

Afghanistan, the Taliban, and Osama bin Laden: The Background to September 11

The Choices Program, Brown University (www.choices.edu)

On May 1, 2011, a group of U.S. soldiers boarded helicopters at a base in Afghanistan, hoping to find a man named Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden, the leader of the al Qaeda terrorist network, was responsible for a number of terrorist attacks around the world, including those of September 11, 2001, that killed nearly 3,000 people in the United States. The United States had been looking for bin Laden for nearly 15 years. On this May night, U.S. soldiers found him hiding in a large house in Pakistan with members of his family and a few al Qaeda members. The soldiers killed bin Laden and four others and flew back to their base in Afghanistan.

The U.S. war against al Qaeda began shortly after September 11, 2001, in Afghanistan, where al Qaeda had been based since 1996. The Taliban, an extreme Islamist group that controlled Afghanistan's government, refused to give in to U.S. demands to hand over bin Laden and dismantle al Qaeda. (The term Islamist is used to describe political movements based on an interpretation of the principles of Islam.) On October 7, 2001, the United States began a military campaign that overthrew the Taliban government and eliminated al Qaeda's

base of operation in Afghanistan. Many Taliban and al Qaeda members, including Osama bin Laden, escaped into neighboring Pakistan.

Today the United States and its allies remain in Afghanistan battling the Taliban, who are trying to regain power. The Afghanistan War has become one of the longest in U.S. history.

Who was Osama bin Laden and how did he come to be such a wanted man? Who are the Taliban and what is their role in Afghanistan? In this article, you will read about the rise of the Taliban

in Afghanistan and the emergence of Osama bin Laden as a global figure in international terrorism.

The Rise of the Taliban

The Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal from the country in 1989. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan during a time of turmoil in December 1979 in order to install a new leader who would protect its political interests in the region. The Soviets assumed they would be there for just a few months. In fact, the invasion provoked a war that would last a decade as Afghans united around a common purpose—resisting the Soviet invasion.

How did Afghans resist the Soviet invasion?

For almost a century, many Afghans believed that resistance to foreign invaders was a form of *jihad* (a struggle against the enemies of Islam). Armed groups opposing the Soviets called themselves the *mujahideen* (a word that means “those who struggle for Islam”). Afghanistan's geography played an important role in how mujahideen groups organized themselves. Without any central leadership, the different regions of the country had different resistance groups led by charismatic

This reading is excerpted from a new unit to be published by the Choices Program at Brown University this September. *The United States in Afghanistan* includes a student text and teacher guide. Nearly 10 years after U.S. military forces first entered Afghanistan, the United States and its allies remain in the country battling an insurgency led by the Taliban. Students use primary source documents, readings, and new media sources to explore the issues at the heart of the conflict and consider the future of U.S. policy in Afghanistan. The unit will be available from the Choices Program at www.choices.edu.

leaders. In spite of their regional, ethnic, and political differences, they all called themselves mujahideen. These groups did not coordinate their efforts and at times even fought each other.

The odds were against the mujahideen. The Soviet Union was a world superpower and had a powerful military with advanced airplanes, helicopters, tanks, and heavy weapons. The mujahideen could not win a large battle against the Soviet army, so instead they fought a guerilla war. Small groups of mujahideen would ambush Soviet troops in Afghanistan's rugged and mountainous terrain where soldiers with heavy weapons could not easily follow.

Why did other countries become involved in the conflict?

A number of other countries played significant roles in the war, most notably the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia.

U.S. leaders saw the Soviet invasion as an attempt to expand towards the oil-rich Persian Gulf region. In response, President Jimmy Carter (1977–1981) declared that the United States would use force to protect the oil of the Persian Gulf region from the Soviet Union. He began to send military aid to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which in turn sent it to mujahideen groups fighting the Soviets. U.S. aid to the Afghan fighters increased substantially under President Reagan (1981–1989). It eventually reached hundreds of millions of dollars per year and included surface-to-air missiles that could shoot down Soviet aircraft.

