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Backgrounder

The Taliban in Afghanistan

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Introduction

The Taliban, an Islamic extremist 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 [al-Qaeda](#) and its erstwhile leader Osama bin Laden, 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 resilient in the region and operates [parallel governance structures](#) aimed at undermining the U.S.-backed central government. Pakistan's support and safe havens for the Taliban have stymied international efforts to end the insurgency in Afghanistan; the United States is set to withdraw its combat forces from the country by 2014. Since 2010, both U.S. and Afghan officials have been pursuing talks with members of the group for a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Afghanistan. But prospects for such a settlement remain uncertain and have raised concerns among Afghanistan's minorities and women who worry their rights and freedoms may be compromised.

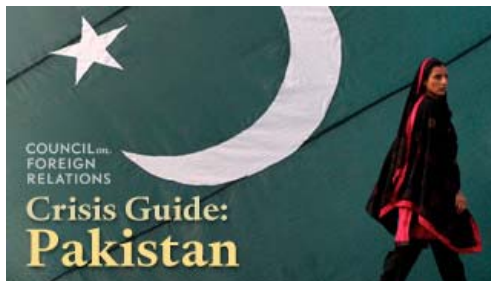
Rise of the Taliban

The Taliban was initially a mixture of mujahadeen who fought against the Soviet invasion in 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 capital Kabul 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 proved resilient. In June 2011, the International Crisis Group reported that the [Taliban had expanded \(PDF\)](#) far beyond its stronghold in the south and southeast to central-eastern provinces. "Insurgent leaders have achieved momentum in the central-eastern provinces by employing a strategy that combines the installation of shadow governments, intimidation, and the co-opting of government officials," it noted.



While a surge in U.S. troops in 2010 and improved capacity of the Afghan security forces has put increasing pressure on the Taliban, in March 2011, the U.S. military viewed the security gains achieved in the last year as "[fragile and reversible](#)." A February 2011 report from the London-based International Council on Security and Development (ICOS) noted that [insurgents are adapting their tactics](#). "Insurgents are now avoiding firefights and direct attacks on NATO-ISAF/Afghan positions, and are focusing on using roadside

bombs and targeted killings instead," the report says. Assassinations of high-level Afghan officials, experts say, are designed to intimidate Afghan civilians and erode public confidence in their security forces. In its report to Congress in September 2011, the White House cited polls showing only 33 percent of the Afghan population considered [security in their communities to be good](#), compared to 50 percent in June 2010. "This change," it noted, "appears to affirm the effectiveness of the insurgents' strategy of perception-oriented targeting."

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. According to some reports, the [group started rearming in 2010 \(Telegraph\)](#) following efforts by the Afghan government to strike a peace deal with the Taliban.

Taliban propaganda has convinced a segment of Afghan public opinion that foreign troops and the Afghan government are the main threat to their physical security. --ICG

Prior to September 11, 2001, Western dealings with the Taliban involved a mix of diplomacy and soft power. In its final years in power, 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 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 Security Council [imposed sanctions](#) against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, freezing funds and restricting travel of the groups' members. The sanctions have been updated nine times since, most recently with [Resolution 1988](#) and [Resolution 1989](#) adopted in June 2011.

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 CIA 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. Pakistan also supported the Taliban in its quest for "[strategic depth](#)" in Afghanistan in order to balance its foremost rival, India. 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 several U.S. officials and experts believe the Taliban is still receiving support from the Pakistani security establishment, which, they say, sees these groups as proxies for their influence in Afghanistan once the international forces withdraw. 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. 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.

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 U.S. service members. In 2001, Tehran helped Washington to [dismantle the Taliban regime](#), but in recent years, experts say, Tehran's strategic interests have aligned with the Taliban's. "From a strategic perspective, the [Iranian government looks at the Taliban](#) as a useful enemy that is undermining the interests of its other enemy, namely the United States," says Iran expert Mohsen Milani. Experts disagree on the extent of Iranian involvement.

Leadership and Structure

The [Taliban is not a monolith](#); it has various factions and includes people who join it for varied motives, ranging from global jihad to local grievances, say experts. 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." [The Taliban movement remains loyal \(PDF\)](#), to varying degrees, to Omar, writes Kenneth Katzman, a specialist in Middle Eastern affairs at the Congressional Research Service. Omar, and many of his top advisers, reportedly are based in the Pakistani city of Quetta, and are usually referred to as the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST).

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. airstrike 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 \(LongWarJournal\)](#). [Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar \(NYT\)](#), commander of Taliban's military operations in Afghanistan, was captured in February 2010 in Karachi.

But Omar has made appointments to [replenish the QST leadership ranks](#) and numerous Taliban commanders continue to evade capture. Chief among them, in addition to Omar, are spokesmen Qari Yousef Ahmadi and Zabiullah Mujahid, as well as leaders of the Haqqani network, Jalaluddin Haqqani and his sons Siraj and Badruddin. [The Haqqani network](#)--largely independent but with close ties to the Taliban--has become a major threat to stabilization efforts in Afghanistan. By some estimates, there are about [three thousand Haqqani fighters \(PDF\)](#).

