Terrorism and Civil War in South Asia
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South Asia, and more particularly the portion of it encompassing Afghanistan and Pakistan, has come to be associated strongly with extremism and terrorism. That association is understandable, given the connection of the area with one of the most traumatic events in U.S. history. The lines of contention in the region are complex, however. Different dimensions of conflict there, such as between moderation and extremism, or what may pose a terrorist threat to the United States and what does not, do not coincide with each other.

The AfPak Region and Terrorism

The connection of this region with militant Islamist terrorism is rooted in the insurgency against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s. That insurgency became the biggest and most prominent *jihad*, attracting militant Muslims from many different countries. Although the anti-U.S. terrorist group we came to know as al-Qaeda did not develop as such until the late 1990s, its connection with Afghanistan and South Asia is based on the earlier effort against the Soviets. When Osama bin Laden left Sudan to take up residence in Afghanistan in 1996, he was returning to the scene of his earlier contribution, which was chiefly logistical, in helping the Afghan insurgents to defeat the Red Army.

There is no intrinsic connection between Afghanistan and international terrorism. In fact, Afghan nationals are conspicuously absent from the ranks of international terrorists. A rare exception was Najibullah Zazi, who was arrested in 2009 for allegedly plotting to bomb the New York City transit system. But even Zazi had left Afghanistan with his family for Pakistan when he was seven years old, and he had lived in the United States since he was fourteen.

Pakistan has developed its own connections with international terrorism. This has included groups, most notably Lashkar-e-Taiba, with some capability to operate far afield. But the primary focus is still within South Asia, and specifically on the Kashmir dispute and other aspects of confrontation with India.

In short, the link between this region and international terrorism is not based on inherent qualities of the region or of the conflicts the bedevil it. Instead it is more of a historical accident related to an attempt by the Soviet Union to quell an insurgency in a bordering state, with the link greatly enhanced in American minds by the residence in Afghanistan—ten years and more ago—of people associated with the 9/11 terrorist attack.

Current violence in Afghanistan is a continuation of an Afghan civil war that began after a coup by Marxist-Leninists in 1978 and, although the line-up of protagonists has changed from time to time, has never really stopped. After the departure of the Soviets in 1989, the fall of the pro-Soviet Najibullah regime in 1992, and internecine fighting among the warlords who had pursued the insurgency, a new movement known as the Taliban—benefiting from Pakistani backing and the support of an Afghan public disgusted by the warlords' violent squabble—asserted control by the mid-1990s over all but the northern tier of the country. The civil war continued as a fight between the Taliban and a mostly non-Pashtun collection of militias known as the Northern Alliance. The intervention in late

2001 of a U.S.-led coalition, in what we call Operation Enduring Freedom, was a tipping of the balance in this civil war. It was enough of a tip for the Northern Alliance to overrun Kabul and to drive the Taliban from power.

The current phase of the Afghan civil war, although commonly seen as a fight between the internationally-backed government of Hamid Karzai and a terrorist-associated Afghan Taliban, is a far more complicated affair with multiple dimensions. The ethnic element is a large part of the conflict, with the Taliban largely Pashtun and other ethnic groups having a major role in the government forces. Other relevant divides are between Sunni and Shia and between rural interests and the urban elite.

The Afghan Taliban

The Afghan Taliban constitute a highly insular, inward-looking movement whose leadership is concerned overwhelmingly with the political and social order of Afghanistan. It concerns itself with the United States only insofar as the United States interferes with its plans for that political and social order. It is a loosely organized movement in which the leadership group known as the Quetta Shura, led by Mullah Omar, is the most important but not the sole point of decision-making.

The motives of the rank-and-file who have taken up arms under the Taliban label are diverse and at least as locally focused as those of the leadership. Those motives include assorted grievances such as ones associated with collateral damage from military operations and resentment over what is seen as foreign military occupation. Probably few of the rank and file are driven primarily by a religiously based desire to remake the Afghan political order, and hardly any of them have perspectives that reach beyond Afghanistan's borders.

The Afghan Taliban are not an international terrorist group. They have not conducted terrorist operations outside Afghanistan. There is nothing in their record or their objectives that suggests that they will.

