

How the Taliban is countering the U.S. surge

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By Ahmed Rashid

The Taliban's riposte to President Barack Obama's speech on Afghanistan - posted on their Web site days after the speech, but largely ignored since by Western media - leaves one gobsmacked.

There is no mention of Islamic law or jihad. Instead the statement reads like a Washington left-wing think tank's critique of U.S. policy, highlighting the mistakes made by the United States since 2001.

Obama should consider himself warned: This savvy argument will ring true to many Afghans. And it contains a potentially important promise by the Taliban (whether it's to be believed is another matter, but it's important at least in the realm of propaganda): that they will not tolerate Al Qaeda safe havens - a direct answer to the U.S.'s core objective of destroying Al Qaeda strongholds.

"Obama's new strategy will add to the anarchy prevailing in the country," reads the Taliban's statement. "Americans are responsible for the chaotic situation. They handed over power to notorious warlords, venal officials and mafia-linked governors."

This gets at what many Afghans view as a fundamental American hypocrisy: Washington's current pressure on Afghan President Hamid Karzai not to include warlords in his new cabinet contradicts American practices in the field. Afghans loathe the warlords, but many blame the Americans rather than Karzai for keeping them rich, powerful and predatory. It took the U.S. three years after 9/11 to support UN plans to disarm the warlords. And since, the Pentagon and the CIA have (according to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction) continued giving warlords or their kinsmen millions of dollars in lucrative contracts to protect American convoys, construct military camps and provide security for the same camps.

And while the State Department wants Karzai to remove his half-brother as the chief in Kandahar because of corruption, the CIA has him on its payroll, according to news reports.

What are ordinary Afghans to think? The Taliban is exploiting their understandable cynicism.

Meanwhile, U.S. agencies and think tanks have documented waste and corruption carried out by U.S. contractors hired by the U.S. Agency for International Development. As much as half the U.S. money devoted to development of schools, hospitals and the like never reaches the Afghan government or the provinces, winding up instead in the pockets of contractors or Afghan subcontractors. This is what the Afghan people see up close.

Taliban leaders, who are getting ever more sophisticated in their messaging, are not acting as jihadists or fundamentalists anymore. Instead, they are playing the nationalism card to try and broaden their appeal - just as the Afghan mujahadin did in 1989 before Soviet troops withdrew.

The U.S. and NATO forces and Karzai will need to oppose this with not just counterpropaganda, but with real measures that show the Afghan people a unity of U.S. command and intentions, an end to support for warlords and corrupt powerbrokers by all U.S. agencies, genuine development through and for the Afghan people and a partnership with the Afghan government that extends to the its efforts to isolate al-Qaeda by reaching out to the Taliban.

Unless such policies are implemented, the Taliban may well conclude that it is better to sit out the next 18 months and stage a major offensive once U.S. forces start to withdraw in July 2011.

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