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What is the current relationship between al Qaeda and the Taliban?

LSE Ideas

By Juha Saarinen

Recent statements regarding a growing rift between al-Qaeda and Taliban by Omar bin Laden, son of Osama bin Laden, and Brigadier Sultan Amir Tarar, retired Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency officer, have brought into light the fundamental problems facing the relationship of the two Islamist movements.

Emerging rifts

Two important developments occurred recently. First, reports have emerged that Taliban militants in the Pakistani border region are refusing to collaborate with al-Qaeda fighters, by not providing shelter or assistance even in return for payment. As a result, al-Qaeda fighters are being increasingly excluded from local communities near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border which previously functioned as their sanctuary.

Second, there exists an increasing “online rift” between Hanafi “nationalist” Taliban and Salafi “universalist” al-Qaeda, which started when Mullah Omar emphasized the nationalist character of Taliban in a statement for Eid al-Fitr in September 2009, drawing aggressive criticism from Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, one of the most influential living Salafi jihadi ideologues. This debate has since set the online jihadi communities ablaze. In late 2006, early 2007, online discord over Iraq “foreshadowed the dramatic split in the Iraqi insurgency in which key insurgency factions flipped to the U.S. side and formed the backbone of the Awakenings/ Sons of Iraq.”

These two occurrences are reflected in a recent interview of Omar bin Laden, who stated “Although Al-Qaeda and the Taliban organizations band together when necessary, they do not love one another.” Indeed, it seems the relationship between al-Qaeda and Taliban, outside the personal bond between Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden, is largely strategic. However, recent Taliban overtures might well suggest the relationship is strained, and as the strategic importance of the relationship declines, ideological differences are becoming pivotal.

An “ally” on the wane

In its quest to restore its presence in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda has failed to make considerable strides and is on the wane while the Taliban insurgency is gaining momentum. According to U.S. intelligence officials, al-Qaeda has approximately a hundred fighters in Afghanistan, and its financial situation is dire. It seems to have lost the capability to launch large-scale coordinated attacks, and relies on Taliban for operational support. Although it retains contacts with insurgents and insurgency groups, its role in the insurgency is increasingly being questioned.

Indeed, al-Qaeda’s strategic utility to Taliban is diminishing, perhaps even to the point where Mullah Omar is contemplating severing ties with al-Qaeda, as suggested by his former mentor and retired ISI officer Tarar in late January 2010. Although such a split is highly improbable in the short term, there has been a notable shift in Taliban’s strategic communication following Mullah Omar’s statement in September 2009, and it now seeks to distance itself from al-Qaeda. Indeed, Taliban is focusing on moderating its image as part of its campaign to retake power in Afghanistan and its relationship with al-Qaeda presents a potential liability.

External pressure

While al-Qaeda’s presence in Afghanistan is relatively marginal, its presence in Pakistan is considerably larger. As a result of Taliban’s reassessment of its ties with al-Qaeda, it has drawn closer to other militant groups in Pakistan’s tribal belt, like the Haqqani Network, and groups trying to overthrow the Pakistani government.

Facing a growing insurgency back home and al-Qaeda’s ambitions in Pakistan, Islamabad drew its own conclusions. At this point, it is uncertain whether the recent arrests of al-Qaeda operatives and senior Taliban leadership in Pakistan are a result of

a significant policy reversal. However, it is likely to signal to Taliban that its relationship with al-Qaeda is not viewed positively by Islamabad, and it has its repercussions. Certainly, al-Qaeda's operations in Pakistan complicate the Taliban's strategic calculus, and will have repercussions to be mapped out in the coming months.

Differing opinions

Naturally, there are different views on the situation. The Obama administration still underlines the threat al-Qaeda presents in Afghanistan, and some regard the possibility of a split between al-Qaeda and Taliban, as speculated by Tarar, as little more than wishful thinking.

Certainly, there is very little evidence to suggest that Mullah Omar prefers cutting ties with bin Laden and other Al Qaeda leaders. Likewise, a complete rupture remains unlikely, as al-Qaeda militants have formed social connections in the region during their stay, and the Pashtunwali demands unfailing hospitality towards guests. However, even Taliban hospitality has its limits, and the idiosyncratic bond between Mullah Omar and Osama is not beyond reconsideration.

Nevertheless, al-Qaeda has been important to Taliban in the past, and there is little benefit in ostracising them in the current strategic situation. Antagonising al-Qaeda would additionally eschew Taliban's politico-religious legitimacy, which it can ill afford. However, al-Qaeda needs to continually prove its worth, providing contacts in the Gulf, equipment, funds, bomb expertise and propaganda advice. As long as its benefits are higher than the costs in Taliban's strategic calculus, there are limits to how far Taliban can distance itself from al-Qaeda.

Prospects

While al-Qaeda and Taliban have a complex relationship that for now seems troubled, a split, at least in the current situation, is highly improbable. While Taliban has made overtures implying the ideological and strategic frictions have taken their toll on the relationship, they still have only little to achieve by ostracizing or antagonising al-Qaeda, and more to lose.

The role of Pakistan however, will be crucial in the coming months, and should the power balance in the region change, Taliban might find itself in a position where strategic interests trump ideological and idiosyncratic bonds. Indeed, common strategic interests, however limited they may be, are a sine qua non for the relationship. Otherwise ideological differences would no doubt prevail, and al-Qaeda could find itself marginalised.

Whether the recent refusal of the Taliban militants to assist al-Qaeda fighters is a result of a policy change in the Taliban leadership or an unsanctioned local development is unclear, but all the same signals troubled times for the relationship.

Juha Saarinen holds a Master of Letters in Middle Eastern and Central Asian Studies from the University of St. Andrews, and he currently studies at LSE for a Master of Science in International Relations, with a research focus on Strategic Studies and Political Violence in the Middle East.

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Amber Holewinski, Editor

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