Pakistan's military dictator, Muhammad Zia al-Haq was a political Islamist who believed that Islam should become the basis for Pakistan's government and laws. Al-Haq saw a chance to increase Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan by helping Afghans resist the Soviet invasion. Tens of thousands of Afghans received military training in Pakistan so that they could return and fight the Soviets. The United States, which had cut off aid to Pakistan

Reuters/Sayed Salahuddin



Afghan Taliban soldiers return to Kabul from the frontline north of the capital on June 24, 2001. The Taliban continually resisted international pressures to stop supporting Osama bin Laden.

because of its nuclear weapons program, renewed its aid in return for Pakistan's help getting weapons and assistance to the Afghan mujahideen. The inflows of U.S. cash also strengthened the ISI and Pakistan's military dictatorship.

Saudi Arabia saw the war in Afghanistan as a religious issue. Its authoritarian monarchy, flush with money from selling oil, channeled billions of dollars through Pakistan to Afghan mujahideen. Saudi Arabia's intelligence services also played an active role, coordinating the distribution of aid from Pakistan. In addition, several hundred Arabs—from Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries—came to participate in the jihad against the Soviet forces. One of them was Osama bin Laden.

Why did the Soviets withdraw?

During the war, Soviet forces numbered between 90,000 and 110,000, but they

were unable to defeat the mujahideen. At least 15,000 Soviets were killed and another 37,000 were wounded. Even in a closed society like the Soviet Union, where the government controlled the media and press, the war became increasingly unpopular. In 1989, the new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev withdrew Soviet forces from Afghanistan.

Why did a civil war begin in Afghanistan?

The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan coincided with the end of the Cold War and improved U.S.-Soviet relations. By 1991, the Soviet Union had collapsed, and the U.S. government saw little reason to continue pouring its resources into Afghanistan.

With the Soviet Union gone from Afghanistan and U.S. support withdrawn, the rivalries between mujahideen groups grew into a civil war for power and control over Afghanistan.

The United Nations tried to negotiate a transfer of power to a new government, but these efforts failed. Afghanistan essentially had no central government. For a country devastated by 10 years of war (more than one million Afghans were killed and four million had fled the country), this situation was catastrophic.

The heavily armed mujahideen groups fought to capture Kabul and created a lawless environment in which ordinary Afghans paid a terrible cost. Tens of thousands were killed. Murder, coercion, rape, corruption, and robbery by these groups were commonplace. The leaders of these groups became known as “warlords” and the groups remained divided along ethnic lines.

For some of the men who had fought to drive out the Soviet army, the violence and chaos plaguing Afghanistan was a disappointment. Their jihad against the Soviets had succeeded, but clearly a struggle for Afghanistan was continuing. Many returned to their villages to consult with elders or attended *madrassas* (religious schools) in Pakistan. They believed that they could solve issues facing Afghanistan by drawing on religious principles. A new, armed movement based on an extreme interpretation of Sunni Islam began to develop. Its members called themselves the Taliban, which means “religious students who seek justice and knowledge.”

“We would sit for a long time to discuss how to change the terrible situation. We had only vague ideas what to do, but we believed we were working with Allah [God] as his pupils.”

—Mullah Mohammed Ghaus

“We were fighting against Muslims who had gone wrong. How could we remain quiet when we could see crimes being committed against women and the poor?”

—Mullah Mohammed Omar

How did the Taliban come to power?

The Taliban began to generate support by protecting the population from the abuse and crimes of the warlords. The leader of the Taliban was a man named Mohammed Omar. Omar was poor and had little formal education.

The Taliban had two powerful and important backers. Pakistan’s military and ISI, hoping for a pro-Pakistan

Islamist government in Kabul, threw its resources behind the Taliban. Pakistan provided military advisors, training, and supplies. Without Pakistan’s support, the Taliban would not have succeeded in taking power. Saudi Arabia also funneled financial support to the Taliban. Saudi money bought supplies, provided for training and transport, and even helped pay other warlords not to oppose the Taliban.

