

The Taliban: Exporting Extremism

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Rewriting the Rules of the Great Game

"Talibanization," the destabilizing export of Afghan-style radical Islam, may be a new term in the American political lexicon. But in Central and South Asia, where the repercussion of the superstrict Taliban rule of Afghanistan have been widely felt, the word has become all too familiar. As political fragmentation, economic meltdown, ethnic and sectarian warfare, and Islamic fundamentalism tighten their grip on Pakistan and much of the rest of the region, the dangerous behavior of Afghanistan's new leaders is no longer a local affair.

More and more, chaos in Afghanistan is seeping through its porous borders. The ongoing civil war has polarized the region, with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia backing the Taliban regime while Iran, Russia, India, and four former Soviet Central Asian republics support the

opposition Northern Alliance. The confrontation is producing enormous economic disruption throughout the area, as the Afghan warlords' dependence on smuggling and drug trafficking grows insatiable.

Into the political vacuum left by 20 years of war and the collapse of stable government has marched a new generation of violent fundamentalists, nurtured and inspired by the Taliban's unique Islamist model. Thousands of foreign radicals now fighting alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan are determined to someday overthrow their own regimes and carry out Taliban-style Islamist revolutions in their homelands. For example, the Chechnya-based militants who took over parts of Dagestan in July included in their ranks Arabs, Afghans, and Pakistanis, most of whom had fought in Afghanistan. So had the 800 Uzbek and Tajik gunmen who took over parts of southern Kyrgyzstan in August. The state breakdown in Afghanistan offers militants from Pakistan, Iran, the Central Asian republics, and China's predominantly Muslim Xinjiang province a tempting package deal: sanctuary and financial support through smuggling.

Meanwhile, Washington's sole response so far has been its single-minded obsession with bringing to justice the Saudi-born terrorist Osama bin Laden-hardly a comprehensive policy for dealing with this increasingly volatile part of the world.

For Western nations to presume that they can safely exploit the vast oil and gas riches of Central Asia without first helping bring peace to Afghanistan is unrealistic to the extreme. A new Great Game is being played in the region. At stake, however, are no longer questions of mere political influence or who gets to build oil and gas pipelines where. These issues will be irrelevant unless the West figures out how to stop the spreading conflagration in Afghanistan-and fast.

The Students Who Came in From The Cold

For Afghanistan to be at the center of both dialogue and conflict between civilizations is nothing new. The country's location at the crossroads between Iran, Central Asia, the Arabian Sea, and India has given its mountain passes a strategic significance for centuries. At certain times, Afghanistan has acted as a buffer between competing empires and ideologies, at others it has served as a corridor through which armies marched. Repeated efforts to colonize the country, most recently by the British and the Soviets, have failed and in the process given the Afghans a fierce sense of independence and pride.

The United States, patron of the Afghan rebellion against the Soviet invaders, walked away after the Soviet Union withdrew its last troops in 1989. The Afghans, once on the frontline of the Cold War, were left with a devastated country. One million had died during the ten-year occupation. But only three years later, when Kabul fell to the mujahideen who had fought off the Soviets, gory civil war again gripped the country, fueled by neighboring countries trying to carve out areas of influence. The civil war has pitted the majority Pushtun population in the south and east against the ethnic minorities of the north Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, and Turkmen.

The predominantly Pushtun Taliban emerged in late 1994 as a Messianic movement made up of *taliban* (literally, students) from Islamic *madrasahs* (seminaries) who were living as refugees in Pakistan. They vowed to bring peace to Afghanistan, establish law and order, disarm the population, and impose *sharia* (Islamic law). Welcomed by a war-weary Pushtun population, the Taliban were at first remarkably successful and popular. Until they captured Kabul in 1996 they expressed no desire to rule the country. But ever since then - abetted by their Pakistani and Saudi backers and inspired by ideological mentors such as bin Laden - the Taliban have committed themselves to conquering the entire country and more.