The Taliban and al-Qaeda

The connection between the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda is an aspect of 1990s-era history. As the Taliban leaders were in the midst of their war against the Northern Alliance, and bin Laden was establishing a new home for himself and his followers after leaving Sudan, each side had something to offer the other. Bin Laden provided resources and manpower to the Taliban's prosecution of the civil war. The Taliban provided bin Laden hospitality. Although the two sides both had radical (though hardly identical) Islamist ideologies, the relationship was largely a marriage of convenience, and not without frictions.

The basis for the marriage is largely gone. The Taliban cannot provide the hospitality they did when they were the government of three-fourths of Afghanistan. Bin Laden (before his death) and what is left of his organization within the region can provide little material support. As U.S. officials have repeatedly observed, there is minimal al-Qaeda presence in Afghanistan, with personnel numbering only in the scores.

Any prospect for the Taliban and al-Qaeda to reestablish anything like the relationship they had in the years prior to 9/11 is severely constrained by the changes (some of them irreversible) that have since taken place in all of the parties concerned: the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and the United States. Taliban leaders are acutely aware that the biggest setback their movement has ever suffered—their being swept from power in the opening weeks of Operation Enduring Freedom—was a direct response to an al-Qaeda operation. They have no incentive to do anything that would facilitate a repeat of that experience. Al-Qaeda leaders are also unlikely to perceive an advantage in having more of a presence on the northwest side of the Durand Line than they already do on the southeast side of it. This is especially so because the Taliban and al-Qaeda alike know that the standards for use of U.S. military

force in Afghanistan have changed drastically since pre-9/11 days. Unlike back then, the re-establishment of anything remotely resembling al-Qaeda's earlier presence in Afghanistan would become a target for unrestricted use of U.S. air power. This would be true whether or not the United States was still waging a counterinsurgency on the ground in Afghanistan. And such use of force would be far greater than the still major restrictions on anything the United States can do militarily in Pakistan.

The AfPak Theater and Terrorist Threats to the United States

Bin Laden never intended whatever organization he controlled to be the entire story as far as jihadist terrorism is concerned. The very name of his group—al-Qaeda, or "The Base"—implies that it would instead be a foundation or starting point from which bigger things would grow. This in fact is what happened. The overall violent jihadist movement to which the name "al-Qaeda" is customarily but loosely applied now goes well beyond anything bin Laden controlled or that his surviving associates in South Asia have been directing. Bin Laden's role in recent years was far more as a source of inspiration, ideology, and ideas (including operational ideas) than command and control. This role was confirmed by what has so far become publicly known about the material seized in the raid at Abbottabad.

Most of the initiative, planning, and preparations for terrorist operations under the al-Qaeda label in recent years has come from outside South Asia. Some of it has come from formally named affiliates—most notably, though not exclusively, from the Yemen-based group calling itself al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Some has come from less formally affiliated groups and individuals, including during the past few years several individuals in the United States. Even though "links" are sometimes traced back to South Asia, the initiative is largely coming from the periphery.

This pattern implies that the situation on the ground in the AfPak region is not one of the more important factors determining the degree of terrorist threat to Americans. To the extent that control of a piece of real estate matters, whether that real estate is in Afghanistan is hardly critical. Other places, such as Yemen, are available. This is in addition to the question of how much the control of *any* piece of real estate affects terrorist threats. A lesson from terrorist operations in recent years—including 9/11, most of the preparations for which took place well away from South Asia, including in Western cities—is that the effect is less than that of many other factors shaping terrorist threats, and that virtual space is more important than physical space in planning and coordinating terrorist operations. The point is not that terrorist groups will not use physical space when they have it—they do—but that it is not one of the more important determinants of how capable they are and how much of a threat they pose.

Impact of Bin Laden's Death

The demise of bin Laden ends a period of well over a decade in which this most wanted of men was able in effect to thumb his nose at the United States and the West merely by staying at large and alive for so long. As such, his removal has dealt a psychological blow to his followers. Revelation of some of the circumstances in which he had been living and operating (or not operating) may also help to lower somewhat his standing even in death. For reasons mentioned earlier, the overall impact of bin Laden's death on the terrorist threat facing the United States is not as great as the enormous reaction to this event would suggest. The national catharsis that the killing of bin Laden involved is understandable, however, and undoubtedly affects the political environment in which further decisions within the United States about the AfPak theater will be taken.

