



THE TALIBAN'S **WINNING** STRATEGY IN AFGHANISTAN

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CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

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Simplified Afghanistan provincial map



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Summary



A misunderstanding of the insurgency is at the heart of the difficulties facing the International Coalition in Afghanistan. The Taliban are often described as an umbrella movement comprising loosely connected groups that are essentially local and unorganized. On the contrary, this report's analysis of the structure and strategy of the insurgency reveals a resilient adversary, engaged in strategic planning and coordinated action.

The Taliban are a revolutionary movement, deeply opposed to the Afghan tribal system and focused on the rebuilding of the Islamic Emirate. Their propaganda and intelligence are efficient, and the local autonomy of their commanders in the field allow them both flexibility and cohesion. They have made clever use of ethnic tensions, the rejection of foreign forces by the Afghan people, and the lack of local administration to gain support in the population. In so doing the Taliban have achieved their objectives in the South and East of the country, isolating the Coalition, marginalizing the local Afghan administration, and establishing a parallel administration (mainly to dispense Sharia justice and collect taxes). In recent months, a more professional Taliban have succeeded in making significant inroads by recruiting from non-Pashtun communities.

These developments, and the strength of the insurgency makes the current Coalition strategy of focusing its reinforcements in the South (Helmand and Kandahar) unwise to say the least. The lack of local Afghan institutions there will require a long term presence and therefore a need for even more reinforcements in the coming year. Meanwhile, the pace of Taliban progress in other provinces (see map, inside front cover) far outstrips the ability of the Coalition to stabilize the South. The Coalition should change the priorities of its current strategy, shifting resources to stop and reverse the Taliban's progress in the North, while reinforcing and safeguarding the Kabul region or risk losing control of the entire country.

Introduction



The situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate; the Taliban-led insurgency retains control of the strategic initiative, and the International Coalition (IC) lacks clear direction. The insurgency has made significant inroads in the past months, consolidating its grip in the South and East, securing its sanctuary in Pakistan, and opening new fronts in the North. The situation around Kabul is unclear. Taliban leaders are now convinced that the International Coalition will soon be compelled to accept the facts on the ground and abandon Afghanistan in a few years.

Since the Bush administration's departure, the United States has tried to develop a strategy for defeating the Taliban. Nonetheless, the recent initiatives lack coherence and do not offer a credible response to the advance of the insurgency. Worse, while some measures are useful, others are potentially dangerous and could very well accelerate the pace at which the Taliban gain ground. The biggest mistake is to concentrate reinforcements in the South, while failing to react quickly and decisively to stop Taliban inroads in the North, where success now would be readily achievable.

The Taliban's strength explains why the reinforcements sent in 2009 (21,000 troops) cannot beat the Taliban in their southern and eastern strongholds. Sealing the border would be politically difficult, and the burden of doing so would fall primarily on the United States. In addition, it would take time, since the Taliban have the momentum. Defeating the Taliban would require at least 100,000 new reinforcements as long as the Afghan-Pakistani border remained open to insurgents. Neither the United States nor NATO is willing or able to pay the human and fiscal costs of reinforcements at this level. Even if they were, sealing the border would be extremely difficult in political and military terms

and would take considerable time. There would also be a risk of the situation in the North deteriorating significantly in the meantime. Indeed, under the current strategy of concentrating new forces in the South and East, the Taliban will move the insurgency to the North.

One of the key reasons for the lack of a productive IC strategy is the IC's and broader western misperception of the Taliban. They are often characterized as "backward," "medieval," and "reactionary," and as an association of loosely organized groups. The insurgency is perceived as a local problem to be solved locally; the national and dynamic dimension of the struggle is not taken into account. In fact, the Taliban are quite capable of strategic planning and coordinated action. This means that they will adapt to and counter any moves by the International Coalition. **On-the-ground observations and reliable evidence suggest that the Taliban have an efficient leadership, are learning from their mistakes, and are quick to exploit the weaknesses of their adversaries. They are building a parallel administration, have nationwide logistics, and already manage an impressive intelligence network.** Based on the analysis of the insurgency, I argue that the Taliban organization and goals call for a different IC strategy.

To describe what appears to be the Taliban's winning strategy, I will address three questions: 1) What is the nature of the Taliban organization? 2) How does the insurgency exploit key social and political issues? 3) How does the insurgency adapt its strategy to various local conditions? Based on this analysis, I suggest an alternative strategy to the one the Obama administration seems inclined to pursue.

Taking the Taliban Seriously



The Taliban have a strategy and a coherent organization to implement it. To believe otherwise, as some U.S. analysts do, is to dangerously underestimate the adversary. The Taliban are a revolutionary movement deeply opposed to the tribal structure in Afghanistan. They promote mullahs as the key political leaders in the society and state they seek to create. More than in the 1990s, the Taliban today also are connected to the international jihadist networks and seek political support by opposing foreign occupation. The objective of the Taliban today is the same as it was in the 1990s: to take Kabul and to build an Islamic Emirate based on Sharia.

The diversity of the insurgency confuses many foreign observers.¹ First, the Taliban are not the only party fighting against the IC and the Afghan government. The Hezb-i islami (an Islamic organization commonly known for fighting the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan), with a more local and limited following, has its own independent organization. In the North especially, the Hezb-i islami can more easily recruit from non-Pashtun ethnic groups. Second, while it is true that the Taliban have multiple commanders, some with “star” quality that may suggest internal rivalry, this does not mean that the Taliban are inchoate or divisible.

The Taliban’s structure is resilient: centralized enough to be efficient, but flexible and diverse enough to adapt to local contexts. (In addition, the Taliban have been pragmatic in their use of criminal gang and opium resources.) Maulani Haqqani enjoys great prestige due to his bravery during the jihad against the

¹ The Pakistani Taliban have different structures, different leaders, and a different social base. They are, in fact, an umbrella movement comprising loosely connected groups.

Soviets and some autonomy in the day-to-day management of the war in the eastern provinces. But Haqqani's network is not independent of the larger Taliban network and does not have an autonomous strategy. He does not appoint cadres on his own authority or have an autonomous strategy. Haqqani obviously is not competing with Mullah Omar for the Taliban leadership. His biography indicates a strong commitment to the Taliban and he comes from the same *madrasa* network as the Taliban leadership of the 1990s.

