
The Future of the Taliban

With patron support waning and the Islamic State expanding, the Taliban may transform into a militant political group in order to survive.

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JUNE 23, 2015

Two new fronts appear to be opening in the Taliban's battle for Afghanistan. The Islamic State's (ISIS's) expansion into Afghanistan and Pakistan poses a strategic threat to the Taliban's influence. But more importantly, Pakistan — long an ally who has supported and sheltered the Taliban since 2001 — seems to be withdrawing its assistance in response to pressure from China, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan. These two unexpected challenges are forcing the Taliban leadership to reassess their approach to the militancy and their future political role in order to ensure their long term survival.

Since assuming the Afghan presidency, Ashraf Ghani's gambit has been to make overtures to Islamabad while coordinating states — especially China — in pressuring Pakistan to bring the Taliban to negotiations or to confront militants of all hues on its soil. Apparently succumbing to this pressure and worried about the growing insecurity in Pakistan, the military and civilian leadership in Pakistan have made unprecedented statements regarding the Taliban. Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif denounced the Taliban's spring offensive during a visit to Kabul in May 2015, saying that the "enemies of Afghanistan cannot be friends of Pakistan." Earlier this year, Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff Raheel Sharif made a similar statement. And earlier this month, Awais Ahmed Khan Laghari, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Pakistan National Assembly, demanded that Islamabad hand over the Haqqani Network and Afghan Taliban to Kabul in exchange for Ghani's overture.

As there are no signs of the Taliban's fight subsiding, Kabul expects Pakistan to undertake military action against Afghan Taliban sanctuaries across the Durand line. Pakistan's pressure on the Taliban would limit their operational capacity, but it is impossible to uproot the group entirely. The Taliban's response to Pakistani pressure will likely take the form of retaliatory attacks and increased activity through 2016, demonstrating their independence and potency. Meanwhile, the group's leadership would need to find alternative safe havens while at the same time expanding territory in Afghanistan.

The Taliban's relationship with Pakistan is based upon convenience. Earlier this year while under pressure to either enter negotiations with Kabul or leave Pakistan, the Taliban reportedly **decided to leave**. Confirming this in a personal interview, a high-profile Taliban leader operating in the southern and southeastern regions of Afghanistan explained that the Taliban cannot be "controlled" by Pakistan and will never enter peace talks unless their conditions are met. "We are not afraid of Pakistan abandoning us and I am certain we [Taliban] will find alternatives and handle the situation well," the source said.

Taliban sources avoid discussing alternatives to Pakistani support, but the recent Taliban expansion in northern Afghanistan appears to be a new strategy. Since the beginning of their Operation Azm — a spring offensive launched in April 2015 — the group has jeopardized security and made territorial gains in northern parts of the country. This appears to be a strategic response to concerns that foreign fighters led by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan — who **shifted** their allegiance to the Islamic State in September 2014 — might gain the upper hand in the region. Moreover, a second Taliban source explained in an interview that the group intends to break the image that the Taliban are confined to Afghanistan's southern and eastern regions by demonstrating their ability to exert influence across the entire country. The source explained the Taliban are concerned that if they are seen as confined to the south and east this might eventually split the country in the long run.

Beyond territorial expansion, the Taliban's survival requires the continued development of resources — both human and financial. According to discussions with Afghan intelligence officials and Taliban sources, the group has control over vast manpower and finances. But with the loss of Pakistan's support and the decrease of international money pumped into the Afghan economy, Taliban resources appear to be challenged for the foreseeable future.

The Taliban's **five main illegal economic** sources, particularly poppy production, will likely expand into the north. Additionally, smuggling into Central Asia and the extraction of precious gems and antiques will also likely expand. Meanwhile, the Taliban can use their **history** of jailbreaks to replenish personnel. And abductions are likely to grow to foster hostage ransoms and exchanges.

Moreover, supporting regional militant groups, potentially the Baloch separatist movements in Pakistan, could provide the Taliban with financial resources and men. International jihadist groups and sympathizers from across the region will remain a source of funding and manpower. The Taliban will likely need to procure weapons from black markets and corrupt Afghan officials, while seizing weapons from operations against Afghan security forces.

But over time, as Taliban resources dwindle and disillusionment grows, a parallel political wing to their military campaign will probably take shape. Some Taliban will actively pursue political aims, seeking to win over sympathetic segments of the population by delivering services — such as **judicial** and security services — while the military wing continues violence as a form of political leverage. At this stage, the Taliban will be transformed, with tactics shifting towards bolstering their political interests and ensuring their survival in exchange for reduced violence. Limited but high-profile attacks, some covert, will continue as way of enforcing their demands and to make sure they are respected while a new status quo slowly takes shape.

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