In 1998, the Taliban overran much of northern Afghanistan, pushing the Northern Alliance (made up of non-Pushtun minorities) into a thin sliver of territory in the northeast. This victory further polarized the region, as Iran threatened to invade and accused Pakistan of supporting the Taliban.

The nature of the Taliban - who they are and what they represent - has been difficult for outsiders to understand because of the excessive secrecy that surrounds their leaders and political structure. The Taliban do not issue policy statements or hold regular press conferences. There is no Taliban manifesto. Because of the ban on photography and television, Afghans do not even know what their new leaders look like. The one-eyed Taliban religious leader, Mullah Muhammad Umar, does not meet with non-Muslims and so remains a mystery.

Historically, Afghanistan was a deeply conservative Muslim country where *sharia*, as interpreted by Afghan tribal custom, prevailed for centuries. But the Islam traditionally practiced in Afghanistan was also immensely tolerant of other Muslim sects, other religions, and different lifestyles. Until 1992, Hindus, Sikhs, and Jews all played a significant role in the country's bazaar economy and sectarianism was not an issue.

Since 1992, however, the bloody civil war has destroyed this tolerance, setting sects and ethnic groups against one another in a way formerly unimaginable. The once-unifying factor of Islam has become a lethal weapon in the hands of extremists and a force for division and fragmentation.

Ninety percent of Afghans are Sunni Muslims, although Shiites predominate among the Hazaras and some Tajik clans settled in central Afghanistan. Traditional Islam in Afghanistan believed in minimum government with as little state interference as possible. Another key factor contributing to Afghan tolerance was the enormous popularity of Sufism, a mystical and undogmatic branch of Islam.

Before the Taliban arrived, none of Islam's extreme orthodox sects - such as the conservative Wahhabis from Saudi Arabia - had ever found a home in Afghanistan. But the Taliban emerged at a critical juncture, as the country was fractured by warlords, Pushtun hegemony dissipated, and an ideological vacuum grew within the Islamist movement. The Taliban began as reformers, following a well-worn tradition in Muslim history based on the familiar notion of jihad - holy war against infidels. Jihad, however, does not sanction the killing of fellow Muslims on the basis of ethnicity or sect. Yet the Taliban has used it to do just that. This appalls non-Pushtuns who accuse the Taliban of using jihad as cover to exterminate them.

The Taliban's anomalous interpretation of Islam emerged from an extreme and perverse interpretation of Deobandism, preached by Pakistani mullahs (clerics) in Afghan refugee camps. Deobandism, a branch of Sunni Islam, arose in British India as a reform movement that aimed to regenerate Muslim society as it struggled to live within the confines of a colonized state. The Deobandis sought to harmonize classical Islamic texts with current realities-an aim the Taliban has ignored.

Early on, a few Deobandi *madrasahs* were established in Afghanistan, but they were not hugely popular. They were more successful in Pakistan, however. Pakistani Deobandis set up a political party, the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), with a strong anti-American stance.

During the war against the Soviets, the few Deobandi Afghan groups that then existed were ignored. Across the border, however, the JUI used the war to set up hundreds of *madrasahs* in Pakistan's Pushtun belt, offering Afghan refugees and young Pakistanis free education, food, shelter, and military training. These Deobandi *madrasahs*, however, were run by barely literate mullahs untutored in the original reformist Deobandi agenda. Saudi funds and scholarships brought them closer to ultraconservative Wahhabism.

Still, the JUI remained politically isolated until Pakistan's 1993 elections, when it allied itself with the victorious Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, becoming a part of her ruling coalition. For the first time the JUI gained access to the corridors of power, establishing close links with the army, the Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) and the Interior Ministry. In 1996 the Taliban handed control of training camps in Afghanistan over to JUI factions, thus enhancing their image among the new generation of Pakistani and Arab militants who studied there.

The JUI and its many breakaway factions have become the main recruiters of Pakistani and foreign students to fight for the Taliban. Between 1994 and 1999, an estimated 80, 000 to 100, 000 Pakistanis trained and fought in Afghanistan. These battle-hardened militants now gravely threaten Pakistan's own stability, and the support the Taliban receives from Pakistan's Deobandi network, quite separate from military supplies it gets from the government, ensures even greater Taliban penetration into Pakistani society.