Rather than a weakness, the local autonomy of Taliban commanders is necessary due to the nature of guerilla warfare, and in fact, it constitutes a strength. The Taliban are not confused or in conflict over who is in charge in a particular district or province. Foreign observers recalling Iraq may wishfully imagine exploiting competition or infighting among Taliban commanders, but the fissures are not there.²

Ironically, the IC is unwittingly helping the Taliban maintain its cohesion by killing those commanders in the field most capable of opposing the central shura. Prime examples are Mullah Akhtar Osmani, killed in December 2006, Mullah Berader in August 2007, and Mullah Dadullah in May 2007. Evidence of the resilient character of the Taliban's structure is the fact that the IC's killing of major leaders and its battlefield victories have not reversed the Taliban's momentum. In fact, the Taliban have always been able to regroup after tactical setbacks due to the resilience of their political structure. Neither the deaths of senior Taliban military commanders, nor the severe losses in 2005 in the Arghandab Valley, stopped the movement.

The Taliban's military organization demonstrates a good level of professionalism in the regions where they dominate. In a country with a long history of determined, effective fighters, today's Taliban are without question the strongest and most effective guerilla movement in Afghanistan's history. The insurgency is able to mobilize thousands of fighters nationwide. Since 2006, the Taliban have been using field radios and cell phones to coordinate groups of fighters. They are able to coordinate complex attacks, are mobile, and are improving their use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Their intelligence is good. Taliban sympathizers ensure that the moves of the coalition are known in advance if Afghan government forces are involved. Whether the IC wants to

² Local Taliban leaders who assisted the government have been pitilessly targeted and generally killed by the insurgency, for example in Helmand province.

admit it or not, the Taliban soldiers are also courageous. The insurgency accepts heavy losses, which contradicts the claim that a majority of the Taliban are motivated by money. The British soldiers in Helmand were surprised in 2006 to find an enemy able to stop them in direct confrontation. In fact, strong ideological commitment is common and a majority of the fighters are local to the South and East (the situation in the North is more complex).

In addition, "The Taliban has created a sophisticated communications apparatus that projects an increasingly confident movement"³ and "the Taliban routinely outperforms the coalition in the contest to dominate public perceptions of the war in Afghanistan."⁴ The Taliban build on the growing discontent of Afghans through a relatively sophisticated propaganda apparatus, which employs radio, video, and night letters to devastating effect. Videos, made in al-Sahab, the Taliban's media center in Quetta, Pakistan, are readily available. Among the most popular are videos showing the seizure of NATO material in Khyber Agency (in 2008) and the August 2008 ambush of a French contingent. The Taliban have also used Internet websites⁵ to chronicle the advance of the jihad (with obvious exaggerations). Propaganda material in the form of preachers calling for jihad against the IC is often distributed through cell phones. In addition, the Taliban regularly monitor Afghan media and, less systematically, foreign outlets as well. Mullah Dadullah, a key Taliban commander, had invited Al Jazeera to meet him on several different occasions, allowing the Taliban to successfully create a hero-like persona from clips (his death in 2007 gave him the status of martyr). In this context, the conventional wisdom that the Taliban, being fundamentalists, are not open to new technologies has also been debunked by their sophisticated use of modern media for propaganda purposes.

³ International Crisis Group, *Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words*, Asia Report no. 158, July 24, 2008, p. i.

⁴ Sean Naylor, "Insurgents in Afghanistan Have Mastered Media Manipulation," *Armed Forces Journal*, April 2008, p. 1, <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2008/04/3489740>.

⁵ For example, see <http://alemarah1.org/english>.

How the Taliban Build Support Over Social Grievances



Taliban propaganda builds on the widely perceived corruption of the Afghan government, the lack of basic services for the people, and the historical narrative of the fight against infidel invaders (British, Soviets, and Americans). Less overtly, the Taliban also play on rural people's distrust for cities, which are seen as corrupted and corrupting. It is difficult to trace the impact of Taliban propaganda. With a few exceptions, polls are extremely unreliable⁶ and the level of support for the Taliban varies widely across social groups. It is high in the rural Pashtun areas and among mullahs and fundamentalists. Uzbeks and Turkmen generally despise the Taliban. Support among educated urban Afghans is limited, and is nonexistent among the Shi'a.

The progress of the insurgency is driven by a clever exploitation of three political problems in Afghanistan. Pashtuns, the most numerous ethnic group in Afghanistan, around 40 percent of the population, are alienated from the central government, which they believe is unfairly influenced by non-Pashtun leaders and interests. The public increasingly doubts the good intentions and effectiveness of the IC. And people are deeply frustrated by and frightened of the insecurity created by the absence, fecklessness, and corruption of state institutions at the local level.

⁶ Pollsters cannot work in areas controlled by the Taliban, so most polling is done by cell phone. This introduces a bias toward educated, young, and urban respondents. Results by locality are generally not given. There is no reliable census, and the ethnic distribution of the population is not well known. There is little competition or basis for validating the integrity of polling contractors to prevent them simply from making up results. This begs the question as to why people would trust unknown pollsters in the middle of a civil war.

Dealing With Ethnicity

In all my visits to Afghanistan since 1988, I have never seen as high a level of distrust and hostility between Pashtuns and other ethnic groups as I witnessed during April 2009. First, the old ethnic hierarchy that had placed the Pashtuns at the top was only reluctantly accepted before 1978. Once war and ongoing internal conflict erupted after 1978, other ethnic groups refused to accept the hierarchy. After the state's presence in the countryside collapsed, the non-Pashtun ethnic groups, the Hazaras, the Tajiks, and the Uzbeks, were empowered. When the unifying narrative of jihad faded after Najibullah's fall in 1992, political parties were able to use existing social tensions and resentments to build a political base as representatives of different ethnic groups.⁷ Abdul Rashid Dostum (for the Uzbeks), Ahmed Shah Masud (for the Persian speakers), and Abdul Ali Mazari (for the Hazaras) have acquired the status of heroes in their communities. As a result of the changing balance of power between the different groups, the Pashtuns have been discriminated against in the North of the country, where they are a minority. The local administration excludes them and exactions are frequent. Complaints to the Ministry of Interior or Tribes produce few results, leaving Pashtuns feeling further victimized.

