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Who are the insurgents?

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March 27 (Reuters) - U.S. President Barack Obama plans to announce on Friday the United States will deploy 4,000 extra troops to train Afghan security forces in a strategy to disrupt al Qaeda and roll back Taliban advances.

After their rapid collapse in the face of the U.S.-led invasion following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, the Taliban and their allies regrouped and launched an insurgency which has now spread from the south and east to the outskirts of the capital.

But who are the armed opposition groups in Afghanistan?

THE TALIBAN

The Taliban arose in 1994 near the main southern Afghan city Kandahar under the leadership of Mullah Mohammad Omar, the imam of a village mosque.

The group of puritanical religious students offered a simple but harsh form of Islamic justice that appealed to many who were weary of corrupt and brutal warlords who destroyed the country in endless infighting after the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989.

Capturing Kandahar in 1994, the Taliban made rapid gains in the mainly ethnic Pashtun south and east, but encountered more resistance in the mainly Tajik and Uzbek north.

The Taliban captured the capital, Kabul, in 1996 and enforced an austere rule, banning television, computers and photography and forbidding women to work and girls to go to school.

Mullah Omar also fell under the spell of al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, who used the refuge given him in Afghanistan to plot the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States.

A U.S.-led invasion, helped by northern Tajik and Uzbek groups, led to the rapid downfall of the Taliban government in late 2001 and most of its leaders are thought to have fled to the lawless tribal areas of neighbouring Pakistan.

With the Bush administration unwilling to engage in nation building and concentrating on the war in Iraq, the Taliban began to regroup in the south then relaunched their insurgency in 2005 with a wave of guerrilla attacks, suicide and roadside bombs that has grown steadily ever since.

The Taliban is still under the overall command of Mullah Omar, who heads a leadership council known as the Quetta shura after the Pakistani city where he is believed to be in hiding.

The Taliban leadership gives overall strategic direction to the insurgent groups on the ground, but day-to-day tactical decisions on where and when to launch attacks are left to commanders in the field, military officials say.

Despite suffering heavy casualties against NATO-led forces in 2006, the Taliban have increased the number of their guerrilla attacks, although in smaller groups. They also rely more on suicide and roadside bombs that Afghan and foreign troops can do little to stop without the active support of the people.

While there are often feuds and disagreements between local commanders, the Taliban have remained remarkably unified with few signs of major splits and resistant to attempts by the Afghan government to reconcile with moderate Taliban.

Some former Taliban officials are now involved in Saudi-sponsored talks aimed at finding ways towards full negotiations, but analysts say the Taliban have no reason to engage in dialogue while they sense they are winning the war.

[AL QAEDA](#)

Formed by wealthy Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden in the late 1980s, al Qaeda seeks to rid Muslim countries of Western influence and instate fundamentalist Islamic regimes.

The group is wanted by the United States for the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks as well as a string of other attacks on U.S. installations. The United States invaded Afghanistan after the 2001 attacks to destroy al Qaeda bases in the country and topple the Taliban, who had allowed bin Laden to operate there.

Following the 2001 U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, al Qaeda leaders, including bin Laden, are believed to have fled to neighbouring Pakistan, seeking refuge in the tribal areas.

Al Qaeda is not now believed to play a leading role in Afghanistan but other militant groups operating inside Afghanistan, particularly the Haqqani network, claim to have close links to the group.

Some analysts believe the Taliban were upset with al Qaeda for bringing down the wrath of the United States on them after Sept. 11 and former Taliban officials have spoken of a readiness to abandon "foreigners" as part of a possible peace deal, something Washington would insist upon.

The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) said last year al Qaeda "remains the most clear and present danger to the safety of the United States".

[HAQQANI NETWORK](#)

Headed by Jalaluddin Haqqani, the Haqqani network is allied with the Taliban and is believed to be linked to al Qaeda. It has been behind several high-profile attacks in Afghanistan.

Effective leadership of the group has now passed from Jalaluddin, who is in his 70s, to his more radical eldest son Sirajuddin, security analysts say.

The senior Haqqani rose to prominence during the 1980s, receiving weapons and funds from the CIA and Saudi Arabia to fight the Soviet occupation and has also had long-standing links with Pakistan's military Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

After the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996, Haqqani sided with the austere Islamist movement and became a government minister.

Sirajuddin told Reuters in March his group was under the overall command of Taliban leader Mullah Omar and admitted ties with al Qaeda but said he did not need its support.

[HEZB-I-ISLAMI](#)

Founded by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Hizb-i-Islami was one of the main mujahideen groups fighting the Soviet invasion in the 1980s, receiving the lion's share of U.S. and Saudi arms and money channelled through the Pakistani intelligence service.

After the Soviet withdrawal Hekmatyar fought and made fleeting alliances with most other mujahideen factions during the resulting civil war and is credited with killing thousands in Kabul with indiscriminate rocket attacks on the capital.

Pakistan dropped the party in 1994 in favour of the Taliban and, after losing to Mullah Omar's forces, Hekmatyar fled to Iran in 1997. Many of his fighters joined Taliban ranks.

After the Sept. 11 attacks Hekmatyar declared himself against the U.S. invasion, was expelled by Iran and returned to his homeland to take up the fight in alliance with the Taliban.

Hekmatyar's revived forces are mostly active in northeastern Afghanistan fighting U.S. and Afghan forces in the area.

With many of his former lieutenants now either in parliament or government, Hekmatyar has declared himself against suicide bombings and there have been a number of false Afghan media reports that he has made peace with the Afghan government.

Having at one time or another either fought or been in alliance with almost every faction in Afghanistan, there is every chance that Hekmatyar may make another deal should that become politically opportune. (Writing by Jon Hemming; Editing by Paul Tait)