Know Thine Enemy
Why the Taliban Cannot Be Flipped

Barbara Elias

BARBARA ELIAS is Director of the Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Taliban Project at the National Security Archive at George Washington University.

General Stanley McChrystal’s proposal for substantial U.S. troop increases in Afghanistan has triggered a major debate about U.S. policy toward the conflict there, both within the Obama administration and without. Behind the dispute over American resources, strategy, and interests, however, lie fundamental questions that rarely get addressed directly: Who is the enemy in Afghanistan, and what do they want? Al Qaeda, die-hard terrorists who seek to continue what they started, is one obvious answer. Fine. But what about the Taliban? Are they so closely linked to al Qaeda as to be indistinguishable from them, or can they be dealt with -- either co-opted or allowed to thrive untouched?

Commentators often distinguish between Afghan Taliban and Pakistani Taliban, but, in terms of ethnicity and location, they are very similar -- both are Pashtun and both enjoy a safe haven in Pakistan’s tribal areas. The main difference is in their leadership structures. In the early 1990s, Mullah Muhammad Omar, the current Afghan Taliban leader, united a group of fellow anti-Soviet mujahideen to combat the chaos that the country had fallen into after the Soviets’ departure. They coined a name for themselves by combining the Arabic prefix “Talib” (meaning “student”) with the Pashto plural suffix “-an” -- seeking to convey their humility and background in Pakistan’s Islamist madrassas. Mullah Omar’s group was able to grow rapidly and take over the country largely because other contenders for power had become so brutal, fragmented, and unattractive to average Afghans. The population did not demand a severe Islamist regime but was willing to accept one as a way to restore order.

The Taliban who governed Afghanistan from 1996–2001 had strong ties to Pakistan, both official and unofficial: they formed their identity in Pakistani schools and refugee camps, received funding and support from Islamabad that enabled their rise, and had close bilateral relations with their patrons after they seized power. Their agenda, however, was primarily a national one, and it remained so even after they were toppled and driven into the wilderness by the United States in 2001–2. Taliban spokesmen claim Mullah Omar has no involvement in militant activities in Pakistan, and that his main goal is to expel American and allied forces from Afghanistan and to reestablish a national Islamic regime. He and his forces aim to outwit, outlast, and outplay yet another alien
The Pakistani Taliban, on the other hand, are largely operationally independent of Mullah Omar and less structured and unified than their Afghan counterparts. Divided among various fiefdoms throughout Pakistan’s restive tribal regions, in recent years they have been loosely connected under umbrella organizations such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan. Baitullah Mehsud, TTP’s commander, was killed by a U.S. Predator strike on August 5, but just how much of an impact his death will have on the effectiveness of the Pakistani Taliban is unclear. Mehsud himself rose to prominence after a Predator strike killed South Waziristan’s rising Taliban commander, Nek Mohammed, in 2004, and Mehsud has already been replaced by a deputy, Hakimullah Mehsud (no relation). The targeted killing is thus likely to undermine the Pakistani Taliban’s recent tentative cohesion, but no individual leader is as important to this movement as Mullah Omar is to the Afghan one.

The public mission statements of the Pakistani Taliban emphasize the group’s dedication to helping expel foreign troops from Afghanistan. Since their emergence in 2002, however, the Pakistani Taliban have been increasingly active locally, implementing sharia law, consolidating power in Pakistan’s tribal regions, and challenging the writ of both traditional tribal authority and Islamabad. They clearly seek to govern parts of Pakistan permanently -- but just how much remains unknown. The TTP expanded its activities outside the tribal regions to the Swat and Buner districts in April 2009, provoking a major counteroffensive by a seemingly embarrassed Pakistani army.

Also unknown is the precise relationship between Mullah Omar and the Pakistani Taliban. The latter’s mission statements proclaim loyalty to Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden, and Mullah Omar’s movement relies on Pakistan’s tribal areas for safe haven and support of all kinds. Yet Mullah Omar reportedly attempted to oust Mehsud in January 2008 for fighting the Pakistani army instead of the United States. (Either reports of this incident were false or Mullah Omar failed; Mehsud did not budge.) Certainly the Pakistani Taliban’s strategic decision to challenge Islamabad directly has significant consequences for the fighting in Afghanistan, because it could finally convince Islamabad to help, rather than undermine, Washington’s efforts. (In the past, Pakistan has supported the Afghan Taliban as a tool and an ally in its endless strategic game with India, but now the country may be paying the price. If the Pakistani Taliban remain united and continue to attack within Pakistan, Islamabad will be forced to reconsider its policies.) At the moment, however, it seems that even if Islamabad has the will to conquer the Taliban, the Pakistani army may lack the desire and capacity.

The chief objective of both Taliban groupings is to control territory in Central and South Asia. Al Qaeda’s agenda, meanwhile, is diffuse, global, and inherently anti-American. So what has kept the al Qaeda–Taliban alliance together? The boons al Qaeda receives are obvious -- safe haven, support, and training grounds. Exactly how the Taliban benefits is less clear, especially when one considers the high costs the alliance has carried for them.