Second, communal and sectarian conflicts, which were essentially local in scale, now resonate throughout the country. In particular, the Afghan media has played a major role in expanding the geographical scope of ethnic and sectarian conflict. Far from promoting understanding between sectarian or ethnic groups, media outlets have actively fueled resentment in the last few years. Major political competitors own TV and radio channels and use them for mobilization purposes. Recently, a TV channel accused the Afghan Shi'a of working for Iran and promoting Iran's interests in Afghanistan. The legal limit between information and defamatory attacks is unclear and, in practice, sanctions are limited.

A typical example of sectarian conflict is the conflict between Shi'i Hazaras and Sunni Pashtuns, which has its origins in the building of the Afghan state at the end of the nineteenth century. In modern times, the state has tended to favor the Pashtun nomadic tribes over the settled Hazaras. The conflict is now a theme for the political mobilization of the Hazaras against the Pashtuns and

⁷ Hezb-i wahdat and Jumbesh-i melli for the most part, but the Hezb-i islami is ambiguous on this theme after it lost some of its non-Pashtun followers to the Uzbek-based Jumbesh and the more Persian speaking-based Jamiat after 1996.

is exemplified by the rise of Mohammed Mohaqeq, who is positioning himself to represent the Hazaras in national politics. In 2008, demonstrations were organized in various places in Afghanistan, far from the site of the actual conflict, reflecting the impact of the national media.

Finally, since 2001, perceptions of Pashtuns and other groups are diverging due to the role of the Afghan state and the international community. Most Pashtuns regard the central government as being in the hands of non-Pashtun leaders. (Although Karzai is from an aristocratic family from Kandahar, he is often seen as being under the influence of the United States.) As a corollary, non-Pashtuns resent what they view as favoritism toward the Pashtuns, who allegedly receive the bulk of international money. The state, being weak and lacking neutrality, is unable to effectively arbitrate disputes. In addition, foreign countries are sometimes suspected of having ethnic agendas. For example, Turkey exclusively supports the Uzbeks and Turkmen and provides bodyguards to the leader of the Jumbesh party, Rashid Dostum.

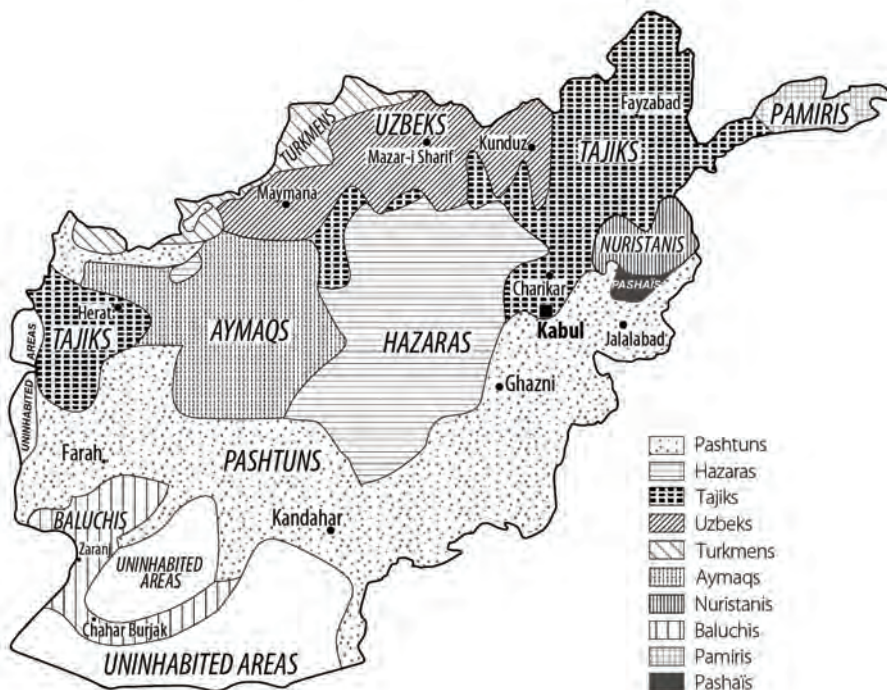
The alienation of the Pashtuns is a major factor in the insurgency's success in the South. However, this could seriously impair the insurgency's progress in the North, where the Pashtuns are a minority. The Taliban cannot hope to "win" Afghanistan ultimately without generalizing the conflict throughout the state. Therefore, the Taliban are trying to avoid being seen as Pashtun and at the same time do not want the Pashtun communities in the North to be stigmatized. The "ethnic question," then, is key for the insurgency: How can a de facto Pashtun-based movement call for the unity of all Muslims and hope to gain ground outside its initial base? In other words, how can the Taliban use the Pashtun resentment in the South and simultaneously broaden the insurgency and include other ethnic groups in the North?

To address this dilemma, the Taliban have been using those members who are drawn from non-Pashtun communities but are affiliated with the Taliban because of an ideological commitment. This strategy seems to work to a certain extent: In Samangan Province, for instance, the Taliban have found support in the Tatar community. Uzbek or Turkmen militants (and some militants from Uzbekistan) give the Taliban movement in the North a local face. In the longer term, the Taliban could rally more non-Pashtun groups on nonideological grounds if they appear to be winning in the war against the IC.

In addition, the second component of the insurgency, the Hezb-i islami, historically has a fairly solid following in the North, for example in Badakhshan

and Kunduz. As Guitozzi writes, “Although it is not clear to what extent Taliban preachers and agents had by spring 2008 been successful in raising support inside Badakhshan, the insurgent leadership of Hezb-i islami seems to have been successful in reactivating its old networks.”⁸ The actions of the two parties (the Hezb-i islami and the Taliban) in different parts of the North are complementary, since they do not try to recruit in the same networks.

Simplified distribution of macro-ethnicities in Afghanistan



⁸ Antonio Guitozzi and Dominique Orsini, “Center-Periphery Relations in Afghanistan: Badakhshan Between Patrimonialism and Institution-Building,” *Central Asian Survey*, 2009, p. 13.

