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## A portentous skirmish in Ghazni province

By Brian M Downing

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Encouraging signs in the Afghan war are not in good supply, but a recent small engagement in the eastern province of Ghazni may be one. Weary of the absence of schools, medical help, safe marketplaces, and pockmarked roads, local Pashtuns calling themselves the "National Uprising Movement" fought the local Taliban bands. Remarkably, the locals inflicted sharp casualties on the Taliban and forced them to back down. The Movement won. [1]

The National Uprising Movement did not act in concert with US troops or the Afghan National Army (ANA). They oppose the US and the Afghan government as much as they do the Taliban. This "third force" in the long Afghan war, though opposed to both sides, will probably benefit the US and Kabul side. But of course artlessness in dealing with this movement could detract from if not ruin its possibilities.

### Origins

This Pashtun third force might be best seen in the context of a fiercely independent tribal order amid a protracted stalemate. It should be no surprise that Afghans are looking for a viable option to ceaseless war.

The Taliban have made little in the way of territorial gains in the last few years and are unable to engage US, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), or ANA troops without taking heavy casualties. Their recent offensive consists of a spate of improvised explosive devices and an occasional spectacular attack in a city, though the latter are likely the work of the Haqqani network, an old mujahideen band only partially integrated into the Taliban.

Western forces and the ANA have not fared much better. They hold a number of enclaves in the south and east but have not been able to expand in the "oil spot" fashion of counter-insurgency doctrine. The Taliban adroitly assassinate government officials; Kabul sends out another group. US and ANA raids kill or capture local Taliban commanders; the Taliban promote new ones.

From the perspective of the Ghazni militia, neither side is appealing. Each in its way is an affront to local autonomy and an obstacle to development. The Karzai government's incompetence and corruption are well known now in much of the world but they are daily burdens in Afghanistan. The US and other ISAF troops are seen as foreign occupiers with little respect for local people.

The Taliban are widely resented, for old and new reasons. In their days in power (1996-2001) their government was often deemed a haughty clique of southerners who ruled with a rough hand and failed to develop the economy. Further, they conscripted locals for an inexplicable war against the Northern Alliance - fellow mujahideen who had helped oust the Russians.

Today, the Taliban oppose schools and development often on political grounds as schools and roads may weaken their appeal. Paradoxically, the Ghazni militia offered to side with the Taliban if they'd allow the schools and markets to operate and the roads and wells to be improved. When the Taliban refused, the shooting started - and the Taliban came out the worse for it.

#### The Movement's significance

There are many Pashtun tribes with long-standing loyalty to the Taliban especially in the south, but there are many tribes that have equally long-standing hostility to them. Neglected in this neat division are the many Pashtuns who are disinterested in extra-local matters and who may be eager to adopt the assertive methods of the Ghazni militia.

The Movement's concern with local education and economic development offer a clue as to which side in the war is likely to benefit from their stirring. Local memories are unlikely to know of international sanctions back in the 1990s, but they will remember that Taliban efforts to rebuild after the Russian war were not very successful. The Taliban's present-day opposition to development will underscore that assessment.

Western aid programs came into remote districts with high hopes, big budgets, and a stream of officials, contractors, security details, and the like who could not but appear to villagers as foreign occupiers. Little came of these efforts as security deteriorated and bureaucratic infighting, confusion, and insensitivities made themselves abundantly clear. Perhaps local villagers will judge that the westerners, for all their conceit and heavy-handedness, are at least able to deliver resources into villages and may do so again on the villagers' terms.

#### Responses

The US instinct will be to see the Movement as a god-send amid stalemate and to provide it with generous supplies of arms and money. After all, the Movement seems to parallel the Iraqis who, embattled by al-Qaeda, came over to the US side. This would almost certainly be a blunder as

association with the US or Kabul would taint the movement in the ever-wary eyes of most locals and perhaps undermine it.

It would be better for now simply to watch the movement as word of it spreads throughout the east and south. The war-weary, the parochial, and those sitting on the fence will soon enough learn of the Movement, its outlook, and its victory over the local Taliban.

Afghan president Hamid Karzai, as artless a politician as the world holds before us, will also be inclined to step in. The Movement represents a potential obstacle to his rule in Ghazni, perhaps even as a rival to it. Nor should the ANA seek to link up to the Movement. The army has too many non-Pashtuns (Tajiks and Uzbeks) who are unlikely to be welcome in Ghazni villages. At most, Kabul should use non-obvious means to spread word of the Movement.

The Taliban's response will be critical. The local commander's decision to back off may of course be overruled by a more doctrinaire superior. This, however, could open up a new war of attrition that will likely benefit their more enduring enemies and spread the legend and appeal of the Movement.

The Ghazni Movement and any parallel groups that should arise are unlikely to coalesce into a united force; their outlooks do not extend beyond their village or valley. But even in sporadic, isolated actions, they can become an important dynamic in the war, underscoring the futility of the stalemate and in time constituting an intermediary for negotiating local truces and even meaningful peace talks.

1. See Jennifer Glasse, National Uprising' waged for Afghan rights, Al Jazeera, June 26, 2012.