

THE AFGHANISTAN CONFLICT, INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM AND THE US RESPONSE*

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* Opinions expressed in this paper are author's personal views only.

The crisis of international terrorism emanating from Afghanistan might have been avoided had Washington heeded the now-slain leader of the Afghan anti-Taliban forces, the legendary commander Ahmad Shah Masood, who repeatedly warned that a dangerous triangular alliance between the Taliban, Osama bin Laden and Pakistan was turning Afghanistan into a major source of instability in world politics. Washington's failure to help Masood to limit the menace eventually cost both the commander and the US dearly. Masood died on 15 September 2001 of wounds inflicted on him in a suicide bombing by two Arabs, apparently organised by bin Laden, only two days before the US fell victim to the apocalyptic terrorist attacks on 11 September. Why did the US fail to act earlier over Afghanistan, and is it now capable of addressing effectively the root-causes of the present crisis?

The axis of Osama bin Laden, Taliban and Pakistan (or more specifically Pakistan's Interservices Intelligence Directorate (ISI), which operated as a government within a government) was not an over-night development. It dated from mid-1994 when Pakistan orchestrated the extremist Taliban militia, made up of mostly ethnic Pashtuns from both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border, as the most appropriate geo-political force to secure a compliant government in Kabul. This followed a very turbulent and devastating decade and a half in Afghan politics. A pro-Soviet communist coup in 1978 brought to an abrupt end the longest period of peace and stability in modern Afghan history, from 1930 to 1978, during which time the ethno-tribally divided Afghans had managed to create an unprecedented degree of national cohesion and stable political order. The failure of the communists, who were very small in number, highly factionalised and lacked historical legitimacy, administrative experience and popular appeal, opened the way for the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. This in turn led to an American-sponsored counter-interventionist strategy, implemented through Pakistan as the 'frontline state', in support of the Afghan Islamic resistance forces (the Mujahidin). The Soviets were forced to leave Afghanistan by the end of the 1980s. The USSR disintegrated shortly thereafter, and the Soviet protégé regime collapsed in Kabul in April 1992. The United States consequently ended its involvement in Afghanistan with no due consideration to the post-communist management of the Afghan conflict. The conflict left Afghanistan in tatters, with the country's political, administrative, security and economic structures in ruins, making Afghanistan terribly vulnerable to its neighbours' post-Cold War pursuit of conflicting regional interests. Pakistan proved to be the most predatory: it tried to assume the US role to achieve certain regional ambitions, most importantly, 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan against its archenemy, India.

The moderate Mujahidin Islamic government that took over Kabul under President Burhanuddin Rabbani, with Ahmad Shah Masood as its powerful commander, could not rapidly consolidate power. Pakistan vehemently opposed Masood's independent stance and was angered by his refusal to compromise Afghanistan's independence in support of

Islamabad's regional interests. When Islamabad failed in its efforts to put its protégé, the maverick Pashtun Mujahidin leader and self-styled Islamist, Gulbuddin Hikymatyar, in a position to head the government, the ISI decided on a daring course of action. It capitalised on its close friendship with the CIA from the days of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan for support in generating a fresh and extremist Sunni Islamic fighting force, which could be seen as occupying higher moral ground than the Rabbani government. That force was the Taliban, which burst onto the Afghan scene with the full human, military and logistic aid of Pakistan, and financial backing of two US allies, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The latter states offered support for two reasons: their Sunni Islamic sectarian affiliation with Pakistan, and their desire to secure some anti-Iranian leverage in Afghanistan, especially in relation to the Iran-UAE territorial dispute over the islands of the Greater and Smaller Tunbs, and Abu Musa in the Gulf. The CIA and for that matter the US government quietly endorsed the Taliban development in an apparent attempt to let Pakistan fill the vacuum to which Washington's neglect of post-communist Afghanistan had contributed.

The US government also showed no qualms over bin Laden's move into Afghanistan in 1996. Bin Laden threw the weight of his wealth and Arab connections behind the Taliban, although by now he was no stranger to American security agencies. He was one of the hundreds of Arab volunteers who, with CIA and ISI support, had joined the Mujahidin to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. He was also already known for his stand against the United States. He had denounced America's protection of what he had called "the corrupt Saudi regime", and its domination of the Middle East. He had condemned America's strategic alliance with Israel and Israel's forcible occupation of Palestinian land, most importantly East Jerusalem (containing Islam's third holiest place after Mecca and Medina). The deployment of US troops in Saudi Arabia – the holiest soil of Islam – to reverse the August 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait had marked a turning point in the growth of his anti-American convictions and his desire for revenge.

