from the period after its fall in 2001 when the Taliban could not find any haven in the community. The insurgents later began to get a foothold in the north as well, exploiting the divisions among various power groups within the new Afghan government.

That success spurred momentum for the Taliban in the entire country. As the resentment against the foreign occupation forces grew, the Taliban's influence increased. Indiscriminate killings and arrests of innocent people added to the alienation and anger felt by local communities. Growing numbers of women and children were also being killed in air attacks. "Each bombing and killing of civilians added to our support," a senior Taliban commander told me in an interview in 2006 in a Pakistani border region. Police brutality turned even those who had initially supported the new Afghan administration toward the Taliban.

The operations carried out by the Taliban up to 2003 comprised relatively small and targeted attacks. There were very few instances of any large-scale attacks on

coalition forces during this period. But, by summer 2006, the Taliban had developed its military and political strategy with an ambition to establish territorial control, particularly in southern Afghanistan.

There was a serious attempt to force the international community and the coalition forces to review their policy in Afghanistan by escalating attacks. The new tactics were to carry out frontal attacks on the Western forces, unleash a massive increase in suicide bombings, utilize improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and wage an aggressive public relations campaign. The full-scale attacks were not very successful and resulted in heavy civilian casualties. Nevertheless, the spectacular acts of violence and growing insurgency in the south and southeast propelled the Taliban propaganda message that Western forces and the Afghan administration were unable to provide security for the local population.

The growing use of suicide bombings dramatically increased the level of violence. Initially most of the suicide bombers were either Pakistanis or Afghans living in Pakistan. But later more local Afghans started signing up. Suicide bombings became a weapon of choice for the insurgents, generating fear and projecting greater capacity than was the actual case.

The escalating civilian casualties also produced a backlash against the Taliban among the local population. This led to a heated debate within the Taliban leadership over the effectiveness as well as religious legitimacy of suicide attacks. That then led to the declaration in 2009 by the Taliban military council that suicide bombing was not a legitimate tactic, although sporadic suicide attacks continue by some insurgent factions.

The Taliban started focusing more on winning over the local population as violence increased in 2008 and 2009. At that time, President Obama took office and embarked on ambitious multiple-level programs that shifted American attention from the U.S. war in Iraq back to Afghanistan. Despite the surge in U.S. forces—numbers moved toward 100,000 by the end of 2009—the security situation deteriorated all over the country. Particularly in the south and southeast, insurgent attacks hit an all-time high as did the number of casualties among Afghan and Western soldiers.

The north also saw a significant rise of Taliban influence during that period. A report by the U.S. military to the U.S. Congress in 2010 estimated that forty-eight districts out of ninety-two surveyed were supportive of the Taliban. According to an estimation by the Afghan intelligence agency, some 1,700 Taliban field commanders controlled anywhere between 10,000 to 30,000 fighters. More than 6,200 Afghan and coalition soldiers were killed or wounded in roadside bomb attacks during this period. The increasing influence of the Taliban in the north was the most significant development.

The insurgents made significant gains in the northern provinces—in particular, Kunduz, Baghlan, Badghis, and Faryab—where active Taliban or associated groups operated. Turning their focus on the north helped the Taliban show that the movement

was not confined to only the Pashtun region in eastern and southern Afghanistan. The Taliban reportedly made significant inroads among the Uzbek and Tajik communities as well.

Rise of Young Radicals

Notwithstanding these successes on the ground, the thinking within the Afghan Taliban concerning the future of Afghanistan remains obscure. This perhaps reflects fracture within the group. Although Mullah Omar enjoys absolute loyalty of the leadership council, his influence seems to have waned over the years with the growing radicalization of a new generation of field commanders. Most of them were teenagers during Taliban rule, but now form the core of the resistance. Being out of the field for so long—believed to be operating from the Pakistani side of the border—seems to have turned Mullah Omar into more of a symbolic figurehead.

