

# On the Edge of the Big Muddy: The Taliban Resurgence in Afghanistan

*Thomas H. Johnson\**

## ABSTRACT

This article attempts to delve into the morass that is developing for American and NATO forces in Afghanistan. Only through a proper understanding of the motivations and multiple identities that the Taliban lays claim to can their rapidly-growing insurgency be defeated and peace reestablished. By examining the historical and tribal facets of the insurgency, the nature of the Taliban is laid bare. This understanding is absolutely critical if the U.S. and NATO hope to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people.

*Keywords* • Afghanistan • Taliban • Insurgency • U.S. • NATO • Pakistan

## Introduction

In May 2003, then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld suggested that the war in Afghanistan was in a “cleanup” phase<sup>1</sup>. Now, four years after Rumsfeld’s statement and five and a half years since the conclusion of major Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) combat operations, it is clear that Afghanistan is anything but a stable and secure country. Indeed, the situation in Afghanistan has become extremely volatile. The Taliban is mounting a significant insurgent campaign against a regime that has not delivered on the expectations of the Afghan people. The new era of

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\* Thomas H. Johnson is a Research Professor of the Department of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. He is also the Director of NPS's Program on the Study of Culture and Conflict. The author would like to thank Alec Metz and Jarad Van Wagoner for their invaluable assistance in the development of this article as well as two anonymous reviewers for their comments. The article also benefited tremendously from the author's discussions as well intellectual exchanges with Chris Mason. Mr. Mason helped shape the author's views on a number of critical issues as well as the presentation style of this article. He should be viewed as a silent coauthor. Portions of this article were delivered as lectures to the Commonwealth Club San Francisco, California, November 16, 2006, entitled “Five Years after the Taliban: Is This Democracy and Stability?” and the World Affairs Council, Monterey California, May 16, 2007 entitled “Pakistan and the War on Terror: Running with the Hare and Hunting with the Hounds?”. The views expressed in this paper are the author's own and should not be construed as an official position or policy of the US Government, Department of Defense or Naval Postgraduate School.

<sup>1</sup> Rowan Scarborough, “War on Terrorism in ‘Cleanup’ Phase,” *Washington Times*, May 2 2003 <[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_go1637/is\\_200305/ai\\_n7511726](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_go1637/is_200305/ai_n7511726)> (April 4 2005).

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stability that was expected after the fall of the Taliban has disappeared. Afghanistan is now embroiled in an intense, violent, and growing insurgency. Faced with a resurgent Taliban, criticism over epidemic levels of corruption, lack of development, and rampant crime, Afghanistan is a mess.

While American and world attention focuses on Iraq, the situation in Afghanistan over the past three years has so deteriorated that the shaky American and NATO coalition risk losing the war against the Taliban. To make matters worse, for reasons to be explored in this article, Afghan President Harmid Karzai has warned that Afghans' patience with foreign troops is wearing thin.<sup>2</sup> Finally to add insult to injury, Afghanistan's economy has been captured by opium production and trafficking.

This dire situation is *not* inevitable; through a better understanding of the situation on the ground, and a corresponding shift in military tactics – if pursued immediately and with vigor – the United States, its NATO partners and their related aid and development organizations can reverse the course of the Taliban resurgence and bring peace to Afghanistan. The greatest threat to Afghanistan is not leftover munitions, *al-Qaeda*, or even narcotrafficking; these are merely symptoms of the real problems. Afghanistan faces a lack of control in the countryside by Kabul regime, its international supporters and its internal security forces and the failure to reconstruct the Afghan economy and infrastructure. The Afghan population's expectations have not been met.

In the absence of security and development, the Taliban threat is not going to diminish. The Taliban's presence is particularly pronounced in the south and east of the country, most notably Kandahar, and Helmand but also Zabul, Paktika and Paktya (among others); these provinces have experienced intensified Taliban activity, including attacks on coalition forces as well as the actual establishment of Taliban "shadow governments." These provinces have two key similarities: first, they border Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) or Pakistan's border provinces of Baluchistan and Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP), where Taliban commanders have allegedly found sanctuary. Secondly, these provinces are in the middle of the traditional Pashtun tribal homeland that has witnessed virtually no meaningful reconstruction since the United States and their Northern Alliance partners drove the Taliban from power in December 2001.

The purpose of this article is three-fold; first it will present a general overview of the present situation in Afghanistan and then examine a number of critical dynamics for the emergent Taliban. Specifically the article will explore the implications of adjacency to Pakistan of critical Afghan border provinces for the Taliban. It will then assess implications

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<sup>2</sup> Noor Rahman, "Afghans dispute U.S. version of raid casualties," *Reuters*, May 30 2007, <[www.reuters.com/article/newsOne/idUSISL25509820070530](http://www.reuters.com/article/newsOne/idUSISL25509820070530)> (May 20 2007).

of the lack of reconstruction in these same provinces for the insurgency. The article will also address a series of other critical aspects of the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan to include the implications of collateral damage to both the staying power of the Karzai regime in Kabul as well as to the influence of the insurgents with the Afghan population. The article will conclude with a discussion of policy options that directly flow from the foregoing analysis.

### **Whither Taliban?**

According to the U.S. Defense Department, the initial U.S. air campaign of OEF that began on October 7, 2001 “eviscerated” the Taliban’s military capability within two weeks.<sup>3</sup> On October 18, 2001 the air campaign was officially joined by a ground campaign when U.S. Special Forces entered northern Afghanistan and teamed up with the Northern Alliance – a loose confederation of veteran mujahideen and warlords from non-Pashtun ethnic blocs who represented the Taliban’s primary resistance. After only 62 days of conflict the Taliban regime was defeated and the United States and their Northern Alliance partner declared victory in Afghanistan.

The Northern Alliance included no significant Pashtun involvement, and was basically regarded by the Pashtun population (42 percent of Afghanistan) as a foreign entity. That the coalition whisked first Abdul Haq and then Hamid Karzai, prominent Pashtuns, to the fore of the fight against the Taliban after 9/11 showed the realization by the coalition that no one but a Pashtun could eventually rule Afghanistan. Haq was captured on October 25, 2001 by the Taliban and tortured to death; and, of course, Karzai went on to assume the presidency. To this day Karzai’s cabinet and government still contains many former Northern Alliance fighters.<sup>4</sup>

The success of the initial campaign against the Taliban was marred by two serious mistakes, one diplomatic and one military, which would prove to be major strategic blunders for the metaphorical “War on Terrorism.” In mid-November 2001, the Bush Administration permitted the Pakistani Air Force to fly out hundreds of Pakistanis encircled in the northern city of Kunduz, an evacuation that turned into a mass extraction of senior Taliban and *al-Qaeda* personnel, dubbed “Operation Evil Airlift” by appalled U.S. Special Forces personnel on the scene.<sup>5</sup> To

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<sup>3</sup> Romesh Ratnesar, “The New Rules Of Engagement,” *Time*, November 5 2001, <[www.time.com/magazine/article/0,9171,1001123,00.html](http://www.time.com/magazine/article/0,9171,1001123,00.html)> (April 5 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Such as the Tajik Amrullah Saleh, now head of the National Security Directorate.

<sup>5</sup> Marcus George, “Kunduz celebrates end of siege,” *BBC News*, November 26 2001, <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/1677157.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1677157.stm)> (May 23 2007); Michael Moran, “The Airlift of Evil,” *MSNBC*, November 29 2001,

many, this revealed the true loyalties of the Pakistani security services, and ensured that the fight against the Taliban would continue well into the future. To others, the evacuation reflected a necessity in order to avoid embarrassing Pakistani President Musharraf who had recently become a significant ally in the U.S. War on Terrorism. At the time, India issued a statement of protest against the airlift, on the assumption that *jihadis* returned to Pakistan would soon be appearing in Kashmir.<sup>6</sup> Instead we have seen them return en masse to the tribal territories on either side of the Afghan-Pak border, further hindering the pacification of Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup> Then, the following month, the U.S. failed to commit ground forces to block the escape route at Tora Bora of Osama bin Laden and dozens of his best men who had been encircled near the Afghan-Pakistan border.<sup>8</sup> The opportunity to complete the decisive destruction of the Taliban and *al-Qaeda* before Christmas 2001 was lost.

After the eventual defeat of the Taliban regime, an interim administration was quickly installed in Kabul under the terms of the UN-brokered Bonn Agreement. The Bonn Process which was formulated in December 2001, while flawed, offered real promise for the country.<sup>9</sup> International attention on Afghanistan remained high, *loya jirgas* were held to help formulate Afghanistan's political future, and donor countries were signing-on to help finance Afghan reconstruction and development. Meanwhile, bin Laden and most of the senior *al-Qaeda* leadership, as well as Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar and the great majority of the senior Taliban cadre, were believed to have taken up residence either in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) or Baluchistan Province, where they began to regroup and rearm. While there were surely exceptions, the time period from 2002 until spring 2003 saw Afghans breathe a collective sigh of relief after 23 years of almost continual conflict that had ripped the country as well as its social fabric apart.

The security situation started to deteriorate significantly in 2003 in the south and east of the country. With U.S. forces now bogged down and overstretched by the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the added strain of a continuing low-intensity war in Afghanistan became evident.

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<[www.msnbc.com/news/664935.asp?0si=-Prior percent20knowledge&cpl=1#BODY](http://www.msnbc.com/news/664935.asp?0si=-Prior percent20knowledge&cpl=1#BODY)> (May 23 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Seymour M. Hersh, "The Getaway," *The New Yorker*, January 28 2002, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, "Saving Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2007), <[www.foreignaffairs.org/20070101faessay86105-p0/barnett-r-rubin/saving-afghanistan.html](http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20070101faessay86105-p0/barnett-r-rubin/saving-afghanistan.html)> (May 23 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Ilene R. Prusher and Philip Smucker, "Al Qaeda quietly slipping into Iran, Pakistan," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 14 2002, <[www.csmonitor.com/2002/0114/pls2-wosc.html](http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/0114/pls2-wosc.html)> (May 23 2007).

<sup>9</sup> See Thomas H. Johnson, "Afghanistan's Post-Taliban Transition: The State of State-Building after War," *Central Asian Survey* 25, 1-2 (March-June 2006), p. 1-26.

Many key intelligence, Special Forces and aviation assets were withdrawn from Afghanistan and sent to Iraq. Moreover, during this same period, many Pashtuns became disenchanted with Karzai's Afghan Transitional Administration (ATA), which was widely viewed as being controlled by the Panshiri Tajik faction that held the government's key ministries of defense, interior and foreign affairs.

Pashtun suspicions and mistrust of the government were further heightened by the ATA's inability to protect Pashtuns from the wave of human rights abuses perpetrated by insurgents and warlords since the fall of the Taliban. Finally, a considerable source of discontent and fuel for the insurgency involved what were widely seen as the heavy-handed tactics of U.S. military operations in Pashtun areas of the country. Despite warnings from many Afghan observers, such "hard-knock" operations continued to be standard procedure for several years, alienating much of the populace.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the Pentagon continued to view the Afghan situation as one of counterterrorism, not counterinsurgency, and conducted operations in the rural areas accordingly. As one U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) commander commented, "Black Ops [Special Operations counterterrorism forces] do more damage in my province in one night than I can undo in six months."<sup>11</sup>

There have been 579 U.S.-coalition casualties and 5,885 have been wounded in Afghanistan since October, 2001.<sup>12</sup> While the overall level of violence in Afghanistan does not yet approach that experienced in Iraq, Afghanistan is actually the more dangerous place to be deployed in terms of fatalities per soldier-day in the combat zone. Furthermore, while the rate of U.S. casualties has stabilized somewhat in Iraq, it has increased steadily in Afghanistan since 2002.