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After Taliban forces took the city of Kandahar in late 1994, thousands of young Afghani Pashtun men flocked to join them. Many had grown up in poverty in refugee camps in Pakistan, and had been educated in madrassas funded by Pakistan's Islamist military dictator Zia al-Haq. While an earlier generation embraced the religious idea of jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan, a new generation found in the Taliban another religious ideal to rally around. Radical Islamists from outside of Afghanistan came by the thousands to train and participate in an international jihad—a struggle against those they saw as enemies of Islam around the world. The international jihadists—many of them from Pakistan—helped Taliban forces gain control of the country.

The civil war was brutal. More than 100,000 Afghans died, and Kabul was badly damaged by bombing and rocket attacks. Former president Najibullah, who sought refuge in a UN building, was dragged from the building and hung by the Taliban in 1996. By 1998, the Taliban was in control of all of Afghanistan except the Northeast, which remained in the hands of Ahmed Shah Masud. Masud's forces received weapons from Russia and Iran, both of whom saw the Taliban as a threat to their security.

What was the rule of the Taliban like?

After taking power, the Taliban imposed

a new legal system based on their extreme interpretation of the Islamic legal tradition, or Shari'a. (The Shari'a is a wide body of literature that lays out legal principles and norms but is not a legal code or single document. Consequently, there are different interpretations of Shari'a.) Women were banned from working. Schools for girls were shut down and women were forced to be completely veiled. All games were banned. Music and television was prohibited. Criminals faced severe punishment including amputations of limbs or death by stoning.

Led by Mullah Omar, who was called "Commander of the Faithful," the Taliban thought that Afghanistan should be ruled by a group of six religious leaders. At first, the population was generally grateful for the peace and order that had been established. But as the Taliban imposed their strict rules, they became more and more unpopular.

“Like so many mujahideen, I believed in the Taliban when they first appeared in 1994 and promised to end warlordism, establish law and order, and then call a Loya Jirga to decide who should rule Afghanistan. The first Taliban I met told me that the jihad had become a disgrace and the civil war was destroying the country.... They were good people initially, but

the tragedy was that soon they were taken over by the ISI and became a proxy....”

—Hamid Karzai, future president of Afghanistan, October 2001

Their unpopularity was strongest in the cities. The Taliban's interpretation of Islam was radical and represented a sharp departure from Afghanistan's traditions. For example, although Islam had always played a role in shaping Afghanistan's laws and policies, religious leaders had never ruled the country. In addition, although Afghanistan's people had always been pious Muslims, there was also a history of tolerance of different forms of Islam, other religions, and more modern lifestyles.

The Taliban's Pashtun leadership believed that its interpretation of Islam would unite Afghans, but the harsh policies against non-Pashtun groups alienated many. The leaders, who had received only basic religious education at best, did not have the skills or knowledge to rule Afghanistan effectively. And after years of violence, war, and economic devastation, the Afghan people needed effective rulers and help from the outside world.

Since the earliest years of British and Russian involvement, Afghanistan relied on money from foreign countries to help prop up its government and economy. During the Cold War, billions of dollars from the Soviet Union and the United States helped build roads and schools,

Osama bin Laden and Islam

Osama bin Laden used his beliefs about Islam to justify his methods and attacks against the United States. For many around the world this raised concerns about Islam. Some wondered whether there are justifications for terrorism within Islam. For others, the events seemed to confirm a perception of Islam as a violent and fanatical faith. Many Muslims worried that their religion would be wrongly associated with the beliefs of bin Laden.

Like all religions, Islam is subject to interpretation. Most interpretations of Islamic tradition note a history of tolerance and peace. (The word Islam is related to the Arabic word *salaam*, which means peace.) Throughout much of history, Muslims have lived peacefully with followers of other religions. For example, many Jews fled the persecutions in Christian Europe for the relative freedom of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. Islam permits the use of force in self-defense, but not the killing of innocents or civilians. After September 11, numerous important Islamic clerics from many branches of Islam and different countries condemned bin Laden.

and buy food. These sources had disappeared. Into their place stepped the UN. The UN provided desperately needed food, medicine, and medical care, though it clashed with Taliban authorities about their consistent violations of human rights. For its part, the Taliban realized that it needed the UN to provide food; any government with a population that was starving was unlikely to remain in power. Despite Taliban policies that appalled many in the UN, and a lack of cooperation from the Taliban on other issues, aid continued to flow.

