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Are The Taliban And Al Qaeda Allies?

by Paul Overby

"In my view" should preface every statement here. It is likely the situation in Afghanistan is understood perfectly by no one, certainly not I. So I present these remarks as a prolegomenon or an extended suggestion to which others may compare their own thoughts. Any figures, for instance, are approximate. I combine references to some of my favorite books with personal experience garnered from a total of about two and a half years on the street as an independent observer in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the first nine months of which are described in my book Holy Blood.

In the challenge of extricating ourselves from the war in Afghanistan, the most critical element is the actual and emotional heart of the opposition we are facing--the Taliban. This war which is taking an American life every day and costing $2 billion a month is not, in all likelihood, militarily winnable. Though they are the reason we went to Afghanistan in the first place, al Qaeda is now marginal. After 9-11 our prime and overriding aim was to secure the American homeland against terror attacks by Islamist extremists like Osama bin Laden (inspiration, coordination, oversight) and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (planning, execution) by preventing al Qaeda and similar groups from enjoying a sheltered gathering space in Afghanistan. The safe haven happened to be provided by the Taliban, but the real villains were AQ. But now, ironically, it is the Taliban we are expending most of our energy fighting.

The assumption here that military victory is not to be expected (if not outright impossible) is very important, but is not the focus of this essay. In many ways the war in Afghanistan is very similar to Vietnam: an insurgency of guerrillas who are supported by a large portion of the people and motivated by a strong belief, however aberrant. Wrong but strong. Popular (or even semi-popular) insurgencies have commonly resisted attempts by foreign armies to break them, and Afghanistan is, I take it, another such case.

At the start of this war very small groups of CIA and Special Forces were able to target and wipe out most significant pieces of the enemy's formal structure--in three months! It was a brilliant campaign, and we had thereupon--in a view supported by Dr. Abdullah Abdullah (in conversation in Kabul, 2009)`--a window of perhaps two years to arrange things as best we could and get out. But, encouraged by the ease of our original victory, and determined on the one hand to make sure that al Qaeda and their local hosts the Taliban were rooted out properly; and on the other hand to set up a viable Afghan government, we overstayed our welcome big time. As a consequence, beginning in perhaps 2005, we fell into an uncertain guerrilla war with the Taliban, who were certainly not our friends but had not actually attacked us and were moreover an authentic Afghan phenomenon, unlike AQ, and were bound to present us with a deep-rooted and stubborn opposition.

During their five-year period in power, 1996-2001, the Taliban occupied a kind of limbo status (laid out in Steve Coll's Ghost Wars), neither friend nor enemy of the US-- until we were attacked by their AQ "guests." And here is the rub, again: though marginally acceptable themselves, the Taliban were willing to accommodate people who were by no means acceptable to us and were, in fact, our deadly enemies. In the present situation, if we withdraw, which is my recommendation, what will the Taliban do? We can bank on their taking over the Pashtun part of the country, or most of it, which is bad enough, but the crucial question--absolutely integral to our basic goal--concerns their relation to AQ. Will they buddy up with al Qaeda as they did before? Or will they quietly shuffle them out the door as too expensive a luxury?

There seems to be evidence for either outcome among the usual welter of inconclusive facts. When Osama arrived in Afghanistan from Sudan in the spring of 1996, he landed in a Jalalabad not yet controlled by the Taliban. He had not been invited by the Taliban but by acquaintances from the days of the anti-Communist struggle, namely Yunis Khalis, a powerful uber-commander, warlord and party leader. Osama may not have had any contact with the more important figures among the Taliban before he came, but he was already an admired figure--for having participated in what is now commonly known as "The Jihad"-- the war against the Soviets and domestic communists, 1978-1992--and for giving up his privileged position in Saudi Arabia to work for the Afghans. It seems that he had established good relations with them soon enough, and that he made successful efforts to stay in their good books.

Yet, as the jihadi theorist and leadership rival Abu Musab al-Suri jealously pointed out (as quoted in Architect of Global Jihad), OBL's activities grew irritating to the Taliban, creating problems for them (already confronted internally with the vexing challenges of governing while largely isolated internationally) by drawing negative attention on the world stage with his bloody rhetoric. Taliban 'moderate'' Mullah Zaeef mentions Osama, Zawahari and al Qaeda only superficially in his memoir and it seems that the group did not like to talk about the presence or activities of al Qaeda. World-wide jihad and its bloody acts did not animate the Taliban in the same way as, for instance, the Koran, stories of Prophet Mohammed and the religious precedents of the rule of Mohammed's successors. Most significantly, after the August 98 attacks in East Africa, the Taliban's leader Mullah Omar made an angry visit (described in intriguing detail by Osama's son Omar bin Laden in Growing Up bin Laden) to Osama and told him to leave. But Osama played the Islam card and persuaded Mullah Omar to give them more time. Later, according to al-Suri, Mullah Omar (apparently having convinced himself by then of the basic righteousness of the AQ presence) in a meeting specially convened to consider the American cruise missile retaliation said it was the duty of the Taliban to show Islamic solidarity with the Osama and company.

