NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

CENTER ON INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Separating the Taliban from al-Qaeda: The Core of Success in Afghanistan

Alex Strick van Linschoten

Felix Kuehn

February 2011

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

CENTER ON INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

The world faces old and new security challenges that are more complex than our multilateral and national institutions are currently capable of managing. International cooperation is ever more necessary in meeting these challenges. The NYU Center on International Cooperation (CIC) works to enhance international responses to conflict, insecurity, and scarcity through applied research and direct engagement with multilateral institutions and the wider policy community.

CIC's programs and research activities span the spectrum of conflict, insecurity, and scarcity issues. This allows us to see critical inter-connections and highlight the coherence often necessary for effective response. We have a particular concentration on the UN and multilateral responses to conflict.

Table of Contents

Separating the Taliban from al-Qaeda: The Core of Success in Afghanistan | A CIC Study

Key Findings	1
1. Overview	1
2. September 11 and the Taliban	5
3. An Avoidable Insurgency	6
4. Engaging Taliban on al-Qaeda	7
5. U.S. Policy and al-Qaeda	9
6. Conclusion	11
Endnotes	13

Key Findings

- The Taliban and al-Qaeda remain distinct groups with different goals, ideologies, and sources of recruits; there was considerable friction between them before September 11, 2001, and today that friction persists.

- Elements of current U.S. policy in Afghanistan, especially night raids and attempts to fragment the Taliban, are changing the insurgency, inadvertently creating opportunities for al-Qaeda to achieve its objectives and preventing the achievement of core goals of the United States and the international community.

- There is room to engage the Taliban on the issues of renouncing al-Qaeda and providing guarantees against the use of Afghanistan by international terrorists in a way that will achieve core U.S. goals.

1. Overview

For much of the international community, relations between the Taliban and al-Qaeda – as well as the Taliban's ties to the wider universe of jihadist groups – pose the core obstacle to including the Islamist movement in a possible political settlement in Afghanistan. Can the Taliban become part of a political process without offering refuge to al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and other groups posing an international threat?

Today the Afghan Taliban collaborate in some ways with al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups. Whether such relations result from the context – the need for assistance against a powerful enemy – or are based on principles or ideology affects how possible it is to change this collaboration. Such an assessment requires examining empirical evidence in context. This report represents a summary of our efforts to date.

The core leadership of the Taliban and al-Qaeda came from different ideological, social, and cultural backgrounds and were of different nationalities and generations. The trajectories of the lives of al-Qaeda's leaders, none of them Afghans, can be traced back to political developments in the Middle East. More often than not these leaders engaged for decades in militant campaigns against their home governments. Their movements responded to regional events, mainly in the Arab world, and were based on the militant Islamism formulated by Arab ideologues like Sayyid Qutb in the 1960s and earlier.

Most of those who would eventually form the Taliban, were too young even to attend school at the time. They grew up in rural southern Afghanistan, isolated from both global political events and the developments in political Islam that the Arabs were exposed to.

The 1980s *jihad* against the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan was a turning point for both groups, however. That war broke open the closed world of rural Afghanistan and swept it into global politics. Militant Islamists and jihadists came to Pakistan and Afghanistan to support the Afghan *jihad* from throughout the Middle East, Africa, and

beyond; some of these would sign up with and found al-Qaeda. Several Afghan mujahedeen groups, in particular in southeastern Afghanistan, interacted and cooperated with the foreign mujahedeen, but those who later became the core Taliban leadership had little contact with them.

The experiences of the 1980s reshaped the Afghan Arabs' understanding of *jihad*.[1] The Palestinian cleric and former Muslim Brotherhood member Abdullah Azzam, who led the Services Bureau that coordinated the foreign jihadis in Peshawar, blazed the way with his book *Join the Caravan*. Azzam's teachings connected the battles the militants had previously fought in their home countries to the Afghan *jihad*. These teachings helped bring together diverse Islamist groups, creating a transnational network of committed and battle-hardened jihadists.

Most of those who would later rise to prominence in the Taliban were too young to play more than minor roles in the war against the Soviet Union. They participated as members of fronts composed of religous students (taliban) that formed most of the fighters of the two madrasa-based parties of the Afghan resistance.[2] Their conception of jihad remained almost apolitical – an individual duty of resistance to invasion by non-Muslims – and the majority returned to their religious studies or communities after the withdrawal of the Soviet forces in 1989.

That withdrawal provoked crises within both groups: the Afghan mujahedeen factions disintegrated, and some fell into war with each other. The foreign jihadis faced their own internal debate in light of the failure of the Afghan mujahedeen to form an Islamic government in Afghanistan and events in the Middle East, especially the first Gulf War. While Afghanistan descended into civil war, the foreign jihadists split into various groupings. Some stayed on to fight in Afghanistan. Some settled in the border region in Pakistan. Others started an itinerant life, fighting in Bosnia, Tajikistan, and Chechnya or seeking to establish new bases of operations in Yemen or Sudan. Much of the top leadership left the region.

