

Afghanistan: Return of the Taliban

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No one in Afghanistan wants to be on the losing side when Mullah Omar's men ride back into town on their motorcycles.

When I lived in Kabul a couple of years ago, it seemed unimaginable that the Taliban could return. The regime was considered a spent force and generally disliked by Afghans. Mullah Omar gathered his associates, told them they were on their own and fled on his motorcycle.

Today there are reports of Taliban attacks as close as two hours from the capital. Nato's forces are getting hammered in the south by an astonishingly strong insurgency. Suicide bombs, utterly alien to the Afghan fighting culture, are now common.

At the same time, Nato air strikes are hitting innocent civilians and increasing the population's resentment against the western armies. In this mess, there is talk of making a deal with the Taliban leadership, whoever they may be, in a bid to bring peace to the south. This is a dangerous idea.

It is worth considering that the Taliban are also responsible for the torture and killing of Afghan civilians. This is no government-in-waiting. This is no popular resistance movement such as the Soviet forces faced in the 1980s. This is a brutal and nasty insurgency in which Afghans accused of spying are beheaded, doctors are assassinated and aid workers kidnapped.

I was in Ottawa recently speaking to a civil servant involved in the Afghan mission. She told me with some frustration that the Canadians opened a clinic hospital just outside Kandahar city, with the local tribal chief's blessing. His son was sick and was treated by Canadian doctors. Almost as soon as it opened the clinic was burned

down and the tribal chief killed. The message was clear: do not co-operate with any western force - on pain of death.

The statistics bear this out. In the first seven months of 2006, there were 202 recorded attacks on schools across the country. In the same time period, 600 civilians were killed or wounded. In about 70% of the cases, the attacks were linked to the Taliban. This figure comes from the respected Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission.

The strategy seems clear: to isolate Afghans from their government in Kabul. If it looks like their own government cannot provide for them, Afghans will turn to the Taliban. The targets of the insurgency are deliberate. There is even a guide, called the Leyeha given out to Taliban fighters which sanctions the killing of anyone seen to cooperate with outsiders and destruction of roads, bridges and dams.

This is an old strategy. In the days of the Russian occupation, the countryside's guerrilla leaders were given arms and funds to isolate the communist government in Kabul. Then, in the early 1990s, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia helped the Taliban rise to power by again, putting pressure on Kabul.

In the post-Taliban era it was never going to be easy for a government to put together such a fractured state. For centuries Afghans have survived invasions by knowing just when to switch to the winning side. It is simple pragmatism.

There is a growing feeling that maybe Nato and America are not going to stay for long. If the west abandons its Afghanistan project, no one wants to face the repercussion of being on the losing side when the Taliban ride back into town on their motorcycles.

How on earth has the south deteriorated so much? Sadly, it is because the west has allowed it to happen. President Hamid Karzai, Afghans and aid workers have repeatedly called for more peacekeepers for the last five years.

There have been warning signs the Taliban were re-grouping. In 2004 I met a couple of tribal

elders from a district in Zabul province who had come to Kabul to plea for help because the Taliban had taken over five districts. They shut down the schools and no one could go out at night, they told me.

But it was not until 2006 - five years after the regime fell - that Canadians and British deployed a large number of troops to the south.

In those five years the south and east were left lawless for Taliban leaders to re-group and drug traffickers to move in. As a result, there has been little development of the economy. Many of the Taliban's fighters are opportunists. Honest civilians can expect a monthly salary of \$50. A Talib fighter can earn up to \$700. According to Amnesty International, the funds for the insurgency are coming from the region but also perhaps wealthy Arabs in the Gulf states.

In this so-called "war on terror" it is Afghan civilians who are paying the price. They are caught - not only between Nato's clumsy air strikes which kill innocent families, but Taliban terrorists who are determined to turn the country into a pitiless theocracy once again.

P.S.

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