

FOR MULLAH OMAR, THIS EID IS DIFFERENT

The Muslim holiday of Eid commemorates Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son Ishmael in obedience to a command from Allah. Every year, for the past several years, the Taliban's senior leader, Mullah Omar, has issued a statement to the Afghan people commemorating the holiday. Typically, the statements discuss a variety of issues including the impurity of the government in Kabul, rumored peace talks between the Taliban and the international community, pleas of support to governments of the Islamic world, and warnings to the American and European public that a continued military campaign against the Taliban is bound to fail. This year, Mullah Omar's message was different.

Unlike years past, Mullah Omar's messages of felicitations to Afghans for Eid ul-Adha contained numerous not-so-veiled references to Pakistan. Of course, those who closely follow the insurgency in Afghanistan understand that elements of the Pakistani security services exercise influence and a degree of authority over the senior leaders of the Quetta Shura Taliban and their families. Although it is impossible to say what role, if any, elements of the Pakistani security services played in crafting Omar's Eid message, several passages indicate that there is an increasing attempt to minimize the Taliban's failures while downplaying Pakistan's increasing interference in Afghanistan's affairs. Mullah Omar's defense of Pakistan could be indicative of closer cooperation moving forward.

Unlike in years past, Omar does not discuss ISAF's ongoing military operations in Helmand and Kandahar but instead focuses on attacks in Kabul that are mainly conducted by the Haqqani network and often with assistance from elements of the Pakistani security services, not the Taliban. In last year's Eid message, Omar touted the mujahideen's resistance to ISAF military offensives in Marjah (Helmand province) and Kandahar. This year, however, there was no mention of Helmand or Kandahar—and for obvious reasons. Marjah, and indeed the rest of southern and central Helmand province, is firmly in the control of ISAF and Afghan forces, and governance is effectively administered by the provincial governor, Gulab Mangal. The Marines in Marjah district have reduced their footprint from two battalions to one and are currently assuming an advise-and-assist role while empowering local security forces to assume more responsibility. ISAF and Afghan forces have largely expelled the insurgency from its strongholds

surrounding Kandahar City, the spiritual home of the Taliban movement. There are even indications that indigenous support for the Taliban in Kandahar has been significantly eroded and that Taliban fighters who are not from the surrounding districts or even Kandahar itself are being refused entry into the former strongholds of Zhari, Panjwai and Arghandab districts.

Omar devotes an entire paragraph to ISAF's concern over foreign (specifically Pakistani) interference and how it is unjustifiable and an excuse for a continued international troop presence in Afghanistan. The message reads, "[ISAF] is trying to attribute the perplexing and glorious operations, military advancements and achievements of Islamic Emirate to foreigners so to hide their shameful defeat and create artificial rationales for permanent presence in Afghanistan by falsely indicating the neighboring countries." In reality, ISAF hasn't failed in the south, but it is difficult to achieve lasting security gains when elements of the Pakistani security establishment aid the Taliban from their sanctuary in Balochistan. Furthermore, the international community's enduring presence in Afghanistan beyond 2014 is required precisely because of a non-Afghan insurgency flowing from the Pakistani border into the country's south and east.

Not surprisingly, Mullah Omar has adopted the position of defending the Taliban-Pakistan relationship because it is only with the help of elements of Pakistan's security services that the Taliban could have any chance of reestablishing the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan.

Jeffrey Dressler is a senior research analyst at the Institute for the Study of War.