Although 9-11 had brought about the destruction of the Taliban emirate; Mullah Omar never condemned the attack and in fact wished (in November 2001) death and destruction on the US. The statements and actions of one of Mullah Omar's most vigorous and competent allies, young Siraj Haqqani, are friendly to or consonant with al Qaeda and harshly condemnatory of the US. The consensus of analysts is that the leadership of the Taliban, or much of it, if it was ever "moderate", has by now been radicalized and would not abandon its connection to AQ in any meaningful way. But I am skeptical of glibness with which positions are taken on this important question. Who can say what the Taliban leadership is thinking? Who knows them well enough to make a sure judgment? If the conclusion is based on intercepts and interrogation, how can we be sure that these haven't been tailored for their suspected eavesdroppers, or that

they have been properly understood in the first place, as subtly shaded as they may be in ways we don't comprehend?

Our present course is an attempt to destroy Mullah Omar and his cohorts in the Taliban leadership, radical or not, along with AQ and as many of the regular Taliban as we can. In the process we are inflicting death and suffering on many other Afghans, at least some of whom are innocent, thereby losing the struggle for the hearts and minds of the population. "The Trust Deficit," a valuable study done by the Open Society Foundation, October 2010 (and available at the AREU library, a rich but underused resource in Kabul) shows that every civilian we kill is a much, much bigger crime than one killed by the Taliban--in the eyes of the average Afghan. Whether the people tolerate al Qaeda certainly depends on how they feel about them, and they are not likely to shun them if they are simultaneously being blown up by the bombs of AQ's major enemy, the US.

In looking for a way to exit Afghanistan gracefully, analysts sometimes divide the Taliban into hard-line and moderate, the latter often thought to consist of rank and file. The full layout of the Taliban should be: leadership, rank and file, and supporters. The supporters are the civilian population in the areas (primarily the south and east of Afghanistan and the border areas in FATA in Pakistan) where the Taliban are most active. The supporters--who actively assist the Taliban while not actually taking part in the fighting, or who at least tolerate the presence of the Taliban--constitute an unknown percentage of the population, but presumably more than half. I assume that the supporters cooperate more or less willingly, or are acting not entirely because of coercion or intimidation, but this--like much else! --is arguable. The reality of the Taliban living among the country Pashtuns must be thought of in the context of a thoroughly religious lifestyle. In his valuable The Secret History of Al-Qa'ida, Abdel Bari Atwan describes the role of Osama to a certain kind of Muslim, which certainly must include the super-observant Taliban: "After centuries of decline, [his supporters] view bin Laden as having brought hope and dignity back to a people under the shadow of humiliation and exploitation..." [32] Average Afghans and Pakistanis, religious in a way that is no longer common in the West, even when they are not in harmony with the much of the ethos of the Taliban, are nonetheless impressed by their strict piety. I have observed a peculiar pause in the conversation when they criticize the Taliban. To some degree they are, I would say, spiritually intimidated.

The Taliban I do not know directly, though I did know their immediate predecessors, the "mujahideen" who fought against the communists. But I have sniffed around the edges of the Taliban in different ways and in different places. Since 1988 I have spent 2 1/2 years on the street in Pakistan and Afghanistan mostly with Pashtuns. Though my time (since 2007) has not been spent in FATA, a truly dangerous place for someone who travels alone, I have talked with scores of people in Peshawar, Chitral, Chaman, Quetta, Asadabad, Jalalabad and Khost, as well as Islamabad and Kabul. The gist of all that is hard to formulate since opinions are naturally of a great variety. At the grass roots, the General Situation looks like a pointillist painting seen from a distance of 18 inches, but here are some of the color dots.

In 1988 as I was making my way back to Pakistan from Aghrendab, after an ambush in the desert, I overheard (and understood !--one of my few definite successes with Pashto) a conversation between two mujahideen about going into Central Asia when they had finished with Afghanistan. This was one of the few indications of interest beyond Afghanistan. He imagined himself as a liberator--but in what sense?

Talking with a local hero in the hills outside Quetta (in early 2009), I asked where OBL was. He said he wouldn't reveal his whereabouts for a million dollars even if he knew, but when I coupled removing OBL with the removal of the Americans, he smiled.

Together with Pashtuns--and the Taliban are mostly Pashtun, though not all Pashtuns are Taliban--I often heard them protest that they had never attacked America and had no interest in doing so. The peaceful nature of Islam was repeatedly stressed. They were not terrorists--it was the foreigners who were, by whom they meant al Qaeda--though that name was hardly used. Opinions in favor of OBL and al Qaeda seemed very rare; exceptions were a fire-eating rug merchant in Peshawar, a hotel guest in Chaman, and a small group I met while staying alone in Khost in November, 2010.