Some analysts believe that the Taliban have at least 12,000 fighters controlling areas in the provinces of Oruzgan, Helmand, Zabul and Kandahar.<sup>13</sup> Extremely troubling indicators – such as the relatively free movement of insurgent groups – reveal that increasingly large areas of the east and south of the country are falling under the political control of

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<sup>10</sup> "Expert: Afghan War Needs New Strategy," *United Press International*, May 21 2007, <[www.upi.com/Security\\_Terrorism/Briefing/2007/05/21/expert\\_afghan\\_war\\_needs\\_new\\_strategy/4851/](http://www.upi.com/Security_Terrorism/Briefing/2007/05/21/expert_afghan_war_needs_new_strategy/4851/)> (May 23 2007); Jason Motlagh, "Afghanistan reels under bumper harvests," *Asia Times*, July 11, 2006, <[www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/HG11Df01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/HG11Df01.html)> (May 23 2007), and Paul Gallis, NATO in Afghanistan: A Test of the Transatlantic Alliance," *CRS Report for Congress*, August 22, 2006 <[www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33627.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33627.pdf)> (May 23 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Marc Sedra, "The Forgotten War Shows No Sign of Abating," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, April 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Casualty data as of May 22, 2007. See <[www.icasualties.org/oef/](http://www.icasualties.org/oef/)>

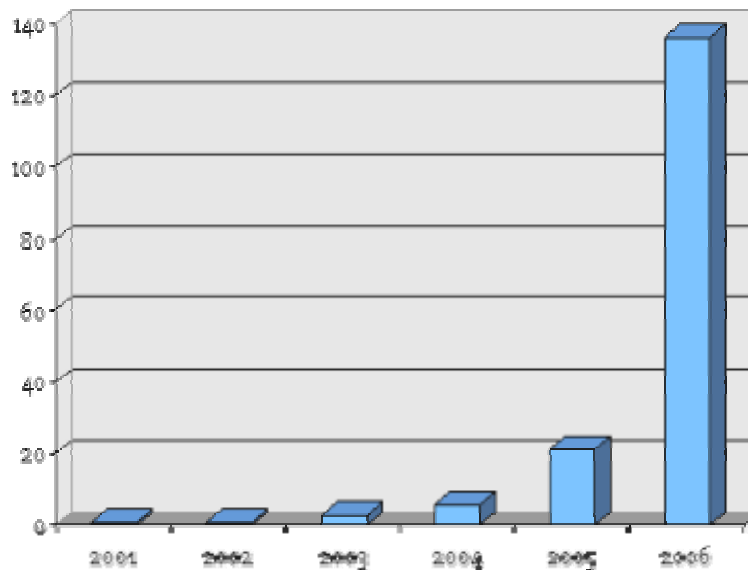
<sup>13</sup> Center for International Issues Research, *Daily Arabic Media Report*, May 25 2006.

the Taliban. Said Jawad, Afghanistan's ambassador to the U.S., recently stated,

"We have lost a lot of the ground that we may have gained in the country, especially in the South . . . The fact that U.S. military resources have been 'diverted' to the war in Iraq is of course hurting Afghanistan."<sup>14</sup>

The last three years have provided ample evidence of increasingly sophisticated insurgent tactics being imported from Iraq and grafted onto classic *mujahideen*-style guerilla warfare. Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and suicide operations, traditionally absent from Afghanistan, have become common place throughout the country. Figure 1 illustrates the exponential increase in suicide attacks in Afghanistan. Between 2002 and 2005 there were only four suicide attacks. In 2005, this figure increased to 25 suicide bombings and in 2006, the country witnessed at least 139 such attacks. Taliban Mullah Hayat Khan has sworn to use 2,000 suicide bombers to make 2007 the "bloodiest year" yet.<sup>15</sup>

Figure 1. Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan by Year<sup>16</sup>



<sup>14</sup> "Taliban, Al-Qaeda regroup in Afghanistan, defying U.S. strategy," *Online International News Network*, <[www.onlinenews.com.pk/details.php?id=97378](http://www.onlinenews.com.pk/details.php?id=97378)> (May 22 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Brian Glyn Williams and Cathy Young, "Cheney Attack Reveals Taliban Suicide Bombing Patterns," *The Jamestown Foundation*, February 27 2007, <[www.jamestown.org/news\\_details.php?news\\_id=222](http://www.jamestown.org/news_details.php?news_id=222)> (May 30 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Data is based on recorded attacks compiled by Human Rights Watch, "Rising Civilian Casualties: Trends and Statistics," *The Human Cost: The Consequences of Insurgent Attacks in Afghanistan*, *Human Rights Watch* 19, 6 (April 2007), <[www.hrw.org/reports/2007/afghanistan0407/index.htm](http://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/afghanistan0407/index.htm)> (May 30 2007).

Similar increases have been witnessed in the insurgent's use of IEDs. In 2006, there were at least 189 bomb attacks in which killed 492 civilians and injured approximately 773, a total of over 1,000 casualties.<sup>17</sup> Overall 2006 witnessed a 200 percent increase in insurgent attacks compared to 2005 with September 2006 being the deadliest month in the country in five years. Many predict that 2007 will be more violent than 2006.

Recent years have also recently witnessed Taliban operations involving larger "unit" sizes. During 2006, for example, Afghanistan witnessed numerous attacks consisting of over 50 insurgents, as compared to just a few such attacks during 2005.<sup>18</sup> Reports of insurgents massing in battalion-sized formations of 300-400 fighters are no longer rare. It is even possible that the future may witness Taliban swarm attacks against smaller coalition Forward Operating Bases (FOBs). In early February 2007 the entire village of Musa Qala, Helmand Province was overrun by 200-300 Taliban. Village leaders had entered into an agreement with the governor of Helmand Province and with British forces that local police groups would keep the Taliban out if NATO forces would remain outside the village. The Taliban takeover resulted in approximately 8,000 people fleeing Musa Qala in fear of a NATO counterattack.<sup>19</sup> In an interview with RFE/RL on 6 February 2007, Ahmed Rashid stated that:

"The Taliban last year fought positional warfare – trying to hold ground, hold territory...The danger this year is that they may try to launch heavy guerrilla attacks with perhaps 200 men at a time, not just in three provinces but perhaps in six or seven provinces, even in Western Afghanistan."<sup>20</sup>

There is no question that Afghanistan's American-backed, post-Taliban government is struggling for its survival. President Hamid

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<sup>17</sup> "Rising Civilian Casualties: Trends and Statistics," The Human Cost: The Consequences of Insurgent Attacks in Afghanistan, Human Rights Watch, 19, 6 (April 2007), <[www.hrw.org/reports/2007/afghanistan0407/index.htm](http://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/afghanistan0407/index.htm)> (May 30 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Senior U.S. Government military analyst. For a similar assessment see: Walter Pincus, "Growing Threat Seen In Afghan Insurgency: DIA Chief Cites Surging Violence in Homeland," *Washington Post*, March 1 2006, p. A08.

<sup>19</sup> For more information on the Musa Qala attack see: "NATO names 'killed' Taliban chief," *CNN*, February 5 2007, <[www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/02/05/afghanistan.battle/](http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/02/05/afghanistan.battle/)>, (May 30 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Ron Synovitz, "Afghanistan: Facing the Taliban Threat in the Coming Months," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 6 2007, <[www.rferl.org/features/features\\_Article.aspx?m=02&y=2007&id=C6C33122-BEC1-44F1-B576-EDD1DA1FBD46](http://www.rferl.org/features/features_Article.aspx?m=02&y=2007&id=C6C33122-BEC1-44F1-B576-EDD1DA1FBD46)>, (May 30 2007).



Karzai's government is encountering extreme difficulty extending control and mandate outside Kabul into the country's hinterland regions.

The stated goal of the United States since the initiation of OEF and its metric of success has been to create a stable Afghan democracy which would never again harbor international terrorists. By that metric, we are losing the war in Afghanistan. Far from being the "success story" trumpeted by the Bush Administration, a more accurate assessment is that Afghanistan is once again on the edge of a collapse into anarchy and a safe-haven for international terrorism.

For its part, the Karzai government seems to be popular with almost no one. To the Dari-speaking tribes of the north, Hamid Karzai is seen as a tool of the Pashto-speaking tribes of the south. To the southern Pashtuns, he is perceived as a weak puppet of the Americans. Today the Afghan government barely controls even Kabul, where suicide bombers now detonate themselves regularly.

The simple, ugly fact is that the Taliban is making significant progress in regaining control in large areas of the country. Additionally, it has been asserted that a new, independent "Talibanistan" has been effectively created on Afghanistan's southern border inside Pakistan, where international terrorists linked to *al-Qaeda* – from Yemen, Iraq, Chechnya, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and even Turkey – now train and operate freely.<sup>21</sup>

Compounding the problem, Afghanistan has been, for at least three years, the worst example of a narco-state on the planet.<sup>22</sup> Afghanistan now produces annually more heroin than the human race actually consumes in a year.<sup>23</sup> Narcotics are responsible for at least one-half of the GDP in the country in one way or another and, as a result, huge amounts of cash are flowing into the war chests of the insurgency. The primary line of defense in the drug battle, the Afghan National Police, is disorganized, poorly trained, corrupt and one of the most hated and inefficient institutions in the country; the senior U.S. drug enforcement official in Kabul estimated in late 2005 that 90 percent of the police chiefs

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<sup>21</sup> "Afghanistan: The Rise of the Narco-Taliban," *Testimony of Congressman Mark Kirk Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing on Afghanistan*, February 15 2007, <[www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/110/kir021507.pdf](http://www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/110/kir021507.pdf)> (May 23 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Jim Maceda, "Poppies fuel Taliban's return in Afghanistan," *MSNBC*, April 27 2007, <[www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18357411/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18357411/)> (May 23 2007). It should be noted, however, that Karzai emphatically denies this ("Karzai Says Afghanistan Is 'Not a Narco State,'" *Voice of America*, May 11 2007, <[www.voanews.com/english/About/2007-05-11-voa52.cfm](http://www.voanews.com/english/About/2007-05-11-voa52.cfm)> (May 23 2007)).

<sup>23</sup> 30 percent more, in fact ("Afghan opium cultivation soars 59 percent in 2006, UNODC survey shows," *UNODC*, September 2 2006, <[www.unodc.org/unodc/press\\_release\\_2006\\_09\\_01.html](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/press_release_2006_09_01.html)> (May 23 2007)).

in Afghanistan are actively involved in or protecting the narcotics industry.<sup>24</sup>

### The Challenges of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Border and Other Problems

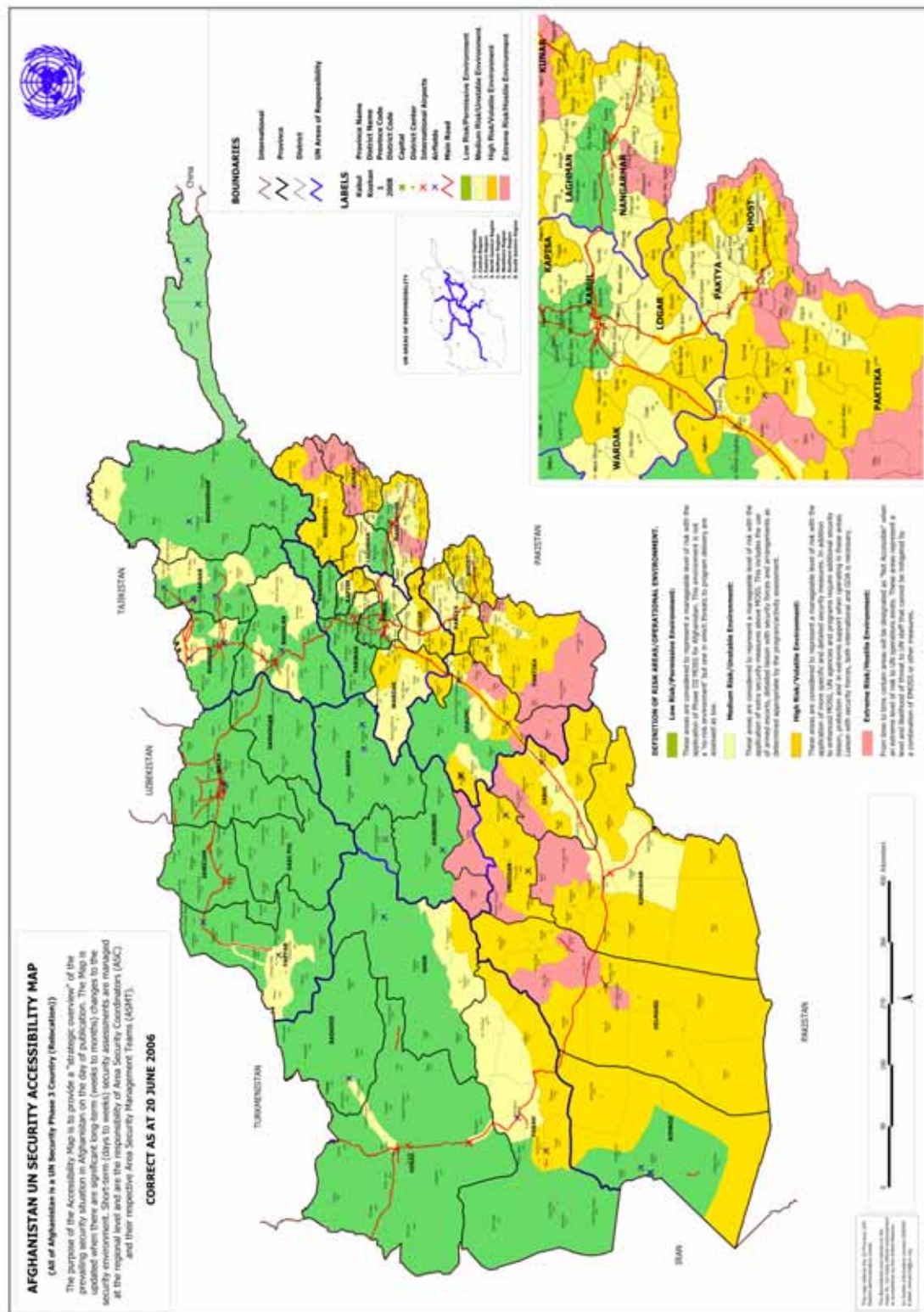
Afghanistan, as well as Pakistan, has significant problems and challenges in its tribal and areas along their often ill-defined 2,560 km common border. As suggested above and illustrated in Figure 2, the southeastern tier of Afghanistan has become a hotbed of insurgents. The most dangerous and volatile insurgent areas in Afghanistan are those provinces adjacent to the Pakistan border where there has been a resurgence of insurgent violence during the past few years. All of these border provinces are designated as either “extreme risk/hostile” or “high risk/hostile” environments by the UN (see Figure 2).

