Beyond the Bin Laden Hunt: The Real Story in the War Against Terrorism

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It is tempting to assume that most of the story is over in Afghanistan, that Konduz and Qandahar will fall, and that the Bin Laden hunt is the proper focus of events. The real situation seems considerably more complex, and other problems deserve a great deal more attention.

A Divided "Nation" with Strong Surviving Taliban and Extremist Elements

Westerners and the Northern Alliance may focus on who occupies and governs in Kabul. There are strong indications, however, that the Northern Alliance cannot really move south into Qandahar and that the Pashtun factions that take over from the Taliban will pay only tenuous lip service -- if any service at all -- to the central government. The Hazaras have already made it clear that they do not trust the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance and the Uzbeks are very likely to follow.

Up to a point, such separatism and regionalism is not a critical problem. Afghanistan has not had a strong central government in recent history, and Afghan politics have always been highly regional and s centered on clan, ethnic group, religious sect, or tribe.

It is all too possible, however, that the Pashtuns may end up fighting fight a low-level battle for power with the Northern Alliance and other groups. The Pashtuns also have a curious political heritage of support for both Islamic extremism and secular extremism. They not only are the core of the Taliban, they provided most of the Marxists in the two Communist factions that struggled for power before and during the Soviet invasion and occupation from 1979 to 1989. This struggle was highly tribal and grew more out divisions between the Ghilzai and Durrani tribal confederations than Marxist ideology.

Given Pakistani involvement in Afghanistan, the problem of the Pashtuns could be at least as messy as the situation in Bosnia and Kosovo. At this point in time, no major Pashtun leader has emerged. Jalaludin HaqqaniIn, the ex-Taliban minister of borders plays some role in the Pakhtia, Paktika and Khost provinces, but local warlords seem to have growing power. Hamid Karzai, a supporter of the ex-king, has uncertain influence in the Qandahar area.

No one has emerged with serious power in the rest of the Northeast, although Haji Kadeer, the brother of the murdered Abdul Haq has some influence. There are also leaders like Younis Khalis, are religious extremists in their own right. Khalis leads the Hezb-e Islami Party, which heavily influenced the religious position of the Taliban.

The Uzbek problem could be serious. Abdul Rashid Dostum, is the head of the National Islamic Movement (Jombesh-e Melli Islami), and does not seem to be willing to share power with the Tajiks who helped him win back Mazar-e Shariff. He has always had a fairly moderate approach to economic and special issues, but he has provoked factional fighting even among his own Uzbeck supporters in the past. He has been remarkably violent in dealing with opposition. He also has repeatedly played off Uzbekistan and the Turks (who are seen as strongly biased towards the Uzbeks) against other Afghans.

The Hazara problem is also complicated, and presents the further complication of Hazara friction with the Baluchs. Ismail Khan has a good reputation for an Afghan warlord, but is clearly seeking Hazara influence and power. There are some Shi'ite religious extremist leaders and clergy among the Hazara that are just as extreme as the worst Taliban. These include some leaders who seem to have left Iran for Afghanistan. Other Shi'ite leaders in the Bamiyan area,, the center of the country and near Mazar-e Sharif also do not owe any clear allegiance to Ismail Khan.

This could be much more than a peacekeeping or nation-building problem. It could mean new enclaves where religious extremism and ethnic hatred would support terrorism, become actively hostile to any peacekeeping force or Western "occupiers," and tolerate a foreign presence.

The Taliban, Al Qaida, and Foreign Volunteer Survivors of the Fighting

One truly critical question will be what happens to the ex-Taliban that survive in the Pashtun-dominated areas, and in the more pro-Taliban Baluch areas.

We have not yet announced what our Special Forces, Marines, and allied elements of Afghans are trying to do with the remnants of Al Qaida and the Taliban, how we will handle the more extreme and guilty personnel other than Omar and Bin Laden, or what will happen to POWs both in Afghanistan and when repatriated to other countries.

It may be that many Taliban and Al Qaida extremists are killed during the rest of the fighting, but even this is uncertain, and it will scarcely be a "solution" to the "postwar" problem.

The battle for Konduz involves a large force -- anywhere from 5,000-15,000 -- and seems to include several top Taliban leaders and elements of the Taliban defense ministry. It also includes significant numbers of Arabs, Uzbeks, Chechens, and Pakistanis associated with Al Qaida.