The Resentment Against the IC: From *Mehman* to *Dushman*

The relationship between foreigners and Afghans has deteriorated due to three decisive factors: the isolation of civilian Westerners; arbitrary violence and civilian casualties; and lack of integrity in international aid.

More than 10,000 foreigners, most of whom live in Kabul, maintain a distance from the Afghan population and enjoy a lifestyle in stark contrast to theirs. Instead of securing the population, the international community has opted for the limited protection of embassies and key administrations. Around half of the city center is off limits to regular citizens, causing frequent traffic jams and frustration among the Afghans. The foreigners have comparatively huge salaries, often do not pay taxes, and for the most part do not learn a local language. They are generally poorly trained to work in an Afghan context and are heavily reliant on local staff. These characteristics, of course, exacerbate traditional Afghan suspicion of foreigners' motives. This is evidenced by frequent rumors and conspiracy theories. It is well known that many Afghans are convinced that the IC is secretly supporting the Taliban.

Civilian casualties from IC military strikes and arbitrary arrests by the IC have been highly alienating. The cases of torture on Bagram Air Base during the first years of the war and reports of mistreatment of prisoners are widely known to the population. The 600 prisoners detained at Bagram Air Base are still off limits for the ICRC and subject to indefinite detention without charge. Even if they are Afghan citizens (as almost all are) Afghan laws do not apply.

Popular support for the U.S. presence among the Pashtuns is very low. In fact, the IC has transitioned from "guest" to "enemy" (*mehman* to *dushman*) in Afghan cultural categories. Special Forces operations, even if technically successful, are generally a political disaster. In Logar province, where the Taliban are strong, Special Forces have allegedly killed innocent people. (This is acknowledged by compensation given to the families, which is a necessary, well intentioned gesture yet does not reverse the resentment over the deaths.) In Chombar district (Balkh Province), the Special Forces arrested a number of suspected Taliban in 2008. The operation rapidly turned into a political problem when the local bazaar became rife with rumors that women were raped, antagonizing the local population. Civilian casualties caused by bombings are the most damaging to the population's perception of the IC. The IC bombing in Farah Province (more than 100 civilian casualties) in May 2009 is the latest in a long series of such incidents and has caused a national

outcry. Afghan media are shaping popular perceptions of IC actions more effectively than Taliban propaganda. Graphic pictures on TV of civilian corpses (women, babies) killed by the IC have resonated with Afghans who remember the Soviet occupation. An interesting point is that the Taliban have also been using violence against civilians, even if their IEDs are more carefully targeted than before. Suicide bombings are widely used with foreknowledge that civilian casualties will result. But the violence attributed to the IC seems to produce more popular resentment than any violence committed by the Taliban. The IC's objectives are also unclear to the majority of Afghans. IC troops have had limited contact with the locals, and accordingly have had little success in winning over the population.

Finally, the absence of integrity in the management of international aid fuels Afghan discontent. There are too many subcontractors dispersing international aid with too little coordination and accountability to Afghans and their interests. The population especially resents the accumulation of wealth by the new Afghan elites. International aid, which is part of a war economy, has created a *rentier* society where foreign money is considered an entitlement. In some places, people rely on foreign subsidies (of which a small part is directed to infrastructural development) distributed by the PRTs or other international bodies. Far from appeasing social tensions, this has created high expectations, growing discontent, and a great deal of local jealousy between communities. In addition, the insurgency has benefited as much as the population from the influx of money through extortion.

The Vacuum in Local Governance

One of the major factors behind the success of the insurgency is the absence of administration at a district level (*uluswali*) and the acceleration of political fragmentation in the past few years.

Chosen by the United States in 2001 mainly because of his closeness to the Bush administration, President Karzai lacked a political base and tried to eliminate local powers who potentially could threaten his control of the periphery. He relied on a narrow coterie to fill important positions in his administration, and nominated governors who were politically allied with him. Because of Karzai's poor choices (based more on personal relations than competence), this strategy backfired. The elimination or weakening of local leaders produced further political fragmentation.

As a result, there are today few local leaders who can control any significant territory: Ismail Khan (part of Herat Province), Ustad Ata (Jawzjan Province), Ustad Rabbani (part of Badakhshan Province), and Wali Karzai (in Kandahar) are among this small group. Gul Agha Shirzai, despite prominent media coverage, is not very strong in Jalalabad and acts as a broker between local powers.

Even the few leaders who control sizeable territory are not rebuilding the state. The central government has sometimes successfully worked to rally local commanders to its side (by helping them get elected or giving them governmental posts), but the situation is not fundamentally changed in the sense that there is no real reconstruction of state structures. These leaders are not very different from the commanders of the 1980s, since their resources are mostly provided from outside the area where they are dominant; they take a percentage of external resources coming from the state or from outside economic operators. By controlling border transit and exacting customs and tolls, these regional strongmen gain personal revenue from legal or illegal cross-border commerce but do not use such resources for the public good and state building. In addition, local leaders take a percentage of foreign aid. Because there is little control over aid outside of Kabul, due in part to the poor security conditions, the money coming from the international community is easily redirected to finance local strongmen.

Given the vacuum left by the absence of the state, local leaders are (re)arming quickly. In 2003–2004 there was a disarmament program that paid people for turning in weapons to the authorities. The main effect, unfortunately, was to enable commanders to upgrade their arsenals by buying new weapons with the money they got for the old. Since 2006, when the insurgency's momentum became clear, people were convinced that the Afghan state and the IC were not going to prevail. To provide their own security, local groups have been buying significant quantities of weapons. The result, especially in the South, is that the prices of weapons have been driven up. Even in Kabul, buying weapons is extremely easy, even in relatively large quantities.⁹

⁹ A Dragonov (sniper rifle) costs \$1500–2000, an AK47 \$500–800, depending on the quality, a box of 600 bullets for the AK47 is \$250; an RPG \$400. There is more demand in the South due to the fighting, so the prices are higher than in the North. The idea that the better control of the border by U.S. troops explains the price increase (Bing West, "Give the Afghan Army a Governance Role," *Wall Street Journal*, May 8, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124174197515699005.html>) is just unfounded.