Washington seemed to view the Taliban as beneficial to its interests. The militia's anti-Iranian character and its purported ability to secure a direct corridor through Afghanistan into the newly independent but resource-rich former Soviet Central Asian Muslim republics appeared appealing. Just in the same way as Washington had failed to see the consequences of disengagement from Afghanistan after achieving its prime goal of defeating Soviet communism, it paid little or no attention to the long-term consequences of these new developments. Even when it became fully apparent after the Taliban take over of Kabul in mid-1996 and Masood and his supporters' bitter complaint that an ugly and disturbing alliance was developing between extremist Arab and non-Arab groups in Afghanistan, Washington remained conspicuously silent. It tacitly, if not actively, endorsed various American companies participating in projects that could allow them to access the energy resources of Central Asia through Afghanistan. The one consortium that attracted widespread attention because of its favourable disposition towards the Taliban was led by UNOCAL of the US and Delta Oil of Saudi Arabia, whose proposed project was to construct a \$2.5 billion pipeline across Afghanistan to export gas from Turkmenistan to South Asia. Washington's concern was to deny Iran a role as an alternative route.

Meanwhile, Washington paid no more than lip service to the international outcry over what increasingly turned out to be the Taliban's brutal, medievalist rule, and their application of a highly discriminatory, extremist form of Sunni Islam, which had no historical precedent in Afghanistan. It offered only occasional verbal criticism of the Taliban, such as that by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright at the end of 1997. Albright drew attention to the

institution of a theocratic reign of terror, involving massive human rights violations, especially against girls and women, who were even barred from receiving education and employment, and against the Shiahhs who make up 15 percent of Afghanistan's population. Similarly, the Washington remained somewhat muted over an increasing number of reports that the Taliban were transforming Afghanistan into a major source of poppy growing, heroin production and drug trafficking, from the proceeds of which they partly financed their relentless war against the opposition. In fact, the Taliban produced two-thirds of the world's heroin in 1999. Washington generally sidelined reports about ISI-driven Taliban training of Arab and Kashmiri militants to fight US hegemony in the Muslim world and India's control of Jammu and Kashmir. It persistently failed to declare as unacceptable Taliban-bin Laden extremism and Pakistan's support for it, and did not provide the Masood-led armed opposition with the necessary help to combat a complete Pakistani-Taliban-bin Laden take over of Afghanistan.

Had it not been for bin Laden's alleged masterminding of the bombing of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania at the cost of hundreds of casualties in August 1998, Washington would likely have been quite content to remain disengaged from developments in Afghanistan; it showed little concern over Pakistan's handling of them. However, the embassy bombings changed the situation dramatically. They brought the chickens home to roost for both the United States and Saudi Arabia, and indeed jolted Washington out of its slumber. Washington finally viewed the developments in Afghanistan as damaging and found it imperative to act. In the first instance, the Clinton administration promptly launched two cruise missile attacks – one on what the US described as a bin Laden-linked chemical weapons factory in Sudan, and another on bin Laden's training camps in eastern Afghanistan. The first target turned out to be a medicine factory with no proven linkage to bin Laden; the second missed bin Laden and his top brass. If anything, the US actions raised bin Laden's profile, enabling him to project himself more effectively than ever as the defender of Arab and Islamic causes to a wider audience in the Muslim world.

Of the 24 people killed in the missile attack on Afghanistan, several were Kashmiri trainees, which clearly established the growing bonds between bin Laden, the Taliban and Kashmiri militants. Since the ISI had been running Pakistan's Afghanistan and Kashmir policies from the early 1980s, providing patronage to both Kashmiri militants and the Taliban and their Arab supporters, it was now clear that the ISI had established close links between various client forces to create a wider, multifaceted regional network of armed activists.

Yet the Taliban and their Arab and Pakistani supporters pushed their military campaign for the conquest of all of Afghanistan. Before the end of 1998, they succeeded in not only taking over most of Afghanistan, confining Masood and his forces to the north-eastern quarter and a few areas north of Kabul, but also consolidated their infrastructure of terror in Afghanistan beyond anyone's expectations. This infrastructure was critical in enabling bin Laden to strengthen his al-Qaeda (The Base) network of Arab and non-Arab activists, gaining a global reach, ready to strike at a wide range of American targets. Bin Laden's relations with the Taliban proved to be of such an organic nature that the latter owed him more for their success than bin Laden owed the Taliban for providing him protection.