What were the Taliban government's relations with other countries?

Only three countries established diplomatic relations with the Taliban government: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Pakistan became the Taliban's most important ally. Pakistan hoped a Taliban-led Afghanistan would be helpful to Pakistan in its ongoing confrontation with India. (Pakistan and India had fought three wars since 1947. Both countries had nuclear weapons and saw the other as a threat.) The Taliban government relied heavily on the ISI for weapons and Pakistan's madrassas for recruits. Pakistan saw the training camps in Afghanistan as a good source of fighters for an ongoing guerilla war in Kashmir—a territory held by India but claimed by Pakistan.

With the exception of Pakistan, bordering countries were not pleased with their new neighbors. For example, the Taliban nearly provoked a war with Iran by murdering Iranian diplomats, massacring Afghans who practiced Shi'i Islam, and criticizing the Shi'i religion practiced in Iran. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan worried about Taliban insurgencies against their secular governments. Russia sent 20,000 troops to both countries' borders to protect against this. Both Iran and Russia sent aid to Ahmed Shah Masud's fighters, the last holdout against the Taliban.

After the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989, the U.S. government had largely lost interest in Afghanistan. In fact, the United States closed its embassy and withdrew its diplomats that same year. Aid programs also ended. The United States was content to let Pakistan and Saudi Arabia take the lead in Afghanistan. But a development in 1996 convinced the United States to reconsider its policy: the arrival of Osama bin Laden.

Osama bin Laden

Osama bin Laden was the founder and leader of an international terrorist organization known as al Qaeda (loosely translated as "the base"). Bin Laden came from a wealthy and influential Saudi family. In the 1980s, he had fought the Soviets in Afghanistan. When Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, bin Laden proposed to the Saudi government that he be allowed to raise volunteers to fight like he had in Afghanistan. Bin Laden saw Saddam Hussein's secular government as an enemy of Islam. The Saudi government rejected his suggestion. It had grown concerned about his increasingly radical ideas and eventually took away his citizenship. Bin Laden fled to the Sudan in the early 1990s. When the U.S. and Saudi governments began to pressure Sudan's government to hand bin Laden over, he fled to Afghanistan.

Why did Osama bin Laden go to Afghanistan?

Afghanistan was an attractive place for bin Laden to go. The Taliban government and bin Laden shared beliefs about what an ideal Islamic society should be. The Taliban also resisted relationships with the outside world, which put bin Laden out of reach of the United States and other governments. At the same time, the Taliban government was very weak and had little influence over al Qaeda's actions.

Bin Laden wanted to start an international jihad that would end U.S. and European dominance, cause the govern-

ments of the Middle East to fall, and create one large nation ruled by a single Islamic ruler. For its part, the Taliban was not interested in international jihad. Instead, they were focused on destroying what they saw as the enemies of Islam inside Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the Taliban welcomed international jihadist groups who provided fighters and resources in Afghanistan's ongoing civil war.

In Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden trained thousands of fighters from Pakistan, the Middle East, and North Africa to fight for the Taliban in their battles against Ahmed Shah Masud. Al Qaeda camps also trained Pakistani militants to fight against India in the disputed region of Kashmir. At the same time, Pakistan provided military officers to coordinate the attacks against Masud. Bin Laden also began to organize international terror operations. From Afghanistan, he directed the attacks on the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998 that killed 224 and wounded nearly 5,000, and the attack on the USS *Cole* in Yemen by suicide bombers in 2000 that killed 17 and wounded 39 U.S. sailors.

Why did Osama bin Laden launch a terror campaign against the United States?