While the core leadership has formed strong administrative structures, the exact composition of and details surrounding the operational command remain opaque. Field commanders act somewhat autonomously, with little control by the central leadership council. Some reports suggest that the young and more radicalized commanders and lower ranks have even started questioning the decisions of Mullah Omar. But his position as supreme leader is not likely to be challenged publicly.

The Quetta Shura administrative leadership structure has evolved over the years. Having begun with eleven members, its number is now believed to have reached thirty-three. Regional Peshawar and Miram Shah shuras also operate under the Quetta council. While the overall leadership lies with Mullah Omar, the head of the shura guides the day-to-day operations. Committees under the provincial shura, however, carry out many administrative functions.

The relationship between the various Taliban committees based in Pakistan and the field commanders in Afghanistan is complex. It is quite evident that the insurgency on the ground is less organized and that decision making is often left to individual commanders. Unlike the top administrative structure, the hierarchy in the field is less clear.

The Taliban may be united under one banner, but the group is comprised of various factions. The most powerful is said to be the Haqqani network, led by Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son Sirajuddin. A leading former mujahideen commander in the resistance against the Soviets, Jalaluddin was appointed as the commander in chief of the Taliban militia in the last days before the fall of the regime in 2001. He had joined the Taliban in 1995 after the militia closed in on Kabul for its victory in the civil war. He heads the Miram Shah Shura and has a seat in the leadership council in Quetta.

The Haqqani network, which until recently operated from Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal region, has emerged as the most lethal insurgent group fighting the

coalition forces in the eastern Afghan provinces of Khost, Paktia, and Paktika. It has also been involved in some spectacular attacks inside Kabul.

The network wields significant influence and power among the Afghan as well as the Pakistani Taliban. It has gained more power because of its long-standing links with Al-Qaeda, providing Al-Qaeda members a safe haven in eastern Afghanistan. The reported weakening of Mullah Omar's authority and the arrests and killing of some of the most powerful members of the leadership shura has further strengthened Haqqani's role in the insurgency.

Sirajuddin has effectively taken over the command of the network as his father has been sidelined because of a prolonged illness. In his early thirties, the younger Haqqani has earned a reputation of being the fiercest insurgent commander. His radical worldview has been shaped by his personal ties with Al-Qaeda and international jihadist groups, in comparison with other members of the Taliban leadership council who did not share Al-Qaeda's global agenda.

For the Taliban generally, however, the events leading to the American invasion of Afghanistan began fraying the group's ties with Al-Qaeda. Many mid-level Taliban commanders blamed bin Laden and the September 11 attacks for the U.S. assault on Afghanistan. The Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaderships largely cut off contact after their retreat across the border into Pakistan.

Al-Qaeda and other foreign fighters were in a very different situation to the Taliban in Pakistan. It was a complete change of environment for the group to operate in Pakistani tribal regions. The shift in the circumstances meant far more compartmentalization of the organizational structure. Most of the Al-Qaeda leadership and foreign fighters initially made North Waziristan their base; some of them scattered to other areas including Pakistani cities, where they were sheltered by Pakistani jihadi groups.

Bin Laden and other Al-Qaeda leaders had contacts in the area that dated back to the war of resistance against the Soviet occupation forces. Jalaluddin and his clan had developed a strong nexus with the Arab fighters. Most of the Al-Qaeda old guard have either been killed by U.S. drone strikes or arrested by Pakistani authorities; bin Laden himself was killed in a U.S. raid in 2011 on his compound in Abbottabad near Islamabad, where he had been secretly hiding for several years. But a new Al-Qaeda organization, mostly comprising Pakistani militants, has evolved over the years. This new generation of Al-Qaeda now has resumed close links with the Afghan Taliban.

For Pakistani authorities, the Haqqani network remained a useful hedge against an uncertain outcome in Afghanistan. The deep reluctance to take action against the network has been a reflection of Pakistan's worries about the eventual withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan.

But in an apparent policy shift, the Pakistan military has now for the first time declared that its latest offensive will target all militant groups without discrimination, including the Haqqani network. Most of the fighters associated with the Haqqani network are believed to have moved to Afghanistan before the offensive in North Waziristan began in June. The military has said the group will not find Pakistani territory a safe haven anymore. There is, however, no likelihood of the Haqqanis engaging in any confrontation with their former Pakistani patrons. There is lot of skepticism that Pakistan will seriously pursue the Afghan Taliban.

