

# Why the Taliban Won't Quit al Qaeda

Don't expect the Taliban to compromise their terrorist allies.

By Barbara Elias, an associate professor of government and legal studies at Bowdoin College.



Taliban fighters pose in front of a bakery at a market area in Khenj district, Panjshir province, Afghanistan, on Sept. 15. WAKIL KOHSAR/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

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The stunning Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has left many Americans wondering whether al Qaeda will make a resurgence in the country. Several recent analyses have argued that the Taliban's self-interest in preserving power will prevent this from happening. This is not a new line of thinking: Over the last 20 years, many scholars and policymakers believed that since the

Taliban “are not idiots,” they could be trusted to avoid their past mistakes and instead contain al Qaeda. After conducting a grueling insurgency, the argument goes, it simply wouldn’t make sense for the Taliban to risk losing power for harboring anti-U.S. al Qaeda terrorists again, as was the case in 2001.

But this logic overlooks the long, complex, and dynamic nature of the al Qaeda-Taliban partnership. The Taliban have never broken ties with al Qaeda, despite significant pressure to do so—not because they are stupid but because their relationship to the terrorist group offers meaningful benefits as they navigate a highly complex political environment in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Now that they’re in power, it’s unlikely the Taliban will—or even can—contain al Qaeda.

Although political and military dynamics in Afghanistan have shifted dramatically since 2001, the Taliban’s past offers clues to what lies ahead.

Throughout the 1990s, the United States pressed the Taliban to extradite al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, especially following al Qaeda’s 1998 attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Taliban leaders issued false promises that they were containing al Qaeda and that there was no threat to the United States.

But U.S. intelligence agencies issued repeated warnings to the contrary, and Washington’s messages to the Taliban and Pakistan became sharper. “If we are attacked, we will hold the Taliban directly responsible for bin Ladin’s actions,” then-U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright wrote in a May 1999 memo providing talking points to U.S. diplomats, “We reserve the right to use any means at our disposal to either pre-empt or to retaliate. ... The Taliban should understand that their choice is clear: They can cooperate with the United States or they can confront the United States.”

It seems logical that the Taliban would have handed over bin Laden at that time in the spirit of self-preservation. But conditions on the ground gave them good reasons to accept the risk instead. Complex local politics, then and now, make the partnership worthwhile for both groups.

One surprisingly banal reason has been bureaucratic capacity. While al Qaeda plotted the 9/11 attacks, it was also running a series of impressively organized training camps for the foreign militants flocking to Afghanistan for combat experience and networking. Staffing and standardizing curricula was an organizational feat al Qaeda managed superbly. Thanks to language and logistical skills that the Taliban lacked, al Qaeda solved several bureaucratic problems for the Taliban, including ensuring that foreign fighters were vetted (many turned out to be spies). They also ensured those recruits were

organized, fed, and either deemed eligible to enter the Taliban's ranks or at least kept out of the way and not recruited by Taliban rivals. Overall, al Qaeda's bureaucratic abilities are a testament to the group's professionalism, durability, and value as a Taliban ally prior to the U.S. invasion.

This bureaucratic know-how was significantly diminished but not eliminated during the U.S. war, as al Qaeda quietly helped Taliban factions consolidate local control, just as it did in the 1990s. Details about the nature of post-9/11 cooperation between the groups remain unclear, but we know through interviews with insurgent commanders that al Qaeda and the Taliban have worked to rebuild and support each other in Afghanistan and Pakistan. And while U.S. counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan have certainly weakened al Qaeda, the group has nonetheless survived and evolved. Down but not out, al Qaeda maintains a diverse range of violent expertise, as the expert Rita Katz recently wrote in *Foreign Policy*, and are quickly rebuilding in Afghanistan. Current intelligence suggests that al Qaeda could have the capacity to threaten the United States by 2023, an alarming projection that the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency called a conservative estimate.

Following the rapid Taliban takeover of Kabul this August, Taliban forces are stretched thin but eager to prove themselves as responsive administrators. They may look to al Qaeda again for help as a long-standing partner managing complex bureaucratic tasks such as organizing the foreign fighters from the Middle East and from Central and South Asia who are reportedly flocking to Afghanistan once again.

The past 20 years of fighting against U.S. and Afghan forces have also created a variety of highly localized partnerships between al Qaeda and Taliban elements that can't be easily broken up. The Taliban are a diverse organization composed of subgroups that have their own arrangements with al Qaeda affiliates, the most notorious being the Haqqanis, a faction known for its long-standing terrorist connections. Taliban leaders may be concerned that coercing al Qaeda could threaten the cohesion of the Taliban themselves. Perhaps worse, if the Taliban shun the group, al Qaeda could turn its military expertise, capacity for violence, organizational abilities, and international network against the Taliban, or at least against certain Taliban factions.