This area has proven vital to the Taliban who form the bulk of the Afghan insurgency and allegedly operate in Afghanistan from bases inside Pakistan. This border region also is central to forces led by Afghan Islamist Gulbuddin Hikmatyar’s *Hizb-i-Islami* (HIG), the *jihadi* network of Maulawi Jalaluddin Haqqani and foreign *jihadi* forces, including the leadership of *al-Qaeda*.<sup>25</sup> These insurgent forces in the borderland provinces present a real and immediate challenge to the Karzai regime as well as state and regional stability.

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<sup>24</sup> Qtd., Steve Kroft, “Afghanistan: Addicted to Heroin,” *60 Minutes*, October 16 2005, <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/10/14/60minutes/main946648.shtml>> (May 23 2007).

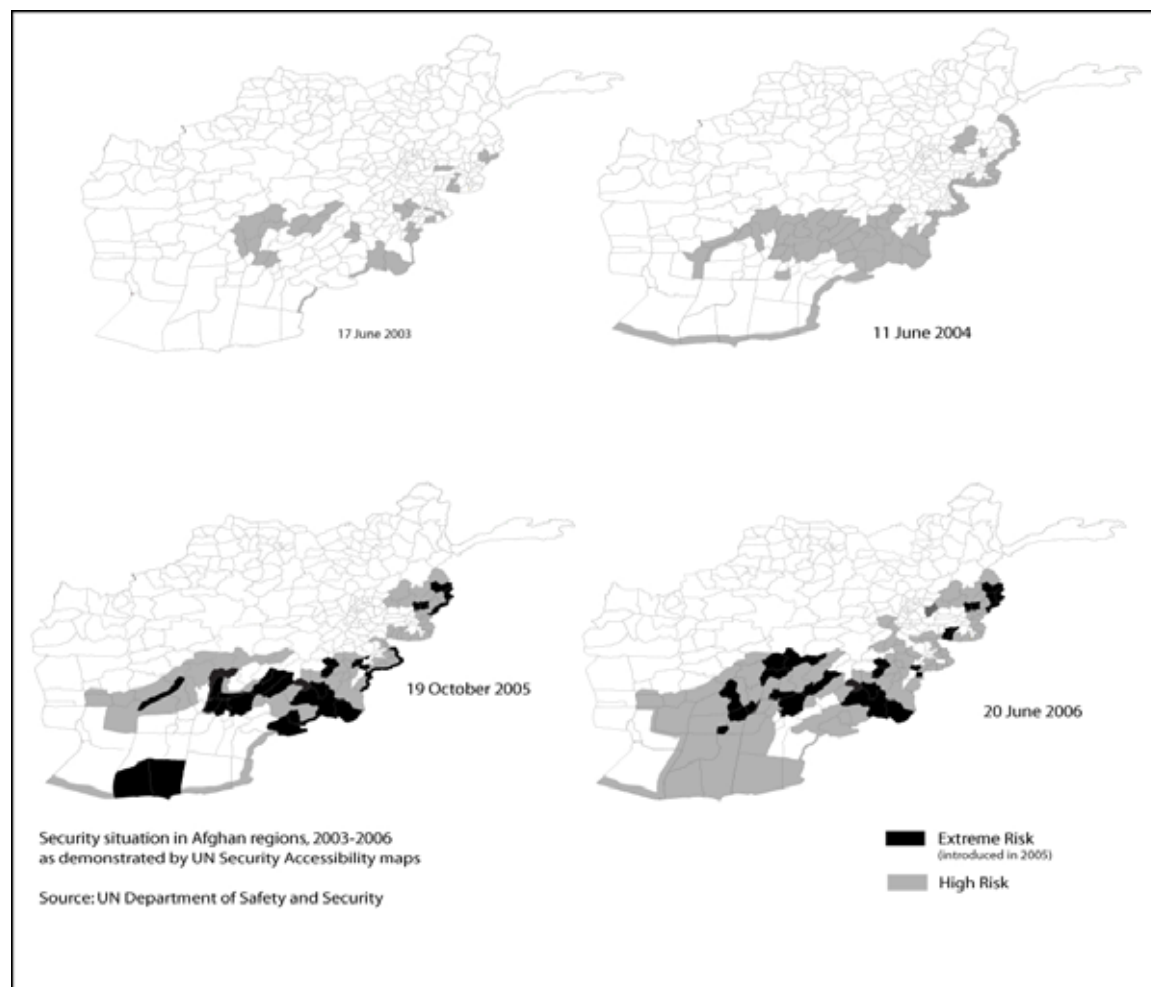
<sup>25</sup> For an assessment of the cross-border nature of the Afghan insurgency, see: International Crisis Group, “Countering Afghanistan’s Insurgency: No Quick Fixes,” *Crisis Group Asia Report*, No 123, (November 2006).

Figure 2. Security Situation in Afghanistan<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Source: United Nations Department of Safety and Security . See: United Nations "Afghanistan – Maps," Global Security.org, 2006, <[www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/maps.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/maps.htm)> (November 5 2006).

Moreover, as suggested by Figure 3, the security situation in Afghanistan and especially along the border area has significantly deteriorated in the last few years. This has been the case, as posited above, since spring of 2003 when many key intelligence, Special Forces and aviation assets were withdrawn from Afghanistan and sent to Iraq.

Figure 3. Growth of High Risk Areas in Afghanistan<sup>28</sup>



Besides the importance of the border area to the insurgency, the border area is also the epitome of a damning problem for Afghanistan – the significant difference between Afghan people's expectations versus reality. While the Afghan population was leery of the United States for abandoning the country after the Soviets withdrew in early 1989, the majority of Afghans welcomed the U.S. action against the Taliban in 2001.<sup>29</sup> The Afghan population expected that the U.S. intervention would

<sup>28</sup> Source: International Crisis Group, *Countering Afghanistan's Insurgency: No Quick Fixes*, p. 28.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of Afghan perceptions of the US post-Cold War abandonment of Afghanistan, see Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil & Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, (New Haven: Yale University Press: 2000), p. 175-176. For a description of reactions

eventually lead to reconstruction of the country and a betterment of their individual lives.<sup>30</sup> Most Afghans were extremely war weary from at least 23 years of continual and incessant warfare that destroyed Afghanistan as a functioning state; *most of the Afghan populous desperately wanted peace and stability*. This same population believed that the United States would quickly stabilize Afghanistan and better their lives. Tragically for Afghans as well as the regional and international community, these expectations have not been met for a number of reasons.

The “kinetic” battle against the Taliban must be tightly and significantly coupled with “nonkinetic” reconstruction of Afghanistan and this is an area where the counterinsurgency is critically failing. According to a recent report assessing progress of Afghan reconstruction:

- “Afghans are losing trust in their government because of an escalation in violence;
- Public expectations are neither being met nor managed;
- Conditions in Afghanistan have deteriorated in all key areas targeted for development, except for the economy and women’s rights.”<sup>31</sup>

In the first year after the invasion by U.S. and coalition forces, the U.S. donated some US\$350 million to reconstruction,<sup>32</sup> or slightly more than ten dollars per Afghan. For a country that had just experienced decades of fighting resulting in the near complete destruction its infrastructure as well as social fabric, this amount barely began to address the most basic needs. By 2004, a child born in Afghanistan had less than a 75 percent chance of living to its fifth birthday.<sup>33</sup> And yet still much of the aid to Afghanistan went to projects of debatable importance to the average Afghan. Considerable funding went to the Kabul to Kandahar road, in some cases costing US\$700,000 per kilometer for the slender, two lane highway (the U.S. built section of the road is 389 kilometers, the rest

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to the US invasion of Afghanistan and the fall of the Taliban, see William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 265-268.

<sup>30</sup> Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars*.

<sup>31</sup> Seema Patel and Steven Ross, *Breaking Point: Measuring Progress in Afghanistan*, (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 2007), p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> “Humanitarian and Reconstruction Aid to Afghanistan: Fact Sheet,” U.S. Agency for International Development, September 5, 2002, <[www.usaid.gov/press/releases/2002/fs020905.html](http://www.usaid.gov/press/releases/2002/fs020905.html)> (May 30 2007).

<sup>33</sup> “Statistics,” *Human Development Report 2006*, (United Nations Development Programme, 2006) <<http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/>> (May 30 2007).

being repaved by the Japanese government).<sup>34</sup> Even before cost-overruns, the road was budgeted to cost US\$270 million.<sup>35</sup> In the end, its construction cost over a million dollars a mile, much of which only went to U.S. contractors who then subcontracted the work to Indian and Turkish subcontractors. Considering that the U.S. in the first four years after the initiation of OEF put only US\$1.62 billion into development works,<sup>36</sup> the cost of this one road consumed a significant portion of the budget.

Further hindering international aids' role in reconstruction is the fact that according to some estimates, approximately 86 percent of such aid to Afghanistan is 'tied'; meaning the aid must be spent on goods or services from the U.S. rather than on Afghan indigenous sources. Such aid has little impact on Afghan economic development and has come to be referred to as "phantom aid".<sup>37</sup>

At the 2004 Berlin Donors Conference for Afghan Reconstruction, US\$8.9 billion was pledged by over 60 countries for the period 2004-2009. This equals roughly US\$56 per Afghan per year. If the phantom aid standard of the U.S. is used, only US\$7.84 would reach the average Afghan. Thankfully, other aid donating nations have proved more responsible and tied less of their donations to the donor.<sup>38</sup> Still, allowing for major construction projects, such as the Kabul-Kandahar road (which is planned to eventually ring the entire country), the U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan would do well to pressure their governments to make rural Afghans shareholders in their development works. Without local buy-in and cooperation in the construction of a new Afghanistan, more Afghans will slip into the shadowy worlds of insurgency and narcotrafficking.

The Taliban in the border area have followed an explicit and systematic campaign of violence and intimidation to keep NGOs, aid and humanitarian workers from gaining access to beneficiaries and promulgating urgently needed reconstruction and humanitarian activities. During 2003 and 2004, thirty-six NGO workers were murdered

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<sup>34</sup> Ann Jones, "How U.S. dollars disappear in Afghanistan: quickly and thoroughly," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 3 2006, <[www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2006/09/03/INGR0KRGMF1.DTL](http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2006/09/03/INGR0KRGMF1.DTL)> (May 25 2007).

<sup>35</sup> "Phase I: Kabul-Kandahar Highway," U.S. Agency for International Development, December 14 2003, <[www.usaid.gov/press/factsheets/2003/fs031214.html](http://www.usaid.gov/press/factsheets/2003/fs031214.html)> (May 30 2007).

<sup>36</sup> Margaret Coker and Anne Usher, "U.S. aid to Afghanistan falls short," *The Washington Times*, November 19 2005, <[www.washingtontimes.com/world/20051118-110234-7070r.htm](http://www.washingtontimes.com/world/20051118-110234-7070r.htm)> (May 30 2007).

<sup>37</sup> Jones, "How U.S. dollars disappear in Afghanistan: quickly and thoroughly"; and *Real Aid: and Agenda for Making Aid Work*, Actionaid International, 2006, <<http://www.actionaidusa.org/actionaidrealaid.pdf>> (May 30 2007).