Security in southern Afghanistan deteriorated as commanders feuded over control, and international interest subsided after the Soviet withdrawal. In 1994, a group of former mujahedeen from the Taliban fronts mobilized against criminal gangs west of Kandahar City. This early Taliban movement was a local group reacting to the situation in its area. It mobilized a blend of local culture and a literalist interpretation of Islam to try to impose order on a chaotic situation. It was not a movement concerned with anything beyond local circumstances.

As the movement gathered momentum, it advanced from Kandahar province to Zabul, on to Helmand and Uruzgan, capturing Herat in September 1995 and Jalalabad and Kabul in September 1996. The five years that followed saw the Taliban struggle to conquer central and northern Afghanistan and consolidate their hold over the country and its diverse population while imposing highly conservative social policies. The Taliban's unprecedented rise was enabled in part by support from the government and security apparatus of Pakistan and the arrival of madrasa students from across the border.

Osama bin Laden and his followers had returned to Afghanistan after being expelled from Sudan in May 1996. They flew to Jalalabad, where they were hosted by commanders and allies from the region whom bin Laden knew from the 1980s war. Bin Laden did not fly to any of the areas under Taliban or Northern Alliance control, as neither group included his main Afghan associates. En route to capture Kabul in September 1996, the Taliban took Jalalabad, thus inheriting custody of bin Laden and the group around him.

The relationship between al-Qaeda and the Taliban during the second half of the 1990s was complicated and often tense. The two groups knew little about each other; bin Laden pursued an independent agenda, often to the detriment of the Taliban. Nonetheless, Mullah Mohammad Omar and bin Laden grew close – although the extent and details of their association remain somewhat unclear – during these years, particularly from 2000 to 2001.

Bin Laden's calls for an international *jihad* and his attempts to mobilize support for attacks for what he saw as a *jihad* against crusaders and Zionists caused a rift

within the Taliban leadership. While Mullah Mohammad Omar regarded him as an important connector to the wider Muslim world, a group of leaders around Mullah Mohammad Rabbani, the chair of the leadership *shura* in Kabul, was concerned that bin Laden's media statements and the unwanted attention he attracted were the principal obstacle to the Taliban government's gaining the international recognition it sought. This group, however, was sidelined and lost traction from 1999 onwards. While publicly proclaiming his support for Mullah Mohammad Omar, bin Laden continued his activities, often in direct violation of Mullah Mohammad Omar's specific directives. Mullah Mohammad Rabbani died in April 2001, which meant the Taliban's internal opposition was effectively marginalized from that point on.

When the United States launched its offensive on October 7, 2001, the Taliban's organization disintegrated under the pressure of the military campaign. Many Taliban returned to their villages and waited to see what would happen. Soon they found themselves targeted by U.S. Special Forces and the new Afghan elites. These actions were dictated by President Bush's policy of making no distinction between members of the Taliban, whose regime had harbored al-Qaeda, and al-Qaeda itself. Those who escaped death or capture and detention in Guantanamo or Bagram fled to Pakistan.

The political process established by the Bonn Agreement of December 2001 was intended, at least by its UN sponsors, to provide a mechanism for integrating Taliban who agreed to become lawful participants in the new order. Isolated and in hiding in Pakistan, the Taliban leaders tentatively explored whether this promise might be sincere. They discussed the possibility of joining the political process that was unfolding in Kabul – notably at meetings in 2002 and 2004 – but these discussions came to little. A combination of factors caused the leadership to begin an insurgency. Internal factions, in particular a younger generation, opposed a political process. Arguably more important, however, was the lack of real options. The counterterrorism policies of the United States at that time threatened the security of Taliban who might have been willing to join the process, and Afghan officials with whom the Taliban communicated said they could not protect them from detention by the United States. The strong interests of neighboring countries such as Pakistan and Iran also helped steer Taliban leaders towards taking up arms once again. By 2003 they had regrouped and put command structures in place, connecting to local groups inside Afghanistan to begin an insurgency.

Al-Qaeda, while surprised by the swift demise of the Taliban resistance, was better prepared to pursue its own agenda during these years, organizing and administering a series of attacks around the world. The September 11 attacks polarized the Islamic world and reshuffled the jihadist universe. An undifferentiated response by the United States – as expressed in the Bush doctrine that one was "with us or against us" promoted the perception that the Taliban and al-Qaeda were integrated into one group.