In short, challenging al Qaeda would be risky. As the Taliban aim to minimize the threat of the Islamic State-Khorasan and other rival groups, it will have to coordinate with its al Qaeda partners for military capacity and political support. The Taliban need allies, and al Qaeda is a familiar friend.

Furthermore, being seen as disloyal to their long-standing al Qaeda partners would undermine the Taliban's brand of uncompromising political Islam. This is not a small issue. The Taliban are stalwart in maintaining their image as

pious and authentic. While not ascribing to identical ideologies—al Qaeda’s intellectual traditions stem from Saudi Arabia and Wahhabi Sunni Islam, while the Taliban are Indian-originated Deobandi Sunni Islamic—they nonetheless describe their coalition as bound by ideological brotherhood, resistance, and shared religious purpose.

As bin Laden wrote in a 1999 letter captured by Americans, “The position of [Taliban leader Mullah Omar] is too hard to comprehend by many who tailor their international relations on earthly interests. Otherwise, what motivates a poor country like Afghanistan to confront America at this age in which the politicians and leaders of the world rush to get close to it and seek its friendship? The reason why those find it hard to understand this stance is because they do not understand the secret of the influence of faith on the hearts of the faithful.”

As it did in the 1990s, the Taliban’s coalition with al Qaeda in recent years shows their willingness to withstand international pressure in the name of political Islam. This has been key to the group’s greatest military and political successes, and they have little motivation now to undermine their reputation. The caretaker government announced on Sept. 7, which is stacked exclusively with Taliban loyalists, can be seen through this lens. While there was international outcry that this stale, Taliban-only group failed to create the inclusive government the Taliban promised in August, the decision to exclude all others in governance is consistent with the Taliban’s trademark obstinance and religious purity.

Further motivating a continued alliance between al Qaeda and the Taliban is Pakistan. Taliban members are supported by Pakistani intelligence officials, who are an established source of weapons, funding, and fuel, as well as operational, logistical, and technical support. But the Taliban are also coerced by those officials and fearful of them. Several top Taliban leaders, including Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghani Baradar, have been arrested and strongarmed by Islamabad. According to a leaked 2012 NATO report based on interrogations of more than 4,000 captured al Qaeda and Taliban fighters and others, both groups are often targeted by Islamabad to ensure they are not acting against Pakistani interests. One frustrated senior al Qaeda member, for instance, was quoted as saying, “Pakistan knows everything. They control everything. I can’t [expletive] on a tree in Kunar without them watching.”

Al Qaeda and the Taliban may rely on their connections to moderate the leverage Pakistan exerts on both groups. As they seek greater autonomy from Islamabad, they need additional sources of support, including their bilateral coalition. Immediately following 9/11, for example, the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research reported: “With the decline in military aid by Pakistan over the last year, the Taleban have increasingly

relied on Usama bin Laden and the al-Qaida organization for support.” The fateful triangle between Islamabad, al Qaeda, and the Taliban is complicated, but it may serve Taliban interests to maintain strong ties to al Qaeda as a way to hedge their bets against their powerful patrons in Pakistan.

Interestingly, aside from some chatter on extremist websites, al Qaeda was quiet in August as the Taliban seized Kabul. Al Qaeda finally broke its silence at the end of last month and voiced support for the Taliban’s victory, but its initial reticence may simply be evidence that both al Qaeda and Taliban want their partnership to remain relatively covert while the world adjusts to the Taliban comeback. Ultimately, a quiet but steadfast association is advantageous for both groups. “Of course, the Taliban’s policy is to avoid being seen with us or revealing any cooperation or agreement between us and them,” al Qaeda official Atiyyat Allah al-Libi reportedly said in 2011. “That is for the purpose of averting international and regional pressure and out of consideration for regional dynamics.”

Over the course of the disastrous 20-year U.S. war, some U.S. officials knew they were working on impossible problems and issued warning after warning about the futility of Washington’s strategies. “Separating the Taliban from Al Qaida is a pretty farfetched concept since the majority of low level fighters for these organizations are known to be used by both,” wrote one U.S. Central Command officer in a December 2008 intelligence report. “Since Al Qaida’s role is a strategic one which deals with multiple independent organizations the Taliban’s ability to separate itself from Al Qaida would only be feasible at a propaganda level.”

They were right. The most likely scenario now may be that the Taliban will make promises about counterterrorism to the United States they will not honor, and al Qaeda will grow in Afghanistan as an international security threat. While there are big risks to the Taliban’s partnership with al Qaeda, these are risks they have always been willing to take. It is unlikely that they will change this calculation anytime soon.

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