Meanwhile, the ISI rejoiced over the bin Laden–Taliban alliance as a potent force for achieving wider regional objectives. It accelerated its efforts to recruit more Pakistani and Arab Islamic radicals, Central Asian Islamic opposition elements, such as those belonging to the Uzbekistan Islamic Movement, and many Chechen Islamic fighters to boost the

operational capacity of bin Laden and the Taliban leadership beyond the borders of Afghanistan. As the Taliban castigated the secular rulers of the Central Asian republics, but declared their full support for Chechen independence from Russia and welcomed the Chechens to open a diplomatic mission in Kabul, the new recruits were trained and armed for operations both inside and outside Afghanistan. Their number soon grew into thousands, with 3,000 - 5,000 well-armed Arabs forming bin Laden's personal army alone. By early 2000 the Taliban and their foreign fighters were able to sponsor a major radical Islamic expedition into the Central Asian republics, which finally ended in Kyrgyzstan with the help of Russian border guards, but at the cost of scores of lives and much anxiety for the Central Asian governments and Russia.

To capture bin Laden and break up the al-Qaeda network, Washington's approach after the embassy bombings in Africa focussed on three main objectives: to indict and put a bounty on bin Laden and demand the Taliban extradite him; to apply diplomatic pressure on Pakistan to lean on the Taliban to meet America's demand; and to pay more attention to Russia's complaint about the Taliban's Islamic threat to the Central Asian republics and to India's outcry about the Pakistan-Taliban sponsorship of cross-border terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir. However, the approach did not include any assistance to Masood's forces, which were holding out against the Taliban with very limited human and material resources. Washington insisted on a policy of 'no support to any Afghan faction'. This was while knowing that Pakistani involvement, bin Laden's money, and Arab and Pakistani recruits were very rapidly changing the balance on the ground against Masood and his United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan (what has wrongly become known as the Northern Alliance), representing the ousted Rabbani government which still occupied Afghanistan's seat at the United Nations. The US refused to name Pakistan as a state sponsoring terrorism or to maximise pressure on Pakistani governments to rein in the ISI and to close Pakistani territory as the only outlet through which bin Laden, his associates and their Taliban protectors could get in and out of Afghanistan.

The Clinton administration seemed to have been gripped by the view that too much pressure on Pakistan, which was both bankrupt and nuclear-armed, could lead the country to implode, with the possibility of its nuclear weapons falling into the wrong hands. It also feared that it could make Pakistan move closer to China, which Washington had accused of providing Islamabad with nuclear and missile technology. It essentially relied on dialogue and persuasion to enlist Pakistan's support for its anti-bin Laden campaign – an approach constrained by the need to maintain US sanctions against Pakistan following its nuclear tests in early 1999.

However, by October 1999, the US appeared to be having some success with the elected Pakistani government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, whom Washington had successfully persuaded earlier in the year to withdraw ISI-backed, Taliban-aided militants from the Indian side of the Line of Control, separating Pakistani and Indian administered Kashmir, and thus halt the Kargil military clash – a confrontation that threatened to develop into a full-scale war between the two protagonists. Sharif finally publicly accused the Taliban of destabilising Pakistan and contemplated a change in Pakistan's Afghanistan policy. But, unfortunately, he could not go any further than this: within days of Sharif's anti-Taliban postures, the Army Joint Chief of Staff, General Pervez Musharraf – a supporter of the Kargil clash with India – toppled him in a bloodless coup.

General Musharraf initially promised President Clinton during his stopover in Pakistan in late March 2000 that he would use Pakistan's influence with the Taliban to change direction and

hand over bin Laden, but he soon changed tack. As his regime became too dependent on the military and pro-Taliban Islamic groups, he was in no position to rein in the ISI. He publicly defended Pakistan's support of the Taliban on the grounds of "national security interests". He urged Washington to enter direct negotiations with the Taliban, and the world community to follow the example of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in recognising the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, although Riyadh had formally frozen its relations with Kabul from late 1998.