Both Nasrullah Baryalay Arsalah, member of an important political family in Nangrahar, and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, among quite a few others, told me that there had been considerable relief when the Taliban were overthrown by us in the fall of 2001--even among Pashtuns. What began as a high-minded (in Afghan terms) movement that brought order and renewed piety had become just another power-hungry party and a harsh one at that. They were internationally ignored or even despised. This meant a crippling loss of the foreign money that impoverished Afghanistan, as one of the world's most dependent states, needs to survive. The Taliban have been good as counter-punchers: answering the disorder of the mujahideen (or civil war) period from 1992 to 1996, and now again the confusions of Karzai.

I heard--from sober Afghan observers--that the Taliban were not the first choice of the people living in the "Taliban" areas who like neither the Taliban nor the Karzai government. The support of the population is thus portrayed as conditional. Perhaps we can stretch this point and say that the attitude of the people within the Taliban--the actual fighters--may be not as hard-line as we sometimes think, and perhaps their loyalty is conditional as well.

Though the leaders may be radical, the followers may not--simply out of a sense of individualism, independence or sheer orneryness. Afghans, perhaps especially Pashtuns, are anything but monolithic in their opinions. They do not seem to want to coalesce into disciplined groups as other peoples do. When I lived--and briefly fought--with the mujahideen in the hills of Kunar in 1988, the mujahideen in the troop insisted that they were fighting as individuals and not as the soldiers of the commander. The Taliban are said by the sharp analyst Thomas Ruettig to be the descendants of the more religious kind of mujahideen--like the Harakat (or "mullah") party, so the two types are related like cousins. The independence--and fractiousness--of Pashtuns is well known. The first thing I heard about Pashtuns--from a Pashtun--was that they tear each other down. David Edwards chronicles these attitudes in his books Heroes of the Age and Before Taliban.

It seems very likely that the motivation of the average Talib is not world-wide jihad so much as a fierce opposition to the Predator drone attacks (in Pakistan--I remember in particular one passionate exchange on a nighttime street corner in Peshawar, late 2007) and to the transgressions of the American army (in Afghanistan)--from the common complaints about the slow foreign military convoys on Afghan roads that do not allow anyone (like the lead-footed Afghan drivers) to pass, to the (apocryphal?) story of a patient dying in an ambulance when it was held up at an American check point that I heard in several places, to the fury over (probably exaggerated) ISAF attacks that resulted in deaths of women and children. Of course these were

not Taliban fighters who expressed these views, but I felt that the conviction and energy with which they were presented would not have been too different in an actual jihadi.

Pashtun liberals--among those I met were educated young men in Peshawar (eg, the group around "Prince" M), Kandahar (where they were associated with a local newspaper) and Kabul (habitués of the city's best bookstore), an older doctor in Peshawar, the son of the well-known Haji Qadir in Jalalabad--these and many more that I met fundamentally rejected the principles of the Taliban ab initio. Though percentagewise small they presumably have some palpable effect on public opinion. Many others--outside the Taliban areas at least--lean away from jihadi thinking for less high-minded reasons, ie, money. Average Pashtuns both outside and inside the Taliban areas are, I believe, swayed to some degree against the jihadi lifesytle by the lure of better money with the foreigners. The Taliban and AQ are thought of as anti-modern and not associated with progress and prosperity.

Over and over I heard that the Karzai government is corrupt and ineffectual. They fail to deliver services such as justice, health and education--or have to cede those functions to foreigners, who are perhaps respected and reviled to the same extent, but are in any case The Other. I found agreement to the propositions 1) that as long as the Kabul government remains weak, the Taliban will grow stronger; and 2) that if the government were strong, fair and effective, the insurgency would melt away like the snow in spring. Taliban and Karzai government are two sides of the same coin. Again, this is a framework in which the Taliban operate that has little to do with AQ-type universal holy war against the West.

Despite our suspicions about the radicalism of the Taliban leaders, or our hopes for the reasonableness of the Taliban foot soldiers, solidly based or not, I think we must continue to look for possible openings based on consideration of the kinds of insights presented above. Whatever the situation, we must assume that something can be done--in order to preserve our moral position, which is all-important. This does not mean that our actions should be limited only to seeking dialog, quite the contrary, but that must be the first stage. Ignoring the chance of negotiation--or misconstruing the realities (as I think we are doing), we may lose our bearings and our morale in a thousand small ways not apparent at the time but corrosive in the long run.

Paul Overby went to Peshawar independently in 1988 to witness the struggle of the Afghan Freedom Fighters; spent 6 months talking to exile Afghans; finally, for a brief moment, fought alongside the mujahideen in the hills of Kunar. In 1993, Holy Blood was published. That same year he returned to visit the major commander Mullah Naqeeb in Kandahar (and helped push start his Mercedes) and interviewed Ahmad Shah Massoud in Kabul. Since late 2007 he has made four trips to AfPak for a total of 20 months. Talking to hundreds of people on the street, staying as a special guest of his old friend Governor Sayed Fazlolah Wahidi in Kunar, and interviewing a few important figures, his goal was to understand the American position in Afghanistan and to find Osama--whom he tentatively placed in the Yarkhun Valley.