<sup>38</sup> *Real Aid: and Agenda for Making Aid Work*.

by Taliban guerillas.<sup>39</sup> In November 2003, two years after the Taliban retreat from Kabul, the United Nations started pulling staff from large areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan and closed refugee reception centers in four provinces.<sup>40</sup> Unable to provide a reasonable level of security for their personnel, most NGO's, including *Medicines Sans Frontiers* (Doctors Without Borders), CARE, and Mercy Corps followed suit by leaving areas most in need. The specific targeting of NGO staff by the Taliban – in addition to the general situation of insecurity – has created an environment in certain areas of the country (especially in the southern, southeastern and eastern regions) where many NGOs are either unable to operate, or are constrained in their operations. This strategy has inhibited reconstruction that could better the lives of Afghan citizens and, more importantly from the Taliban's perspective, results in the population's disenchantment with policy initiatives from Kabul. When a reconstruction or humanitarian team appears the Taliban either greet it with violence or intimidation until it abandons its efforts.<sup>41</sup> The risk to foreign aid workers was increased when, in 2005, the Taliban issued a *fatwa*, or religious edict, ordering the death of all "infidels" and others supporting the foreign occupation of Afghanistan.<sup>42</sup> This *fatwa* was an explicit part of the Taliban's strategy to inhibit reconstruction efforts and increase the delta between popular expectations and reality. It also, ironically, allowed the Taliban to continually ask the hinterland community, "what has Kabul or the international community done for you lately?"

Kabul and its international supporters have been hindered in countering this Taliban strategy primarily due to their very light security foot print. The absence of adequate number of troops and sufficient resources, they have not been able to secure the countryside to an extent that has allowed for reconstruction strategies to be pursued in an integrated and safe fashion. Table 1 presents data concerning the concentration of international peacekeeping forces in a variety of recent conflict situations. Overall, Afghanistan has the lowest international-troop-to-population ratio (and one of the lowest international-aid to-

<sup>39</sup> Afghanistan NGO Safety Office and CARE, *NGO Insecurity in Afghanistan*, May 2005, p 3-4, <[www.care.org/newsroom/specialreports/afghanistan/20050505\\_ansocare.pdf](http://www.care.org/newsroom/specialreports/afghanistan/20050505_ansocare.pdf)>, (May 23 2007).

<sup>40</sup> "U.N. Refugee Agency Begins Afghan Withdrawal," *The Associated Press*, November 18 2003.

<sup>41</sup> See Afghanistan NGO Safety Office and CARE, *NGO Insecurity in Afghanistan*; "Taliban Threatens to Kill Afghan Women in Foreign NGOs," *Asian Political News*, October 28 2003; and Medicins Sans Frontiers Article, "Military Humanitarianism: A Deadly Confusion," December 16 2004.

<sup>42</sup> Amnesty International, *Afghanistan, All Who Are Not Friends Are Enemies: Taleban Abuses Against Civilians*, April 2007, <<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa110012007>> (May 23 2007).



population ratios) of any major intervention in the past decade.<sup>43</sup> In the Kosovo and Bosnia interventions, the peacekeeper-to-citizen ratios were 1:50 and 1:66, respectively. For the first four years of the Bonn process, the comparable figure for Afghanistan hovered near 1:2000. In fact, historically, the force commitment to Afghanistan represents the lowest level of effort in any international intervention since World War II. Today as seen in Table 1, the ratio of NATO and U.S. troops to Afghan population is roughly 1:653, or about 1/10th of the force level required to actually bring about stability when there is no active resistance or insurgency.<sup>44</sup>

Table 1: Comparison of Peak International Troop Strength by Territory and Population<sup>45</sup>

Location	Peak Number of International Troops	International Troops per kilometer	International Troops per population
Kosovo	40,000	1 per 0.3 km	1 per 50
Bosnia	60,000	1 per 0.85 km	1 per 66
East Timor	9,000	1 per 1.6 km	1 per 111
Iraq	155,000	1 per 2.8 km	1 per 161
Somalia	40,000	1 per 16.0 km	1 per 200
Liberia	11,000; 2200 (MEF)	1 per 8.0 km	1 per 265
Sierra Leone	18,000	1 per 4.0 km	1 per 300
Haiti	20,000	1 per 1.5 km	1 per 375
<b>AFGHANISTAN</b>	<b>49,000</b>	<b>1 per 13.21 km</b>	<b>1 per 653</b>

In summary, the international force commitment to Afghanistan is absurdly small for its stated mission. Using case studies of more than 50 insurgencies since WWII, counterinsurgency experts apply a rough rule of thumb of one security provider (i.e., a soldier, reliable policeman,

<sup>43</sup> Michael Bhatia, Kevin Lanigan & Philip Wilkinson, "Minimal Investments, Minimal Results: The Failure of Security Policy in Afghanistan," AERU Briefing Paper, June 2004, p. 9.

<sup>44</sup> "Bush, NATO Chief regret Afghan deaths," *Agence France-Press*, May 22 2007, <[www.afp.com/english/news/stories/070522033722.nl6zilhp.html](http://www.afp.com/english/news/stories/070522033722.nl6zilhp.html)> (May 23 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Sources: Rubin, B.R., Stoddard, A., Hamidzada, H., Farhadi, A., Building a New Afghanistan: The Value of Success, the Cost of Failure, (Center on International Cooperation, March 2004):15; CIA World Factbook ([www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov)); Dobbins, J., McGinn, J., Crane, K., Jones, S., Lal, R., Rathmell, A., Swanger, R., Timilsina, A., America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2003), and; Michael Bhatia, Kevin Lanigan & Philip Wilkinson, "Minimal Investments, Minimal Results: The Failure of Security Policy in Afghanistan," AERU Briefing Paper, June 2004, p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> Kalev I. Sepp, "Best Practices in Counterinsurgency", *Military Review*, (May-June 2005), p. 8-12; also see: David Galula, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956-1958*, (Rand Corporation, 2006); David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, (London: Praeger, 1964); Robert Taber, *War of the Flea: The Classic Study of Guerrilla Warfare* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac, 2002), and; John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).



temporary armed auxiliary, etc., under the effective command and control of the central government) for every six citizens to shut down an insurgency.<sup>46</sup> Counting the Afghan National Police (ANP), the Border Police, the paramilitary militias and other armed squads not even remotely under government control, the figure for Afghanistan today is not 1:6 but closer to 1:200. This type of security commitment can not pacify the countryside and allow for meaningful reconstruction to take place.

Haji Fezal, an Afghan farmer and transport business owner from Khakar, Zabul Province sums up the problem, when he states, "In our hearts we don't support the Taliban, but people have no choice because the government can't provide them with security ... [the Taliban are] pouring across the border from Pakistan, and the government can't control what is happening in the districts."<sup>47</sup> Border area villages such as Khakar can be considered "swing areas." That is to suggest, as Haji Fezal implies, that people living in this border area would probably side with Kabul if the Afghan regime and their international supporters offered the villagers sustained security and hope for a better life. But these desires have not been fulfilled and in their absence much of the population has turned its allegiance to the Taliban insurgents or has remained neutral. Khakar is illustrative of most of the Afghan villages south of the Helmand River where the Taliban's power and influence is greatest and security is paltry. For example, Khakar has:

- No aid or humanitarian workers assisting to better the lives of its poor and illiterate population (According to the United Nations 80 percent of Zabul's 300,000 residents are ill fed subsistence farmers and herders);
- Only two midwives, but no obstetricians or trained doctors or any medical facilities, and;
- Less than 10 percent of girls attending school and only 5 percent of woman are literate (in 2005 Afghan legislative elections, 11 percent of Zabul women voted, compared with the national average of 40 percent).<sup>48</sup>

The small number of NATO Forces in the border area provinces compounds the problems because it does not allow for meaningful

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<sup>47</sup> Denis Gray, "A backwater Afghan village straddles the fence between government and the Taliban," *The Associated Press*, April 30 2007, <[www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/04/29/asia/AS-GEN-Afghan-Razors-Edge.php](http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/04/29/asia/AS-GEN-Afghan-Razors-Edge.php)> (May 31 2007).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

reconstruction or humanitarian aid. NATO has only 1,000 troops and the Afghan National Army has only 600 troops in the entire province of Zabul; meaning that there is approximately one troop for every 11.3 square kilometers in Zabul. While this troop concentration is greater than the average across the entire country (see Table 1) it is still meager considering the amount of insurgent activity in this critical border province.

### **The Pakistani-side of the Border**

Many claim that attempting to analyze the Afghan-side of the border without recognizing the importance of the Pakistani-side of the border is a fruitless exercise. Afghan officials in the past two years have made progressively stronger comments linking Islamabad to the Taliban insurgency by claiming that Pakistan provides a reliable, safe, and fertile recruiting, training, and fund-raising haven just across the border. President Hamid Karzai has directly accused Pakistan's government of supporting the Taliban: "The problem is not Taliban. We don't see it that way. The problem is with Pakistan ... The state of Pakistan [is] supporting the Taliban, so we presume if there is still any Taliban, that they are being supported by a state element."<sup>49</sup> The Pakistani regime vehemently denies such allegations and argues that they are making incredible sacrifices supporting the U.S. War on Terrorism.

The Pakistani-side of this border area contains the country's two western provinces of Baluchistan and the Northwest Frontier (NWFP), as well as the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA). These areas have some of the highest rates of poverty, illiteracy, and violence in Pakistan but they receive little development assistance from Islamabad. The NWFP, for example, received just US\$34 million in federal aid and development grants in 2006, compared with Punjab's US\$210 million – even though Punjab, by many accounts, already has the healthiest economic indicators in Pakistan.<sup>50</sup> Some American intelligence officials place Mullah Omar within 20 miles of Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan,<sup>51</sup> although the Pakistani senior authorities vigorously deny

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<sup>49</sup> Alisa Tang, "Pakistan accused of supporting Taliban," *Associated Press*, December 12 2006, <[www.afghanistannewscenter.com/news/2006/december/dec132006.html](http://www.afghanistannewscenter.com/news/2006/december/dec132006.html)> (December 14 2006).

<sup>50</sup> David Montero, "Pakistan losing territory to radicals," *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 29, 2007, <[www.csmonitor.com/2007/0529/p01s04-wosc.html](http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0529/p01s04-wosc.html)> (May 30 2007).

<sup>51</sup> Peter Bergen, Anderson Cooper, and Charlie Moore, "Source: Mullah Omar in Pakistan," *CNN*, September 9 2006. <[www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/asiapcf/09/09/pakistan.mullahomar/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/asiapcf/09/09/pakistan.mullahomar/index.html)> (November 11 2006).

this.<sup>52</sup> But what few deny is the apparent fact that economic and political failure in these provinces, as well as in the FATA, is fanning extremism.

The FATA in particular has become an extremely prominent area for the Afghan insurgency. The FATA is located along Pakistan's north western border with Afghanistan, and consists of seven semi-autonomous agencies or administrative districts – Bajaur, Khyber, Kurram, Mohmand, Orakzai, South Waziristan and North Waziristan (see Figure 4).<sup>53</sup>

The name for this area is actually a misnomer. These lands are not *Federally Administered* in any sense of the word.<sup>54</sup> As experienced by the British as well as the Pakistanis, this is an area that has never been under the explicit control of anyone but the Pashtun tribes that dominate the area.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Islamabad for all practical purposes has never controlled any more than ten yards to the left and right of the major roads of the tribal areas. Just as Kabul has little control on their side of the border, Islamabad comparably has little control on their side.