Bin Laden's departure will affect decisions within South Asia as well, and particularly the Taliban leadership's calculations regarding al-Qaeda and negotiations to resolve the conflict in

Afghanistan. Any sense of debt among Mullah Omar and the Taliban leaders, dating back to the assistance that bin Laden gave them in the 1990s, was more to bin Laden personally than to his group. With bin Laden gone, the Afghan Taliban probably feel freer than before to renounce any prospect of future ties with what is left of al-Qaeda. For the Taliban leaders, al-Qaeda now means to them less a former ally in past phases of the civil war and more a source of potential trouble, with shades of the enormous trouble that al-Qaeda caused the Taliban in 2001.

Probably also entering the Taliban leaders' calculations are the implications of the raid against bin Laden for what the United States is able and willing to do to hit targets important to it, even targets nestled deep inside Pakistan. What the United States did at Abbottabad could be done as well at Quetta or elsewhere. This fact may also incline the Taliban leaders more toward negotiations because of reduced confidence in their own security during an indefinite continuation of the conflict. Factoring in the Pakistani military's likely thinking—following the embarrassment of Abbottabad, any reduced leverage of Pakistan against the United States, and what this may mean regarding future hospitality in Pakistan—would make the Taliban leaders even less sure of being able to wage their insurgency indefinitely from havens beyond the Durand Line. In brief, the net effect of bin Laen's death has probably been to improve the opportunities for negotiations to wind down the war in Afghanistan.

Military Forces and Counterterrorism

The successful U.S. operation against bin Laden sheds additional light on the role of U.S. military forces in counterterrorism, including with regard to the collection of necessary intelligence. Military force is one of several tools that can be used for counterterrorism, intelligence being another one. It can be used in several specific ways for counterterrorist purposes, ranging from the elimination of a terrorist leader, as was the case with the bin Laden operation, to striking back at a state that has perpetrated a terrorist act. And of course, the United States maintains and uses military forces for many other functions besides counterterrorism. Today in Afghanistan—although Operation Enduring Freedom began as a direct and justified response to a terrorist act—U.S. military forces and their coalition partners are performing some of those other functions, which involve trying to stabilize the Afghan state and waging a counterinsurgency that is part of the current phase of the Afghan civil war.

The raid at Abbottabad, deep inside Pakistan, illustrated that U.S. military boots on the ground are not necessary for even the precise type of intelligence required for such an operation. The same point has been repeatedly demonstrated by the strikes against other terrorist targets with missiles launched from unmanned aircraft over northwest Pakistan. There is no reason to suppose that the forces involved in waging a counterinsurgency, which are large in number and focused on securing territory and defeating insurgents, will be a significant factor in collecting intelligence on international terrorism. It is not as if insurgents who are observed or captured on the battlefield are, when they are not waging a guerrilla war, involved in hatching international terrorist plots or even have access to those who do. Collection of intelligence is certainly an important part of counterinsurgency, but it is almost all intelligence pertinent to the counterinsurgency itself, not intelligence having to do with the sort of terrorism that might otherwise threaten Americans.

The intelligence work that reportedly underlay the successful operation against bin Laden was typical of the work aimed at terrorist targets, although obviously the very high priority of this particular target meant that disproportionate time, effort, and resources were devoted to it. The work entails the exploitation of fragmentary reporting from a variety of technical and human sources. It also entails painstaking following up of leads through intelligence and law enforcement resources. Interrogation of detainees sometimes contributes to the mix, although the most important detainees, such as 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, have been captured not on a battlefield in the midst of an insurgency but instead as the result of themselves having been the targets of the same kind of

painstaking, multi-source intelligence work.

The raid at Abbottabad points to the value of nearby military assets, but they are assets of a very specialized sort. They include staging areas or bases for the operation of drones or the launching of raids. They include highly skilled forces specially trained to accomplish the sort of task the SEALs did at bin Laden's compound. These are assets far different in size from a counterinsurgency force charged with securing large amounts of territory.

A final consideration to remember in any discussion of the use of military force in counterterrorism is how such use may affect broader perceptions and emotions that in turn affect the propensity of some individuals to resort to terrorism, including anti-U.S. terrorism. The effects include resentment and anger in the areas immediately affected, particularly over unavoidable collateral damage to civilians and their property. We have seen much of this in the war in Afghanistan, and it has been reflected in the increased numbers of those willing to take up arms under the banner of the Taliban. The effects also include lending credibility to the fraudulent, but unfortunately influential, extremist narrative according to which the United States is determined to kill Muslims, occupy their lands, and plunder their resources.