

U.S. Reassesses Taliban Role In Fight Against Al-Qaida

by JACKIE NORTHAM



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Julie Jacobson/AP

U.S. Marines with Golf Company, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Regiment run to take position behind a building after being fired on by Taliban while on patrol in the village of Dahaneh, in Helmand province, Afghanistan, on Aug. 28.

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The Obama administration is exploring new options for Afghanistan. One reported proposal — said to be favored by Vice President Joe Biden — calls for scaling back the U.S. military presence and focusing on protecting large population centers.

Preventing the Taliban from gaining control again is a key premise of the Obama administration's current strategy for Afghanistan. But there are increasing questions about the threat the Taliban actually pose to U.S. national security interests.

The goal of the U.S. counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan has been to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaida. To that end, the theory goes, the Taliban must also be defeated, in order to prevent them from regaining control of Afghanistan and once again offering al-Qaida safe haven from which to plot attacks against the U.S.

Mistake To Conflate Taliban, Al-Qaida

This thinking is misguided, says Ted Galen Carpenter, a defense and foreign policy expert at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

"It has been a big mistake of U.S. policymakers to completely conflate al-Qaida and the Taliban. The former is a foreign terrorist organization with the United States in its cross hairs. The latter is a parochial insurgency. It is not a direct security threat to the United States," he explains.

Carpenter says that over the years, the U.S. has drifted into war against the Taliban in Afghanistan — not primarily against al-Qaida, which U.S. intelligence officials say has been entrenched in neighboring Pakistan since being driven from Afghanistan in late 2001 by American forces. Carpenter says it is time to rethink the strategy.

"If al-Qaida is not in Afghanistan, why on Earth are we in Afghanistan? We went there to defeat al-Qaida. If this isn't the arena for al-Qaida anymore, then our mission seems to have no rational purpose whatever," he says.

Even if the Taliban were able to re-establish control, Carpenter says, it's not at all certain that they would allow al-Qaida to use Afghanistan as a training and logistical base again. After all, the Taliban were driven from power because of their association with al-Qaida.

Taliban Provide More Than Just Safe Haven

But Frederick Kagan, with the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank, disagrees. Kagan, an adviser to Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, says the

Taliban's links with al-Qaida are strong and go far beyond providing safe haven in Afghanistan.

"The reason al-Qaida was there was because of an ideological affinity between the Taliban leaders and [Osama] bin Laden and his group and because of personal ties between the groups that go back to the 1980s, and I don't think that there's any evidence to suggest those personal ties or ideological ties weakened," Kagan says.

Paul Pillar, a former national intelligence officer who is now a professor at Georgetown University, questions how much of an advantage al-Qaida would gain if the Taliban regained power.

Pillar says al-Qaida could become an easier target if it moves from Pakistan and tries to regroup in Afghanistan. He also notes that groups such as al-Qaida don't actually need a haven nowadays: Globalization has led to freer movement of ideas, people and money, which has been exploited by international terrorists. And that means they are not beholden to any one headquarters.

"Most of the things that terrorists may do, and what comes to be regarded as a safe haven, can very easily be done — or at least with little additional cost and trouble — someplace else, including hiding places in Western countries," Pillar says.

Taliban, Too, May Pose Threat To U.S.

Brian Glyn Williams, a professor of Islamic history at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, says it might not be al-Qaida that the U.S. would need to worry about if the Taliban were able to gain control in all or even parts of Afghanistan. Williams says the Taliban have become more sophisticated in their tactics over the past few years and more global in their thinking.

"I'm afraid the Taliban of 2001 is not the Taliban of 2009, that they have become more radicalized, more extreme. They've become closer to al-Qaida, and they will see the U.S. as an enemy for removing them from power back in 2001," Williams says.

Some analysts say the U.S. should have good enough intelligence — and certainly the use of unmanned drones — to prevent al-Qaida from setting up shop once again in Afghanistan.

But as one analyst pointed out, despite all of the intelligence assets the U.S. has in Afghanistan — and all the drones flying around the region — it still hasn't been able to wipe out terrorist networks.

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