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The Nation

New US General Vs. Taliban, Pashtuns

by Robert Dreyfuss

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The war in Afghanistan has been overshadowed in recent weeks by the crisis next door in Pakistan, but no more. Secretary of Defense Gates has fired the US commander there, General David McKiernan, and replaced him with a counterinsurgency specialist [with a spotty track record](#), General Stanley McChrystal. It's the first time a wartime commander was fired since Harry Truman got rid of General Douglas MacArthur in the Korean War.

Don't expect any quick improvement on the battlefield.

A [smart commentary](#) on the dual crises in Afghanistan and Pakistan came from Selig Harrison, a longtime expert on Asia at the Center for International Policy, in yesterday's *Washington Post*. He raises the critical issue of ethnic Pashtun support for the Taliban. Pashtuns make up about half of Afghanistan's population and dominate the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan. Even though most Pashtuns don't support the Taliban or their extremist ideas, the Taliban are nearly entirely Pashtun in both countries. The US war effort, including air strikes in Afghanistan and drone attacks in Pakistan that kill civilians, are inflaming Pashtun sentiments, and driving Pashtuns and Taliban together.

Harrison ends his piece on this ominous warning:

In the conventional wisdom, either Islamist or Pashtun identity will eventually triumph, but it is equally plausible that the result could be what Pakistani ambassador to Washington Husain Haqqani has called an "Islamic Pashtunistan." On March 1, 2007, Haqqani's Pashtun predecessor as ambassador, the retired Maj. Gen. Mahmud Ali Durrani, said at a seminar at

the Pakistan Embassy, "I hope the Taliban and Pashtun nationalism don't merge. If that happens, we've had it, and we're on the verge of that."

Meanwhile, writing in the *Saudi Gazette*, a former CIA station chief in Kabul, Graham Fuller, has a related piece [worth reading in its entirety](#).

Fuller is an expert on political Islam, and a recurrent thesis in his recent work is that moderate Islamists are the antidote to radical and extremist Islamist movements.

He writes:

The Taliban represent zealous and largely ignorant mountain Islamists. They are also all ethnic Pashtuns. Most Pashtuns see the Taliban -- like them or not -- as the primary vehicle for restoration of Pashtun power in Afghanistan, lost in 2001. Pashtuns are also among the most fiercely nationalist, tribalized and xenophobic peoples of the world, united only against the foreign invader. In the end, the Taliban are probably more Pashtun than they are Islamist.

He writes: "US policies have now driven local nationalism, xenophobia and Islamism to combined fever pitch." His prescription is to reduce the pressures that are inflating Pashtun nationalism and xenophobia:

Only the withdrawal of American and NATO boots on the ground will begin to allow the process of near-frantic emotions to subside within Pakistan, and for the region to start to cool down. ... Sadly, US forces and Islamist radicals are now approaching a state of co-dependency.

Fuller also adds his voice to those who assert, like me, that changing Afghan culture won't happen overnight. And in any case, doing so isn't the job of the United States. It certainly isn't the job of General McChrystal.