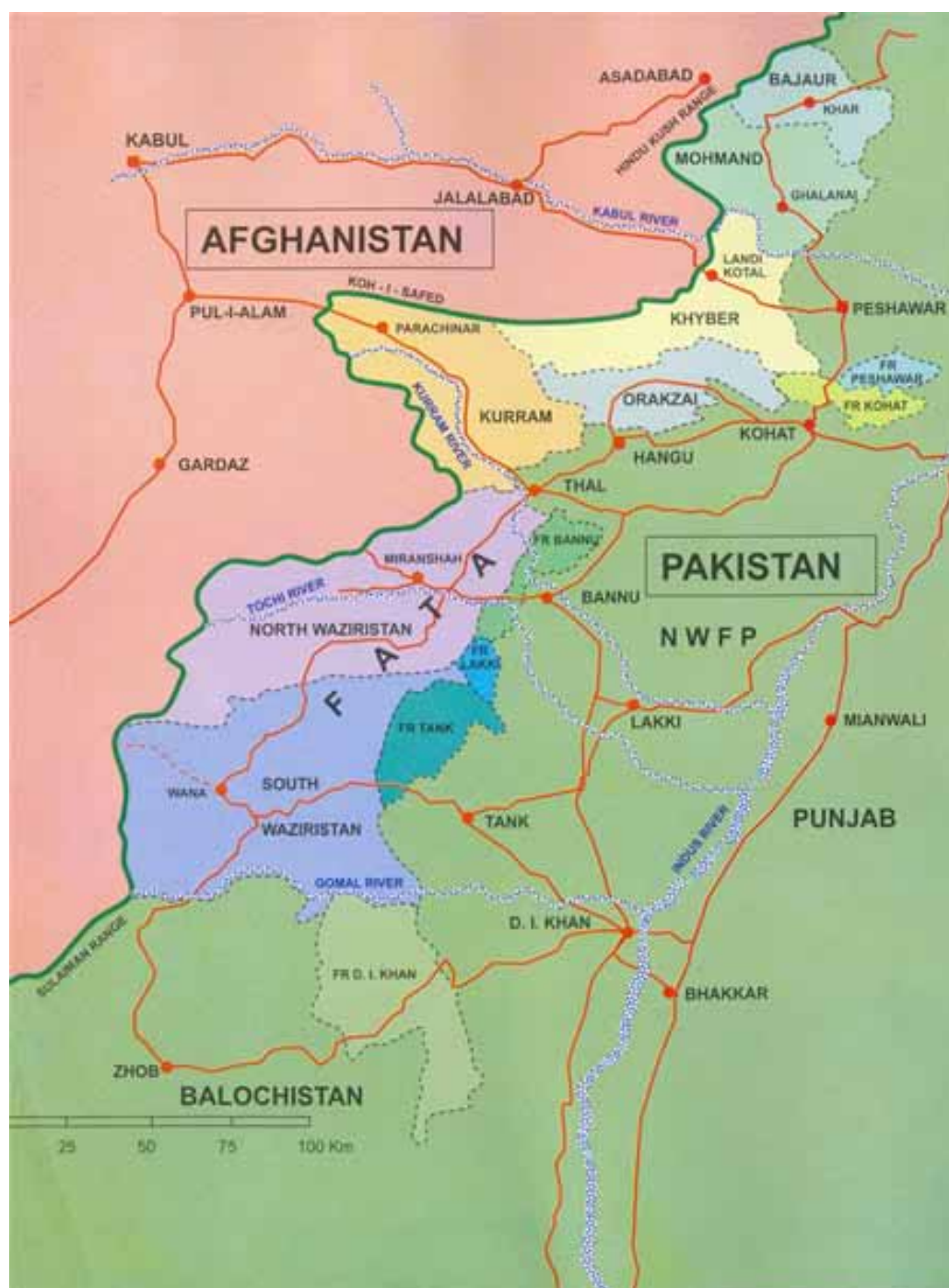
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<sup>52</sup> "Mullah Omar not present in Quetta: Kasuri," *Pak Tribune*, September 18 2006. <<http://www.paktribune.com/news/index.shtml?154478>> (November 11 2006) as well as the author's numerous interviews with senior Pakistani government officials, March 2007.

<sup>53</sup> For an excellent analysis of the FATA and border area: International Crisis Group, "Pakistan's Tribal Areas: Appeasing The Militants," *Asia Report* No. 124, December 11, 2006.

<sup>54</sup> As pointed out by Rahimullah Yusufzai, in his analysis for BBC, "...Pakistani courts and police have no jurisdiction in the tribal areas." See Rahimullah Yusufzai, "Analysis: Pakistan's tribal frontiers," *BBC News*, December 14 2001, <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/1711316.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1711316.stm)>, (May 23 2007). For an overview of the political administration and control of the FATA please refer to the website maintained by the Pakistan government see <<http://www.fata.gov.pk/index.php?link=3>>, (May 23 2007).

<sup>55</sup> The obstinacy of the Pashtun tribes combined with the inability of the British to control them contributed to the policy of "masterly inactivity" toward Afghanistan and a very loose system of political activity in the area that now comprises the FATA in Pakistan. See Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia* (New York: Kodansha America, Inc., 1992), p. 285-286; and Martin Ewans, *Afghanistan: A Short History of Its People and Politics* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), p. 76.

Figure 4. Pakistan's Federally Administers Tribal Area<sup>56</sup>

The mainly Pashtun tribes that inhabit the areas are fiercely independent but, until friction resulted following the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan (many of which originally came from refugee camps or madrassas – religious schools – in the FATA), the tribes had primarily

<sup>56</sup> Source: "Welcome to FATA," Federally Administered Tribal Area Official Government Website, <[www.fata.gov.pk/](http://www.fata.gov.pk/)> (June 4 2007).

friendly relations with Pakistan's central government. These tribes are still governed by the Frontier Crimes Regulation introduced under the British Raj.<sup>57</sup> The head of each tribal agency is the political agent. Historically the political agent wields extensive powers but lately many of these powers have been reduced. Each Agency has roughly two to three thousand *khasadars* (tribal security officers) and five to nine wings of the Frontier Corp<sup>58</sup> to ensure maintenance of law and order in the agency as well as border security.

The FATA's lawlessness and lack of explicit federal control has made it a perfect ungoverned space to be exploited by both *al-Qaeda* and the Taliban. Likewise, Pakistan's failure to extend its control over and provide good governance in the FATA is equally responsible for empowering the radicals. In addition, the FATA is undoubtedly one of Pakistan's poorest regions. With high poverty and unemployment rates and a badly under-developed infrastructure, its economy is dependent on smuggling as well as narcotics and weapons trafficking.

The Pashtuns, whose traditional homeland runs on either side of the Afghan-Pakistan border and prominently includes the FATA, have always been leery of any government control, be it from Pakistan or Afghanistan. Moreover, after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, Afghans fled to refugee camps many of which are located in border area (see Figure 5). During the 1980s, millions of Pashtun Afghans fled to Pakistan to escape the atrocities of the Soviet military campaigns. Most of these refugees settled in the camps that had sprung up in the border area provinces. These camps which represent over 40 percent of the estimated Afghan population in Pakistan<sup>59</sup> and the thousands of madrassas located in the FATA have offered the Taliban an almost infinite supply of recruits. Many poorly educated, unemployed Afghan youth who have grown up in the border region's refugee camps have gravitated to the militant madrassas. Hundreds of these madrassas basically function as radicalization academies that eventually feed recruits to Taliban commanders.

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> Both the Khasadars and Frontier Corps consist of Agency tribal members. A Wing of the Frontier Corp is roughly equivalent to an infantry battalion.

<sup>59</sup> Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), *Afghans in Peshawar: Migration, Settlement and Social Networks*, January 2006, p. 13.

Figure 5: Afghan Refugee Camps in Pakistan: Top 35 Camps by Province<sup>60</sup>

## Census of Afghans in Pakistan : Top 35 Camps by Province of Residence

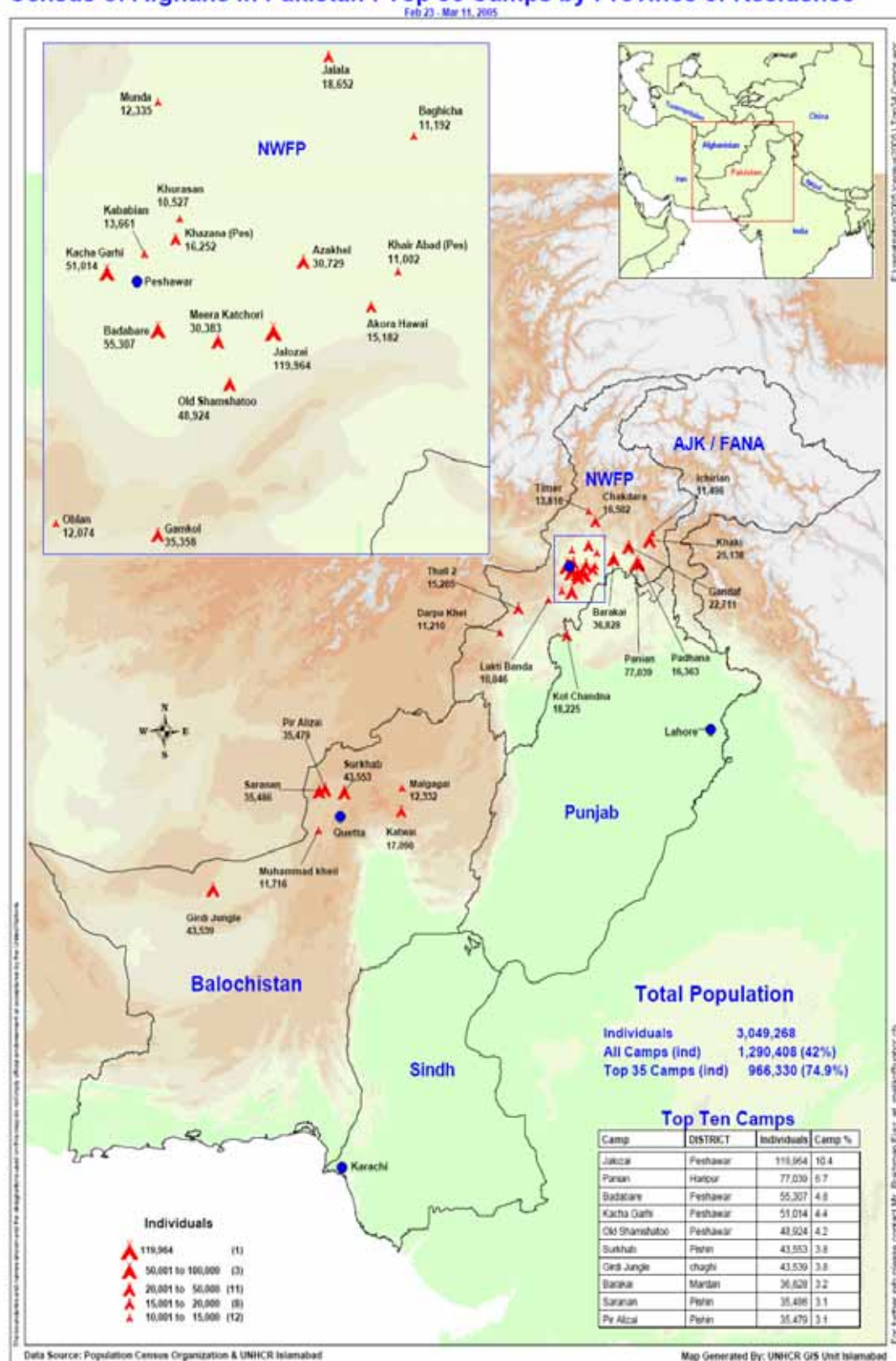
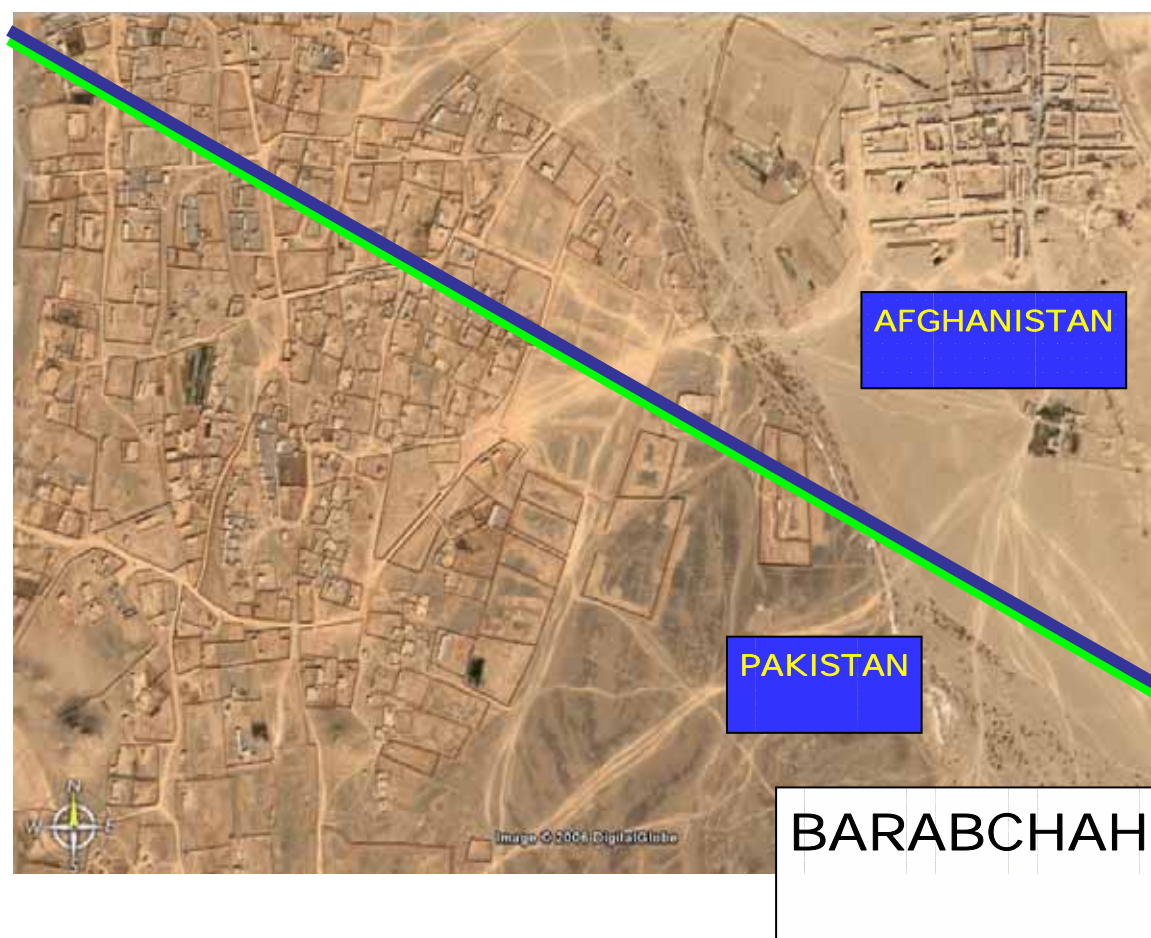
<sup>60</sup> Pakistan Population Census and UNHCR GIS Unit, Islamabad.<sup>62</sup> Received by author from Senior Pakistani Military Officer, Islamabad, March 2006.