Frustrated with Pakistan and alarmed by the discovery of more anti-American terrorist plots by elements allegedly related to bin Laden, in late-May 2000, Washington dispatched Under-secretary of State Thomas Pickering to Islamabad for a 'tough talk'. The failure of Pickering's mission prompted Washington to up the ante on the Taliban. It decided to respond more warmly to Moscow and New Delhi's overtures for closer policy co-ordination against international terrorism – an imperative which had gained more urgency following the successful hijacking in late December 1999 of an Indian passenger airliner by Kashmiri militants in apparent cahoots with the ISI and the Taliban. A month earlier, in November 1999, Washington had sponsored (jointly with Russia) UN Security Council Resolution 1267, imposing limited economic sanctions on the Taliban. It followed this a year later with Resolution 1333, tightening the sanctions and this time also to subject the Taliban, but not their opponents, to an arms embargo. The Security Council complemented this measure in July 2001 when it adopted Resolution 1363, endorsing the stationing of monitors in neighbouring countries, especially Pakistan.

However, all these measures proved quite ineffective, given the Taliban's defiance and Pakistan's blatant violations. They did little either to moderate the Taliban's behaviour or to make Pakistan change direction. If anything, the more the UN measures came into effect, the more the Taliban and their ISI minders reacted with provocative counter-measures to impress upon the international community that they were in charge of Afghanistan and that the West should deal with the Taliban directly. Their counter-measures in the first eight months of 2001 included the destruction of all pre-Islamic statues, most importantly two ancient ones of Buddha, closing down UN-run bakeries which provided bread for numerous destitute families in Kabul, the requirement that the tiny Hindu minority in Afghanistan wear yellow badges of distinction; and finally the arrest of eight Western aid workers and 16 of their Afghan support staff on charges of spreading Christianity among the Afghans. These steps outraged the international community and yet at the same time forced it to interact with the Taliban. The Musharraf government played a dubious role at best in all this. While publicly calling on the Taliban to moderate its counter-measures, Pakistan kept criticising the UN measures and urging the international community to engage rather than isolate the Taliban. It rejected any criticism of Pakistan's role in Afghanistan and maintained its façade of no military involvement in the country.

The problem with the American strategy was that it mostly focussed on judicial means, diplomatic pressure and a couple of attempted covert military operations for one and only one purpose: to capture bin Laden and his top aides. It failed to see that bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network were closely intertwined with the Taliban and the ISI, that bin Laden virtually owned the Taliban by providing the militia with millions of dollars and thousands of Arab fighters, and that there was little chance of taking out bin Laden and his al-Qaeda lieutenants without at the same time taking on the Taliban and the ISI. It also paid only transitory attention to the wider brutalities of these three forces against the Afghan people. Under Soviet occupation, an estimated 1.2 million Afghans were killed, two million became internally

displaced and six million externally exiled mainly in Pakistan and Iran. Later, under Rabbani's government, some 35,000 civilians were killed but mostly by Hikmatyar's bombardment of Kabul. However, under the Taliban the situation again nose-dived. It is estimated that since the Taliban's assumption of power another 300,000 Afghans have been killed, with another seven million or one-third of the population internally or externally exiled and destitute due to Taliban repression, its goal of military victory against all its opponents, the lack of social development and the worst drought in Afghanistan in fifty years. However, Masood and his United Front partners could do nothing but suffer from growing frustration and disappointment over the US's narrow and, in many ways, futile approach. All Masood's efforts in trying to make the Americans, and for that matter the international community, understand that the ISI was crystallising a dangerous situation in Afghanistan came to very little. For Masood, the only way to contain the Taliban and their Arab supporters was for the United States to deal with the source of the problem: Pakistan's ISI and military leadership. Disenchanted with what he regarded as the US's apathy towards the Afghan tragedy, Masood found it imperative to continue and widen the resistance in whatever way possible. He considered resistance to be the only means of pressuring the Taliban and Pakistan to opt for a negotiated settlement of the Afghan conflict, and to provide for the formation of a broad-based multiethnic government, removal of terrorist networks from Afghanistan and curtailment of Pakistan's creeping invasion of the country.

He augmented his efforts to expand the opposition by incorporating more former Mujahidin leaders into the resistance, thereby opening various fronts and so preventing the Taliban-Arab-Pakistani forces concentrating against his fighters alone. By late 2000, he welcomed back into the resistance the former governors of the western province of Herat, Ismail Khan, who had escaped from a Taliban prison a few months earlier, and the eastern province of Nangarhar, Haji Abdul Qadir, as well as General Rashid Dostum, a former Uzbek warlord of the northern province of Balkh. Masood was aware of past human rights abuses by some elements, like Dostum, in the United Front, but he contended that the world would recognise the Front for it was: a coalition of various forces, like any other liberationist movements in history, in which the inclusion of a few unsavoury elements would not discredit the resistance as a whole. While the Front was and still is largely made up of non-Pashtuns, it contains some Pashtun Mujahidin leaders, such as Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, and Haji Abdul Qadir, as well as a number of Pashtun commanders.