In most of the provinces, no district-level institutions are functioning. Some district administrators, known by locals to be corrupt or inefficient, are often simply transferred to other districts, thanks to their personal connections in the central government. In this administrative and security void, the Taliban are building an alternative administration, discrediting the central government, and extending their influence into areas where they initially had no support.

The main problem is the absence of security and law enforcement structures, notably police and judges. Not enough money has been directed toward institution building and the justice and police programs have been a total failure. Practically speaking, there are no state judges. The few police officers that exist are poorly paid, prone to corruption, and poorly trained and armed. In Kunduz Province, for example, the population of one million people is policed (in theory) by 1,000 men, though the actual figure is said to be closer to 500. In most cases, people now seek to resolve disputes by going to local *jirga* (when effective) or to local *ulema* for Sharia justice.

The West has placed too much emphasis on economic development, despite the fact that successful state building will depend much more on establishing security and a functioning, responsive judicial system. Even among PRTs, development initiatives are proposed and implemented by foreign actors, not locals, further marginalizing the population and thus undermining state building.

Finally, the Afghan National Army is unable to deploy large units, despite better training and, according to some anecdotal evidence, a better fighting spirit. The ANA's command and control is still weak and does not enable it to operate on its own, independent of IC leadership. Observers in direct contact with the ANA report that operations involving more than 100 troops cannot be effectively conducted autonomously. In addition, the IC in the North, despite thousands of troops, is not engaged in the fight against the insurgency. For example, when the northern gate of the city of Kunduz was attacked in mid-April, the local German PRT based just a few kilometers away did not intervene.

The Regional Fronts and the Global Strategy

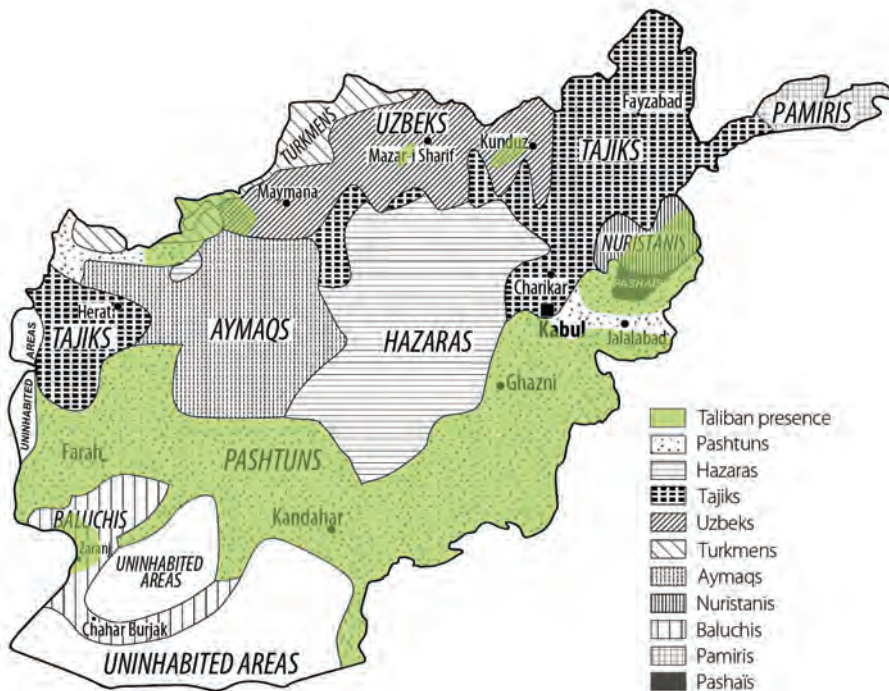


In drawing a map of the Taliban's presence, I have defined distinct areas according to different criteria. The number of conflict incidents is not directly relevant here, since the number of incidents tends to decrease in the places where the Taliban are in total control. In other places, a significant share of incidents are not directly linked to the insurgency. (It is misleading, therefore, to assess the strength of the insurgency by noting that most of the incidents happen in only a few districts.) In addition, some places, such as Ghor Province, are basically devoid of political control, meaning that neither the Taliban nor the government occupy them, but the insurgency is free to circulate. A good empirical test of the presence of the insurgents is the ability of a foreigner or an Afghan working for a foreign organization to move freely. Another measurement that indicates a higher level of insurgency control is the absence of government officials and the presence of a parallel Taliban administration.

According to the level of strength of the insurgency, three zones can be defined. First, places where the insurgency is now dominant (southern and eastern provinces, a few districts in the North); second, places where the insurgency due to ethnic/social structures will not be able to make significant gains (Hazara-populated areas, Panjshir) and, third, places where the insurgency is growing, but is still developing (Kunduz, Baghlan, Ghor, Takhar, Faryab, Jawzjan, Samangan, and Badakhshan provinces).

The progress of the Taliban is the result of a coherent strategy and of an impressive ability to subvert the traditional structures (notably tribal structures), to extend Taliban influence beyond their Pashtun base, and to build original political structures. The Taliban have attained most of their objectives in the South, where they have put the IC on the defensive. Since they are not strong

Simplified distribution of macro-ethnicities and Taliban presence in Afghanistan



enough to take the cities (or at least to keep them), they are pushing to the North to extend the fight geographically, giving the insurgency a national reach.

To describe the recent progress of the insurgency, I will analyze how the Taliban takes advantage of sanctuary in Pakistan and largely controls the roads to Afghanistan. Then I will analyze the Taliban's strategy at a regional level, focusing first on locations where the Taliban are dominant, then on the growth of the insurgency in the North. I conclude by discussing the state of affairs around Kabul.

Sanctuary and Roads

The Afghan-Pakistani border is largely open to the Taliban. The sanctuary in Pakistan is now larger and safer for the Taliban than it was a few years ago. In

consequence, the insurgency has full latitude to build its logistical routes deep inside Afghanistan.