Figure 7. Village of Barabchah: Divided by Afghanistan-Pakistan Border<sup>63</sup>

Further compounding the dilemma of the border is that on the average day 31,000 people, Afghans as well as Pakistanis cross the border at one of the two *legal* crossing points.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, there are thousands who cross illegally at a plethora of other remote border crossing points. The often ill-defined 2,560 km border between Pakistan and Afghanistan does not even constitute a speed bump to groups such as the Taliban and *al-Qaeda* seeking to increase their influence among the Pashtun. To some in the U.S. this has led to a belief that Pakistan is actively supporting or at least complacent regarding Afghan insurgents. As Henry A. Crumpton, the U.S. Department of State coordinator for counter-terrorism, asserts:

“The Americans are finding the Pakistanis much more reluctant to face down the Taliban—who are brethren from the Pashtun ethnic group that dominates in Afghanistan—than

<sup>63</sup> Received by author from Senior Pakistani Military Officer, Islamabad, March 2006; DigitalGlobe data.

<sup>64</sup> The reference is to the border crossing at Chaman, Baluchistan and the data is based on an interview by the author of a senior Pakistani Official, March 12, 2007, Rawalpindi, Pakistan.



they have been to confront *al-Qaeda*, who are largely outsiders. Has Pakistan done enough? I think the answer is no. . . . Not only Al Qaeda, but Taliban leadership are primarily in Pakistan, and the Pakistanis know that.”<sup>65</sup>

The problem is more complicated than this. There is little argument that the dynamics of the FATA are closely tied to continuing problems in Afghanistan, especially the Taliban insurgency. As witnessed by recent combat clashes in the tribal agency of South Waziristan, this area is possibly Pakistan’s most troubling. Clashes between native Pashtun tribal elements and foreign militants, primarily disenchanted groups such as Uzbeks and other Islamists, indicate this area is being used for guerrilla training and as an operating base.<sup>66</sup> Many of these groups (but not all) are explicitly aligned with their “Talibanized” Pashtun allies.

In 2004, after negotiating with tribal spokesmen, Pakistan responded to rising FATA Islamic militancy with an unprecedented deployment of a reported 80,000 troops to the border area and started military campaigns against Islamist rebels; “miscreants” in the official language of Islamabad. The major goal of these operations was to forcibly integrate the FATA into Pakistan-proper. Pakistani military actions in the FATA have been conducted primarily by the 11<sup>th</sup> Corp of the Pakistani Army with the support of the Frontier Corp. These actions have resulted in the deaths of some 700 Pakistani troops.<sup>67</sup>

According to the International Crisis Group, the military operations in South and North Waziristan Agencies,

“...to deny *al-Qaeda* and the Taliban safe haven and curb cross-border militancy have failed, largely due to an approach alternating between excessive force and appeasement. When force has resulted in major military losses, the government has amnestied pro-Taliban militants in return for verbal commitments to end attacks on Pakistani security forces and empty pledges to cease cross-border militancy and curb foreign terrorists.”<sup>68</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Eric Schmitt, “Springtime for Killing in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, May 28 2006.

<sup>66</sup> “Afghanistan: The Rise of the Narco-Taliban,” Testimony of Congressman Mark Kirk Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing on Afghanistan, February 15 2007, <[foreignaffairs.house.gov/110/kir021507.pdf](http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/110/kir021507.pdf)> (May 23 2007).

<sup>67</sup> M Ilyas Khan, “Taleban spread wings in Pakistan,” *BBC News*, March 5 2007, <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/6409089.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6409089.stm)> (May 23 2007). Other senior Pakistani Military officials put the death toll closer to 500 (author’s interview with senior Pakistani Military Officials, March 2007, Islamabad, Peshawar, and Quetta Pakistan).

<sup>68</sup> International Crisis Group, “Pakistan’s Tribal Areas: Appeasing the Militants,” p. i.

Recently Islamabad signed the Miranshah “peace agreement” in North Waziristan, seemingly in an attempt to control militants and their “guest fighters,” who have been operating against NATO forces in Afghanistan as well as Pakistani forces in the FATA. Similar agreements in 2004 and 2005 did virtually nothing to stop cross-border movements of the Taliban and other insurgents. The simple fact is that Pakistan has limited or no control in this area. This most recent “peace agreement” represents either: one, a formal Pakistani surrender to the Waziris, or two, a tactic in a larger strategic campaign to reconstruct the tribal social structure in an attempt to deter the influence of *jihadis* as well as the Taliban in the border area.

One of the very significant consequences of the Afghan’s anti-Soviet *Jihad* of the late 1970s and 1980s relative to the Pakistan border area was the destruction of the Pashtun temporal maliks<sup>69</sup> and khans and their replacement by Islamist mullahs as FATA power-brokers. This became even more important when Pakistan helped push the Taliban into Afghanistan in the 1990s.<sup>70</sup> That is, Pakistan purposefully deconstructed the traditional tribal order in the FATA in an effort to promote radical Islamist mullahs who could recruit for the Afghan *mujahideen* in their conflict against the Soviet occupiers.<sup>71</sup> In retrospect this policy of social reconstruction in the tribal areas helped fuel not only the eventual Soviet defeat in Afghanistan (Pakistan’s as well as the U.S. original strategic objective) but also the promotion and “blowback” from radical mullahs. While this social experiment resulted in the recruitment of many FATA Pashtuns to fight with their Afghan cousins and brothers against the Soviet invader/occupier, it also led to the permanent radicalization of the FATA tribal area and the opening of the FATA area to *jihadist* and other radicals such as bin Laden. Many in Pakistan felt that they could eventually recreate the traditional malik/khan dominated social system once the Soviets were defeated and driven out of Afghanistan. The momentum of radicalization and the very significant presence of foreign *jihadis* in the FATA, however, suggest that the odds of the radical fundamentalist genie returning to the bottle are unlikely indeed. Continued radicalization and the failure to prohibit access and refuge for the Taliban as well as foreign *jihadis* in the FATA has greatly hindered

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<sup>69</sup> The British first introduced the maliki system which Pakistan retained. This system was aimed at creating reliable local elite whose loyalty could be rewarded by the state through special status, financial benefits, and official recognition of influence over the tribes.

<sup>70</sup> Ahmed Rashid delves into the evolution of Pakistan support for radical Islamists and the Taliban as part of a comprehensive Afghan Strategy. See Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil & Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, p. 84 and pp. 186-187.

<sup>71</sup> Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2005): p. 67.

stabilization in Afghanistan, and has prompted Washington's criticisms of Pakistan's border policies.

An alternative view of the Pakistan's Miranshah "peace agreement" is that Islamabad has basically been attempting to buy time with the FATA Pashtuns. According to this view, the peace agreement is only understood as a part of a more important, long-term strategy to buy off tribal leaders and others in an attempt to reconstruct the old malik/khan social structure of the FATA. Eventually, according to its Pakistani proponents, this strategy is to result in the FATA's integration into the NWFP.<sup>72</sup> A primary driver of this strategy is its objective to separate the Taliban from the foreign *jihadis*. Inter-militant fighting in Waziristan is, in part, indicative of fissures based on, and demonstrative of ideological rifts between the Taliban and the *jihadis* and reflective of comments made recently by Mullah Omar, who has claimed that the Taliban and *al-Qaeda* operated separately.<sup>73</sup> The differences in opinion are due to differing points of focus for the Taliban and *al-Qaeda*: the Taliban remain focused on Afghanistan, while *al-Qaeda* and its affiliates remain committed to fighting the U.S. and its global allies, including Pakistani President Musharraf and the Pakistani presence in the FATA. These internal differences are indicative of the continued willingness of tribal leaders to sign peace agreements with the Pakistani government and point to why, despite the signing of such deals, militant attacks against Pakistani government officials have continued.

By now, it is obvious the security dilemmas of Afghanistan, Pakistan and U.S./NATO Forces rest in the land of the Pashtuns. Any further analysis of the efforts there must be made with a firm understanding of the Pashtun human terrain.

## The Pashtun Population of Pakistan and Afghanistan

*The Pashtun is never at peace, except when he is at war.*

- Pashtun Proverb

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*You want to know whether I am first a Pashtun, a Muslim, or a Pakistani. I have been a Pashtun for 2,000 years, a Muslim for 1,400 years, and a Pakistani for 30 years. Therefore, I will always be a Pashtun first.*

- Wali Khan

The Afghan provinces that are significantly threatened by the Taliban or witnessing intensified Taliban activity are predominantly

<sup>72</sup> Author's interview with senior Pakistani Military and Government Officials, March 2007, Islamabad and Peshawar, Pakistan.

<sup>73</sup> Hassan Abbas, "South Waziristan's Maulvi Nazir: The New Face of the Taliban," *Terrorism Monitor*, 5 9, (May 10, 2007), <<http://jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2373385>> (May 23 2007).

Pashtun (see Figure 2).<sup>74</sup> Pashtuns, of course, are also the primary players in the present insurgency rocking Afghanistan. Many policy makers as well as analysts, however, view the Taliban as nothing more than a highly radicalized Islamists, and view all Taliban as terrorists. This view misses the shared Pashtun tribal ethnicity of the insurgency and the family and clan ties that are stronger than any ties to the central government. To understand the Taliban one must understand their Pashtun ethos.

In addition to the Taliban, the two other major insurgent groups challenging the Karzai regime and his international supporters – the HiG and the *jihadi* network of Maulawi Jalaluddin Haqqani – are also Pashtun movements. Quite simply, to understand the Afghan insurgency one needs to understand the Pashtun.<sup>75</sup> As seen in Figure 8(a/b), the home of the Pashtuns is found in the region of southeast Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan. This region has been a crossroads for countless conquerors and is an environment of stark contrasts with snow capped peaks, fertile river valleys, and barren plains and as suggested by Sir Olaf Caroe – a place where the land fashions the people, rather than the people fashioning the land.<sup>76</sup>

Pashtuns represent one of the largest ethnic groups in the world with an estimated 25 million members.<sup>77</sup> With a significant number of people living in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, the ethnic group wields a great deal of influence in both countries. Yet Pashtuns are not homogeneous. As an ethnic group, Pashtuns are divided into several different tribes, which represent larger groupings such as the Ghilzais or Durrani in Afghanistan and the Wazirs or Mahsuds in Pakistan.<sup>78</sup> All members share a common language (Pashto), a common culture (largely based on Pashtunwali), and can trace their lineage back to the tribe's original founding father. Each tribe is made up of different clans, which are also based on paternal lineage.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Pashtuns refer to a tribal society, Pashto or Pushto refer to their indigenous language, and Pashtunwali refers to their cultural/tribal code. Pashtuns are believed to be the world's largest tribal society (as defined by anthropologists), see: James Spain, *The Pashtun Borderland*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1963) p. 17.