How deep the divisions within the Taliban really go is not at all clear. There are conflicting views about the state of unity within the insurgency. While one view is that the Taliban is an amorphous collection of groups and factions, other analysts portray the Taliban as a monolithic and organized resistance movement owing its total loyalty to Mullah Omar. Lack of clarity makes it hard to predict whether the Taliban would remain united or split after the withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan.

There is strong concern within the Taliban leadership that the end of foreign occupation may lead to a sharp drop in recruitment among the Pashtun who have been fighting a “defensive jihad” against the invaders. A continuation of civil war may not get the Taliban the same level of support. One other point of divide could be the issue of a possible negotiated settlement with the new Afghan leadership.

Some relatively moderate elements in the Taliban leadership favor peace talks with the Kabul government on minimal conditions that may give the insurgents a share in the central government and de facto control over most of eastern and southern Afghanistan. In return, the Taliban would end the war and evict Al-Qaeda from their territory.

For moderates, the thinking appears to be the belief that the Taliban cannot win an outright military victory leading to the conquest of the whole of Afghanistan, or the approximately 90 percent of the country that they held in the summer of 2001 prior to the September 11 attacks and resulting American invasion.

The future of the Taliban will be dictated by the course of events in Afghanistan itself. The different factions of the Taliban will wait to see how things develop on the ground. It will also depend to some extent on the new Afghan president and what legitimacy he holds following the contested presidential election in 2014.

Threat to Pakistan

Whatever happens in Afghanistan will have a direct bearing on Pakistan. With the Afghan endgame looming, Pakistan’s biggest nightmare is the prospect of Taliban control—even only in parts of Afghanistan—after the withdrawal of the foreign forces.

The very notion of success of the Taliban across the border may have a cascading effect on Pakistan's threat matrix.

The fear stems from the fact that it is ethnic Pashtuns on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border who have taken the lead in the insurgency. A distinctive Taliban movement known as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), with strong ties to the insurgents across the Durand Line, has evolved to present a serious threat to Pakistan's internal security.

Both the Afghan and the Pakistani Taliban are predominantly Pashtun movements and have close ideological and organizational ties. Despite their differences in tactics—the Afghan Taliban leadership does not support TTP's policy of fighting the Pakistani forces—they share the same objective of establishing a harsh version of Islamic rule. More importantly, both the movements owe their allegiance to Mullah Omar.

The prospect of the Taliban dominating both sides of the border is the one of the most significant threats to regional security. Continued instability in Afghanistan has had significant implications for Pakistan. The long war in Afghanistan has turned Pakistan into a new battleground for Al-Qaeda linked militants, and has also had devastating effects on Pakistan's domestic economy and political scene, thus threatening to destabilize the country. Thousands of Pakistani civilians and military personnel have been killed in terrorist attacks and in the fighting against the insurgents in the country's northwestern territories.

The emergence of the Pakistani Taliban is both a consequence of the war in Afghanistan and the military operations carried out by Pakistan forces, which severely undermined the age-old administrative structure in the tribal areas. Members of the tribal councils and chieftains—through whom the federal government established its authority—were either killed or driven out by militants. A new crop of Pakistani militants emerged to fill the vacuum created by the collapse of the administrative system in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) over which the Pakistani government had at best tenuous control.

Taliban groups started emerging in FATA and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in 2004. Those militants forcibly closed down video and audio shops, as well as Internet cafés, declaring them un-Islamic. The Taliban also ordered barbers not to shave beards. People were prohibited from playing music, even at weddings and traditional fairs, which provided some form of entertainment to the public.

The group took a formal organizational shape in December 2007 when some forty militant leaders commanding 40,000 fighters gathered in South Waziristan to form a united front under the banner of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. They unanimously elected Baitullah Mehsud, already their most powerful commander, as emir or supreme leader of the new organization. Almost all the top militant leaders

operating in the tribal regions and/or their representatives set aside their differences to attend the meeting.