The joint venture between the Taliban and the JUI, funded by Saudi Wahhabis and supported by the Pakistani ISI, has become an ever-expanding enterprise, seeking new markets in Central Asia and beyond. The Taliban may have debased Deobandi traditions-but in doing so they have promoted a new, radical model for Islamist revolution. Unlike their predecessors, the Taliban have little knowledge of Islamic and Afghan history, of *sharia* or the Quran. Their exposure to the radical Islamic debate around the world is minimal; indeed, they are so rigid in their beliefs that they admit no discussion.

The Next To Fall: Pakistan and Kashmir

The Taliban's purist ideology and the Pakistani recruits it has nurtured have had immense cross-border repercussions in Pakistan. An already fragile nation in the midst of an identity crisis, economic meltdown, ethnic and sectarian division, and suffering under a rapacious ruling elite unable to provide good governance, Pakistan could easily be submerged by a new Islamist wave led not by established, more mature Islamist parties but by neo-Taliban groups.

By 1998, such neo-Taliban parties had become a major influence in the Pakistani provinces of Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province. In those regions, they had begun banning television and videos, imposing *sharia* punishments such as stoning and amputation, assassinating Pakistani Shiites, and forcing women to adopt the restrictive Taliban dress code. Their influence is now starting to creep outside the Pushtun belt to Punjab and Sind. Of the 6,000-8,000 militants who joined the Taliban for their July 1999 offensive against the Northern Alliance, the majority were, for the first time, not Pushtuns but Punjabis. The Pakistani government's support for the Taliban is thus coming back to haunt it, even as Pakistan's leaders remain oblivious of the danger and continue their support.

The contradictions in Pakistan's Afghan policy have become even more acute due to the support given to the Taliban by two extremist JUI splinter groups, the Sipah-Sahaba Pakistan and the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. Both groups have killed hundreds of Pakistani Shiites and allegedly twice tried to assassinate Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz. Sharif. When Sharif responded with a crackdown against them in Punjab, their leaders took refuge in Kabul and came under Taliban protection-the same Taliban still backed by Islamabad.

Pakistan believes that a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan will be an ally and give its army strategic depth in its ongoing conflict with India. In particular, Islamabad considers support for the Taliban necessary because of its dispute with India over Kashmir. The Taliban, Deobandi groups in Pakistan, and bin Laden's terrorist network all give major support to Kashmir insurgents resisting New Delhi's control of Indian Kashmir. Islamabad therefore cannot drop its support for them without affecting the Kashmir cause it espouses.

Yet the increasing Islamicization of the Kashmiri struggle has undermined both the Kashmiri's own demand for self-determination from India and Pakistan's bid to win international mediation of the dispute. The Kashmiri independence movement is losing world sympathy as more and more Pakistani and Arab recruits join the fight and turn it into a Taliban jihad. The longer this goes on, the less chance there will be that the territorial dispute will ever be peacefully resolved. Day by day, the danger grows for Pakistan, Kashmir, and India itself.

Dominoes: Central Asia, Iran, and China

With their porous borders, weak security apparatuses, and crisis-torn economies, the five former Soviet Central Asian republics-Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have every reason to fear the turmoil emanating from Afghanistan. The threats include the flow of drugs and weapons and a possible flood of refugees if the Northern Alliance is defeated.

But Central Asia's leaders, who have not changed since the Soviet era, are growing increasingly authoritarian. Their rigged elections and restrictions on political parties have undermined democratic alternatives, leaving underground Islamist movements as the only political opposition. Widespread poverty and unemployment provide a fertile recruiting base for young militants.

