

The Taliban's Expat Jihadists

News that Afghans living in the UK fight for the Taliban shows the Afghanistan insurgency is a global partisan movement

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The recent revelations from Guardian reporter Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, that some Afghan émigrés in the UK and other western countries regularly [return to fight with the Taliban against perceived western occupation of their homeland](#), signals that Afghan insurgency has become a partisan movement of the global age. "I work as a minicab driver," one London-based Taliban part-timer said, "I make good money. But these people are my friends and my family and it's my duty to come to fight jihad with them."

The name "partisan", which probably stems from the resistance of the Parthian people to Roman occupation 2,100 years ago, was first systematically applied to Jewish zealots and other "terrorists" just after the time of Jesus. Jewish partisans carried out suicide attacks to incite Roman retaliation against the civilian population and so increase popular support for the rebels' cause. Beginning with the Spanish guerilla war against Napoleon and on through the second world war, partisan came to mean a member of any irregular force formed from a population to fight foreign control of their territory.

The hallmark of any successful partisan movement is wide-ranging local involvement, most tellingly from "part-timers" – the bakers and candlestick-makers who work for the occupiers by day and the insurgency by night. Partisan strength lies in the social network within which the insurgency is embedded: in the dense fabric of families and friends that now extends, courtesy of globalisation's easy movement and communication, to fellow travellers among immigrant and internet communities.

Among the London cabbie's fighting circle in Afghanistan, we find farmers, teenage madrasa students, local officials, European part-timers and old-timers fighting "because the foreigners are here"; 30 years before, they were called Russians, but they are the same, all *kafirs* (infidels). A century ago, British army missionary TL Pennell [wrote](#):

"The Afghans are never at peace except when they are at war. For when some enemy from without threatens their independence, then, for the time being, are their feuds and jealousies thrown aside, and they fight shoulder to shoulder – all desirous of joining some jihad."

Today, "Taliban" is an umbrella term for those who collectively hate the "foreign invader" enough to turn even traditional enemies into friends. Since 2005, when the US and UK began ratcheting up Nato's military involvement, Taliban ranks have swelled many fold and their influence has spread to nearly every part of the country. The [bloodiest year yet](#) of fighting is 2010, with insurgent attacks up by two-thirds over last year. The Taliban coalition now extends

to almost all segments of the population, including the Pashtun's traditional rivals: Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazara and others.

In counterinsurgency, the population is not just the field of battle but the prize. The problem with our efforts in Afghanistan is that almost each passing day not only makes that prize more unattainable abroad but brings new risks at home. Danger lies in the fact that al-Qaida, which seeks to hijack and exploit globalisation for a radically different world order, depends for its success on piggybacking essentially local and regional struggles that have hitherto wanted no part of globalisation. Yet the more these parochial movements tie into the global network for their support, the more they become susceptible to al-Qaida's siren song, where the whole world is a "[house of war](#)" until it accepts salvation.

Fortunately, most remaining core al-Qaida members are hiding out in caves or other hole-ups, and have a hard time implementing or even communicating strategy, much less actions. Unlike al-Qaida, the Taliban are primarily interested in their homeland, not ours (although some Pakistani Taliban leaders are now forging stronger alliances with al-Qaida and calling for hits against the US and UK because of the "rain of drones" that is killing them and the people around them).

The Afghan Taliban realise that any closer association to al-Qaida than is convenient would likely only strengthen western resolve to stay. They don't allow al-Qaida to operate from their territory and, indeed, could well sever their relationship should al-Qaida become a bigger headache to them than we are. But the longer we stay, the more we play into al-Qaida's hands, and the more likely the part-time partisans of the Taliban will become full-time global partisans who fight us where we live.