Cooperation against a common enemy, however, did not resolve or dissolve the underlying tensions and even ultimate incompatibility of the two groups' aims. The claim that the link between the Taliban and al-Qaeda is stronger than ever, or unbreakable, is potentially a major intelligence failure that hinders the United States and the international community from achieving their core objectives. Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban remain two distinct groups, with different membership, agendas, ideologies, and objectives. The interaction and contacts between the two groups are found in three main forms: personal/individual ties, a shared religion, and their circumstances (a shared location and enemy). Some of the Kandahari leadership of the Taliban, however, recognize the damaging impact of the foreign jihadists and navigate a cautious path seeking to demonstrate their independence and difference to the international community while avoiding friction or tension. The al-Qaeda leadership has relied on and coordinated with a group led by Jalaluddin Haqqani, a former mujahedeen commander and Taliban minister. The Haqqani network remains a part of the Taliban, and they too confine their activities and aspirations to Afghanistan.

Arrests by Pakistani authorities in early 2010 of a significant number of members of the Taliban leadership council, together with the military campaign targeting insurgent

leaders within Afghanistan, has weakened the overall command structure and the ability of the central leadership to enforce decisions. A reshuffling of the leadership, along with all layers of ranks of commanders, has seen the rise of a younger and more radical generation. This in turn has weakened Mullah Mohammad Omar's influence; he is now more of a symbolic religious figure than an authoritative commander.

The new and younger generation of Afghan Taliban is more susceptible to advances by foreign jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda, resulting in an increasing ideologization of the conflict. This development, paired with an overall increase in suspicion among the Afghan population of the United States and its "real intentions," bodes ill for the future. Current policies pursued by domestic and international actors – led by the United States – are a key factor driving the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda together.

2. September 11 and the Taliban

The Taliban leaders do not seem to have had foreknowledge of the September 11 attacks. Bin Laden effectively manipulated the Taliban, using their lack of international experience to advance his own goals.

Considerable disagreement over bin Laden broke out among the Taliban following the attacks. Significant parts of the senior Taliban leadership, along with rank-and-file commanders, were outraged at bin Laden's abuse of their hospitality and his blatant disregard for their government. The combative international stance towards the Taliban, the polarization of the Islamic world, and the fear of Mullah Mohammad Omar and others of losing the few allies they believed they had left pushed them into a de facto defense of bin Laden. There can be little doubt that the leaders then and since have gained more insight into the complex world of international political Islam and the costs of their policy of hospitality.

Initial statements by the Taliban condemned the September 11 attacks while expressing disbelief that they were the work of bin Laden. There was considerable disagreement among the senior leadership, as to the likely repercussions. As pressure from the United States and its allies mounted (along with a revival of all the criticisms of the Taliban government over human rights abuses and its treatment of women), the Taliban movement's public stance grew increasingly belligerent.

While many Taliban saw any effort to compromise or negotiate with the United States as capitulation, one group of Taliban leaders approached Mullah Mohammad Omar and asked him to consider handing over bin Laden, but he rejected the proposal. According to former leaders, Mullah Mohammad Omar claimed that bin Laden had sworn he had nothing to do with the September 11 attacks, while Pakistani security officials assured the inexperienced leader that the United States would react in a limited way, as in 1998 following the African bombings of U.S. embassies. Others, however, knew that the survival of the Taliban government was at stake.

Mullah Mohammad Omar saw few options in dealing with bin Laden. The Taliban presented the United States with the same solution they had suggested in the aftermath of the African embassy bombings in 1998: they would assess any evidence they received against bin Laden to determine if they would hand him over for trial in another Islamic country or even before a multinational Islamic court.

The sacrifice Mullah Mohammad Omar made for not handing over bin Laden is difficult to rationalize. The Taliban's worldview and their underlying fear of alienating the Muslim umma, however, formed the basis for his decision. He regarded the protection of guests as a religious and cultural duty. Even more so, he believed that the Taliban's standing in the Islamic world depended on resisting U.S. demands about bin Laden. In the run-up to the start of Operation Enduring Freedom, Pakistan also repeatedly assured the Taliban of its support, contributing to Mullah Mohammad Omar's determination.

3. An Avoidable Insurgency

The insurgency that emerged from 2003 onwards was not an inevitable response to the international intervention in Afghanistan. It resulted in part from policies that created an environment in which both segments of the Afghan population as well as the senior Taliban leadership perceived that they lacked real alternatives. Elements of the Pakistani state also thought they could use an insurgency in Afghanistan as pressure against the Afghan government and the U.S. Al-Qaeda has had little or no influence on the origin and course of the insurgency, though it has assisted with training and fundraising.

Little known, for example, are the attempts of the Taliban and Haqqanis to reconcile with the Karzai government after 2001, a possibility totally alien to al-Qaeda ideology but logical for Taliban who still saw themselves as part of Afghanistan. There was no coherent response, though, from either Afghan actors or their international backers. Some Taliban (by and large from the political cohorts of the movement) were accepted as individuals without much fanfare, often after lengthy detention, while others found themselves confined in Guantanamo or other detention facilities.