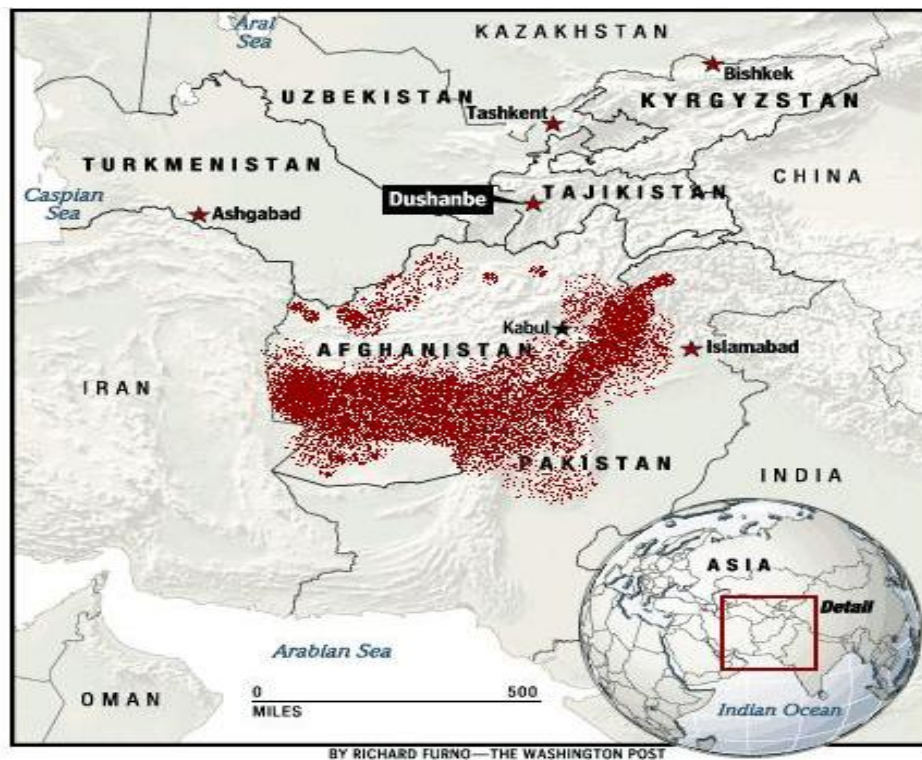
<sup>75</sup> For a discussion of the Pashtun tribal dimensions of the Taliban, see: Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan," *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs* 51, 1 (2007).

<sup>76</sup> Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans* (London: Kegan Paul, 2000), p. xii.

<sup>77</sup> Tribal population estimate from the CIA World Factbook, <[www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html)> (April 6 2007).

<sup>78</sup> For a breakdown of the tribal division within the Pashtun ethnic group, see: Caroe, *The Pathans*.

<sup>79</sup> For more information see: Akbar S. Ahmed. *Social and Economic Change in the Tribal Areas: 1972-1976*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 16; and Akbar S. Ahmed. *Pukhtun Economy and Society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 84.

Figure 8a: Maps of the Pashtuns of Afghanistan and Pakistan<sup>80</sup>Figure 8b: Maps of the Pashtuns of Afghanistan and Pakistan<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Source: Richard Furno, "America at War: News Graphic," *Washington Post*, <[www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/graphics/attack/investigation\\_15.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/graphics/attack/investigation_15.html)> (June 4 2007.)

<sup>81</sup> Source: John F. Burns, "A Nation Challenged: The Aftermath: Taliban Army Chief Scoffs at Report of Peace Talks," *The New York Times*, October 21, 2001, Section 1B, Page 4, <<http://graphics.nytimes.com/images/2001/10/21/international/1021webPASHTUN.gif>> (May 30 2007);

<sup>86</sup> Louis Dupree. *Afghanistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 415.

As a people, Pashtuns identify themselves in terms of familial ties and commitments. Social, political, and economic activities exist within this sphere and prevent government oriented institutions from gaining a foothold in tribal areas.<sup>86</sup> Despite the fact that the Pashtun's homeland is an easy area to invade, no foreign entity has been able to truly conquer it.<sup>87</sup> During the period of the Great Game, Great Britain struggled and failed to subject the Pashtuns to state authority.<sup>88</sup> The Soviets, during their time of invasion and occupation, were never able to subjugate the Pashtun homelands despite the commitment of extensive military personnel and materiel.<sup>89</sup> Even today on the Pakistani side of the border – the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas – are predominantly inhabited by Pashtuns who are exempt from Pakistani law. This fact also illustrates the importance of the FATA to the Taliban insurgency as a place of refuge, training and cross-border incursions into Afghanistan.

To understand the Pashtuns, and in many respects the Taliban, it is important to understand their tribal code known as Pashtunwali, which translates as “the way of the Pashtuns.” The Pashtuns live in a tribal culture and the Taliban are intimately aware of this fact and play on its implications. For example, the Taliban will regularly appeal to people's sense of “Pashtunism” in their narratives.<sup>90</sup>

First and foremost, Pashtunwali is about honor (*nang*). The Pashtun's concept of honor is not derived from a western society's modern definition of honor based on morality or justice. Rather, the Pashtun's sense of honor is founded on his close, unquestionable observance of Pashtunwali. In the past, this difference has created a great deal of tension between Pashtuns and those states attempting to establish their own rule of law. The concept of justice is wrapped up in a Pashtun's maintenance of his honor. Action which must be taken to preserve honor, but contradicts or breaks the laws of a state would seem perfectly acceptable to a Pashtun. In fact, his honor would demand it.<sup>91</sup> “[Pashtunwali is] an uncompromising social code so profoundly at odds with Western mores that its application constantly brings one up with a jolt.”<sup>92</sup> A Pashtun must adhere the code to maintain his honor to retain his identity as a Pashtun. Pashtunwali defines both action and reaction to

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Hopkirk, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia*.

<sup>89</sup> David B. Edwards, *Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>90</sup> For example, see: Thomas H. Johnson, “The Taliban Insurgency and an Analysis of *Shabnamah* (Night Letters),” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 18, 2 (Spring 2007, forthcoming).

<sup>91</sup> Charles Allen. *Soldier Sahibs I* (New York, Carrol & Graf Publishers, Inc., 2000), p.119.

<sup>92</sup> Allen, *Soldier Sahibs I*, p. 13; Also see: John C. Griffiths. *Afghanistan*. (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1967), p. 59; James W. Spain. *The People of the Khyber: The Pathans of Pakistan* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc, 1962), p. 46-47

most circumstances of social interaction. Below, we will see this code's implications for operations resulting in the deaths of civilians in the Afghan insurgency and counterinsurgency.

Pashtunwali encompasses a code of conduct, dealing with everything from such noble ideas as democracy and alms-giving. But what concerns us here and U.S./NATO forces in the field, is the concept of *badal* or "revenge." Life is seen as a sacred gift, and once taken, inadvertently or otherwise, the taker must be prepared for the consequences. The kith and kin of the deceased will remain mortal enemies until the issue is resolved, and therefore "collateral damage" must be avoided at all costs.

Pashtuns represent a "hard case" for any government seeking to establish its central authority over their tribal areas – be it Kabul or Islamabad. Historically, rural Pashtuns have avoided being subjugated or integrated by a larger nation. As one elderly Pashtun tribesman once stated to Mountstuart Elphinstone, a British official in Afghanistan in 1809, "We are content with discord, we are content with alarms, we are content with blood...we will never be content with a master."<sup>93</sup> Many of these characteristics make Pashtuns the perfect insurgents, a fact not lost upon the Taliban.

Respect for their well-established, long standing tribal code binds the numerous Pashtun tribes, especially the rural tribes, and constitutes them as a distinctive ethnic group. Several states have attempted to intervene in Pashtun society and supersede Pashtunwali with a more progressive central rule of law, yet Pashtunwali continues as the rule of law for tribes living in rural areas.

While it would be incorrect to refer to the Taliban insurrection or resurrection as merely a Pashtun affair, it would not be far from the mark. Pashtun areas of Afghanistan have received the least amount of development assistance, and projects undertaken by the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are just as easily destroyed by the Taliban once coalition forces leave the area. The head of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), Gen. Maples, has stated that due to the Taliban's increased strength within their core Pashtun community, 2007 will witness heretofore unseen levels of violence and possibly twice the casualties of 2006.<sup>94</sup>

The journalist Ahmed Rashid recently claimed that in addition to the noticeable decrease in Pashtun power in Afghanistan since the removal of the Taliban (despite the fact that President Karzai himself is a Pashtun of the Durrani tribe), the Taliban has been working hard to coalesce Pashtun public opinion and support behind them. Together with the

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<sup>93</sup> Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban* (New York: De Capo Press, 2002), p. 134.

<sup>94</sup> "Afghan violence 'likely to rise'," *BBC News*, <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/6153194.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6153194.stm)> (November 16, 2006).

perception that Americans see all Pashtun as the enemy, the Taliban and their Pakistani sympathizers within the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) have striven to unite the Pashtun conceptions of the mosque (*masjid*) and the throne (*hujra*), under the divine leadership of the Taliban and Mullah Omar.<sup>95</sup>

## Death of Afghan Innocents

While the death of non-combatant civilians (often referred to as collateral damage) has unfortunately accompanied all wars, the death of Afghan innocents has become an extremely significant aspect of the Afghan insurgency and counterinsurgency.

The Taliban regularly threaten and kill Afghan civilians in the pursuit of their insurgent goals.<sup>96</sup> The Taliban often justify such acts through narratives that claim that their battle with the Karzai “puppet” regime and its foreign coalition represents a “cosmic conflict” between the righteous and the infidel. Afghans, in the eyes of the Taliban, have a collective religious responsibility to fight the “apostates and invaders”. Those Afghans assisting or cooperating with the Kabul regime or the United States and its international coalition are legitimate targets because the Afghan population has a “religious duty” to oppose “infidels and foreign crusaders.”<sup>97</sup> The death of Afghan non-combatants by the United States and their coalition does not have such a pat response.

Operations resulting in the death of Afghan civilians have become extremely problematic for the counterinsurgency and have sparked angry protests against foreign troops and calls for President Hamid Karzai's resignation. It is increasingly argued that mounting civilian casualties from U.S. and NATO air strikes against the Taliban are undermining Kabul's mission, and in turn helping the insurgents recruit more fighters.<sup>98</sup> The issue of civilian deaths is a delicate one for Karzai's U.S. - backed government and takes on even broader implications when combined with the Afghan complaint of the lack of development despite billions of dollars spent in Afghanistan.

Particularly problematic has been the careless use of U.S. air power, which has killed scores of civilians, and the apparent lack of sensitivity

<sup>95</sup> Ahmed Rashid, “Pashtuns want an image change,” *BBC News*, December 2 2006. <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/6198382.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6198382.stm)> (December 2 2006).

<sup>96</sup> “All who are not friends, are enemies: Taleban abuses against civilians,” *Amnesty International*, April 19, 2007, <[web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa110012007](http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa110012007)> (May 23 2007).

<sup>97</sup> For an analysis of Taliban narratives see: Johnson, “The Taliban Insurgency and an Analysis of *Shabnamah* (Night Letters),”.

<sup>98</sup> Jim Loney, “Civilian deaths undermine West's Afghan mission,” *Reuters*, May 22 2007, <[http://in.today.reuters.com/news/newsArticle.aspx?type=worldNews&storyID=2007-05-22T184642Z\\_01\\_NOOTR\\_RTRJONC\\_0\\_India-299435-1.xml&archived=False](http://in.today.reuters.com/news/newsArticle.aspx?type=worldNews&storyID=2007-05-22T184642Z_01_NOOTR_RTRJONC_0_India-299435-1.xml&archived=False)> (May 23 2007).



by U.S. troops to local perceptions, laws and customs. According to reports in the Afghan press, "U.S. Special Forces, during routine sweeps of Afghan villages searching for weapons and members of resistance groups, have physically abused villagers, damaged personal property, and subjected women to body searches, a major affront on a family's honor."<sup>99</sup> UN officials have commented that "This doesn't help us at all . . . the people are basically pro-America. They want U.S. forces to be here. But American soldiers are not very culturally sensitive. It's hardly surprising that Afghans get angry when the Americans turn up and kick their doors in."<sup>100</sup>

There have been multiple episodes of U.S. and NATO counterinsurgency actions that have resulted in the death and injury of Afghan innocents. The implications of this are profound. As suggested by the International Crisis Group (ICG) "when a child is killed in one of these villages, that village is lost for 100 years. These places run on revenge."<sup>101</sup>

Afghans, and especially Pashtuns, have historically been fiercely independent and highly xenophobic. Operating in such an environment is extremely challenging for foreign forces as witnessed by Alexander the Great,<sup>102</sup> the British,<sup>103</sup> the Soviets<sup>104</sup> and now the United States and NATO.<sup>105</sup> It is especially difficult when such operations involve the loss of civilians and can be explicitly used by the Taliban to seemingly validate their narratives that the conflict in Afghanistan is "a cosmic conflict between the righteous' and the infidel who want to kill innocent Muslims." The Pashtun population, in turn, finds itself increasingly siding with the Taliban both on the Afghan and Pakistani sides of the Durand line or at least clinging to neutral positions.