The Taliban have systematically enlarged and consolidated their sanctuary in Pakistan due to the progress of the Pakistani Taliban. The deal giving the Pakistani Taliban control of the Swat Valley and the penetration of the Buner district, with the entire Malakand district under Sharia, marked the Pakistani Taliban's most audacious success. The Federally Administered Tribal Agencies (FATA), especially Waziristan, are mostly impenetrable to governmental reform or security-building efforts. Osama bin Laden and Rashid Rauf, the transatlantic bombing suspect, are probably based there. Less publicized than the FATA, Baluchistan is probably the most secure place for the Afghan Taliban because the presence of al-Qaeda there is minimal and the Pakistani state nurtures the Taliban for use against the Baluch nationalist movements. In Quetta, the central government uses the Afghan Taliban to counter the Baluch nationalists. The Taliban have dealt efficiently with two potential adversaries in extending their position in Pakistan: the Shi'a and the tribal leaders. In the Kuram Agency near Parachinar, the Shi'i Turi tribe has been subdued by the Afghan Taliban and is no longer an obstacle to the insurgents. In certain cases, the Pakistani Taliban have assassinated elders close to the government.

The Pakistani Taliban's progress is now threatening the heart of Pakistan and has triggered a massive reaction from the army, begun in May 2009 with the offensive in the Swat Valley. The situation can be best described as a small-scale civil war that has displaced more than 2.5 million people. It is too early to assess the results of these operations, especially since military operations are set to continue in Waziristan. For the moment, the Pakistani army is not targeting the Afghan Taliban. As long as the Afghan Taliban's sanctuary in Pakistan remains undisturbed by the IC or the Pakistani army, the insurgency will continue to enjoy strategic depth with little possibility of a decisive strike against its bases.

There are three major routes into Afghanistan from Pakistan, which are not very different from the ones used by the *mujahideen* in the 1980s.

- ▶ The first is the Parachinar way toward the south of Kabul. (The distance from Parachinar to Kabul is 90 kilometers.) The Taliban have made serious gains in Azrah district (Logar Province), a strategic gateway to the south of Kabul. The Jaji tribe in the Jaji Maydan district in Khost Province is under serious pressure to let the Taliban cross their territory, consolidating the route for the insurgency.

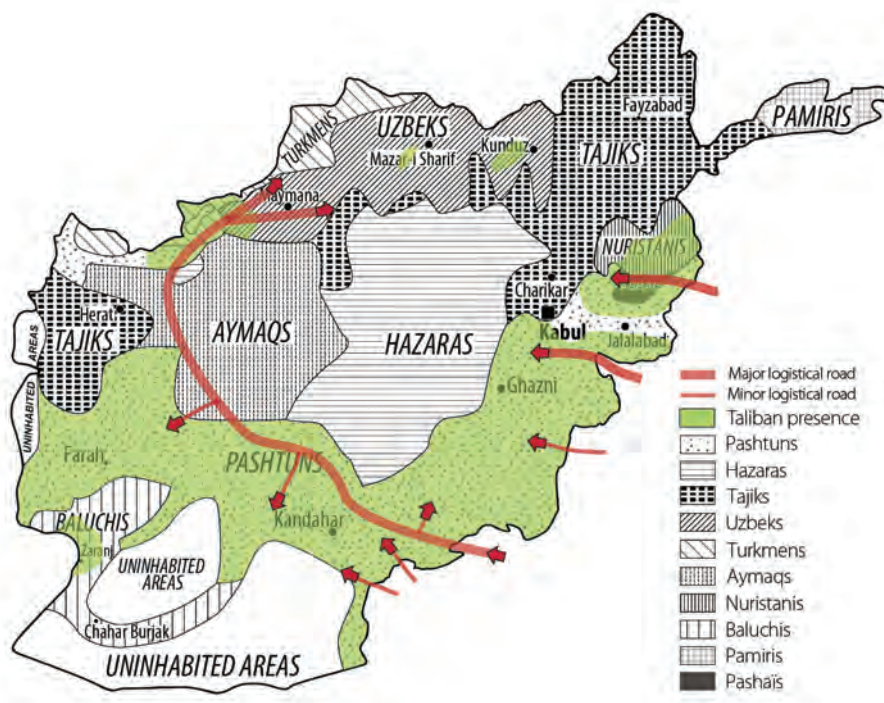
- ▶ The second is the road through Zabul Province toward the South, West, and North. This road is a critical passageway for moving insurgent fighters to the North (Ghazni and Wardak, Logar), as well as to Kandahar Province and through Uruzgan Province to the West (Helmand, Herat, Badghis). Zabul province is totally under Taliban control with no state structure. The U.S. bases are totally isolated in this area.
- ▶ The third is the road through Kunar Province and north of the Kabul-Jalalabad road. There is a deep rejection of foreigners in Kunar Province, which is also a historical stronghold of the Hezb-i islami. U.S. military posts are isolated and subject to continuous attacks by the local villagers and the Hezb-i islami.

There is no practical way to seal the border from either the Pakistani or the Afghan side. If one does not control the entire border, military operations to control part of it are of little value. On the Afghan side, these roads are very difficult to control due to topography and local intolerance of foreigners. In fact, even tens of thousands of U.S. troops deployed along the border would probably not be enough to seal the border. The number and scale of U.S. border posts that are feasible within overall force levels in Afghanistan are clearly insufficient to control infiltration. At best, they can provide intelligence on the pace and scale of the crossings.

The building of new roads is one of the major infrastructure development priorities of the international community and the Afghan state. Places like the center of Afghanistan and Badakhshan are or will be connected in a near future. The building of a central road, plus a road to Herat, as well as a road to Maimana in the next few years are steps in the right direction.

Developing a national road network is desirable for economic and security reasons. Government troops will be able to move more quickly, strengthening the capacity of the state to secure the population, which is key to the counterinsurgency. In addition, it is more difficult to hide IEDs on an asphalt road. While new roads will strengthen the Afghan state, the insurgents (without their weapons) use the new roads, too. During the communist regime, universal conscription had meant that young resistance fighters could not enter cities for fear of being exposed, but today the Taliban can move around freely by public or private transport. In addition, since there is no effective state or military control over the roads, arms can be freely moved from one province to another.

Taliban logistical roads



The insurgency has also been able to profit from their construction by extorting money from contractors in exchange for allowing construction to proceed.

