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Two faces of Islamism in AfPak

***An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban/Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan* by Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn**

Asia Times Online
by Brian M Downing
3/24/2012

Peace talks between the US and the Taliban are in the offing and the relationship between the latter and al-Qaeda will figure highly in them. Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn argue that the two Islamist groups have never had close ties. This will strike longtime observers as a straw argument but the book makes clear that the misperception has shaped US policy over the years, most portentously and tragically after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

The title may also cause some to wince as it seems to promise preaching about Western foolhardiness. But *An Enemy We Created* is an excellent study of the Taliban and al-Qaeda - mainly the former. Based on interviews with Taliban officials and on documents captured after their 2001 ouster, it traces each group's intellectual origins, roles in the Soviet war, and present embodiments. Along the way, it notes considerable differences and even antagonisms between the two groups and examines varying opinions and changes within the Taliban.

The Taliban developed out of Deobandi thought, which in turn came from mid-19th-century Muslim opposition to Hindu ascendancy in and British domination of the subcontinent. Their concerns were essentially nationalist and they had no agenda outside the region.

The origins of al-Qaeda lie in Sayyid Qutb's (1906-66) Islamist thought which gained a following after the failure of Arab nationalism and Egypt's defeat in the 1967 war with Israel. This form of Islamism is international in outlook as it seeks to transcend the failed and failing nation-states of the Muslim world and restore Islamic unity.

The Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979-89) brought the Taliban and the Arab fighters who would become al-Qaeda into the same cause, though owing to differing locations, without significant contact. The Taliban developed from mujahideen bands in southern Afghanistan that were based on school networks and loyalty to mullahs.

The concerns of the Taliban bands rarely strayed outside their villages and valleys; ridding them of Russian troops was their only goal. The cause of international jihad and a restored caliphate, if word of it reached them, would have elicited no interest. Unlike other mujahideen groups, the Taliban bands became involved in settling disputes and administering justice in their localities. Today those skills are key to their growing insurgency as their courts are often deemed fairer than those of the Kabul government.

Arab jihadis, on the other hand, saw themselves as part of an international effort to help their brothers and restore Islamic greatness. They did not arrive in numbers until well into the war and served in mujahideen bands in the east, unassociated with the Taliban ones far to the south. The Arabs were appreciated by the mujahideen but not especially liked; their urban, middle-class ways did not sit well with Pashtun rustics.

The Taliban rose to power in the mid-1990s as the old fighting bands reconstituted to fight warlordism and banditry in the chaotic aftermath of the USSR's 1989 withdrawal. The Arab fighters, most of whom had gone home or off to new causes, played almost no role in this.

It was only after the Taliban had formed a mobile army and laid siege to Kabul in 1996 that they came into contact with Osama bin Laden. The al-Qaeda leader convinced the venerable mujahideen commander, Jalaluddin Haqqani, to fight alongside the Taliban, which soon led to Kabul's fall. Haqqani's forces were indigenous Pashtuns; Arab fighters played no role.

The Taliban and al-Qaeda had important differences. It was hoped that bin Laden would attract funds for economic development, but he could not. When the Taliban head, Mullah Omar, met with bin Laden in late 1996, he chided him for his international jihad agenda; better to rebuild the war-ravaged country, he thought.

Many in the Taliban high council saw bin Laden and al-Qaeda as of little military value and of no value in reconstruction. They wanted international aid and a band of jihadists plotting up bombings around the world were to say the least unhelpful in that regard. Rank and file al-Qaeda didn't like the Taliban. They'd seen or heard of the Taliban's harsh justice and were put off by warring against respected mujahideen such as the famed Tajik leader, Ahmed Shah Massoud, though of course al-Qaeda agents later killed him.

The responses to al-Qaeda's 1998 bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania are instructive. Some in the Taliban council insisted that bin Laden's recklessness was endangering their very rule. Others pointed to the US cruise missile reprisal, the insistence on handing over bin Laden, and the human-rights campaign against them as evidence of a Western conspiracy to extirpate Islamist governments and control the resource-laden region. Mullah Omar settled the dispute by proclaiming Bin Laden a well-intentioned yet impetuous brother but he ordered bin Laden to be out of Afghanistan by early 2000. He did not follow through on his order.

The authors do not see convincing evidence that Mullah Omar or other Taliban chiefs knew in advance of al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks. Mullah Omar had more than once cautioned bin Laden against planning attacks on the US from Afghanistan and much of the evidence of foreknowledge rests on coerced confessions.

The ensuing debates in Kabul and Washington were filled with misconceptions. Many Taliban saw the US demand to hand over bin Laden as part a Western conspiracy. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) head George Tenet argued that the refusal to give up bin Laden was proof the two groups were as one and that as long as the mullahs remained in power Afghanistan would be a haven for terrorist groups.

The CIA's view won out, of course, and the Taliban and al-Qaeda were driven into the tribal areas of Pakistan. Each went about its work there: the Taliban in building an insurgency across the frontier, al-Qaeda in launching attacks across the globe.

The invasion of Iraq in early 2003 was critical to both groups' revival. It underscored the belief that the West was bent on controlling the region. With Western resources and attention shifted to Iraq,

Afghanistan fell into warlordism and banditry - conditions the Taliban well knew how to rectify and exploit. Funds and recruits came al-Qaeda's way and its forces grew in numbers and lethality from the Maghreb to Southeast Asia. These enterprises, the authors note, were largely independent of one another.

The Taliban has reasserted its control or at least its presence in many parts of the south and east. In the course of the war, an important fissure has opened inside the Taliban, though not a promising one. The older Taliban commanders, who fought the Russians and ruled the country, are more flexible regarding the issue of re-establishing control over the country. Many are willing to confine their ambitions to southern and eastern provinces and to a few ministries in the Kabul government.

Younger ones, however, are more rigid and dogmatic and they insist on re-establishing the emirate over the entire country. Born and raised amid conflict, they know nothing of peace and compromise, only war and hardness. Paradoxically, perhaps ominously, the US kill/capture and drone programs are whittling down the older leaders and helping to promote these young lions.

Some readers will look at the Taliban/al-Qaeda ties described by the authors and see them as more substantive than the authors do. Such is the ambiguity of evidence and interpretation regarding guerrilla groups and foreign policy in general. A less benign interpretation of the authors' material may also come from looking at the many intermediaries between the two groups, such as the Haqqanis and the Islamist Movement of Uzbekistan, both of which cooperated with al-Qaeda in fighting the US and the Northern Alliance in 2001 and continue as part of the insurgency along the AfPak frontier today.

The authors make little mention of a Pakistani intelligence (ISI) role with either group since 2001, possibly because any connections would be deeply clandestine. Nonetheless, ISI is almost certainly supporting the Taliban and various jihadi groups, and at least parts of ISI extended hospitality during bin Laden's lengthy stay in Abbottabad which ended so abruptly and embarrassingly last May.

As peace talks begin, many policy makers will wonder if, despite clear differences between the two groups, the Taliban would turn on al-Qaeda as part of a settlement - undoubtedly a non-negotiable US position and one that will be supported by all regional powers except perhaps Pakistan. Or is Mullah Omar's commitment to Muslim solidarity and opposition to Western plots in the region as resolute as it was 10 years ago, perhaps even strengthened by US policies in the region since 9/11. These views are certainly deeply held by the young lions opportunistically rising in the movement's ranks.