During the recent Afghan civil war, the newly independent Central Asian states supported their ethnic kin in northern Afghanistan, who provided a buffer against the spread of Pushtun fundamentalism. That buffer has now been virtually eliminated. The Taliban control Afghan territory bordering Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. Yet apart from Turkmenistan, which has declared itself neutral in the Afghan conflict, these states continue to support the weakened Northern Alliance. Ahmad Shah Masud, the alliance's ethnic Tajik military commander, keeps a major resupply base in southern Tajikistan, where he receives arms from Russia and Iran.

Meanwhile, earlier this year, Tahir Yuldashev, the leader of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), fled to Afghanistan. Yuldashev is allegedly one of the masterminds behind the assassination attempt against Uzbek President Islam A. Karimov in February, when six bombs in Tashkent killed 16 people and wounded 128. In May, the Taliban allowed Yuldashev to set up a military training camp in northern Afghanistan, just a few miles from the border. Multiple sources in the region say he is training several hundred Islamist militants from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, as well as Uighurs from Xinjiang province in China.

Taliban officials deny helping the IMU. Yet in June, the Taliban rejected a request to extradite Yuldashev to Uzbekistan. And in late August, Juma Namangani, another IMU leader entered southern Kyrgyzstan with some 800 militants, seized villages and hostages, and threatened to invade Uzbekistan. For Central Asians, the war in Afghanistan is now truly coming home.

Although the IMU are not Deobandis, they are influenced by Wahhabism and have tried to impose the Taliban code in their areas of influence. Although Uzbeks have historically been suspicious of the Pushtuns, the Taliban offer the IMU a sanctuary from Karimov's crackdown, weapons, and the means to finance themselves through the drug trade.

Iran is also threatened by the Taliban. The Shiite regime in Tehran has long opposed Pushtun fundamentalism because it is backed by a regional rival-Pakistan-and because it is Sunni-dominated. Moreover, the Taliban are virulently and violently anti-Shiite. During the Afghan war against the Soviets, the Iranians backed the Shiite Hazaras. They have now extended military support to all non-Pushtun groups in the Northern Alliance. Matters came

to a head in late 1998, when the Taliban executed 11 Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif. Iran threatened it to invade Afghanistan, and war was narrowly avoided.

The Taliban now harbor various Iranian dissidents. They have given sanctuary to the small Ahl-e-Sunnah Wal Jamaat, made up of Sunni Iranians opposed to the Tehran regime. And leaders of the principal Iranian opposition group, the Iraq-based Mujahideen-e-Khalq, frequently visit Kandahar and have asked the Taliban for an operational base.

China, too, has been affected by the ascendance of the Taliban. Beijing shunned the civil war in Afghanistan until February 1999, when it first made overtures to the Taliban in an attempt to stem the tide of Afghan heroin flooding Xinjiang. The heroin was helping fund Islamist nationalist opposition to Beijing among the Uighurs and other Muslim ethnic groups. Uighur militants have trained and fought with the Afghan mujahideen since 1986, and Chinese officials say the arms and explosives the rebels have used against Chinese security forces come from Afghanistan. Taliban officials have assured China that they are not harboring fugitive Uighurs, but some Uighur militants are known to be involved with Yuldashev and with bin Laden-if not the Taliban itself.

The Taliban's reasons for this regional adventurism are a mixture of naiveté, frustration, and ideology. At one level, the Taliban insist that Afghan tribe tradition obliges them to give sanctuary to guests such as the Uighur rebels or bin Laden. But the Taliban are also furious with Iran and Uzbekistan for their military support of the Northern Alliance. And Kabul is deeply frustrated with its rejection by the international community and the Muslim world, which has refused to recognize the Taliban government. By harboring dissidents, Afghanistan gets its revenge.

"Our prestige is spreading across the region because we have truly implemented Islam, and this makes the Americans and some neighbors very nervous," says Afghan Information Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi. That is putting it lightly. As militants from around the world flock to it for sanctuary, Kabul only increases its support for the wave of Talibanization it hopes to unleash on the region and beyond.

Blowback

With the active encouragement of the CIA and Pakistan's ISI, who wanted to turn the Afghan jihad into a global war waged by all Muslim states against the Soviet Union, some 35,000 Muslim radicals from 40 Islamic countries joined Afghanistan fight between 1982-1992. Tens of thousands more came to study in Pakistani *madrasahs*. Eventually more than 100,000 foreign Muslim radicals were directly influenced by the Afghan jihad.

