

Taleban Defy US bombers

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Western military engagement alone will not defeat the Taleban.

The Taleban's unexpected resistance to high-altitude bombing has added to the confusion surrounding the current US-led military campaign in Afghanistan. There is no sign of a split in the Taleban leadership, nor significant defections from their ranks. Pessimistic remarks by officials in Washington and London indicate that achieving a quick result is no longer possible.

British foreign secretary Jack Straw warned on Sunday that the military campaign in Afghanistan could last "indefinitely". "From the start we have spelt out ... that we are there for the long haul," he told the BBC's Breakfast with Frost programme. Rear Admiral John D Stufflebeem, a senior official in the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, said last week that he has been "a bit surprised at how doggedly [the Taleban] are hanging on to their power".

Such doubts are the result of an inaccurate assessment of Taleban's abilities and nature in the first place. It was a serious misjudgement to believe they could be treated the same as Afghanistan's other militia forces, or to think they would vanish as soon as foreign states stop backing them.

The motives of the Taleban, as well as their social foundations and foreign relationships, are different from any other Afghan group.

The anti-Taleban forces were mainly the product of the Cold War fight against Afghanistan's Soviet occupiers. Since that cause no longer exists, neither does their motivation as fighters.

The Taleban, by contrast, have an entirely different mission to fulfill. From the ideological point of view, they are extreme religious conservatives who believe that Muslim societies must be governed by the absolute application of Sharia law.

The activists in this movement largely comprise clergy and religious students who consciously fight for their cause. They seek salvation in sacrificing their own lives in the service of their beliefs. The Taleban's ambition to impose a pure Islamic rule on the country is supported by most clerics, even those with no interest in politics.

Common cause and shared belief are powerful factors that connect Taleban to each other. Absolute obedience to the commands and fatwas issued by their leaders reflect a harsh but voluntary discipline, the violation of which amounts to apostasy.

Although there is a wide consensus that the Taleban were the creation of Pakistan, their network of foreign relationships is far more extensive.

So while they enjoy the broad support of influential religious and fundamentalist forces in Pakistan, they have also established close links with similar groups in countries as far afield as China and Chechnya. Their apparent merger with al-Qaeda has boosted their prestige among Islamist fundamentalist groups worldwide, particularly with Arab terrorists.

Similarly, relying on their ethnic origin, the Taleban benefit from Pashtun support from both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border.

Afghan Pashtuns may not instinctively sympathise with the Taleban, but they see them as a bulwark against any return to power by the Northern Alliance. The latter has been marked as an anti-Pashtun coalition.

Strong spiritual motives and broad ethnic, religious and international ties have turned the Kabul regime into a dangerous enemy, especially when there is no shortage of arms and fighters and, as Stufflebeem conceded, the Taleban "are in an environment [in which] they are obviously are experts".

The struggle against the Taleban, therefore, cannot be confined to simply trying to bomb them into submission.

The allies now admit that they will not be defeated overnight. And the danger of prolonged military engagement is that it could result in more and more civilian casualties. This would rally Afghans behind the Taleban. So that even if they are eventually overthrown, they could still summon sufficient support to threaten any post-war settlement.

The Taleban must be fought on the ideological, political and propaganda fronts as well as the battlefield. Ordinary Afghans could play an important role in this, by coming together and making their voices heard.

While a revolution in media and communication has unified the rest of the world, Afghans live in tragic isolation. Two decades of war have destroyed all the bridges that once connected them. Different political and ethnic groups have no means of communicating with each other and entire Afghan provinces are denied reliable information about the outside world.

A radio broadcasting facility that provided Afghans with an opportunity to hear each other speak and debate could help them overcome their differences. Without such a bridge, the existing problems will remain far from resolved.

In addition, to confine the post-war process of nation building to secret deals by foreign powers or unpopular armed groups would be a further blunder. The entire history of Afghanistan is a testimony to the fact that any solution imposed from outside has never been welcomed by the people. The active contribution of Afghans is vital, since they are the only ones who can put an end to the Taleban era.

Mohammed Qabool was publisher and editor of the Kabul newspaper Nawa-e-Sobh (Voice of Morning) between from 1990 to 1991, when it was closed by former president Mohammed Najibullah.

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