

## Are the Taliban Really “Gone”?

By Mark Sedra | March 2004

“America’s got the watches, but the Taliban has the time” (BBC, January 16, 2004). This telling statement, attributed to a Taliban spokesperson in early 2004, illustrates a fundamental truth about the present situation in Afghanistan: The longer it takes to consolidate the peace and deliver a peace dividend to the beleaguered population, the greater the likelihood that antigovernment spoiler groups, whether they are the Taliban, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hizb-i-Islami, or al Qaeda, will be able to unravel the nascent state-building process. The Taliban are acutely aware that sustained donor interest and military support will not last forever; donor fatigue, shifting budgetary priorities, and waning donor attention are inevitable. With the world’s eyes firmly fixed on Baghdad—not Kabul—maintaining high levels of donor support for Afghanistan is an arduous task. An historic window of opportunity exists to stabilize and reconstruct this war-torn country, but with each passing day that window closes ever more slightly. Once that window is closed, there is no guarantee that a similar opportunity will arise again, for the Taliban and other fundamentalist groups will be waiting to take advantage.

Undoubtedly, the above-mentioned assessment would be considered alarmist by many actors close to the state-building process, particularly members of President Hamid Karzai’s inner circle and the U.S. Pentagon. It was Karzai who declared at a February 26, 2004 joint news conference, with U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld on the occasion of his one-day visit to Kabul, that the Taliban were defeated and “as a movement [it] does not exist any more.” “They are gone,” he said, attributing continuing violence to “common criminals,” as opposed to politically driven insurgents (AP, February 26, 2004). These were the boldest public statements made by President Karzai about the Taliban since he took office. Similarly dismissive of the group’s capabilities, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld stated: “I’m not seeing any indication the Taliban pose any military threat to Afghanistan.” Only a week earlier, one of Rumsfeld’s top aides at the Pentagon, U.S. Undersecretary of Defense Dov S. Zakheim, contemptuously spoke of the “cowardly” nature of Taliban operations (AFP, February 22, 2004).

Such proclamations would normally arouse feelings of unbridled relief and joy among most Afghans and internationals working in Afghanistan—that is, if they did not contrast so sharply with recent events on the ground. More than 550 people have been killed over the past six months, making it the most violent period in the two years that have elapsed since the fall of the Taliban regime. Within twelve days, between February 14 and February 26, 2004, nine Afghan aid workers and one U.S. soldier were killed in separate incidents across the country. Perhaps what is most alarming about this recent spate of attacks are the tactics that have been employed. Since December 28, 2003, there have been four suicide attacks in Afghanistan, resulting in the deaths of eight people—six Afghan intelligence agents and two International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) peacekeeping soldiers. The evidence does not support the notion of an overwhelmed and defeated enemy.

In a January 2004 interview, Lieutenant General David Barno, the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, explained that since the Taliban “could-



---

n't come out in large numbers against coalition military forces" it was no longer a major threat (AFP, February 22, 2004). If the U.S. military formulates threat assessments on the basis of an adversary's ability and willingness to fight conventional battles in large military formations, then the Taliban are indeed a spent force. However, if there is one thing that September 11 and the ensuing war on terror has shown, it is that measuring security threats on the basis of conventional criteria, such as troop numbers and weapons technology, is outdated. Groups with nothing more than explosives and belief can be as dangerous as an entire conventional army; while their acts are certainly criminal, to dismiss or disparage the threat they pose is a grave miscalculation.

Far from marking the defeat of the Taliban, recent events have signaled a new phase in the antigovernment insurgency. One must only examine the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to gauge the potential physical and psychological impact of suicide attacks. There is no established history of martyrdom operations in Afghanistan, but just as counter-terrorism tactics and strategies have assumed a transnational character, shared by states around the globe, so, too, have those of terrorist and insurgent groups. Further suicide attacks, which are unpredictable and virtually impossible to prevent, could deliver a severe blow to the state-building process. In the aftermath of the December 28th suicide blast, a Taliban spokesperson proclaimed that sixty more suicide bombers were in Kabul awaiting orders to strike. With the UN still reeling from the devastating attack on its headquarters in Baghdad and the shooting death of a UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) worker in Ghazni Province in November 2003, a major attack on the UN could trigger a pullout of the organization's international staff. "Countries that are committed to supporting Afghanistan cannot kid themselves and cannot go on expecting us to work in unacceptable security conditions," Lakhdar Brahimi, the former UN envoy to Afghanistan, stated on December 3, 2003 (*USA Today*, January 22, 2004). If the UN were to withdraw, this would leave a void in the reconstruction process that would be difficult to fill.

