

Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan

by Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason

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***Abstract:** Afghanistan is in danger of capsizing in a perfect storm of insurgency that mimics operations and tactics witnessed in Iraq. This article assesses this insurgency and the re-emergent Taliban. The common view of the Taliban as simply a radical Afghan Islamist movement is overly simple, for that organization has been able to build on tribal kinship networks and a charismatic mullah phenomenon to mobilize a critical and dynamic rural base of support. This support, buttressed by Taliban reinforcements from Pakistan's border areas, is enough to frustrate the U.S.-led Coalition's counterinsurgency strategy. At the operational level, the Taliban is fighting a classic "war of the flea," while the Coalition continues to fight the war largely according to the Taliban "game plan." This is resulting in its losing the war in Afghanistan one Pashtun village at a time.*

After nearly thirty years of continuous war in Afghanistan, the country's American-backed, post-Taliban government is now struggling. President Hamid Karzai's government is encountering extreme difficulty extending control and mandate outside Kabul into the country's hinterland regions. Undermining President Karzai's efforts to build a truly national government with national control is a resurgent Taliban backed by Al Qaeda, which together are mounting an increasingly virulent insurgency, especially in the east and south, near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. While then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld suggested in May 2003 that the war in Afghanistan was in a "cleanup" phase,¹ now, nearly five years since

¹ Rowan Scarborough, "War on Terrorism in 'Cleanup' Phase," *Washington Times*, May 2, 2003.

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the conclusion of major Operation Enduring Freedom combat operations, it is clear that Afghanistan is anything but a stable country. The twin insurgencies of the revitalized Taliban and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's faction of Hizb-i-Islami (HiG) are growing steadily in strength and influence, while Kabul's control and influence in a broad swath of the country are rapidly diminishing. As demonstrated by the deadly anti-American riots in the capital in May 2006, political volatility is even starting to reach urban areas.

The chief purpose of the resurged Taliban/Al Qaeda/HiG insurgency appears to be to force the U.S. military to fight the war according to the "Taliban game plan." The priority of U.S. effort seems to be on the "kill/capture mission," just as the Taliban desires, with the U.S. and NATO forces concentrating on battalion-sized sweep operations which are consistently failing, just as they failed in Vietnam. With the U.S. military focused on countering the Taliban game plan, every uphill battle is a losing one and will continue to be until a new strategy is implemented. Currently, the best strategy would be focused coordination of a dramatically increased Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) presence and massive economic development. The Afghan population has to see tangible results from the Karzai government's efforts in order for it to gain legitimacy with them. That is the best way of winning against the Taliban, which for now has good chances of returning.

We attempt here to shed new light on the *idea* of the Taliban. Behind all actions lie ideas, and the current Western perception of the Taliban, both in academia and in policy circles, centers on the belief that the Taliban are primarily an obtuse, radical Islamist organization. The Islamist element of the Taliban may be simply that—an element of the complex historical and tribal phenomenon of the Pashtuns—but this article assesses other aspects of the Taliban, such as its tribal dynamics and charisma. We then analyze the effects of the current insurgency from the strategic and operational levels and examine its implications for U.S. and Coalition forces' strategy and tactics. We assume that the insurgency stems from three fundamental problems: (1) the lack of state formation and the inability of the national government to establish a significant presence throughout the country, (2) the failure to make the rural areas secure so that development and reconstruction can proceed, and (3) the lack of any meaningful improvement in the lives of the great majority of the people in the southern half of the country.

Making Sense of the Taliban

"A host of wandering Talib-ul-ilums, who correspond with the theological students in Turkey and live free at the expense of the people. . . ." — Winston Churchill, 1898²

²Winston S. Churchill, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force: An Episode of Frontier War* (London: Green and Longmans, 1898).

Popular Western perceptions of the Taliban movement have been driven by images of robed, bearded men toting Qurans and guns and instituting draconian social policies while harboring global jihadists. While these images are accurate to a degree, understanding the Taliban requires more subtle analysis of Afghanistan's Soviet occupation and post-occupation experience, its Islamic traditions, Afghan ethno-linguistic and tribal phenomena, interlopers of the frontier border areas with Pakistan, and the context in which the Taliban rose.

Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, Afghanistan deteriorated into a brutal civil war between rival mujahideen groups, many of which had spent much of their energy fighting each other even during the height of the anti-Soviet jihad. This civil war claimed thousands of lives and decimated the country's infrastructure. The civil war intensified after a mujahideen group took Kabul in April 1992. Shortly afterwards, Beirut-style street fighting erupted in the city, especially between the Pashtun HiG and the Tajik Jamaat-i-Islam. This civil war, fought with the vast surplus ordnance of the covert anti-Soviet military aid program and huge stockpiles of abandoned Soviet weapons, eventually wreaked as much if not more damage and destruction on the country than the Soviet invasion and occupation. Kabul, which was left virtually untouched under Soviet occupation, was savagely bombarded with rockets, mortars, and artillery by Hekmatyar. In Kandahar, fighting between Islamists and traditionalist mujahideen parties resulted in the destruction of much of the traditional power structures. In the rural areas, warlords, drug lords, and bandits ran amok in a state of anarchy created by the unraveling of the traditional tribal leadership system.