In November 2002, senior Taliban figures gathered in Pakistan and considered the possibility of political engagement and reconciliation with the new Afghan government. One participant later described the meeting: "Mullah Mohammad Omar wasn't there, but everyone else was, all the high-ranking ministers and cabinet members of the Taliban. We discussed whether to join the political process in Afghanistan or not and we took a decision that, yes, we should go and join the process."[3]

One interlocutor who was asked to engage with this group has since stated that this was an important moment for the Taliban leadership; if they had been given some assurance that they would not be arrested upon returning to Afghanistan, he said, they would have come, but neither the Afghan government nor their international sponsors saw any reason to engage with the Taliban at that time – they considered them a spent force. Similarly, in 2002, Jalaluddin Haqqani's brother Ibrahim came to Kabul to meet with American and Afghan government officials to inquire about this possibility. He was detained and allegedly mistreated.[4]

The leadership alone, however, could not have launched the insurgency. It required both an alienated Afghan population from which to recruit and Pakistani support for the creation of secure areas of operational retreat. The Afghan population in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban's ouster was supportive of the international intervention, particularly as the new government promised positive changes in their lives. Within two years, however, this attitude began to change. The new Afghan government, supported by the international community, was plagued by entrenched corruption and nepotism. Individuals and certain groups found themselves in conflict with the new powers in charge.

The U.S. reliance on a strategy driven by immediate military objectives led to alliances with commanders such as Gul Agha Shirzai, a Karzai rival, who became governor of Kandahar as a result of U.S. support to the militias he led. (Today Shirzai is the governor of Nangarhar in eastern Afghanistan). These local allies captured the state apparatus for personal gain. While not identical in all parts of Afghanistan, individuals, warlords, and semi-warlords fought over shares of the state and monopolized access to the government, foreign forces, and resources, including contracts with those same forces.

The political vacuum that followed the ouster of the Taliban gave ample space for old and new conflicts to erupt. In Kandahar, U.S. ally Shirzai and his allies moved to consolidate their power and to settle old and new scores. President Karzai's brother, Ahmed Wali, belatedly developed a power base to counter that of the family's rival, using the same methods but attracting far more public criticism. The United States became an unknowing instrument of local feuds and power struggles, at times manipulated by misleading intelligence provided by Afghan partners. Entire tribes – the Eshaqzai in Maiwand, a district west of Kandahar City, for example – were systematically targeted and denounced as Taliban members. Family and tribal

members of senior Taliban were harassed and deprived of access to the government, marginalizing them. The Noorzai tribe, members of which had previously held many government positions in the border district of Spin Boldak, was completely sidelined by another tribe – the Achekzai – with the help of Shirzai, leading to the rise of Colonel Raziq, commander of the border police. Today Raziq leads a militia that is an important partner of the international forces in the campaign to wrest Kandahar province from Taliban control.[5]

Bandits and rogue commanders seized the opportunity to operate, while family members of Taliban and tribal elders fell victim to abuses by individuals associated with the new interim government and were alienated and sidelined.[6] Many of those who found themselves targeted began actively reaching out to the Taliban leadership that was regrouping across the border from Kandahar in Quetta, Pakistan. Domestic developments in Afghanistan gave the fledgling resurgent movement a contact network and footholds in local communities throughout 2003.[7] The United States soon diverted its attention to Iraq.

The international presence in Afghanistan was minimal. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in September 2003 had only 5,000 troops stationed in Afghanistan, all in Kabul, with U.S. troops numbering 9,800 in total. ISAF would expand out to the provinces only years after the Taliban were ousted. Little attention was paid to local political developments.

This process continues across the country today: local communities in southern Afghanistan regard the government as corrupt and unjust. Often actively targeted and excluded, they side with the Taliban in various ways (from tacit non-objection to offering direct support), more out of pragmatism than from ideological motives. The Taliban, meanwhile, have employed mixed tactics of intimidation and resolution of local conflicts in order to coerce and reward local communities. The ISAF campaign in Kandahar has curbed Taliban operations in some communities; it has not yet proven that it can establish an alternative sustainable form of governance.

From a Pakistani perspective, the post-2001 period was a balancing act in which publicly expressed interests differed from those expressed privately. General Musharraf and other officials made numerous public statements pledging support for U.S. goals, but at the same time drew private conclusions that the interests of Pakistan were not best served by moving against the Taliban and their associates. They regarded the government in Kabul as too close to India and maintained the former rulers they had supported as a tool of pressure to protect Pakistan's security interests.

