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Backgrounder

The Taliban Resurgence 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. 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 while working to undermine President Hamid Karzai's U.S.-backed government. Violent clashes between Taliban and coalition forces have increased in recent months, underscoring the Taliban's resurgence. As NATO forces take over security operations in southern Afghanistan they are faced with a changing insurgency.

Are the Taliban terrorists?

It's unclear. The Taliban has never appeared on the [U.S. State Department's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations](#), nor does it appear on similar lists maintained by Britain, the European Union, Canada, and Australia. Yet since the Taliban was driven from power in Afghanistan, the group is believed to be behind numerous attacks that have killed workers for nongovernmental organizations, civilians, government officials, policemen, and Pakistani and Afghan soldiers. Christopher Langton, a defense expert at the Institute for International Strategic Studies, says the Taliban "is an insurgent organization that will periodically use terrorism to carry out its operations."

Where are the Taliban now?

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. Afghan and U.S.-led coalition forces report frequent clashes with Taliban fighters in the south. According to Kathy Gannon, the former Associated Press bureau chief for Pakistan and Afghanistan, these fighters have at times aligned themselves with al-Qaeda fighters and with mujahadeen (holy warriors) led by the anti-government warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. During the Soviet occupation, Hekmatyar received more support from U.S. and Pakistani agents than any other fighter. "The Afghan Taliban is better organized today than it was in 2001," says Gannon, "they have more recruits [and they] have been able to take advantage of the lawlessness, the criminal gangs, and the corruption in the government."

Langton says the Taliban "have largely recovered from their initial defeat," and are proving a savvy enemy for coalition forces. Taliban fighters have become encouraged by the domestic opposition some NATO nations face as they deploy in former Taliban strongholds previously patrolled by U.S. forces, he says. "They are very adept at reading these signals and seeing where the weaknesses lie."

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 the September 2005 parliamentary election. This is not so surprising. Gannon says that during the Taliban's rule, "if you wanted to be anything you had to be Taliban."

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Who are the Pakistani Taliban?

In recent years, men calling themselves "Taliban" have turned up in Pakistan, though experts say many of these are not members of the group that ruled Afghanistan. The fall of Afghanistan's Taliban government in 2001 inspired militant tribesmen in northern Pakistan's North and South Waziristan regions to take up the name. "The term 'Taliban' means student," Gannon says. "They're calling themselves 'Taliban' as in religious students who are imposing religious law."

The Urdu press has reported on the growing influence of the Pakistani Taliban in North and South Waziristan as well as in the Northwest Frontier Province. Clerics and intellectual leaders have turned up dead, journalists have been threatened, beardless men have received warnings, and, in many places, women are not permitted in public without veils. In March 2006, in the town of Wana, South Waziristan, a judge in a newly opened Taliban office replaced the traditional tribal council of elders, or *jirga*, as the municipal body addressing locals' grievances. This is not a wholly unwelcome change; many locals think it will help stabilize the area. "For some people," Langton says, "the Taliban are a force of good."

Pakistani Taliban gunmen have clashed violently with Pakistani security forces, and are reportedly providing refuge for scores of foreign fighters. There is speculation that among these could be several senior al-Qaeda leaders, including [Osama bin Laden](#) and his deputy, [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#). Gannon is skeptical, saying that while many among the Pakistani Taliban would be willing to harbor bin Laden, the bounty for him makes it "very hard for Osama to hide in the tribal area without being fingered."

Why isn't the Taliban designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department?

It's unclear. Some experts say it is because the Taliban are not terrorists, "You could never say that the Taliban themselves espoused the wholesale use of terror," Langton says.

Not everyone agrees: "If the same thing happens in any other country it's called terrorism," says [Amin Tarzi](#), the Afghanistan analyst for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. He says a political motive is behind this double standard. In order to gain a broad base of support, Afghan President Karzai has reached out to Pashtuns, many of whom were members of the Taliban. "You can't call them 'terrorists' and at the same time reconcile with them," Tarzi says. In an April 2003 speech, Karzai noted a distinction between "the ordinary Taliban who are real and honest sons of this country [and those] who still use the Taliban cover to disturb peace and security in the country." [Steven Simon](#), CFR's Hasib J. Sabbagh Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies, says Tarzi's explanation is plausible, "The designation of 'Foreign Terrorist Organization' has always been highly political," he says.

How did the Taliban rise to power?

The Taliban was initially a mixture of mujahadeen 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). This group emerged as a force in Afghan politics in 1994 in the midst of a civil war between forces in northern and southern Afghanistan. The Taliban gained an initial territorial foothold in the southern city of Kandahar, and over the next two years expanded 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. Before its ouster in 2001, the Taliban controlled some 90 percent of Afghanistan's territory.

Who supported the Taliban?

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 mujahadeen. 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. But Gannon believes the Taliban is still receiving support from the ISI. Gannon says, "In Pakistan, the military always hedges its bets." 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.

How did the Taliban govern?

The Taliban imposed 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. But the public's initial 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. When the Northern Alliance forces, composed mainly of ethnic Tajik and Uzbek fighters, ousted the Taliban, they were greeted in the streets of Kabul with cheers.

Who are the Taliban's leaders?

Mohammed Omar, a cleric, or *mullah*, helped form the Taliban and led them during their rise to power. Omar is also a military leader, and lost his right eye fighting the Soviets. From 1996 to 2001 he ruled Afghanistan with the title "Commander of the Faithful." The Taliban leader remains at large with a U.S.-sponsored bounty on his head; though RFE/RL analyst Tarzi says Omar does not play a significant role in current Taliban operations.

Other notable Taliban leaders are former security chief Naqiblah Khan, who was arrested in December 2004, and spokesman Latifullah Hakimi, who was apprehended ten months later.

In Pakistan, the most prominent Taliban leader is Pakistani-born Haji Omar, a 55-year-old veteran of the resistance against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and a former lieutenant to Mohammed Omar before 2001.