

Senator John McCain: The ‘Charlie Wilson’ of Syria War

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In [an editorial](#) [1] last week, Jeffrey Goldberg, the editor-in-chief of *The Atlantic*, lambasted **Donald Trump** for canceling a visit to the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery near Paris in 2018 due to rain, and accused him of disparagingly mentioning military veterans as “losers” and “suckers.”

But in order to substantiate his allegations, Goldberg came up with a rather bizarre example. While noting Donald Trump wasn’t invited to the funeral of Republican **Senator John McCain**, who died battling cancer in 2018, Goldberg observed:

“Trump’s understanding of concepts such as patriotism, service, and sacrifice has interested me since he expressed contempt for the war record of the late Senator John McCain, who spent more than five years as a prisoner of the North Vietnamese. ‘He’s not a war hero,’ Trump said in 2015 while running for the Republican nomination for president. ‘I like people who weren’t captured.’”

Alluding to Goldberg’s article, Trump said during a Labor Day press conference on September 7 held at the White House:

“I’m not saying the military’s in love with me, the soldiers are, the top people in the Pentagon probably aren’t because they want to do nothing but fight wars so that all of those wonderful companies that make the bombs and make the planes and make everything else stay happy.”

Though a decorated Vietnam War veteran, McCain was a highly polarizing figure as a senator and was regarded by many leftists as an inveterate neocon hawk, who vociferously exhorted Western military interventions in Libya and Syria.

McCain was a vocal supporter of the 2011 military intervention in Libya. In April 2011, he visited the anti-Gaddafi forces and National Transitional Council in Benghazi, the highest-ranking American to do so, and said that the rebel forces were “my heroes.”

Regarding Syria’s proxy war that began in 2011, McCain repeatedly argued for the US intervening militarily in the conflict on the side of the anti-government forces. He staged a visit to rebel forces inside Syria in May 2013, the first senator to do so, and called for arming the Free Syrian Army with heavy weapons and for the establishment of a no-fly zone over Syria.

Following reports that two of the people he posed for pictures with had been responsible for the kidnapping of eleven Lebanese Shia pilgrims the year before, McCain disputed one of the identifications and said he had not met directly with the other.

In the aftermath of the alleged chemical weapons attack in Ghouta in 2013, McCain vehemently argued for strong American military action against the government of Bashar al-Assad, and in September 2013, cast a Foreign Relations committee vote in favor of Obama's request to Congress that it authorize a military response.

Charlie Wilson was a Democratic Congressman representing Texas in the House of Representatives from 1973 to 1996. He was a vocal supporter of training and arming Afghan jihadists during the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s, and on one occasion, he praised the leader of fearsome Haqqani Network Jalal-ud-Din Haqqani as "goodness personified." He was a subject of a Hollywood feature film "Charlie Wilson's War," in which Tom Hanks played the role of Charlie Wilson.

In more than one ways, Senator John McCain was the hawkish equivalent of Charlie Wilson and Syria's proxy war was the re-enactment of the Soviet-Afghan War.

If we were to draw parallels between the Soviet-Afghan jihad during the 1980s and Syria's proxy war 2011-onward, the Western powers used the training camps located in the Af-Pak border regions to train and arm Afghan jihadists battling Soviet troops in Afghanistan.

Similarly, the training camps located in the border regions of Turkey and Jordan were used by the CIA and Pentagon to provide money, training and weapons to militants battling the Syrian government with the collaboration of Turkish, Jordanian and Saudi intelligence agencies.

During the Soviet-Afghan jihad, it is a known historical fact that the bulk of the so-called "freedom fighters" was comprised of Pashtun jihadists, including the militant factions of Jalaluddin Haqqani, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf and scores of other militant outfits, some of which later coalesced together to form the Taliban militant group.

Similarly, in Syria, the majority of purported "moderate rebels" was comprised of Islamic jihadists, such as Jaysh al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sham, al-Nusra Front, the Islamic State and myriads of other militant groups, including a minuscule fraction of defected Syrian soldiers which went by the name of Free Syria Army (FSA).