4. Engaging Taliban on al-Qaeda

The issue of the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda is not as big a potential stumbling block among old-generation Taliban as common wisdom holds. For circumstantial reasons, in the last three years (2007-10) the Taliban have taken considerable care in their public statements to implicitly distance themselves from al-Qaeda, while offering clear indications of their disaffection with the foreign militants in private. Public statements and interviews explicitly opposing al-Qaeda and foreign militants have been seen as extremely risky for all but the most senior political members, many of whom refused to speak frankly about the topic on the record. Even non-active Taliban members like Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef have remained relatively silent over the issue; his book *My Life With the Taliban*, published in 2010, contained very little that substantively dealt with the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda. They could not publicly indicate their differences with the foreign militants since, for the moment, they were caught in a marriage of convenience brought about by the need to fight a war against the international ISAF/NATO military forces. Nonetheless, signals had been passed – the Taliban leaders had long ago realized the importance of the issue to the internationals and, in hedging their bets given the increased talk of a possible negotiated settlement, seemed to concede in public commentary that they would be required to provide guarantees against Afghanistan being used as a terrorist sanctuary. There have been some pledges along these lines. A statement released at the time of the London Conference in January 2010 included

the following declaration: "We do not intend to harm neighboring countries as well as other countries of the world, nor do we want them to harm us. We will not allow our soil to be used against any other country." [8]

Mullah Mohammad Omar's *eid ul-fitr* message of September 2010 also stated:

> Our upcoming system will be based on mutual interactions with neighboring Islamic and non-Islamic countries. We want to frame our foreign policy on the principle that we will not harm others nor allow others to harm us. Our upcoming system of government will participate in all regional and global efforts aimed at establishing peace and stability... [9]

In a recent interview in *Al-Masry al-Youm* newspaper (Egypt), Mullah Zaeef acknowledged both bin Laden's responsibility for the September 11 attacks and his culpability for lying to Mullah Muhammad Omar, a new level of frankness, even for reconciled Taliban.[10]

A discussion of the Taliban's position on al-Qaeda must be – at least on the surface – exactly that: a discussion. A precondition that the Taliban renounce or denounce al-Qaeda prior to the start of a dialogue – as Saudi Arabia has demanded[11] – is not an option for the Taliban unless they receive assurances of security in return. The importance of actionable and observable signs of cooperation – confidence-building measures – as opposed to symbolic statements (whereby the Taliban publicly reject al-Qaeda, for example) should not be underestimated. These measures can include ceasefires, cooperation over independent humanitarian aid provision, or even a commitment to ending the targeted assassination of unaffiliated tribal elders.

An examination of the Taliban's public statements – particularly those from the past two years – shows the care being taken over any reference to al-Qaeda and its affiliates. There are no congratulatory postings in response to the actions of internationalist jihadist groups, but rather a sense that the Taliban leaders are acutely conscious of the problem that their relationship – both the realities and the perception – continues to cause them. In statements on the London and Lisbon conferences on Afghanistan, the Afghan elections, the U.S.-NATO offensive in Kandahar, and many other subjects, the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," as the Taliban call themselves, has consistently stated that as far as it is concerned Afghanistan will never threaten any other country. Thus far, however, it has stopped short of explicit condemnation of al-Qaeda.

Afghans have not been involved in international terrorism, nor have the Afghan Taliban adopted the internationalist jihadi rhetoric of affiliates of al-Qaeda. The late Mullah Dadullah had begun to echo al-Qaeda rhetoric before he was killed in 2007; his brother Mansour was later expelled from the Taliban movement, reportedly for the same offense. None of the September 11 hijackers were Afghan, and the only reported case of an Afghan involved in an act of international terrorism is that of Najibullah Zazi, who had lived in the United States since the age of 14. In this respect he fits the profile of second- and third-generation al-Qaeda recruits – many of whom became radicalized in the West – rather than that of the Taliban. There has even been some debate among the Afghan Taliban about the legitimacy of suicide bombing, a tactic they learnt from al-Qaeda.[12]

Some senior leaders of the Afghan Taliban acknowledge the damage done by the September 11 attacks and the movement's association with bin Laden/al-Qaeda. In many ways, the years since September 11 have been a crash course in the realities of international relations for the political leadership of the Taliban.[13]

This review and rethinking of the past came about only following the collapse of their government, and it took several years for the leadership to come to some consensus in acknowledging this even in private. They reevaluated not only the foreign jihadi groups, but also their movement's own capacity for governance.

The leaders of the Afghan Taliban do not see themselves in a conflict that extends beyond the borders of Afghanistan. The "Islamic Emirate" has not called for attacks to be carried

out in foreign countries against what al-Qaeda calls the "far enemy"; calls to *jihad* have been limited to assets or troops within Afghanistan. Moreover, there have been continual and repeated statements noting that the goals of the Afghan Taliban movement do not extend outside the borders of Afghanistan.

This is a basic reality that the United States and others should recognize and incorporate into their strategy. U.S. and NATO policies have a direct impact on the trajectory of the ideological development of the movement and its relationship to other radical Islamic groups, which see themselves engaged in a different war with different goals, and who therefore pose a different threat.