During a 24-hour period in early March of this year, for example, two such events took place that crystallized the damning implications of "collateral damage" in Pashtun Afghanistan. On March 4<sup>th</sup> a U.S. Marine Special Operations Command convoy traveling on a roadway connecting the eastern city of Jalalabad to the Pakistani border, in the district of Mohmand Daraas was attacked by a VBIED (vehicle-borne improvised

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Luke Harding, "Heavy Hand of America Fans the Taliban Embers into Life," *The Guardian*, June 18 2003, <[www.guardian.co.uk/afghanistan/story/0,1284,979617,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/afghanistan/story/0,1284,979617,00.html)> (May 31 2007) .

<sup>101</sup> International Crisis Group, August 2003.

<sup>102</sup> Milt Bearden, "The Pashtuns of Afghanistan: Alexander the Great also got in trouble here," *International Herald Tribune*, March 31 2004, <[www.iht.com/articles/2004/03/31/edbearden\\_ed3\\_3.php](http://www.iht.com/articles/2004/03/31/edbearden_ed3_3.php)> (May 23 2007).

<sup>103</sup> Hopkirk, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia*.

<sup>104</sup> David B. Edwards, *Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>105</sup> Thomas H. Johnson, "Afghanistan's Post-Taliban Transition: The State of State-Building after War," *Central Asian Survey*, (March-June 2006) 25, 1-2, p. 1-26.

explosive device) and subsequently starting shooting at passer-bys as the convoy sped from the scene according to Afghan witnesses.<sup>106</sup> U.S. Army sources later reported that ten civilians were killed and 35 more injured by the Marines. This event was broadly criticized by both Afghan President Hamid Karzai and the international media and eventually led to the removal of the entire unit (about 120 Marines)<sup>107</sup> from Afghanistan by Army Maj. Gen. Francis H. Kearney III, head of Special Operations Command Central. He also initiated an investigation into the March 4 incident.<sup>108</sup> The incident also resulted in street protests by thousands of Afghans in Jalalabad calling for the demise of the Kabul Government as well as the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops.

Less than 24 hours after the Jalalabad incident, eight civilians were reported killed and 35 injured in Kapisa during a coalition air strike and artillery attack. Afghan President Karzai was quick to criticize these events and declared that his government can no longer tolerate the deaths of innocent Afghans.

Recently President Bush and NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer have stated they would attempt to “reduce civilian deaths” in Afghanistan. While lamenting the civilian deaths, Scheffer as well as Bush blamed the losses on Taliban tactics such as using “civilians as human shields”.<sup>109</sup> As suggested elsewhere,

“[T]he Taliban purposely retreat to village areas after an operation hoping that the coalition will attack. At the strategic level, the Taliban is fighting a classic ‘war of the flea,’ largely along the same lines used by the mujahideen twenty years ago against the Soviets, including fighting in villages to deliberately provoke air strikes and collateral damage. They gladly trade the lives of a few dozen guerrilla fighters in order to cost the American forces the permanent loyalty of that village, under the code of Pashtun social behavior called Pashtunwali and its obligation for revenge (Badal), which the U.S. Army does not even begin to understand.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> See Griff Witte, “At Least 8 Civilians Dead; Witnesses Fault Troops’ Response to Assault on Convoy,” *Washington Post Foreign Service*, March 5 2007, 10:14 AM.

<sup>107</sup> This was the first Marine Special Operations Command Company foreign deployed since the since the command was created in February 2006.

<sup>108</sup> Robert Burns, “Marine unit ordered out of Afghanistan,” *Associated Press*, March 23, 2007, <<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory?id=2976597>> (May 30 2007).

<sup>109</sup> Laurent Lozano, “Bush, NATO chief regret Afghan deaths,” May, 22 2007, <[http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20070522/pl\\_afp/usnatoafghanistanbushrussia\\_070522072916](http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20070522/pl_afp/usnatoafghanistanbushrussia_070522072916)> (May 23 2007).

<sup>110</sup> Johnson and Mason “Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan,” p. 87.

Even recognizing the insidious nature of such Taliban actions, such as retiring to a village and attempting to bait a coalition response, the lack of an explicit apology to the Afghan people concerning the deaths of innocent civilians is counterproductive. In the prosecution of a counterinsurgency, where the opinions and support of the local, indigenous population are critical for operational success, an official apology for civilian deaths is a small price to pay for hearts and minds. While many U.S. officers recognize this fact, other high ranking U.S. officers seem to lament its recognition. Consider for example the experience of U.S. Army Col. John Nicholson, the brigade commander of U.S. Forces in the eastern sector of Afghanistan. Nicholson recently apologized to the families of the Afghan civilians killed and injured by Marines during the March 4, 2007 event near Jalalabad discussed above. Nicholson apologized because,

“keeping civilians on the side of the U.S.-led coalition was essential in combating the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan.”<sup>111</sup> Gen. James T. Conway, commandant of the Marine Corps, subsequently criticized Nicholson for his apology “because investigators have yet to determine whether any wrongdoing occurred.”<sup>112</sup>

While Conway may be correct in a legalistic sense, his criticism fails to recognize that every civilian death counts against the Americans and greatly hinders the counterinsurgency. The ultimate implications of “collateral damage” to the Pashtun tribal ethos – that puts a high premium on personal and family honor and in codes of revenge that demand revenge – are immense:

“The shopkeepers glower as an American military patrol rumbles past the village bazaar at Afghany, some 80 miles northeast of Kabul. Mohammad Qayam and Ghul Jan are still seething about the precision U.S. airstrike in early March that hit their friend Mirwais's home, less than a mile away. They and other neighbors pulled nine broken corpses from the ruins: Mirwais's grandfather, father, mother, wife and five small children. Mirwais himself and his 7-year-old son were away seeing relatives, the men say; now he has fled into the mountains. Although local officials accuse Mirwais of belonging to the Taliban, his neighbors say he was only a

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<sup>111</sup> Peter Spiegel, “Army apology to Afghans called mistake,” *Baltimore Sun*, May 18, 2007, <[www.baltimoresun.com/news/nationworld/bal-te.marine18may18,0,4517660.story?coll=bal-pe-asection](http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/nationworld/bal-te.marine18may18,0,4517660.story?coll=bal-pe-asection)> (May 31 2007).

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

farmer. "We hate the Americans so much now, we don't want to see their faces," says Jan. "They're no different from the Russians.'"113

The United States and its NATO allies must come to grips with the implications of the death of Afghan civilians and pursue operations that avoid the harm to civilians. Mohammad Farid Hamidi, a member of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, cogently suggests the ultimate implications of civilian deaths when he quotes an Afghan proverb: "A hundred good works can be destroyed by one mistake."<sup>114</sup>

## Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Afghanistan faces significant hurdles as it seeks to overcome the Taliban insurgency in the Pashtun areas. Not only must it prevent the insurgency from spreading into other parts of Afghanistan, but it must deal with the Taliban in the Taliban's home turf, in the Pashtun tribal areas of the Southeast and in the hearts and minds of the Pashtun tribesmen.

Pashtuns, and Pashtunwali, are complicated dynamics that defy any simple explanation. Culture, development indicators, and history all play a huge role in the conflict, and one that cannot be solved solely by combat operations. The culture of the Pashtuns must be accommodated and taken into consideration before the outset of any action. Canine units in homes, soldiers dressed in full body armor, and especially "collateral damage" are things Pashtuns take very seriously. As their support is necessary for a stable Afghanistan, their concerns must be addressed.

Developmentally, the role of U.S./NATO forces must be proactive. Much of the tribal hinterlands that have proved so fertile for the recruitment efforts of the Taliban have seen little or no development works from either foreign forces or the government in Kabul. When the tribes living in these regions can see a benefit for themselves from a stable and democratic Afghanistan, the Taliban will see its sea drained.

Historically, Afghanistan, and especially the tribal belt, has proven impossible to pacify by foreign armies. Since the first Anglo-Afghan War onward, it has been Pashtun tribesmen who have brought destruction to imperial armies. As has oft been stated, however, this war *is* different. The goal is not territory or domination or colonial interests, but the hearts, minds, and freedom of the Afghan people. With a new government in Kabul, led by a Pashtun president, Afghanistan has a fresh start, and one that is theirs and ours to lose. Both military and non-

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<sup>113</sup> Sami Yousafzai and Ron Moreau, "Collateral Disasters," *Newsweek*, May 6, 2007.

<sup>114</sup> Qtd., Sami Yousafzai and Ron Moreau, "Afghanistan: Anti-U.S. Sentiment on the Rise," *Newsweek*, May 14, 2007, <[www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18507648/site/newsweek/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18507648/site/newsweek/)> (May 23 2007).

military resources must be increased if a free and stable Afghanistan free of terrorists is to be realized.

From a military viewpoint, a more determined effort must be made to avoid civilian casualties. Increasingly air power has been relied upon to dislodge Taliban elements from their strongholds, which although effective, also has disastrous consequences for any non-combatants in the area. When an enemy element is located, the area must be secured and the element neutralized *on the ground*, and thereby lessening the possibility of civilian casualties. As one anonymous writer in Kandahar said, "The foreign soldiers don't fight face to face because they are too scared of the Taliban. However, they should fight face to face and not send in the aircraft bombers, because doing so they kill civilians."<sup>115</sup> While airstrikes may prevent U.S./NATO casualties in the immediate term, they will almost certainly prolong the conflict. Although exact figures are classified, in one month of 2006, Human Rights Watch counted more than twice as many airstrikes in Afghanistan than Iraq.<sup>116</sup> This cannot continue without seriously alienating the local populations of the exact regions U.S./NATO forces hope to win over.

As previously shown, the peacekeeper to population ratio in Afghanistan is at a dangerous level. In order to better secure troubled areas, the security footprint must be increased, but only *in tandem* with increased development works. This will release rural Pashtuns from the terror of the Taliban, and the growing dependence on narcotrafficking as a viable means of sustenance.

In fiscal year 2006, the U.S. spent slightly less than one billion dollars on development in Afghanistan, or less than forty dollars per Afghan. Reportedly most never leaves the U.S., being spent on studies, consultants, and administrative costs.<sup>117</sup> Of the funds that eventually do make it to Afghanistan, near half is spent on maintaining the Kabul to Kandahar highway.<sup>118</sup> With this in mind, it can be assumed that roughly the cost of a fast food meal reaches each Afghan per year. More must be spent on the ground improving the lives of average Afghans.

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<sup>115</sup> Qtd., *Countering the Insurgency in Afghanistan: Losing Friends and Making Enemies*, Senlis Council, London: Senlis, February 2007, <[www.senliscouncil.net/modules/publications/018\\_publication](http://www.senliscouncil.net/modules/publications/018_publication)> (May 22 2007).

<sup>116</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: NATO Should Do More to Protect Civilians," October 30 2006, <<http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/10/30/afghan14475.htm>> (May 24 2007).

<sup>117</sup> By some accounts as much as 86 percent of American aid dollars sent to Afghanistan are in fact "phantom aid" (Ann Jones, "How U.S. dollars disappear in Afghanistan: quickly and thoroughly," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 3, 2006, <[www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2006/09/03/INGR0KRGMF1.DTL](http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2006/09/03/INGR0KRGMF1.DTL)> (May 24 2007).

<sup>118</sup> Kenneth Katzman, "Afghanistan: Post-War Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy," *CRS Web*, 3 November 2006. <[www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30588.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30588.pdf)> (November 15 2006).

The Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are an interesting experiment because their combination of counterinsurgent kinetic and non-kinetic foci and objectives, but there are not enough PRTs in the field. At present there are 23 PRTs in Afghanistan – less than one per province.<sup>119</sup> Although significantly more expensive, DRTs (District Reconstruction Teams)<sup>120</sup> could prove invaluable in approaching many of the insurgent and drug related problems that ail Afghanistan, and give peacekeepers and development workers a presence visible to all Afghans. As the number of stakeholders in the success of a democratic Afghanistan increase, the well of despair from which the Taliban draws its support will shrink.

Were these tactics to be adopted, U.S./NATO casualties would increase in short-term. But in order to avoid a prolonged insurgency, with more Afghan civilian and foreign peacekeeper casualties in the long run, a proactive stance must be taken. Without careful study of the human terrain in Afghanistan, and a corresponding shift in tactics, international forces risk getting stuck in the big muddy there.

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<sup>119</sup> “Provincial Reconstruction Teams,” *USAID*,  
<[www.usaid.gov/locations/asia\\_near\\_east/countries/afghanistan/prt.html](http://www.usaid.gov/locations/asia_near_east/countries/afghanistan/prt.html)> (May 24 2007).

<sup>120</sup> I am grateful to Chris Mason for first developing the DRT concept.