Consolidating the Insurgency's Grip in the South and East

The Taliban are the dominant political force in numerous regions of Afghanistan, including Pashtun-majority provinces in the East and the South: Paktia, Paktika, Zabul, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Ghazni, Wardak, Logar, Helmand, Farah, Kunar, and Laghman. (In Ghazni, Uruzgan, and Wardak, the Hazara-populated areas exclude the Taliban). The Taliban also dominate the Bala Murghrab and Gormach districts (Badghris) and most of the Kunar and Laghman provinces. The situation in Nangrahar is confusing, especially around Jalalabad, and requires separate

analysis, but the insurgency is well entrenched, notably in the southern part of the province (Khogiani district) and in the northern part. Helmand is often misdiagnosed: this province is not the main base of the Taliban—even though the opposition is extremely strong there, the organization of the insurgency is not classically Taliban. Overall, the core territory for the movement is Kandahar, Zabul, and from Ghazni to the south of Wardak. In this area, the Taliban have the support of a significant part of the population and its elites (mostly mullahs, but also landlords and tribal leaders).

Here, the clear strategy of the insurgency is to destroy the Afghan administration, isolate the IC, and build a parallel administration in the countryside. In these provinces, the situation of the International Coalition is comparable to that of the Soviet Union in the 1980s in that the IC, largely isolated at its posts, is operating with neither the social support nor the acceptance of the Afghan population. The insurgents control the countryside and have a strong presence even inside cities like Kandahar and Ghazni. The Afghan administration is nonexistent outside the major cities.

The Taliban are systematically destroying the local administrations at the district level, with the objective of creating a situation where the administrations' contact with the population is eliminated. Such a situation would prove to people that the state is unable to protect them or provide services, pushing them to instead accept the justice and order the Taliban provide. This situation would force the U.S. Army to take charge of local security and governance, giving the Taliban the opportunity to call attention to the foreign occupation and recruit resistance to it.

In some places the state no longer has a physical presence: the district administrator is often unable to travel to the district center. In some cases, the Taliban have taken over district centers for a day or two, as happened in Musakhel district in Khost Province in April 2009. In most cases though, the Taliban do not need to actually capture the district center, but merely isolate it. When the district administrator is local, the insurgents can pressure him through his family. Police officers are systematically targeted, since effective local policing is potentially a major threat to the insurgency. Today the police are not a problem for the Taliban in the East and South. Basic police and judicial services are not provided in these areas, leaving the Taliban free to provide their own brand of law enforcement and dispute resolution.

Barnett Rubin correctly explains: "In some areas, there is now a parallel Taliban state, and locals are increasingly turning to Taliban courts, which are seen as more effective and fair than the corrupt official system."¹⁰ Crime has decreased, for example, in Logar, although the Taliban also network with criminal groups attacking travelers on roads. Religious leaders are viewed to be above tribal affiliations and they provide Sharia justice. They take *ushr* (harvest taxes) from the villages they control, but the taxes are also a way of building their control (for example recently in the Faryab province).

The Taliban systematically target Afghans who work with foreigners, especially translators for the U.S. Army, but also those who work for nongovernmental organizations or the United Nations. (There have been around 30 such casualties in 2009, and kidnappings are not reported systematically.) At a mosque 200 meters from the UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan) in Gardez, a preacher calls for death to foreigners and the Afghans who work for them. In Kandahar, the Taliban are inside the city, spying on the population and killing their opponents.

The tribal system is weak in most parts of Afghanistan and cannot provide alternatives to the Taliban or U.S. control. The Pashtuns generally have a tribal identity. Tribal identity is a rather flexible and open notion and should not be confused with tribal institutions, which are what establish enforceable obligations on members of a tribe. Political entrepreneurs, especially in Kandahar, can use tribal identity as a way to build patronage, but tribal institutions are generally not strong, except in the eastern provinces of Afghanistan, especially Paktia and Paktika. The U.S. Army has tried since 2002 to use the tribes to fight the Taliban. Khost in particular has been repeatedly presented as a success story. The Army's first Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), based in Gardez, was the first to be established in an attempt to use the local tribes against the Taliban. Its annual budget is in the tens of millions of dollars and the PRT has allowed the local command to manage significant programs in agriculture, etc. However, the tribal structure has been further weakened. The Taliban have managed to build trans-tribal groups of fighters even among tribes that are usually enemies. In some cases, they have killed or frightened the elders who opposed them. The tribes that try to resist Taliban pressure have seen their ability to move outside their

¹⁰ Rubin Barnett, "Saving Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 1, January/February 2007, p. 6.

territory significantly limited. The Taliban permit tribes to receive money from the PRT; in return the tribes let Taliban groups cross their territory.

Some members of the tribes individually join the Taliban. In addition, the Taliban are trying, with a fair amount of success, to build trans-tribal fighter groups, particularly in the eastern provinces. The process is close to what happened the last few years in Waziristan, where the jihadists were able to marginalize the elders and built a movement strong enough to supersede the tribal system. In a few places, the local tribes favor the government but are not in a position to actively oppose the Taliban.

Opening a Northern Front

Having achieved their objectives in the southern and eastern provinces, the Taliban are striving to open a front in the North, defined very broadly here as the provinces between Herat and Badakhshan. Any perception that the northern provinces are quiet is misleading. The Taliban have been able to make inroads into the northwest and northeast with small but efficient groups and are expanding their influence. If the IC does not mobilize against this northern thrust, the insurgency will become fully national within two or three years and the United States and the IC will simply be unable to provide sufficient resources to reverse it.

The Balk and Kunduz provinces have seen a fivefold increase in the number of security incidents between 2007 and 2008, with German patrols routinely coming under attack. Even more telling than the increase in incidents is their changing nature. The Taliban used to pay fighters to attack IC patrols and carry out a variety of different actions. In addition, they were working on recruiting almost exclusively within the Pashtun communities. Over the past few months, however, local analysts have witnessed two changes. First, the Taliban have built more solid networks and are relying less, if at all, on paid fighters, especially in Kunduz. They are also trying to recruit fighters from outside the Pashtun pockets, especially Uzbeks and also Turkmen. (The Hazaras, who are Shi'i, are totally allergic to Taliban propaganda.) Second, since the beginning of 2009, the Taliban have demonstrated greater capacity to organize attacks. Their increased professionalization—among other things, they move about quickly on motorbikes—explains how they have pulled off more aggressive and coordinated strikes, including simultaneous attacks on three Kunduz police posts in April.

