The 'Safe Haven' Myth

If we leave Afghanistan, Al Qaeda will be in no position to re-establish a base there.

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Richard Holbrooke, America's special envoy to South Asia, maintains that if the Taliban succeed in Afghanistan, "without any shadow of a doubt, Al Qaeda would move back into Afghanistan, set up a larger presence, recruit more people and pursue its objectives against the United States even more aggressively." That, he insisted, is "the only justification for what we're doing." This is an especially ardent presentation of the "base camp," or "safe haven," myth. Stressed by virtually all promoters of the war, this key justification--indeed, the *only* one, according to Holbrooke--has gone almost entirely unexamined.

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Although some terrorist attacks since 9/11 have had "links" or "strings" or "threads" to Al Qaeda, and although some have probably been inspired by its example, it seems likely that there have been no fully developed operations by Al Qaeda central anywhere in the world since 2001, even though the group's leaders have repeatedly threatened to carry them out in the United States and elsewhere. The myth essentially contends that although 9/11 was substantially plotted in Hamburg, just about the only reason further attacks haven't taken place is that Al Qaeda needs a bigger base of operations in Afghanistan.

In 2001 Al Qaeda was a fringe group of a fringe group, and reactions around the world by policing organizations to 9/11 and to subsequent terrorism by its occasional imitators have caused it to become a shadow of what it was then. In all, intelligence estimates of Al Qaeda central put its numbers at a few hundred. The group could still be dangerous, of course, and it does try to assist at least one of the Taliban groups, but its problems do not stem from not having enough space in which to operate or plan.

Actually, it is not clear that Al Qaeda would even want to establish a base camp in a war-ravaged, impoverished, insecure and factionalized Afghanistan. American efforts to go after it in Pakistan are hampered by concerns about the sensitivities of the Pakistanis. There would be no such constraints in a Talibanized Afghanistan. It's difficult to see how an Afghan "haven" would be safer than the one Al Qaeda occupies now. In fact, Douglas Saunders of Canada's *Globe and Mail* reports that most allied commanders in Afghanistan he's talked with think it "very unlikely" that Al Qaeda would establish a base there even if the Taliban were to take over.

The terrorist group also has problems with Mullah Omar's original Taliban, the one that controlled the country in the 1990s and, according to the recent report from US Gen. Stanley McChrystal, is the most threatening of the Taliban groups and the only one to establish what the report calls "major elements of governance" in portions of the country.

Saunders reports that Omar is "very much opposed" to Al Qaeda. This is plausible because, as sources like Lawrence Wright's prizewinning book *The Looming Tower* make clear, the relationship between the two groups was often very uncomfortable. The Taliban never invited Osama bin Laden to the country in the first place; and when in residence from 1996 to 2001, he repeatedly broke pledges to refrain from issuing messages and from engaging in terrorist activities. According to a senior Taliban official bin Laden was, in the words of a CNN reporter, "a pain in the backside."

There are reports that Omar's group has made clear its rupture with Al Qaeda in talks with Saudi Arabia, which was almost the only country to support the Taliban in the 1990s and whose support the Taliban would need in order to have even a prayer of establishing coherent government in Afghanistan. For nearly twenty years now, the Saudi regime has been bin Laden's number-one enemy, and the Saudis tried several times to have him extradited in the 1990s.

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Unlike Al Qaeda, Omar has a very localized perspective. The last thing he would need, should he take over Afghanistan, is an active terrorist group continually drawing fire from the outside. As Richard Barrett, the UN's Taliban and Al Qaeda monitor, says of the Taliban, "They don't want Al Qaeda hanging around."

In many ways the "safe haven" myth is like the "dominance" myth repeatedly promulgated by promoters of the war in Iraq. That one held that if Saddam Hussein could just lay his hands on a chemical bomb or two, or maybe on fancier "weapons of mass destruction," he would be able to "dominate" the Middle East. Rarely considered were the inconvenient facts that the impoverished, hated and pathetic dictator controlled only a shard of his country and that he so distrusted his army (which he would presumably need to "dominate") that he issued it little ammunition and wouldn't allow it to enter Baghdad with heavy equipment.

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