This, together with some financial assistance and arms that he received from India, Iran and Russia, helped him to frustrate his opponents. He had been the target of many Taliban-Pakistani assassination attempts, but finally at the time when he was ready to go on the offensive in the final weeks of the northern autumn (September - October) of 2001, his enemies succeeded in eliminating him not on the battlefield, but through an act of terrorism. His death was a major blow to his forces, but this does not appear to have affected their morale and fighting capability: Masood left a number of excellent commanders and a solid military structure to ensure the continuation of the resistance.

Now that, in the wake of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, the US and other Western powers have finally come to share Masood's cause in support of freedom and against terror, they need to act prudently so as not to disappoint all those Afghans and other Muslims who applauded Masood's stand either loudly or quietly. To realise its anti-terror goals, the US and its allies cannot just confine their efforts to defeating bin Laden, the Taliban and al-Qaeda with a proportionate military response. The destruction of these forces alone would do little to eradicate international terrorism as a threat to world stability. They will also need to address those causes that lay at the core of enabling the al-Qaeda brand of terrorism to flourish. It is

imperative to focus on four urgent, interrelated political objectives.

The first is to resolve the Afghan conflict itself, which has gone on for too long, at the cost of too much devastation for the Afghan people and with tragic implications for the world. After destroying the Taliban regime and dismantling the al-Qaeda network in Afghanistan, the US and its allies have a unique opportunity to create the necessary conditions in Afghanistan for the formation of a genuinely broad-based, multiethnic governmental system and to provide generous assistance for the reconstruction of Afghanistan in support of making this system work. They have made a promising start in this respect, but there is a long and difficult way to go yet.

The second is to help Pakistan in whatever way possible to:

- Restructure the ISI and make it a responsible security organisation with no powers to operate above the law either inside or outside Pakistan;
- Close down radical Islamic groups and the medreses (religious schools) which have been involved in violent cross-border activities in Afghanistan and Indian-controlled Kashmir;
- Generate rapid socio-economic stability; and
- Return to genuine democracy sooner rather than later.

These are objectives that could also help resolve the long-running and potentially explosive Indo-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir.

The third is to secure a viable resolution of the Palestinian problem, and alleviate the sufferings of the Iraqi people that the decade-long UN sanctions have created. These problems have been two constant sources of accumulated anti-American frustration and anger across the Arab and for that matter the Muslim worlds. Not only bin Laden but many more like him can easily draw on these problems to recruit dedicated supporters and galvanise anti-American sentiment in the region, given America's strategic partnership with Israel. Israel must be made to understand that ultimately its peace and security are intertwined with those of the Palestinians, and without a viable independent Palestinian state there can be no peace and security for Israel.

The fourth is to foster the necessary conditions for wider democratisation in the Arab world. The Arab regimes need more than ever before to widen public participation in both policy-making and policy-implementation processes within pluralist, responsible and transparent governmental frameworks. A failure in this respect can only ensure the continuation of those popular political and social frustrations that could make many people, especially the young, susceptible to Islamic radicalisation. It is an established fact that political disillusionment in the Arab world is widespread and often it is this disillusionment that finds channels of expression through other causes, more importantly anti-Israeli and anti-American causes. As long as this remains the case, many more like bin Laden or Saddam Hussein will have a fertile ground on which to draw to defend their positions and focus regional discontent on the United States and its allies.

In short, a reshaping of Afghan and of regional and international political and economic orders has never been more urgent. The removal of bin Laden, his al-Qaeda activists and the Taliban regime on their own will not ensure the necessary changes. Nor would it necessarily

eliminate the danger from those groups that are or will be gripped by apocalyptic missions, and such groups may well require further military responses as their challenges arise. However, if the US and its allies cast their net wider to address the principal causes from which people like bin Laden gain motivation and with which they may swell recruitment for horrific acts of terror such as those of 11 September 2001, then the world will be closer to eliminating the chances of such acts reoccurring. There will also be less of a political swamp to enable a figure like bin Laden to be type-cast as a 'hero' in the eyes of those who can identify their causes with his actions. The United States and its allies need to get it right this time; otherwise the present situation does not augur well for the future.