Some characterize the al Qaeda–Taliban relationship as a marriage of convenience, in which both sides benefit for the time being but are not inextricably linked. The Taliban support al Qaeda now, the argument goes, because they are united against a common enemy (i.e., the United States), but those ties could be severed if significant elements of the Taliban were offered the right incentives. This cannot explain, however, why the majority of Taliban officials chose to maintain their allegiance with al Qaeda after the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent U.S. invasion, even when it was in their overwhelming self-interest not to do so. If key Taliban officials behaved as representatives of a government seeking to maintain control of their territory, they would have given up al Qaeda in the fall of 2001, just as Pakistan supposedly agreed to give up the Taliban. Why would they turn against al Qaeda now if they didn’t then?
The reason the Taliban have chosen repeatedly not to seek legitimacy through governance or diplomatic compromise has little to do with the incentives offered them and everything to do with how their leaders see the world. The fact is that the Taliban and al Qaeda are neither permanently bound by ideology nor held together merely by a fleeting correspondence of interests. Their relationship is rooted in more complex issues of legitimacy and identity.

The Taliban cannot surrender bin Laden without also surrendering their existing identity as a vessel for an obdurate and uncompromising version of political Islam. Their legitimacy rests not on their governing skills, popular support, or territorial control, but on their claim to represent what they perceive as sharia rule. This means upholding the image that they are guided entirely by Islamic principles; as such, they cannot make concessions to, or earnestly negotiate with, secular states.

Furthermore, both the Taliban and al Qaeda are part of a larger movement of Sunni Salafism, with the former being Deobandis and the latter Wahhabis, and in some ways they compete for the claim to represent uncorrupted political Islam. Coming from an impoverished Central Asian state rather than a traditional hub of Islamic scholarship, the Taliban protect bin Laden partly in order to garner recognition from established Arab Sunni scholars, many of whom are tied to Wahhabi traditions and/or bin Laden himself. Taliban leaders such as Mullah Omar probably also believe they would appear weak and corrupt if they chose to abandon al Qaeda. Asked whether he would give up bin Laden, Mullah Omar explained in a September 21, 2001, interview with the Voice of America that “We cannot do that. If we did, it means we are not Muslims . . . that Islam is finished. If we were afraid of attack, we could have surrendered him the last time we were threatened and attacked. So America can hit us again.”

The type and intensity of Taliban bonds with al Qaeda vary enormously by region and community. Some al Qaeda agents have found a home in Pashtun areas since the Soviet era, becoming part of the social fabric of local tribal communities. Al Qaeda has provided the Taliban with support since their mutual beginnings in the early 1990s, and the organizations have fluid borders and memberships. Further, after years of fighting the United States alongside the relatively more sophisticated members of al Qaeda, the Taliban’s ideological compass has swung even further toward bin Laden and al Qaeda’s anti-American message. And the leaderships have only grown closer over time.

Bin Laden assassinated Mullah Omar’s hated rival Ahmed Shah Massoud just two days before 9/11 (for both his own as well as Omar’s political gain), and some intelligence analysts attribute Baitullah Mehsud’s decision to move against Islamabad to his close alliances with Ayman al-Zawahiri and the al Qaeda–connected warlord Sirajuddin Haqqani.

That few Taliban leaders in either branch are likely to betray al Qaeda does not mean that all efforts to peel off or “flip” Taliban members are worthless. Some defections have already occurred, and such efforts can help undermine more obstinate Taliban elements while fostering the development of an inclusive and conciliatory Afghan polity. Nevertheless, trying to isolate al Qaeda by subsuming the Taliban into a federated national Afghan government and/or a semi-autonomous government in Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province simply will not work, for a variety of reasons.

The main Taliban leaders will never abandon al Qaeda, and Pakistani intelligence services will not support governments in the tribal areas or in Afghanistan that do not help it in its campaign against India. Many of the important “moderate” Taliban figures who could have been leaders of a more acceptable Taliban (such as Mullah Mohammad Rabbani, Mullah Omar’s former second in command) have already died or been killed, quite a few by Mullah Omar himself. Most Taliban officials know little but war and would fit uncomfortably in a peaceful state.
Everybody in the region expects the United States to leave, just like the Soviet Union, and so allying with U.S. forces seems to them like a bad bet.

The core of the Taliban, in short, will not flip against its al Qaeda allies. Moreover, even if some elements gave indications of being willing to do so, they would probably not follow through: the Taliban’s history is littered with promises to adversaries that remain unfulfilled. And there is little reason not to expect flipped Taliban to flip back when it suits their purposes.

Understanding the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban for what they are means recognizing that they will likely continue to protect al Qaeda, whether in exile or in power. The Afghan Taliban will probably remain united against U.S. forces. The Pakistani Taliban are a looser collection of affiliated groups and individuals, and so it might be possible to create or exploit divisions, as the killing of Baitullah Mehsud may already have done. (In fact, Islamabad and the United States are probably pursuing just such a strategy now.) But promoting civil war among militant factions in Pakistan’s tribal regions could lead to even more trouble: after all, it was the chaos and civil war in Afghanistan in the early 1990s, that led the Afghan public into the arms of the Taliban in the first place. And in order to divide Taliban factions, Islamabad would have to give concessions to some militant elements, undermining its resolve to break completely with Islamist groups.

Since the Taliban won’t give al Qaeda up, the United States has little choice but to destroy al Qaeda, and since the Taliban cannot be meaningfully split or co-opted, Washington, unfortunately, has no real option but to prepare itself for a long struggle in the region. Yet there is no reason why it has to be waged by military means alone. In addition to standard counterterrorism and counterinsurgency measures, the Obama administration should do what it can to support a viable alternative to the Taliban, its sources of legitimacy and brand of political Islam. Progress in building effective states and healthy nationalisms in Afghanistan and Pakistan is bound to be maddeningly elusive. Without it, however, it will be difficult to eradicate perceptions that the conflict is one between local heroes (the Taliban) and American puppets (the Afghan and Pakistani national governments). For better or worse, the Afghan and Pakistani states are the critical actors in the battles over their territory and authority.

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