The shura council not only had representation from all the seven tribal agencies but also from the parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa including Swat, Malakand, Buner, and Dera Ismail Khan where the Taliban movement was active. The eight-point charter called for the enforcement of sharia rule and vowed to continue fighting against Western forces in Afghanistan. The TTP also declared what it described as “defensive” jihad against the Pakistani military. The newly formed TTP was in fact little more than an extension of Al-Qaeda.

Its formation followed bin Laden’s declaration of war against the Pakistani state in the aftermath of the siege of Islamabad’s Red Mosque in July 2007. Its charter clearly reflected Al-Qaeda’s new strategy to extend its war to Pakistan. Almost all the top leaders of the new organization, particularly Baitullah, had connections with Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban movement.

The rise of a distinctive Pakistani Taliban movement represents a new and more violent phase of Islamic militancy in the country. Unprecedented violence engulfed all seven tribal regions as well as parts of the northern province. Just days after its creation, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was assassinated a few weeks following her return to the country after a protracted period in exile. The militants had finally succeeded in removing the leader who had dared to confront them. Baitullah was blamed for Bhutto’s murder, which was to completely change Pakistan’s political landscape.

The new generation of Pakistani Taliban became more brutal than their Afghan comrades. Beheading and public executions of opponents and government officials became common practice. The videos of those brutal actions were then distributed to create fear. These sadistic actions were unknown in traditional Pashtun culture. This behavior was greatly influenced by Arab and Uzbek militants. The Pakistani Taliban’s creed probably stemmed from the Salafist jihadism ideology espoused by Al-Qaeda. It was also the result of Wahhabism found in Saudi-funded *madrasahs*, which created a new kind of Sunni radicalization specific to the Taliban.

Successive Pakistani military operations and U.S. drone strikes have hugely weakened the TTP. Over the last few years, it has lost many of its senior commanders and the organization has fragmented into various factions. The long delayed military offensive in the North Waziristan tribal area, which had emerged as the center of gravity of the militancy in Pakistan, has driven out Taliban leaders from their most secure stronghold. Now their ability to launch major terrorist attacks has been badly crippled, but Pakistan’s control over the tribal territories remains tentative.

A key flaw in Pakistan’s strategy in the fight against the insurgency is that it has not taken into account the ability of the groups to regenerate. The government has failed to

put in place an effective administration and policing system after successful military operations drove the militants out but left residents under perpetual threat of their return.

Their fear is justified. The militants have shown themselves capable of regrouping and striking back. The Pakistani military has now deployed 100,000 troops in the effort to root out the militants. Yet, despite the increased deployment, militant attacks have resumed in some of the areas that were thought to have been already cleared.

A major challenge confronting Pakistani security forces is that many Pakistani Taliban leaders, including the new TTP chief Mullah Fazlullah (who rose following the U.S. drone strike killings of Baitullah Mehsud and his successor Hakimullah Mehsud), have fled the military offensive and are now operating from bases on the Afghan side of the border. Most of the attacks on Pakistani security forces are being carried out from those cross-border sanctuaries.

Pakistan's patronage of the Afghan Taliban and particularly of the Haqqani network became a convenient rationale for the government in Kabul to permit sanctuaries for Pakistani insurgents on Afghan soil. There is strong evidence of close links between some TTP factions and Afghan intelligence agencies.

This tit-for-tat policy has had disastrous consequences for both nations. Their age-old legacy of using proxies against each other had disastrous consequences for regional security. The war of sanctuaries has only benefited the militants who have sought to establish their barbaric rule on both sides of the border.

The problem is further highlighted after Pakistan launched the massive military operation against local and foreign militants in North Waziristan. The fleeing insurgents using sanctuaries on the other side of the Durand Line for cross-border attacks has been Pakistan's biggest security nightmare.

Both countries need each other to cooperate more than ever at this critical juncture as the Western forces prepare to end their combat mission in Afghanistan. Continued instability in Afghanistan is bound to spill over into Pakistan.