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UPROOT BIN LADEN'S TERRORIST NETWORK AND TALIBAN ALLIES IN AFGHANISTAN

JAMES PHILLIPS

The September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington have driven home the need for a decisive counterattack against Osama bin Laden's global terrorist network. Though many states are threatened by bin Laden's terrorist operations, the United States must lead the effort to apprehend him and his far-flung associates. It must be relentless in hunting down bin Laden and eradicating his terrorist infrastructure in Afghanistan, where he has taken refuge under the protection of the ultra-radical Taliban regime. But this will not be enough. The Taliban regime that aids bin Laden and other Islamic extremists must also be rooted out. The United States must cooperate with the Afghan opposition and as many of Afghanistan's neighbors as possible to oust the Taliban if its war on terrorism is to be successful.

The Afghan Jihad. Bin Laden was one of the estimated 25,000 foreign Muslims who flocked to Afghanistan in the 1980s to join the jihad (holy war) against the Soviets. A Saudi multimillionaire, he provided financial and logistical support to the most radical Afghan resistance groups and foreign Muslim volunteers. After the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul was toppled, bin Laden bankrolled the extremist Taliban ("Islamic students" or "seekers") in its efforts to seize power, bolstering it with fanatic non-Afghan Muslims he helped mobilize against the Soviets. These "Afghan Arabs" were instructed in revolutionary and terrorist techniques in Afghan training camps and dispatched to spearhead Islamic revolutions in their homelands. They

provided bin Laden with a global network of collaborators for such terrorist attacks as the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the October 2000 bombing of the USS Cole, and the recent terrorist atrocities in the United States.

The U.S. Campaign. To protect Americans around the world, the United States must root out bin Laden's terrorist infrastructure in Afghanistan and force out the increasingly unpopular Taliban regime that protects bin Laden and other Islamic extremists seeking to export jihad throughout the Muslim world. Mullah Omar, the Taliban's supreme leader and a close associate of bin Laden, has refused to surrender his Saudi financial backer. The United States has warned the Taliban's leadership that it will be held responsible for terrorism orchestrated by its guest. Now Washington must back up these warnings with a coordinated military, diplomatic, economic, and political offensive to overthrow the harsh rule of the Taliban. Specifically, it should:

- **Plan for a sustained military campaign.** Bin Laden, who has gone into hiding, will be

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extremely difficult to target with cruise missile or air strikes. The Pentagon must wage a protracted, unconventional war against such an unconventional enemy. The best prospects for capturing him and punishing the Taliban leadership that gives him safe harbor would be commando operations executed by air-transported special forces that are supported by helicopter gunships and airborne assault troops. Because detailed intelligence is crucial for such an operation, it will be vital to gain the cooperation of Pakistan, which has the best intelligence assets inside Afghanistan.

Time is working against bin Laden because increasing numbers of Afghans resent the Taliban's oppressive rule and the economic hardship and international isolation that its unstinting support for him has brought. Rather than risk failure in a hastily executed operation that could bolster the Taliban's morale, the Pentagon should patiently build up its forces and undertake a war of nerves against the jittery Taliban. Washington should make it clear that it is fighting a war against bin Laden and the Taliban, not against the Afghan people they in effect have taken hostage. Washington should choose its targets carefully to minimize civilian casualties that could help the Taliban rally support for its jihad. U.S. air and missile strikes should target Taliban forces deployed against Afghan opposition forces in the north, particularly bin Laden's "Arab brigade."

- **Seek international cooperation.** The United States should coordinate its efforts to oust the Taliban with states threatened by the Taliban's jihad, particularly Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. It is particularly important to pressure Pakistan, which initially sponsored the Taliban but lost influence over it, to join the effort. Washington should quietly seek access to air bases, overflight rights, and intelligence-sharing with this coalition to enhance its ability to deploy military forces and strike targets in Afghanistan. It also should try to assemble a multinational force with contingents from as many Muslim nations as possible to back up the Afghan opposition and to help stabilize Afghan-

istan once the Taliban is overthrown. However, the United States must not negotiate away its freedom of action in these efforts.

- **Support the Afghan opposition.** The Northern Alliance of opposition groups, which has fought the Taliban since it seized power in 1996, can provide vital military and political intelligence, forward staging areas, air bases, and ground troops to assist the U.S. military efforts. The United States should work with Afghanistan's neighbors to provide the Northern Alliance with military, economic, and diplomatic aid and tactical air support.
- **Encourage defections from the Taliban.** The Taliban initially enjoyed the support of many war-weary Afghans because it held out the promise of an end to the factional bloodletting that convulsed the country after the 1992 fall of the communist regime. Now it is clear that the Taliban's extremism will only bring death and destruction. In close cooperation with Pakistan, Washington should identify, approach, and seek the defection of Taliban commanders, many of whom enjoy considerable autonomy. Offered a chance to join the winning side, avoid death, and pocket financial incentives, these opportunistic local commanders may choose to defect to the opposition.

The Endgame. Once the Taliban is overthrown, bin Laden and others like him will have nowhere to hide. Washington's regional strategy to weaken the Taliban, build up the Afghan opposition, and encourage defections among its ranks should have a clear goal: to help establish a stable, inclusive Afghan government that poses no threats to its neighbors and provides no support for terrorists. Washington will need to cooperate with broad anti-Taliban coalitions, both inside and surrounding Afghanistan, to succeed.

—James Phillips is a Research Fellow in the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies at The Heritage Foundation. For additional information, see Backgrounder No. 1383, "Defusing Terrorism at Ground Zero: Why a New U.S. Policy Is Needed for Afghanistan," July 12, 2000, available at <http://www.heritage.org/library/backgrounder/bg1383.html>.