Stakeholders and policymakers need to move beyond oft-proclaimed preconceived ideas regarding the Taliban. It takes considerable imagination, for example, to envision commonalities between the Taliban and the United States. One such vision – recently suggested in private by a senior Taliban political strategist – is that Taliban forces could conduct counterterrorism operations, including joint operations together with U.S. Special Forces, against al-Qaeda and possibly its affiliates along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.[14] While this idea seems impossible to implement at present, it signifies considerable flexibility within the senior Taliban leadership.

5. U.S. Policy and al-Qaeda

In his speech at West Point on December 1, 2009, President Obama announced a temporary troop "surge" in Afghanistan to reverse the momentum of the insurgency and win back the trust of Afghans in the international engagement as well as in the Afghan government.

While part of the counter-insurgency strategy aims at protecting the population, another part directly targets insurgent leaders for capture or killing. In July 2010, the *New York Times* quoted NATO military statistics that showed that in the prior six months 130 important insurgency figures had been captured or killed in Afghanistan.[15] Later in the year, according to NATO, in the ninety days prior to November 11, 2010, Special Operations forces had conducted 1,572 operations that resulted in 368 insurgent leaders killed or captured, and 968 lower-level insurgents killed and 2,477 captured, indicating a significant uptick in tempo.[16] In the face of the offensive, the older generation of Taliban leadership is struggling to maintain its hold over the insurgency.

This, when taken together with the arrest of a number of members of the Afghan Taliban's leadership council in Pakistan in early 2010,[17] indicates how the insurgency has seen a turnover from its highest executive council to the regional and local levels, often down to district level commanders. While there seems to be ample manpower to fill these positions, as reflected in the still increasing number of insurgent attacks per month in comparison to 2009, the change of leadership of entire networks has weakened the chain of command, and threatens the overall integrity of the leadership's hold over the insurgency. Younger Taliban members have moved into the command structures and leadership positions.

Members of the old generation who are still active have seen their authority decrease over the past twelve months. This applies not only to the leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, but also to those one level below him: Mullah Obaidullah and Mullah Beradar are but two of the best-known examples of senior leaders now in detention and therefore out of action.[18] Mullah Beradar was removed from the field by Pakistan's security services in what seemed to be a calculated move to reaffirm and stress the brokering role that Pakistan seeks for itself in any future political settlement.

The campaign to target the mid and high-ranking leadership appears to be a key part of the U.S. strategy against the Taliban at the moment.[19] Its impact has been felt. As the older generation decreases in size, the vacant positions and power vacuum are filled by two groups from younger generations: the clerics and bureaucrats involved in the Taliban's government during the 1990s and an even younger set of commanders. These newer generations are potentially a more serious threat. With little or no memory of Afghan society prior to the Soviet war in the 1980s, this new generation of commanders is more ideologically

motivated and less nationalistic than previous generations, and therefore less pragmatic. It is not interested in negotiations or compromise with foreigners. They have never lived in an Afghanistan that was at peace. Members of the youngest generation, often raised solely in refugee camps and madrasas in Pakistan, have no experience of traditional communities, productive economic activity, or citizenship in any state; they are citizens of *jihad*. Al-Qaeda operatives have been known to seek out direct contact with such younger Taliban field commanders inside Afghanistan.[20] Where the old leadership speaks of a fight against foreign invaders, the new generation is adopting the discourse of fighting against infidel crusaders. With al-Qaeda making tentative advances, its worldview increasingly infiltrates the younger generation of the Afghan Taliban. This trend is not yet widespread, but it is noticeable.

The U.S. military appears to hope that aggressive targeting of the insurgency leadership leave local networks more open to reconciling with the government, thus avoiding the need to deal politically with the movement. This strategy will, the argument runs, lead to the demise of the movement at large.[21] The more likely outcome, however, is potentially very different: a still growing and ever more radical but largely leaderless insurgency.

The United States claims that it is supporting a policy of fighting the insurgency while supporting Afghan-led reconciliation. But this tactic often leads to unresolved and contradictory messages about the US position on negotiations. A September 12, 2010, US Treasury Department statement blacklisted three alleged Taliban and Haqqani "financiers."[22] The three figures, Mullah Gul Agha, Amir Abdullah, and Nasiruddin Haqqani, had all recently been engaged in discussions with the Karzai government – in April, early spring, and June, respectively.[23] While there could be other reasons for their blacklisting, this move was seen by the Taliban's leadership as a direct US attempt to control the start of any negotiation process and prevent these groups from reaching out independently of their influence. General Petraeus himself is frequently cited as the source of this interference.[24]

One interview conducted for this study with a Taliban leader who requested anonymity to protect his security is worth quoting at length in this regard:

> If there is financial support, military and political support, and diplomatic support, it will influence the policy of any society, any party, any country, or any side that is being supported. Their policies will be affected by this support. ... Everything is possible if their intention or political will is present, but so far it is difficult to locate this intent to go to the negotiating table. The actions of the western countries and the U.S. government offer proof in the opposite direction. ... The policy of the United States so far is totally ambiguous, and it is unclear both for the people of Afghanistan and the people of the whole region. This is the main problem and contradiction in their policies. They divide people into black and white, radical and moderate, but there is no clear policy. Why are they fighting here in Afghanistan? What do they want for the people of Afghanistan? What do they want for themselves? The people of Afghanistan do not seek to deny their legitimate interests in the region, but still our national interest is dear to us, so why do they not coordinate their policies with our high interests? By neglecting our national interest they are following their own interest in an ambiguous environment.[25]

Some of the information that forms the basis for arrests and night raids to extract individuals appears to be based on faulty intelligence.[26] While civilian casualties caused by foreign troops have decreased since mid-2009, night raids and the imprisonment of individuals who find themselves handed over to Afghanistan's corrupt security services and justice system have increased. This state of affairs sometimes has severe repercussions for the United States and foreign troops' relationships to entire communities.[27]

The current processes aimed at fragmenting the insurgency are unlikely to lead to its demise. The insurgency's structure – its fighters and subcommand – are proving considerably more durable. Much of the support structure is provided by separate networks of people. Weapons, ammunition,

and other supplies are provided by a diverse set of traders and smugglers, some of whom are affiliated with the Afghan government and security forces.[28] Alongside the weakening of the chain of command within the Afghan Taliban, local Taliban commanders are gaining more and more financial independence: Taliban field commanders are mostly responsible for their own weapons and logistics supplies, for which they seek and find independent funding.[29]

The Taliban leadership are continuously trying to maintain the cohesion of the overall insurgency but only managing to control parts and sections. While the overall strength of the insurgency is unlikely to be diminished by these processes, its increasing fragmentation gives room to groups like al-Qaeda to infiltrate and manipulate the Afghan Taliban. That fragmentation fosters a shift towards a more ideologically driven insurgency that holds the potential to become an even greater international threat.

6. Conclusion

Many Taliban leaders of the older generation are still potential partners for a negotiated settlement. They are not implacably opposed to the U.S. or West in general but to specific actions or policies in Afghanistan. These figures now understand the position of the international community much better than they did before 2001. They are not seeking a return to the failed interactions between the Taliban and the international community of the 1990s. At present they still represent the movement.

Could the older-generation leadership be relied on to keep Afghanistan terror-free? The reaction of the insurgents depends in part on how their opponents choose to engage them. There would be support for a break with al-Qaeda within the senior leadership, but how this is addressed will determine how effective the break is to be. What is highly likely is that engagement on a political level will create opportunities that do not yet exist.

For a process of political negotiation to have a chance of addressing the core grievances and political inequalities that help the insurgency by alienating the population, it must occur on multiple levels nearly simultaneously. These various tables around which negotiations need to be held are important to reinforce the message – and the reality – that discussions about Afghanistan's political future must include all parties and not just be a quick-fix deal.

Fighting and negotiating are not mutually exclusive; these can and will happen in parallel. But the way the conflict is conducted is important. If a political settlement is indeed being sought, there is little sense in trying to destroy the organizations one wants to talk to.

Alex Strick van Linschoten and **Felix Kuehn** are researchers and writers based in Kandahar. They have worked in Afghanistan since 2006, focusing on the Taliban insurgency and the history of southern Afghanistan over the past four decades. Their research extends to other Muslim countries, and they are regular commentators on major western news channels. They are the editors of the acclaimed memoir of Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My Life With the Taliban*, published by Hurst in 2010. A book-length study of the themes explored in this paper will be published in April 2011 by Hurst (UK) entitled *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban/Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan*, 1970-2010.