The camps in Pakistan and Afghanistan where they trained became virtual universities for promoting pan-Islamic radicalism in Algeria, Egypt, Yemen, Sudan, Jordan, the Philippines, and Bangladesh. Americans woke up to the danger only in 1993, when Afghan-trained Arab militants blew up the World Trade Center in New York, killing six people and injuring 1,000. The bombers believed that, just as Afghanistan had defeated one superpower - the Soviet Union - they would defeat a second.

One of the main recruiters of Arab militants for the Afghan jihad was bin Laden. As the richest and highest-ranking Saudi to participate in the struggle, he was heavily patronized by the ISI and Saudi intelligence. Bin Laden left Afghanistan in 1990 but returned in May 1996. Soon he turned on his former patrons and issued his first "Declaration of Jihad" against the Saudi royal family and the Americans, whom he accused of occupying his homeland.

Striking up a friendship with Umar, the Taliban chief, bin Laden moved to Umar's base in Kandahar in early 1997, Bin Laden reunited and rearmed the Arab militants still remaining in Afghanistan after the war against the Soviets, creating the "055" brigade. The Taliban had no contact with Arab Afghans or pan-Islamic ideology until then. But Umar was quickly influenced by his new friend and became increasingly various in his attacks on Americans, the United Nations, and the Saudis and other pro-Western Muslim regimes. Recent Taliban statements reflect a bin Laden style outrage, defiance, and pan-Islamism that the Taliban had never used before his arrival.

Kenya and Tanzania, the United States accused bin Laden of financing terrorist camps in Somalia, Egypt, Sudan, Yemen, Egypt, and Afghanistan. A few days later, America fired cruise missiles at bin Laden's camps in eastern Afghanistan, killing nearly 20 militants but leaving his network unharmed. Washington demanded bin Laden's extradition; the Taliban refused to comply.

Bin Laden's notoriety has created major problems for Pakistan and Saudi Arabia-two key American allies in the region who have recognized the Taliban government. Pakistan is reluctant to help the United States capture bin Laden; the Saudi terrorist gives valuable help to the Kashmiris and the JUI would protest if Islamabad was seen to do Washington's bidding. Already in July the JUI issued death threats to Americans in Pakistan, to be carried out if bin Laden is extradited to the United States.

The Saudi dilemma is even worse. Saudi Arabia has helped finance Taliban and has provided crucial military support for their offensives. But this all ended after the U.S. embassy bombings in Africa. The Saudis suspended diplomatic relations with the Taliban and ostensibly ceased all aid, although they did not withdraw diplomatic recognition and private donations continue to flow. Like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia would like to leave bin Laden in Afghanistan. His arrest and trial in the United States could be highly embarrassing, exposing his continuing relationship with sympathetic members of the ruling elites and intelligence services of both countries.

Flower Power

Around Kandahar, poppy fields stretch as far as the horizon. In Herat, the Taliban have set up model farms where farmers learn the best methods of heroin cultivation. The U.N. Drug Control Program reports that Afghanistan produced 4,600 metric tons of opium in 1999-twice as much as in the previous year. Afghanistan now produces three times more opium than the rest of the world put together. Ninety-six percent of it is cultivated in Taliban-controlled areas, making the Taliban the largest heroin producer in the world.

The Taliban collect a 20 percent tax from opium dealers and transporters-money that goes straight to the Taliban war chest. The Northern Alliance imposes a similar tax on opium shipments crossing into Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Drug dealers operate the only banking system in the country-offering farmers credit in advance of their poppy crop. This criminalized economy has weakened states throughout the region.