The geographic scope of the insurgency is expanding. In certain parts of Herat province, the state structure has collapsed and the insurgency is moving freely in the triangle in three provinces (Herat, Badghris, and Ghor). In addition, the districts of Gurmach and Bala Murghab (Badghris Province) are now under the control of the Taliban. From there they are driving toward Faryab and Jowjan and Sar-i Pul. In Kunduz province, especially in Char dara and in Baghlan-i naw districts the Taliban are solidly entrenched.

The Situation Around Greater Kabul

For obvious reasons, the Taliban put a high value on controlling Kabul and are moving now to penetrate south and east of the capital. For analytical purposes here, the Kabul region covers the area from Kabul and its periphery to Jalalabad, and does not correspond to current official administrative divisions or NATO's military organization.

The Taliban have systematically organized the destabilization of Wardak and Logar provinces, which (outside the towns) are now largely under the control of the insurgency. The Musayi district (Kabul Province) is also under Taliban influence and hundreds of Taliban propaganda DVDs have been distributed in Qala-i Niyazi, a few miles from Kabul. To the east of Kabul, the Taliban (and the Hezb-i islami) have a strong presence in Kapisa Province and the North of Sarobi district.

The Southeast of the capital is open to Taliban infiltrations. Considering that the Pakistani border, which is under Taliban control, is only 90 kilometers away, it seems vulnerable. The Azrah district (Logar Province) dominated by Ahmadzai tribes is now under Taliban influence, and there is a contiguous band of insurgent territory from Wardak to the Pakistani border through Logar (see map). The road between Kabul and Jalalabad is under threat from the South; the Taliban are dominating the Khoriani district in Nangrahar Province; and even where the government has local support, local tribes still are unable to stop the Taliban. In Jalalabad, the current governor Sheer Agha Shirzai is popular but security is no better than before his induction. As an outsider, he is more an intermediary between different groups that were opposed to his predecessor, Haji Kadir.

The U.S. reinforcements now being deployed to Afghanistan will secure the road south of Kabul to Pul-i Alam and Gardez to the greatest extent possible, but not necessarily the surrounding territory. The road is not secure at night, in fact, in the East and South where the Taliban are dominant, few roads are secure. (The

road to Gardez is safe during the day, but not the stretch between Gardez and Khost.) There has been an effort to recruit militia in Wardak Province, although the recruiting process is unclear. Limited success for the coalition is possible around the Maydan Shahr district due to the fact that the Wardakis there are linked more to the city of Kabul than to the rest of the province. Altogether, the limited gains of the coalition south of Kabul are not threatening to the insurgency.

NATO aims to block the Taliban advance from Pakistan or Nuristan toward Kabul, though so far it has had little effect. In Kapisa Province, the French military became more cautious following the ambush on its troops in August 2008, and a more integrated NATO strategy has been worked out to protect the province and the Sarobi district from the insurgents. The resulting calm is, however, fragile and the insurgency has quickly reorganized. In Kunar, the U.S. forces are currently deployed in a series of isolated posts and it is relatively simple for insurgents to infiltrate between them.

Conclusion: Why the Current Strategy Is Not Efficient

The Taliban strategy has been successful so far. They have achieved most of their objectives in the South and East, and they are making inroads in the North. The Taliban are unlikely to change their strategy significantly in the face of the U.S. troop surge. The leadership will probably not concentrate forces to challenge the IC, as they regretted doing in 2005. The Taliban could decide to exert more pressure on cities such as Kabul, Ghazni, and Kandahar, where they are well infiltrated.

The bulk of the new IC resources is going to the South to reinforce the existing military apparatus. This deployment will benefit the Taliban: Success is unlikely in the South and the North is left open to insurgent infiltration. The IC is sending thousands of troops to Helmand, for example, which may prompt the Taliban to retreat tactically to the northern part of the province or to Ghor (or Uruzgan) and return later after IC forces leave. There will not be enough IC forces to take and hold most of the areas now controlled by the insurgency, so the Taliban can leave areas where American troops concentrate and then return when troops redeploy elsewhere. There is no way to force the Taliban to fight when they have a sanctuary in Pakistan or in the mountains. Concentrating U.S. forces in the South will also leave the North open for Taliban gains.

The insurgency does have weaknesses, though. The Taliban presence in the North is fragile. If the IC reinforced the Afghan police and military there, the insurgents could be stopped relatively easily. This will not be the case in one or two years if the insurgency is allowed to grow. In addition, the Taliban leadership is largely in Pakistan, which makes it susceptible to police operations, especially in Quetta.

The recent offensive of the Pakistani army after the Pakistani Taliban tried to take over the Buner district indicates that the main danger to the Afghan Taliban would be a change in Pakistani strategy that would put the Afghan Taliban in the difficult position of having to fight on two fronts. The results of the current military operations in Pakistan are probably going to weaken marginally the insurgency. But the Pakistani army does not aim to destroy the sanctuary for the Afghan Taliban. In addition, the more than 2 million Internally Displaced People in camps are likely to become radicalized by political movements that exploit the resentment and aimlessness of the young.

Based on this analysis, the IC should have a national perspective on the war and devise a strategy to halt the progress of the insurgency:

- 1) Stop focusing on the local leadership of the Taliban in Afghanistan and focus more on the central command in Quetta while pressuring Pakistan directly to take action there.
- 2) Focus new resources in places where the Taliban are still relatively weak: around Kabul and in the North to counter their strategy of geographical and ethnic extension of the war.
- 3) The current strategy of focusing the reinforcements in two provinces (Helmand and Kandahar) is risky. The lack of Afghan institutions condemns the IC forces to stay there indefinitely to prevent the return of the Taliban, especially since the Pakistani sanctuary enables them to conduct hit-and-run operations. In addition, the insurgency could rapidly redirect its resources to the North. Finally, more reinforcements will be needed in 2010 if this “clean and hold” strategy is to be expanded to other provinces.
- 4) NATO mistakenly views the insurgency as a local or regional phenomenon and has organized its forces accordingly, thereby failing to develop an integrated, coherent national response. The current offensive in Helmand, with its very local focus, is the latest example of this misguided strategy.

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