Jalaluddin Haqqani, a mujahadeen commander during the U.S.-backed war against the Soviet Union, served as minister of tribal affairs during Taliban rule. The Haqqani network

As long as the Taliban believe that they have a backer in Pakistan, even if it is passive backing to provide safe havens, they are inclined to play the long game with the United States, which is to wait it out in Afghanistan. --Dan

remains a central partner for the QST, acting as a regional platform for the Taliban to project power and influence in southeastern Afghanistan and acting as a force multiplier for the Taliban, write Don Rassler and Vahid Brown. The group's effectiveness and operational sophistication is most apparent in Kabul, they argue, saying it is "tied to most, if not all, complex and strategic suicide attacks there." Siraj Haqqani stated in October 2011 that the group considers Omar as its leader. CFR's Dan Markey says the statement was directed at the Afghan audience to show a unified face of the Taliban. "It's to show that they are genuine, nationalist Afghans looking to liberate their country from occupiers." *Markey, CFR*

Just before he stepped down, U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen blamed the Haqqani network for the September 2011 attacks on the U.S. embassy in Kabul, calling it a "veritable arm" of the Pakistani ISI. But the U.S. government has shied away from adding the Haqqani network to its list of terrorist organizations. Experts say such a move would complicate U.S. cooperation with Pakistan, given U.S. accusations of ISI's collusion with the militant group and scuttle any chances for a peace deal with the group.

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.

Ten years after being ousted, the Taliban continues to enjoy political and psychological support in the south, experts say, largely because the international community has not coupled its military gains with equally robust efforts in development or governance. "The impact of the conflict, coupled with chronic poverty, unemployment, and corruption," has made it easy for the Taliban to manipulate the population, notes a May 2011 survey from ICOS (PDF). Almost 42 percent of survey respondents in the south said working with the Taliban is right. The ICG report (PDF) says the "Taliban propaganda has convinced a segment of Afghan public opinion that foreign troops and the Afghan government are the main threat to their physical security."

The insurgents are also increasingly adopting technology for propaganda; they use Twitter and text messages (Dawn) to communicate with media, operate a clandestine radio station, "Voice of Shariat," and publish videos.

The Road Ahead

The 2011 UN resolutions split the Taliban and al-Qaeda with regard to the sanctions. In July, fourteen Taliban figures were removed from the original sanctions list. These measures were to help Afghan and international efforts to engage in negotiations with the Taliban. There have been some international and Afghan-led efforts since 2003 to reintegrate low- and mid-level insurgent fighters into communities by offering them incentives and jobs if they disarm and disavow the Taliban. These efforts have had limited results.

Since 2010, Washington has expanded the endgame in Afghanistan to include a negotiated settlement with top Taliban leaders who break ties with al-Qaeda and accept the Afghan constitution. But the talks have suffered several setbacks; most recently in September 2011 when the Afghan government's chief negotiator with the Taliban, Burhanuddin Rabbani, was assassinated. Plus, they have raised concerns for women's rights in Afghanistan. "A looming question is whether Afghan women will play a substantive role in a nascent reconciliation process," says CFR's Gayle Tzemach Lemmon.

Some analysts believe the death of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in May 2011 may have offered an opening to strike a deal with the Quetta Shura Taliban and its leader Mullah Omar. This is because, says CFR's Stephen Biddle, "Mullah Omar pledged loyalty to Osama bin Laden, not to al-Qaeda." But Biddle adds it is uncertain if Omar has really broken with al-Qaeda. Some experts believe the group is riddled with internal divisions on questions of negotiating with the United States and cooperating with international terrorists, including al-Qaeda.

Even before bin Laden's death (PDF), Katzman notes, some U.S. officials argued that the successes produced by the U.S.

military surge in Afghanistan were causing some Taliban leaders to mull the concept of a political settlement. In August 2011, [Mullah Omar acknowledged talks with Washington](#), although only over prisoner exchanges. [Siraj Haqqani also said \(BBC\)](#) his group would support any talks that Omar pursued. News reports revealed that U.S. officials [secretly met with leaders of the Haqqani network \(WSJ\)](#) in the summer of 2011 to draw them into talks.

But experts caution against a deal with the Haqqani network, saying the group still has links to al-Qaeda. [Pakistan's support \(Atlantic\)](#) for the Haqqani network prevents any changes in the group's behavior, says Joshua Foust. The country's support for the Quetta Shura Taliban also makes it difficult to strike a deal with the group. Markey says: "As long as the Taliban believe that they have a backer in Pakistan, even if it is passive backing to provide safe havens, they are inclined to play the long game with the United States, which is to wait it out in Afghanistan." In October, Afghan President Hamid Karzai said it is [Pakistan, not the Taliban \(CNN\)](#), that Kabul should pursue peace talks with, implying Pakistan was in bed with the Taliban leadership.

Greg Bruno and Eben Kaplan contributed to this Backgrounder.

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