The Northern Alliance commander, Mohammed Daud, has so far stated that he will only accept the surrender of Afghans, not foreigners, but it is very unlikely that even mass executions will really kill most of the surviving forces. Messy as the end result may, it will still probably produce thousands of bitter, angry revanchists The hard-core Taliban and al-Qaida presence in Qandahar presents an even more serious potential problem. We cannot assume that Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Taliban's Amir al-Mumemeen ("Commander of the Faith"), will simply disappear, be imprisoned, or be killed. Even if he is, many who supported him will almost certainly survive.

We cannot assume that those Taliban, members of Al Qaida, or other volunteers who accept defeat -- or make deals to change sides -- will in any way be more pro-Western or American after the fighting than they were before it began.

No one can rule out the possibility that Taliban and/or Al Qaida elements will take to the countryside or the caves. However, it is not clear that a largely urban Taliban can now become rural guerrillas or take to the caves. What is clear is that the issue of where ex-members of the Taliban go once they are defeated and how they interact with the Pashtuns and other elements in Afghanistan is virtually certain to present lingering problems. This means the Pashtun separatism discussed above may take on a very ugly character, particularly if alliances are formed with Islamist extremists in Pakistan.

It is also important to remember that the extremists in the pro-Taliban clergy will be not only probably survive but retain much of their previous influence.

The problem of Al Qaida and other non-Afghan survivors in Qandahar is even more acute. It does not seem likely that we are going to "eradicate" most of these forces, and it is much more likely that there will be several thousand hard core survivors. Even if we wrap up the rest of Al Qaida, the fighting in Afghanistan will leave a heritage of hostile, embittered extremists. The end result could be the new terrorists groups and cells in many Arab and Islamic countries.

The Future of Al Qaida

It is clear from developments in Europe, Egypt, and the Middle East that broad progress is being made in dealing with the Al Qaida cells outside of Afghanistan. At the same time, US officials keep talking about Al Qaida as being in 60 countries, and there do seem to be elements of Al Qaida or affiliated organizations in at least 43 nations.

There have been no overall reports on progress in "eradicating" these organizations, and it seems reasonable to assume that Bin Laden and Al Qaida made contingency plans for many of these groups and cells to go underground and to distribute the organization's money in some cases. Many of the groups involve are also only affiliated with Bin Laden, rather than under his control, and are scarcely going to be leaderless even if Bin Laden and all of his major coterie in Afghanistan is killed or captured.

Like the remnants of the Al Qaida and Taliban forces in Afghanistan, the people in most of the cells outside Afghanistan will generally survive any destruction of the cell. As a result, they may simply shift to new organizations or create their own follow-on movements.

Once again, the situation will be complicated by the fact that many of the clergy affiliated with such groups - or encouraging them - will have a high degree of immunity. This presents a strong prospect that Al Qaida will survive in some form, or at least elements of Al Qaida.

One Last Strike and the Problem of Martyrdom

No one can know now if Bin Laden or Al Qaida made plans for a last stand or some form of dramatic martyrdom. Leaders of such movements are generally better at planning the martyrdom of other people than themselves. However, such planning a real possibility. If Bin Laden had the vision to see the outcome in Afghanistan, he might have had the vision to plan for a last attack in the US or one of its allies, or to attack a key religious site as a possible last act by Al Qaida. He may have planned for some act of martyrdom if he escaped the country.

The possibility that Al Qaida has nuclear or other major weapons of mass destruction also seems overblown. The documents found in Kabul are dated, and were the source of CIA warnings in the late 1990s. Once again, however, it is possible that such weapons exist and has been reserved for a last attack.

This gives a real priority to the effort to root out Al Qaida in other countries, and is a risk that the US government is giving quiet attention.

The Impact of the Powell Speech

One final factor. Secretary Powell gave a good moderate speech on the Middle East peace process on November 19th, and stretched the previous limits of the US position in supporting the Palestinians. It was, however, a moderate speech with little, if anything, that can ease tensions between the US and Arab and Islamic extremists. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that General Zinni cannot make quick enough progress towards a cease-fire to satisfy hard-line expectations, and many extremists refuse to accept Israel's existence under any conditions.

General Powell also did not address any aspect of the Iraqi problem in ways that would ease these tensions or say anything likely to ease tensions in the Gulf.

As a result, no outcome of the fighting in Afghanistan seems likely to avoid complicating the broader problem of extremism and tension in the Arab and Islamic world. This is particularly true given the growing instability in key Islamic states like Indonesia.

Extremists will see the US victory as "neo-imperialism," "crusading," or whatever hostile label they choose. As a result, there is a significant risk that the end fighting in Afghanistan will not deter future terrorism.

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