Apart from Pashtun militants, various factions of the Northern Alliance of Tajiks and Uzbeks constituted the relatively "moderate" segment of the Afghan rebellion, though those "moderate" warlords, like Ahmad Shah Massoud and Abul Rashid Dostum, were more ethnic and tribal in character than secular or nationalist, as such. Similarly, the Kurds of the so-called "Syrian Democratic Forces" can be compared to the Northern Alliance of Afghanistan.

During the last few years, the Islamic State's purported "terror franchises" in Afghanistan and Pakistan have claimed a spate of bombings against the Shia and Barelvi Muslims who are regarded as heretics by Takfiri jihadists. But to contend that the Islamic State is responsible for suicide blasts in Pakistan and Afghanistan is to assert that the Taliban are responsible for the internecine conflict in Syria and Iraq.

Both are localized militant outfits and the Islamic State without its Baathist command

structure and superior weaponry bankrolled by Western powers and oil-rich Gulf States is just another ragtag, regional militant outfit. The distinction between the Taliban and the Islamic State lies in the fact that the Taliban follow Deobandi sect of Sunni Islam which is a sect native to South Asia, whereas the jihadists of the Islamic State mostly belong to Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi-Salafi denomination.

Secondly, and more importantly, the insurgency in Afghanistan and the border regions of Pakistan is an indigenous Pashtun uprising which is an ethnic group native to Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan, whereas the bulk of the Islamic State's jihadists in Syria and Iraq was comprised of Arab militants and included foreign fighters from the neighboring Middle Eastern countries, North Africa, the Central Asian states, Russia, China and even radicalized Muslims from as far away as Europe and the United States.

The so-called "Khorasan Province" of the Islamic State in the Af-Pak region is nothing more than a coalition of several breakaway factions of the Taliban and a few other inconsequential local militant outfits that have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in order to enhance their prestige, and draw funds and followers, but which doesn't have any organizational and operational association with the Islamic State proper in Syria and Iraq.

The total strength of the Islamic State-Khorasan is estimated to be between 3,000 to 5,000 fighters. In comparison, the strength of the Taliban is estimated to be between 60,000 to 80,000 militants. The Islamic State-Khorasan was formed as a merger between several breakaway factions of the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban in early 2015. Later, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a Pakistani terrorist group Jundullah and Chinese Uyghur militants pledged allegiance to it.

In 2017, the Islamic State-Khorasan split into two factions. One faction, based in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province, is led by a Pakistani militant commander Aslam Farooqi, who was reportedly arrested in May, and the other faction, based in the northern provinces of Afghanistan, is led by a former Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) commander Moawiya. The latter faction also includes Uzbek, Tajik, Uyghur and Baloch militants.

In Pakistan, there are three distinct categories of militants: the Afghanistan-focused Pashtun militants; the Kashmir-focused Punjabi militants; and foreign transnational terrorists, including the Arab militants of al-Qaeda, the Uzbek insurgents of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Chinese Uyghur jihadists of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Compared to tens of thousands of native Pashtun and Punjabi militants, the foreign transnational terrorists number only in a few hundreds and are hence inconsequential.

Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is mainly comprised of Pashtun militants, carries out bombings against Pakistan's security apparatus. The ethnic factor is critical here. Although the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) like to couch their rhetoric in religious terms, it is the difference of ethnicity and language that enables them to recruit Pashtun tribesmen who are willing to carry out subversive activities against the Punjabi-dominated state apparatus, while the Kashmir-focused Punjabi militants have by and large remained loyal to their patrons in the security agencies of Pakistan.

Although Pakistan's security establishment has been willing to conduct military operations against the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), which are regarded as a security threat to Pakistan's security apparatus, as far as the Kashmir-focused Punjabi militants, including the Lashkar-e-

Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad, and the Afghanistan-focused Quetta Shura Taliban, including the Haqqani network, are concerned, they are still enjoying impunity because such militant groups are regarded as “strategic assets” by Pakistan’s security agencies.

