

Who are the Taliban Today?

It is an oversimplification to think of the Taliban as a large, unified group with identical interests and motivations. The Taliban is actually made up of an array of distinct groups and individuals with diverse motivations, and this makes defeating them militarily or pursuing a political resolution to the conflict complicated. U.S. and Afghan officials believe the Taliban is made up of four distinct types of people. There are **Islamic extremists**, the majority of whom are foreigners who came to the region in response to al Qaeda's call for support to the Taliban. There are also **Pakistani fighters**, many recruited to the training camps located throughout the FATA. In Afghanistan, **unemployed youth** have joined the Taliban, as have many from **disaffected tribes** throughout the east and south. Many of these individuals are part-time farmers and part-time fighters, and some officials believe that these last two groups—driven to support the Taliban because of their frustration with the state of the country—could be won over by job creation, education, and development. There is a debate about whether it is possible, or even desirable, to negotiate an end to fighting with the Taliban leadership.

underestimated the size and organization of Taliban forces, and the offensive caught them off guard. NATO countries were unwilling to risk high troop casualties, and so NATO forces relied on airpower to strike back against the Taliban.

NATO was further crippled by the restrictions that most contributing countries placed on their troops. For example, some troops could not attack the Taliban; others were not authorized to interfere in the drug trade. Governments had placed these restrictions on their troops as a way of making the deployment more agreeable to their citizens back home.

These restrictions created divisions among NATO countries. Some countries—the United States, Great Britain, and Canada in particular—felt that they were shouldering an unfair load of the burden in Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan became increasingly unpopular around the world.

How did the fighting affect people in Afghanistan?

The resumed fighting took a heavy toll on Afghanistan's civilian population. Eighty percent of those killed by Taliban suicide bombs were civilians. In addition, Taliban fighters often hid among local populations, making it difficult for international forces to identify them. NATO's aerial bombing campaigns caused civilian casualties to skyrocket. Many

Afghans began to question the international community's commitment to Afghanistan.

By the time President Bush left office at the end of 2008, the Taliban were stronger than they had been at any time since 2001. They controlled large parts of the country, and had set up parallel governments and courts in many areas. By 2008, more U.S. soldiers were dying in Afghanistan than in Iraq.

Obama's War

In November 2008, Barack Obama was elected president of the United States. He came into office promising to reinvigorate the campaign against the Taliban and al Qaeda, which he believed had been sidetracked by the war in Iraq.

“Our troops have fought bravely against a ruthless enemy. Our civilians have made great sacrifices.... Afghans have suffered and sacrificed for their future. But for six years, Afghanistan has been denied the resources that it demands because of the war in Iraq.... Now, that will change.”

—President Obama, March 27, 2009

How did President Obama change U.S. policy?

President Obama pushed Afghanistan to