President Karzai is correct in claiming that the Taliban movement in its previous form no longer

exists. It has evolved into a decentralized guerilla group that portrays itself as a vehicle for Pashtun nationalism. The group is concentrated primarily in the southeast and operates in small, disparate units. In response to early setbacks in their military operations against coalition forces, the Taliban have adopted a new approach, shifting the locus of their attacks from military targets to "soft targets," such as aid workers, government employees, and civilians. The new strategy has borne fruit, as the UN and major international organizations, including the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), have scaled back their operations in the south, depriving approximately one-third of the population of much-needed development assistance. This perpetuates a destructive cycle by which Pashtuns, disillusioned by the failure of the Karzai government to fulfill its promises of greater security and economic opportunity, are driven to support extremists.

General James L. Jones, NATO's supreme commander in Europe, has estimated that the Taliban's strength has dwindled to 1,000 hard-core fighters. Accordingly, Jones has concluded that "the level of the threat... is quite a bit lower" than previously assumed (*CP*, February 10, 2004). While his estimate regarding the number of operational insurgents may be accurate, he neglects to consider the growing number of Taliban sympathizers in the south, which may number in the tens of thousands. This civilian support base, which includes government officials in some areas, may not have any direct involvement in Taliban operations, but provides crucial indirect support. Such assessments also overlook other spoiler groups involved in the antigovernment insurgency, such as Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami, who have forged a loose strategic alliance with the Taliban. It is estimated that Hekmatyar commands a comparable number of fighters as the Taliban—and is actively recruiting.

The support that the Taliban have received from Pakistan, its longtime patron, has been a decisive factor in its resurgence. Taliban supporters organize openly in Pakistani cities like Quetta and Peshawar; Pakistani *madrasas*, or religious schools, continue to churn out dedicated Taliban foot soldiers in large numbers; and a significant proportion of Taliban attacks over the past two years have been launched

---

from Pakistani territory. Initially, Washington was reluctant to pressure the Pakistani government to crack down on Taliban cross-border activity, due to fear that it could destabilize the Musharraf government and open the door for an Islamist coup in the nuclear-armed country. However, in recent months the U.S. has opted to ratchet up pressure on Pakistan, a policy that has begun to show results. The Pakistani military has launched a spring offensive against al Qaeda and Taliban insurgents in the border area with Afghanistan, leading to scores of arrests and the deaths of dozens of insurgents. Lieutenant General Barno has said that Pakistani and U.S. forces are working together like a “hammer and anvil” to combat these groups (*New York Times*, February 23, 2004). While cessation of Pakistani support to the Taliban would weaken the group considerably, it is far from certain whether recent Pakistani actions represent a permanent policy shift that will be observed by all levels of the military and intelligence apparatus, or merely a temporary maneuver to appease the Bush administration.

The Taliban and its allies cannot overthrow the current regime unilaterally. However, coupled with other security threats—the burgeoning drug trade, which now accounts for a staggering 50% of Afghan gross domestic product; the entrenchment of regional warlords; and a surge in crime rates—the danger it poses is greatly amplified. War in Afghanistan follows seasonal patterns, with the spring traditionally being campaigning season. Taliban spokesman, Mohamed Saiful Adel, in a statement to the Agence France Presse in mid-February 2004, affirmed that the Taliban will “stage attacks on an unprecedented scale in the spring” (AFP, February 22, 2004). The elections, currently scheduled for June 2004, will undoubtedly be the prime target of attacks, prompting many UN and Afghan officials to openly advocate the delay of the polls until next year.

