



Background to the War

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1. Ramadan, the Eid, and Winter

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has stated that the war against terrorism must go on during Ramadan, which runs from Nov. 17 through Dec. 16. The Eid-ul-Fitr starts on Dec. 17 and lasts for three days, with the main festivities taking place on the first day. Although terrorism will continue through Ramadan and fighting has routinely occurred in Islamic countries—certainly in Afghanistan—during Ramadan, more serious military issues are involved.

First, bombing pauses are even more important than usual during a limited air campaign. We found during World War II that even a few days of not striking a target allowed a surprisingly high degree of recovery and dispersal. This proved equally true in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Kosovo.

The air strikes that the Department of Defense is flying total fewer than 100 each day and more than 80 percent are fighter-attack. Even with precision-guided weapons, striking at large area targets like Kabul and Kandahar can have only limited daily effect and gives the Taliban and Al Qaeda a great deal of time to recover. Iraq and the Serbs have shown that it is comparatively easy to disperse and hide large amounts of equipment and supplies in a relatively short period of time. In short, this campaign is highly dependent on sustained effort.

Second, the coming of winter grows increasingly critical. If the United States is to seriously reduce Taliban capabilities in the cities in Hazar and Uzbek areas during the winter, it cannot afford to let the Taliban continue to resupply and reinforce during the critical month before winter has its most serious effect.

2. Al Qaeda and the "55th Brigade"

One of the forgotten dimensions of the war is the role that Al Qaeda's regular military forces, along with Pakistani volunteers, play in supporting and stiffening the Taliban. Al Qaeda is not simply a terrorist organization. It trains and equips regular forces to fight with the Taliban. Al Qaeda attempts to use Arabicized versions of U.S. and British ranger and special forces training methods. Some put the nominal strength of these forces—sometimes called the "55th Brigade" in the West and "055 Brigade" in the region—at 5,000 men. But the actual strength of trained fighters may be anywhere from 1,500 to 3,000 men, and the total volunteer base could be as high as 7,000—including volunteers who have joined since September 11th.

These forces usually dress as Afghans and can be found with Taliban troops, not in training camps or Al Qaeda's "terrorist" facilities. They are composed of Arabs from Algeria, Egypt, Libya and the Gulf and also include some radical Uzbeks and Tajiks. This unit has trained some of the Uzbeks in the IMU, as well as some Uighurs and Chechens. It also has some volunteers serving in Kashmir. These forces have been supplied not only by Al Qaeda but also by the ISI in Pakistan. They are reported to have modern communications, commercial night vision equipment, advanced Western sniper rifles and night sights, and some light spotter aircraft. Their major support facilities—including a dedicated airstrip—are reported to be around Kandahar.

These troops present a special problem for the United States in any effort to split the Taliban. They are ethnically divided, but tend to be far more ideological than the normal Taliban commanders and troops. Along with the Pakistani and other Asian volunteers, they give the Taliban leadership a loyal cadre that may enforce loyalty to the Taliban. At the same time,

most are Arabic speakers and like other volunteers are seen as foreigners, symbols of past Pakistani interference, and as "extremists" by the social and religious standards of the average Afghan.

3. Pakistan and the Pakistani-South Asian Volunteers

One of the greatest missing dimensions in our understanding of the capabilities of the Taliban is the role of Pakistan in supporting the regime, what has happen since Musharaf purged the head of the ISI and other senior commanders who aided the Taliban, and the 4,000 to 7,000 "Pakistani" volunteers (volunteers from many Asian countries also are involved) believed to be in Afghanistan.

Pakistan used the Taliban to train most of its guerrillas in Kashmir and then create a Pashtun-dominated Afghanistan. It is believed that the Taliban received major military supplies from Pakistan and that retired and seconded Pakistani officers and personnel served with the Taliban as well as helped organize and train them. Reports that Pakistani troops and special forces fought with the Taliban have never been confirmed. The main element of Pakistani military intelligence-the ISI-led and organized this effort.

Reports indicate that several thousand Pakistani volunteers may have gone to join these forces since September 11th, although this could be sharply exaggerated. What is not clear is whether Musharaf has succeeded in ending all ISI support for such volunteers, has shut off the major flow of supplies and arms, and has created his own counter-Taliban effort to establish a new pro-Pakistan Pashtun faction. It is equally unclear how Pakistan is now dealing with guerrillas in Kashmir.

As is the case with the 55th Brigade, the deep ideological convictions of these volunteers gives the Taliban cadres that may both be ultra loyal and be used to help ensure the loyalty of Afghan Taliban forces. At the same time, many Pashtuns do resent the Pakistan's interference.