Osama bin Laden's public statements outline his justifications for the attacks against U.S. citizens and others. He expressed anger about the presence of U.S. troops in Arabia, the sacred lands of Islam. (Like the Taliban, bin Laden had an extreme interpretation of Sunni Islam.) He saw their presence as a way for the United States to fight against and humiliate the peoples of Islam in the region. He objected to U.S. support of Israel and Israel's presence in the holy lands, as well as to the deaths of Muslims at the hands of Israel. Bin Laden believed that U.S. actions amounted to a declaration of war by the United States on God and Muslims. He presented his call to arms as a defense of Islam, a struggle against an enemy

whom he believed wanted to destroy Islamic culture and religion.

In public statements and interviews with news organizations, bin Laden warned repeatedly that he would take revenge on the United States for humiliating Muslims.

“We call upon Muslim scholars, their faithful leaders, young believers, and soldiers to launch a raid on the American soldiers of Satan and their allies of the Devil.”

—Osama bin Laden, 1998

What was the response to bin Laden’s terror campaign?

Bin Laden’s actions and the support he received from the Taliban regime began to focus international attention on Afghanistan. After the attack on the embassies in 1998, President Clinton ordered 75 missiles fired at al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan. That attack killed some Pakistani militants, and some members of the ISI, but no senior members of al Qaeda. The CIA formed a group devoted to finding bin Laden. They worried that he was trying to obtain chemical, biological, or even nuclear weapons.

At the UN, the United States helped pass resolutions demanding that the Taliban turn over bin Laden and stop harboring terrorists, and that all nations stop sending weapons to the Taliban. Saudi Arabia demanded that Mullah Omar hand over bin Laden. When he refused, Saudi Arabia withdrew its ambassador from Kabul. In the midst of international efforts to pressure the Taliban, Pakistan remained a firm supporter. The ISI organized political support in Pakistan to help the Taliban resist international pressure and continued sending weapons.

“We are trying to stop the U.S. from undermining the Taliban regime. They cannot do it without Pakistan’s help, because they have no assets there, but

we will not allow it to happen.

—Major General Ghulam Ahmad Khan, May 15, 2000

When President George W. Bush took office in 2001, U.S. national security officials began to brief the new administration about their growing concerns about bin Laden. They worried that an attack was coming. It was just uncertain where and when it would be.

“There will be a significant terrorist attack in the next weeks or months.... Multiple and simultaneous attacks are possible and they will occur with little or no warning.”

—CIA official, in a briefing to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, July 10, 2001

U.S. diplomats began to pressure Pakistan to end its support of the Taliban and to stop al Qaeda from recruiting new members in Pakistan. France and Russia presented information at the UN showing that Pakistan was violating UN resolutions and still arming the Taliban. There were other diplomatic efforts including one in Europe where Iranian and U.S. officials met to discuss a plan to arm the Northern Alliance and undermine the Taliban. This was remarkable because Iran and the United States had not had an official relationship since 1979 and were generally hostile to each other in public.

As the international community tried to figure out how to deal with the Taliban, bin Laden was planning a big attack on the United States. He knew this attack would lead to pressure on the Taliban to hand him over. To preserve his sanctuary in Afghanistan, bin Laden needed the Taliban’s leaders in his debt and willing to shield him from the outside world. He offered to assassinate Ahmed Shah Masud, the leader of the Northern Alliance and the last organized resistance to the Taliban. On September 9, 2001, two Tunisian men, disguised as television journal-

ists, killed Masud with a bomb hidden in a television camera. Two days later, planes hijacked by al Qaeda terrorists crashed into the World Trade Center buildings in New York, the Pentagon building in Washington, D.C., and a field in Pennsylvania. The suicide attacks killed nearly 3,000 people.

The attacks would have profound effects that would ripple around the world. In the United States, disbelief, patriotism, and anger were followed by sharp changes in U.S. laws and foreign policy. They would also change the course of Afghan history. 🌐

Questions for Discussion

Why did the United States and Pakistan cooperate after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan?

How did the Taliban initially gather support among the population of Afghanistan?

What was life like under the Taliban?

Why did the people of Afghanistan change their attitudes toward the Taliban over time?

Why did Osama bin Laden go to Afghanistan?

What was the relationship between the Taliban and Osama bin Laden before September 11, 2001?

What evidence is there that the United States and the international community were extremely concerned about Osama bin Laden before September 11, 2001?