Therefore, recent allegations by regional power-brokers that Washington provided material support to splinter groups of Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) as a tit-for-tat response to Pakistan’s security agencies double game of providing support to the Afghan Taliban to mount attacks against the Afghan security forces and their American backers cannot be ruled out. In fact, a [UN report in July](#) [2] estimated that more than 6,000 Pakistani militants had sought refuge in Afghanistan following Pakistan’s military operations in tribal areas in 2014.

In November 2018, for instance, infighting between the main faction of the Afghan Taliban led by Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada and a breakaway faction led by Mullah Mohammad Rasul left scores of fighters dead in Afghanistan’s western Herat province.

Mullah Rasul was close to Taliban founder Mullah Mohammad Omar, and served as the governor of southwestern Nimroz province during the Taliban’s rule in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. After the news of the death of Mullah Omar was made public by the Afghan intelligence in 2015, Mullah Rasul broke ranks with the Taliban and formed his own faction.

Mullah Rasul’s group is active in the provinces of Herat, Farah, Nimroz and Helmand, and is known to have received arms and support from the Afghan intelligence, as he has expressed willingness to recognize the Washington-backed Kabul government.

Regarding Washington’s motives for providing covert support to breakaway factions of the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani militants, the US invaded Afghanistan in October 2001, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attack, and toppled the Taliban regime with the help of the Northern Alliance comprised of ethnic Tajik and Uzbek warlords.

The leadership and fighters of the Pashtun-majority Taliban resistance movement found sanctuary in Pakistan’s lawless tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, and mounted an insurgency against the Washington-backed Kabul government. Throughout the occupation years, Washington kept pressuring Islamabad to mount military operations in the lawless tribal areas in order to deny safe havens to the Taliban.

However, Islamabad was reluctant to conduct military operations, which is a euphemism for all-out war, for the fear of alienating the Pashtun population of the tribal areas. After Pakistan’s military’s raid in July 2007 on a mosque (Lal Masjid) in the heart of Islamabad, which also contained a religious seminary, scores of civilians, including students of the seminary, died.

The Pakistani Taliban made the incident a rallying call for waging a jihad against Pakistan’s military. Thereafter, terror attacks and suicide bombings against Pakistan’s state apparatus peaked after the July 2007 Lal Masjid incident. Eventually, under pressure from the Obama administration, Pakistan’s military decided in 2009 to conduct military operations against militants based in Pakistan’s tribal areas.

The first military operation was mounted in the Swat valley in April 2009, the second in South Waziristan tribal agency in October the same year, and the third military operation was launched in North Waziristan and Khyber tribal agencies in June 2014. In the ensuing

violence, tens of thousands of civilians, security personnel and militants lost their lives.

Although Pakistani political commentators often point fingers at the Washington-backed Kabul government in Afghanistan and Pakistan's arch-foe India for providing money and arms to the Pakistani militants for waging a guerrilla war against Pakistan's state establishment, reportedly Washington has provided covert support to the Pakistani Taliban in order to force Pakistan's military to conduct military operations against militants based in Pakistan's tribal areas.

Keeping this background of Washington's covert support to breakaway factions of the Afghan Taliban that have waged an insurgency against the US-backed Kabul government and to the Pakistani Taliban that have mounted a guerrilla war against Pakistan's state establishment in mind, the allegations that Washington has provided material support to militant groups in the Af-Pak region in order to divide and weaken the Taliban resistance against American occupation of Afghanistan are not entirely unfounded.

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Notes

[1] Trump: Americans Who Died in War Are 'Losers' and 'Suckers':

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/09/trump-americans-who-died-at-war-are-losers-and-suckers/615997/>

[2] UN says thousands of anti-Pakistan militants in Afghanistan:

<https://apnews.com/ab3668337f310b4be8e1ed2442470992>

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