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Afghanistan: Taleban External Ambitions (U)

The Taleban remain focused on their military campaign against rival Afghan factions and currently lack the material resources and ideological vision to pursue a broad pan-Islamic agenda. But the movement's influence is already being felt within Pakistan as well as in the training of Kashmiri militants, and Iran and Central Asia fear Taleban-inspired cross-border subversion. In the longer term, the Taleban's willingness to host training camps for foreign militants could provide an important ready-made asset for a potential drive to "export" the Taleban "revolution" more widely. (C)

Since the Taleban emerged in 1994, their key objective has been to end the fighting by eliminating factional rivals within Afghanistan and to establish a Sunni Islamic republic. With northern alliance commander Masood's forces digging in for the coming winter, the movement will remain preoccupied with pursuing outright military victory and with efforts to impose its austere version of Islam on the Afghan population. (C)

Pan-Islamic stirrings...

Despite the Taleban's domestic focus, Embassy Islamabad suggests that recent reported criticisms of Saudi Arabia and the US military presence in the Gulf by Taleban Supreme Leader Mullah Omar--possibly reflecting the influence of exiled renegade Saudi financier Usama bin Ladin--may signal a broadening of the movement's outlook. A more pan-Islamic orientation would be consistent with the Taleban's theological underpinnings in the Deobandi "school" of Sunni Islam. That "school," founded in the 19th century to challenge the perceived decadence of South Asian Islam, has always been pan-Islamic in tenor. (C)

...but still country boys

Nonetheless, the Taleban's capacity to advance a pan-Islamic agenda appears circumscribed for the foreseeable future. With Afghanistan devastated by 20 years of foreign occupation and civil war, the movement lacks adequate material resources to "export" its brand of radical Islam on a worldwide basis, as Iran sought to do in the wake of its 1979 revolution. (C)

The parochial character of the Taleban leadership (rooted in the values and culture of their largely tribal ethnic-Pushtun background) and their inexperience in wielding political power may further constrain the movement's ability and desire to spread its revolutionary message. Despite the proximity of bin Ladin and other "guest" militants, Taleban exposure to the wider intellectual currents of the Muslim world has been limited. By contrast, established Islamist parties in Pakistan and the Middle East emphasize their

potential role as the vanguard of an international Islamic revival. (C)

Regional repercussions

Despite these limitations, the Taleban already appear to be having an impact beyond Afghanistan's immediate borders, whether by design or example:

- In Pakistan, the Taleban's rise already may have boosted the fortunes of the Jamiat-i-Ulema Islam, a pro-Deobandi Islamist party based in the North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan, whose *madrassas* (Islamic schools and colleges) provided the Taleban with much of their early indoctrination.
- Taleban gains appear to have further radicalized Pakistani Sunni militant factions in their increasingly vicious conflict with local Shia rivals.
- Sectarian tensions also could be exacerbated by the expected return of thousands of Pakistani "volunteers" who fought alongside the Taleban in Afghanistan.

Although the Taleban probably will strengthen their cross-border political ties--a trend that could eventually pose a threat to Pakistan's internal stability--they may be cautious about seeking to inspire a Taleban-style upheaval in Pakistan, at least so long as they remain dependent on Islamabad for material and diplomatic support. (C)

Retaliation, however, may prove a central motive in the Taleban's dealings with other states. Iran--a key patron of the anti-Taleban northern alliance--has long worried that Afghan and Pakistani Sunni extremists might foment unrest among Iran's sizable Sunni population. Its concern about Taleban intentions was underscored by the murder of several Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif last August. In addition, Tehran may fear that the Taleban will permit the anti-Iranian regime Mujahideen-e-Khalk to operate from western Afghanistan, just as Saddam Hussein allows them to maintain bases in eastern Iraq. Currently controlling most of northern Afghanistan, the Taleban also may seek to punish some Central Asian states for having facilitated the supply of military aid to their opponents. Tajikistan, with its fragile internal peace process, could be especially vulnerable to Taleban-inspired subversion. (S)

Bad moon rising?

One area where the Taleban already are indirectly involved in fueling an ongoing Islamic insurgency is Kashmir. As a result of their military advances, the Taleban now control areas of Afghanistan where training camps for Kashmiri and other militants (some of which are associated with bin Ladin) have operated for many years. With evident Pakistani encouragement, the movement continues to condone and protect these activities, and may even become more directly engaged in training recruits for Kashmir. In addition, demobilized Pakistani Taleban fighters may be sent to Kashmir, at Islamabad's behest, to stiffen resistance there in the face of the continued Indian crackdown. Over the longer term, the Taleban also could seek to exploit the network of camps on its soil--which train militants from all over the Muslim world and are not focused solely on the Kashmir struggle--as a ready-made infrastructure through which to disseminate their brand of radical Sunni Islam much more widely. (S)

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