Whereas Afghan opium was exported to the West through Pakistan in 1980, there are now multiple export routes through Iran, the Persian Gulf states, and Central Asia. As these routes expand, so do the beneficiaries. U.S. officials claim that, with most of his bank accounts frozen, bin Laden now finances his operations through opium. Chinese officials report that drug smuggling from Afghanistan is similarly funding the Uighur opposition. Uzbekistan's government has drawn a direct drug-smuggling link between Afghanistan and the Ferghana Valley, where the IMU is based. The civil war in Tajikistan was partly fueled by Afghan drugs, and Pakistan's economy has been crippled by them. Furthermore, according to governments in the region, heroin addiction is growing: there are now five million addicts in Pakistan, three million in Iran, and one million in China, largely in Xinjiang.

Meanwhile, the smuggling of consumer goods, fuel, and foodstuffs through Afghanistan is wreaking further havoc. The contraband trade developed in the 1950s, when Pakistan granted landlocked Afghanistan the right to import duty-free goods through the port of Karachi under the Afghan Transit Trade Agreement (ATTA). Many of these imported goods were resold in Pakistani bazaars, but with the opening of Central Asia and Iran and the arrival of the Taliban in 1994, this trade has expanded enormously.

Today Afghan and Pakistani truckers smuggle goods across a huge swath of territory that includes Russia, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Iran, and Pakistan. ATTA was worth only \$50 million in the 1980s, but it increased to \$128 million in 1992-93 and then jumped to \$266 million in 1994-95 - the first year of Taliban conquests. A 1999 World Bank study estimates that the smuggling trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan alone amounted to \$2.5 billion in 1997, equivalent to more than half of Afghanistan's estimated GDP. Add to that the smuggling to and from the rest of the region and the total rises to \$5 billion.

This smuggling has crippled local industry in the affected states; local factories cannot compete with smuggled, foreign-made, duty-free consumer goods. The smuggling also creates huge losses in customs revenue and sales taxes. According to Pakistan's Central Board of Revenue, Pakistan's losses in 1998 amounted to 30 percent of the government's total revenues of \$6 billion. The Taliban tax on the smuggling trade was its second-largest source of income after drugs.

New transport and smuggling mafias have developed in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Iran. They are ignored by their governments, due to a web of corruption that benefits everyone from border guards to cabinet ministers. Not surprisingly, all these transport mafias are keen supporters and major founders of the Taliban. And this illegal economy is only expanding, since Afghanistan's formal one remains nonexistent. The Afghan infrastructure is devastated, health care and education are virtually absent, and abject poverty is rampant. Afghanistan today has 6 working factories, compared to 220 in 1979. Fighting and smuggling offer the only employment.

And The West Sleeps On

After providing billions of dollars' worth of arms and ammunition to the mujahideen, the United States abandoned Afghanistan once Soviet troops withdrew. America gave its allies in the region, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, a free hand to direct the ensuing Afghan civil war.

After the end of the Cold War, Washington never developed a new strategic framework for the area. The United States dealt with issues as they came up in a haphazard, piecemeal fashion, pursuing constantly changing single-issue agendas that were driven more by domestic American politics than the goal of ending the civil war. Afghanistan's neighbors took note of U.S. reluctance to get involved and stepped up arms supplies to their Afghan proxies.

What the United States needed and still needs to do is to put serious pressure on neighboring states to halt the supply of arms into Afghanistan—beginning with local U.S. allies such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Uzbekistan. That may convince Iran and Russia to do the same. If the flow of weapons ceases and drug exports are curtailed by united regional resolve, the Afghan warlords will see their main sources of support dry up and may then be forced to negotiate an end to the war.

This is the track that the U.N. mediator for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, has pursued for the past two years. His lack of success has been directly related to the lack of Western pressure on neighboring states to end their interference. Most Afghan civilians still believe that Americans hold the key to ending foreign interference. Despite Washington's record, there is still enormous goodwill for America among ordinary Afghans. But until the United States demonstrates that it has the determination to mobilize an international effort for ending outside interference, Afghanistan's chaos will only spread. Terrorism will develop new adherents there. The drug trade will expand. These are costs that no country—not Afghanistan, the United States, its allies, China, or Iran—can hope to bear.

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