Overcoming the present security crisis in Afghanistan requires augmented international support and a renewed, multi-layered strategic approach, encompassing several components. First, security sector reform, intended to rebuild the country’s security institutions, must be advanced with greater urgency. Encumbered by a lack of funding, inadequate donor

coordination, and insufficient local capacity, the process has been largely ineffectual. Exemplifying this is the program to train the Afghan National Army (ANA), which has been overseen by the United States. The desertion rate of the ANA reached a startling 10% per month in October 2003. Although the figure has now been lowered to 3% per month, of 10,000 soldiers trained as of February 2004, 2,500 have deserted. Insufficient salaries, poor food and living conditions, and difficulties finding qualified recruits have been cited as the principal reasons for the high attrition rate. The U.S. has begun to implement measures to rectify these deficiencies, including an increase in the pay scale, improvements of barracks, the establishment of a comprehensive recruiting strategy, and the formation of a national guard to complement the ANA, but it is clear that even more must be done to put the process on track.

Second, domestic security forces will be unable to provide the base level of security needed for the state-building process to move forward for two to three years, the minimum amount of time it will take to complete basic structural reforms and create security forces of a critical mass necessary to enforce the rule of law. During this period, it is advisable that the ISAF underwrite the country’s security. NATO, currently in command of ISAF, has pledged to do so by establishing numerous Provisional Reconstruction Teams (PRT), small units of soldiers and civil affairs officers mandated to provide security for reconstruction activities and to carry out small-scale development projects at key locations across the country. However, three months after NATO’s governing council authorized expansion, member states have yet to commit the requisite troops. Although NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer has repeatedly referred to Afghanistan as the alliance’s “top priority,” at a NATO defense ministers’ conference in early February, he was unable to collect more than a few offers of liaison officers and controllers for the Kabul airport (AP, February 12, 2004). Quite apart from expansion, it appears NATO may have difficulty filling the mandate of ISAF’s mission in Kabul once most of the Canadian contingent withdraws in August. This has created a monumental problem for the Afghan government, as the international community has once again elevated the expectations of the

---

populace and pinned those expectations to the Karzai government. If NATO fails to deliver on its promise of expansion, it will not only undermine the credibility of the alliance, it may also delegitimize the government.

Lastly, the entire state-building process is dependent on durable and long-term donor commitments of funds. The Tokyo Donors Conference of January 2002 grossly underestimated the costs of reconstruction, particularly with regard to security. An opportunity to rectify this mistake will present itself at a second pledging conference to be held in Berlin March 30 – April 1, 2004. A recent study by the American nongovernmental agency, CARE International, and the Centre on International Cooperation (CIC) of New York University pointed out that only 1% of Afghanistan's reconstruction needs had been met thus far. To address this shortfall, the Afghan government is requesting \$28.5 billion to rebuild the country over a seven-year period, a reasonable figure considering that \$33 billion has been committed to Iraq over five years, a country of comparable size, but possessing extensive natural resources. The government will do more than merely present a pledging figure to the international community; it has published a report offering a comprehensive strategic plan for investment, reconstruction, and reform over the next seven years (see report at:

<http://www.af/recosting/index.html>). The Berlin meeting represents an historic moment where the international community will be able to right past wrongs and guarantee Afghanistan's continued progress on the road to peace and stability. The Afghan government has designed an ambitious yet realizable vision for its future, taking firm ownership of the process; all that is left is for the international community to buy into this strategy. As the government report states: "In light of the ubiquitous security, economic, and social ramifications that the collapse of Afghanistan's peace-building process would have for the international community, it is an investment that donors cannot afford not to make."

The Afghan government and the international community are winning the war against the Taliban and its allies, but victory has yet to be assured. This challenge can only be met with unwavering resolve and vigilance from all the actors involved, a necessity that could be imperiled by premature declarations of victory.

---

*Mark Sedra is a research associate at the Bonn International Center for Conversion. He recently returned from Afghanistan, where he spent two months assessing the needs of the Afghan security sector on behalf of the UN and the Afghan government. He writes regularly for Foreign Policy in Focus ([www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org)).*

---

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at [www.ips-dc.org](http://www.ips-dc.org)). ©2004. All rights reserved.

## Foreign Policy In Focus

"A Think Tank Without Walls"

Established in 1996, Foreign Policy In Focus is a network of policy analysts, advocates, and activists committed to "making the United States a more responsible global leader and global partner." For more information, visit [www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org).

### Recommended citation:

Mark Sedra, "Are the Taliban Really 'Gone'?", (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, March 2004).

### Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/papers/2004taliban.html>

### Production Information:

Writer: Mark Sedra

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

