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### Five Years After the Fall of the Taliban: Afghanistan and the War on Terrorism

By [Beth Ellen Cole](#) and Jorge Aguilar  
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Five years after coalition troops defeated Afghanistan's Taliban-led government, a resurgent al Qaeda-influenced Taliban has resurfaced, with many of its senior leaders now receiving support from the terrorist organization, state supporters in Pakistan, wealthy Arab financiers, and other anti-government forces. The emergence of a successful media campaign by the Taliban—which had previously eschewed all forms of commercial media—bears the mark of Al Qaeda's tutelage over the past half decade; so too, does the worrying rise in suicide terrorism. The insurgents find an increasingly hospitable environment as popular support for the central government has eroded due to its incompetence, its corruption, and its failure to extend its authority much beyond Kabul. Winning back the support of the people through security and development is the only way to defeat the insurgency. The center of gravity in this campaign will not be al Qaeda or the Taliban, but the Afghan people.

These were the alarming conclusions drawn by three top experts on terrorism and the Afghan insurgency delivered at a [public meeting](#) held by the U.S. Institute of Peace on November 8, 2006, the third of a four-part series on "Afghanistan: Five Years After the Fall of the Taliban." The meeting featured presentations by **Hekmat Karzai**, director of the Center for Conflict and Peace Studies in Kabul, Afghanistan; **Peter Bergen**, author of the best selling book *Holy War Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden*; and **Seth Jones**, a senior political scientist and expert on the insurgency at the RAND Corporation. The discussion was moderated by [Beth Ellen Cole](#), coordinator of the Afghanistan Working Group at the U.S. Institute of Peace. This USIPeace Briefing does not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Institute of Peace, which does not take policy positions.

#### **A Campaign "Deeply Intertwined" with al Qaeda**

While the face of the Taliban dominates the insurgency, there are other significant players among the forces vying to take over Afghanistan, according to Jones. The Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG) is bent on installing its leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, as the ruler of Afghanistan. Al Qaeda's foreign fighters and other allied groups seek broader objectives, including U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East. Tribal groups on both sides of the [Afghanistan-Pakistan border](#) are involved. Finally, criminal organizations are taking advantage of the chaos unleashed by the insurgency and an economy fueled by the production and trade of narcotics. The Taliban, newly conscious of its international role, and its allies advertise "the clash of civilizations" to the Afghan people with their forces "for Islam" arrayed against the United States and other Western "anti-Islam" forces.

Karzai asserted that the insurgent campaign has evolved and become more sophisticated. For instance, while the Taliban had previously banned "fruits of globalization," it has now adopted media campaigns that make use of DVDs, websites, and other forms of modern technology. Following al Qaeda's lead, the Taliban have developed a video production arm. Al Qaeda's own expanded video production center, As-Sahab, has turned out dozens of statements by Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri this year. The Taliban "are learning from them [al Qaeda]," Bergen continued. Jones agreed that the Taliban has become "deeply intertwined" with the al Qaeda organization and has been influenced, both ideologically and militarily, by them.

Another troubling development in Afghanistan is the emergence of suicide terrorism. Karzai's Center has documented a startling increase in suicide attacks in Afghanistan; so far in 2006, there have been 83 suicide attacks—with 21 attacks alone in the month of September—compared to 21 in 2005 and only one in 2001 and 2002. Jones observed that there have been more suicide attacks in 2006 than in the entire previous history of the country. Moreover, said Bergen, suicide attacks have proven quite successful in achieving the goals of the insurgents. The exponential rise in suicide attacks creates a climate of fear, hinders reconstruction efforts, and has made areas, such as Kandahar, a veritable "no-go" place for foreigners. Jones and Karzai both noted that neither the government nor coalition forces are effectively deploying information operations designed to highlight the fact that the majority of these attacks kill civilians, not military forces.

### **A Resurgent al Qaeda**

While the conventional wisdom is that al Qaeda is effectively dead, replaced by "intellectual" and "homegrown, self-starting movements," Bergen warns that such thinking is flawed and that there are still reasons to fear the Islamist organization. Although al Qaeda may not be as powerful as in the past, it continues to thrive and provides leadership for major global terrorist attacks. Its ability to plan and execute attacks was demonstrated by the July 2005 suicide bombing campaign in London, England. Moreover, organizations such as Algeria's Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat and Hekmaty's HIG have declared allegiance to al Qaeda. People don't join "weak" organizations, Bergen observed.

### **With Safe Havens in Pakistan**

While the insurgents have received support from such organizations as al Qaeda, they have also received international and state support, including safe havens in Pakistan. After 9/11, Afghans began to develop serious reservations regarding Pakistan, and today, Karzai notes, "the ties between Taliban and Pakistan are very clear."

All three speakers suggested that the international community should increase pressure on Pakistan to deal with the threats to Afghanistan. The United States and other nations, such as Britain, must press Pakistan to stop providing sanctuary to terrorists. On the other hand, Karzai underscored the importance of efforts to improve the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. He said the upcoming loya jirga between the two nations represents a "bold step," but more must be done to resolve the tension that exists. This loya jirga, scheduled for January, could draw hundreds of Afghans and Pakistanis from the state parliaments, civil society, and tribes on both sides of the border. Pakistan's President Musharraf will be invited to attend alongside President Karzai. The United Nations is expected to play a monitoring role at the gathering.

### **The Center of Gravity is the Afghan People**

While the Taliban and insurgent groups are understandably the focus of heightened concern for policymakers, the international community needs to recognize that the "center of gravity" in Afghanistan is not the Taliban but the Afghan people, Karzai emphasized. Indeed, Jones' data on 91 past insurgencies since World War II suggests that popular support of the indigenous government is critical to success over insurgencies. However, corruption and other internal weaknesses have caused an erosion of such popular

support for Afghanistan's national government.

Jones argued that the international community must focus on indigenous capabilities in dealing with the insurgents. These local institutions "will have to win it over the long run." That focus, specifically, should be to support the government and extend government services throughout the country. More roads are needed. Provision of electricity, even in Kabul where four hours per day of power is typical, must be increased to fuel the economy and give people hope. A "mini-Marshall plan" would be "pennies on the dollar," Bergen concluded. Making a renewed commitment to provide Afghanistan with increased international forces and the twenty billion dollars that it needs to emerge from the list of the world's poorest countries would send an important signal to the Afghan people that they are, indeed, the "center of gravity."

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