Endnotes

[1] "Afghan Arab" was the name by which the foreign jihadis in Afghanistan came to be known during and after the 1980s jihad against the Soviet Union.
[2]These were the *Harakat-i Inqilab-i Islami*, led by Mawlawi Muhammad Nabi Muhammadi, and the Hizb-i Islami faction, led by Mawlawi Yunus Khalis. Today's Haqqani Network in Waziristan and southeastern Afghanistan is led by former fighters of Khalis's party.
[3]Interview, Kabul, July 2010 (with senior Taliban political figure who attended the meeting).
[4]Jay Solomon, "Eager for Allies, Army Tries Turning Insurgents; Chaos Embroils Pakistan," The Wall Street Journal, November 8, 2007. Also, interview, Anand Gopal, Washington D.C., June 2010.
[5]Matthieu Aikins, "The Master of Spin Boldak: Undercover with Afghanistan's Drug-Trafficking Border Police," *Harper's Magazine*, December 2009. http://harpers.org/archive/2009/12/0082754 (accessed December 19, 2010).
[6]Anand Gopal, *The Battle for Afghanistan: Kandahar*. (Washington D.C.: New America Foundation, 2010).
[7]Interviews, Kandahar, 2009-10.
[8]http://theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Jan10/Statement%20of%20the%20Leadership%20Council%20of%20the%20Islamic%20Emirate%20of%20Afghanistan%20regarding%20the%20London%20Conference.htm (accessed December 19, 2010).
[9]http://theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Sep10/Message%20of%20Felicitation%20of%20the%20Esteemed%20Amir-ul-Momineen,%20on%20the%20Eve%20of%20Eid-ul-Fitr.htm (accessed December 19, 2010).
[10] See http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/news/taliban-stronger-says-group-leader (accessed November 26, 2010).
[11]AP/MSNBC, "Saudi Arabia Wants Taliban to Expel Bin Laden," February 2, 2010. http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/35196297/ (accessed September 1, 2010).
[12] The rise in instances of suicide bombings from 2005 onwards is frequently attributed to information flows from Iraq, where the insurgency employed both of these to great effect; the directly causal nature of this relationship, however, is less than certain. Evidence points rather to the influence of Pakistani militants in providing the expertise and the rise of certain commanders within the Taliban as an explanation, therefore offering a far more diffuse linking of different groups than straight connections.
[13]Interviews, Kabul, Kandahar, and Khost, 2006-10.
[14]In this scenario, Taliban fighters would conduct joint operations with American or other Special Forces.
[15]Thom Shanker and Alissa Rubin, "Quest to Neutralize Afghan Militants Is Showing Glimpses of Success, NATO Says," *The New York Times*, June 28, 2010. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/29/world/asia/29military.html?pagewanted=print (accessed October 19, 2010).
[16]Thom Shanker, Elizabeth Bumiller, and Rod Norland, "Despite Gains, Night Raids Split U.S. and Karzai," *The New York Times*, November 15, 2010.
[17]Dexter Filkins, "Pakistanis Tell of Motive in Taliban Leader's Arrest," *The New York Times*, August 22, 2010. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/23/world/asia/23taliban.html?pagewanted=print (accessed October 5, 2010).
[18]Mullah Berader is believed to have been released from detention, but this has not been confirmed.
[19]Kimberly Dozier, "Petraeus Fights Time, Enemy in Afghanistan," *Associated Press*, October 29, 2010. http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5gKQgVdBxfhWneF-UNXpCJfoEDcPgD9IHC3P80?docId=D9IHC3P80 (accessed October 5, 2010).
[20]Interview, Kabul, July 2010.
[21]Con Coughlin, "We May Be Beating the Taliban, But in this Country You'd Never Know It," *The Daily Telegraph*, September 24, 2010. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/concoughlin/8022154/We-may-be-beating-the-Taliban-but-in-this-country-youd-never-know-it.html (accessed October 5, 2010).
[22]http://www.treas.gov/press/releases/tg782.htm (accessed September 12, 2010).
[23]Interviews, Kabul and Kandahar, July and August 2010.
[24]Interviews, Kandahar, July and August 2010.
[25]Interview, Kabul, July 2010.
[26]For the significant problems with the intelligence in Afghanistan see Major General Michael T. Flynn, Captain Matt Pottinger, and Paul D. Batchelor, *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan*. (Washington D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2010).
[27]Authors' observation, Kandahar, 2009-10.
[28]Interviews, Kandahar, 2008-2010.
[29]Authors' observation and interviews, Kabul and Kandahar, 2008-10.

Related Publications from the
Center on International Cooperation

Is a Regional Pact to Stabilize Afghanistan Possible?
Tom Gregg

Drug Production and Trafficking, Counterdrug Policies, and Security and Governance in Afghanistan
Jonathan P. Caulkins, Mark A.R. Kleiman, Jonathan D. Kulick

Counter-Narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan: The False Promise of Crop Eradication
Barnett R. Rubin and Jake Sherman

The Public Cost of Private Security in Afghanistan
Jake Sherman and Victoria DiDomenico

Building a New Afghanistan: The Value of Success, The Cost of Failure
Barnett R. Rubin, Abby Stoddard, Humayun Hamidzada, and Adib Farhadi

Cooperating for Peace and Security: Evolving Institutions and Arrangements in a Context of Changing U.S. Security Policy
Bruce Jones, Shepard Forman, Richard Gowan, eds.,

Annual Review of Global Peace Operations 2010

Power and Responsibility: Building International Order in an Era of Transnational threats
Bruce Jones, Carlos Pascual and Stephen John Stedman

A Plan for Action: A New Era of International Cooperation for a Changed World 2009, 2010 and Beyond
Managing Global Insecurity (MGI)

Conflict Prevention in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific
Elsina Wainwright

CENTER ON INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

New York University
726 Broadway, Suite 543
New York, NY 10003
(212) 998-3680
cic.info@nyu.edu
www.cic.nyu.edu