As the mujahideen factions and warlords were fighting each other for power, Saudi Arabia invested heavily in the region, most notably funding madrassas (religious boarding schools) in Pakistan that sought to spread the conservative Wahhabi version of Islam practiced in the Saudi kingdom. Pakistan's Jamiat-i-Ulema Islami (JUI) party built a network of its own to extend the influence of the indigenous Deobandi School of Islamic thought. These madrassas would come to serve as an important educational alternative for the numerous displaced refugees from the anti-Soviet jihad and Afghan civil war as well as for poor families along the frontier who could not afford the secular schools. With the oversight of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISID), which had grown weary of their favorite Afghan mujahideen leader, Hekmatyar, the Taliban emerged from the madrassas of Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the federally administered tribal area (FATA), not to mention kinship networks inside the remaining Afghan refugee camps. In Afghanistan, the Taliban recruited primarily from madrassas near Ghazni and Kandahar. It arrived on the Afghan scene in 1994 with little warning and vowed to install a traditional Islamic government and end the fighting among the mujahideen. With massive covert assistance from

Pakistan's ISID, Army, and Air Force, it overthrew the largely Tajik (and northern) mujahideen regime in Kabul, capturing the capital in September 1996. The Taliban considered this regime responsible for a continuing civil war and the deterioration of security in country, as well as discrimination against Pashtuns. Afghanistan soon became a training ground for Islamic activists and other radicals from the Middle East and around Asia.

War-weary Afghans initially welcomed the Taliban, which promoted itself as a new force for honesty and unity and was seen as the desperately needed balm of peace and stability by many Afghans, particularly fellow Pashtuns. The Taliban immediately targeted warlords who were deemed responsible for much of the destruction, instability, and chaos that plagued the country since the outbreak of the civil war. But it also instituted a religious police force, the *Amr Bil Marof Wa Nai An Munkir* (Promotion of Virtue and Suppression of Vice) to brutally uphold its extreme and often unorthodox interpretations of Islam, which were not previously known in Afghanistan. Taliban philosophy, Ahmed Rashid notes,

... fitted nowhere in the Islamic spectrum of ideas and movements that had emerged in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1994. ... The Taliban represented nobody but themselves and they recognized no Islam except their own. ... Before the Taliban, Islamic extremism had never flourished in Afghanistan.³

The people's optimism soon turned to fear as the Taliban introduced a stringent interpretation of sharia, banned women from work, and introduced punishments such as death by stoning and amputations.

While Tajik resistance to the Taliban in the form of the Northern Alliance held out throughout the Taliban period and retained Afghanistan's seat in the UN, the Taliban eventually conquered 80 percent of the country.⁴ By September 2001, it was poised to perhaps wipe out the Northern Alliance. But the 9/11 attacks led to U.S. intervention on October 7, 2001, aimed at destroying Al Qaeda as well as removing the Taliban from Afghanistan.

Characteristics of the Taliban

The Taliban primarily consists of rural Pashtuns from the Ghilzai confederation with some support from the Kakar tribe of the Ghurghusht confederation. Mullah Mohammed Omar Akhund and most of the senior members of the Taliban are from the Hotaki tribe of the Ghilzai. Their movement represents an ultraconservative Islamic front with an ideology derived from the

³ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 85, 93.

⁴ Only three countries provided diplomatic recognition to the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan: Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the UAE.

Deobandi School (discussed below). The Taliban, however, took Deobandism to extremes the school's founders would not have recognized. The roots of the Taliban are found in the mujahideen effort against the Soviets. From the hundreds of resistance groups that sprang up, the ISID recognized seven and established offices for them through which to channel covert support. Although most had a strong religious ethos, the groups were organized primarily along ethnic and tribal lines. Significantly, three of the seven were led by Ghilzais and none by their rivals, the Durranis, who were deliberately marginalized by the ISID.⁵ The importance of these ethnic roots of the Taliban in the mujahideen movement cannot be overstated. Yet its tribal heritage is only a partial explanation of what the Taliban represents.

The Taliban's Islamic Component

The Taliban initially represented a rise to power of the mullahs at the expense of both tribal leaders and mujahideen commanders. Many mujahideen commanders, especially those from Hizb-i-Islami (Maulvi Khalis) and Harakat-i-Inqilab-i-Islami-Islamic Unity Movement (Nabi Muhammadi), were later absorbed by the Taliban.⁶ And, as noted, the Taliban was influenced by the teachings of Deobandi Islam in Pakistani seminars and madrassas, especially the Jaamia Haqqania at Akora Khattack.⁷ The Pakistani version of the Deobandi schools in Afghan refugee camps were for the most part run by inexperienced, semiliterate mullahs associated with Pakistan's JUI. Saudi funds in combination with a lack of appreciation on the part of the mullahs of the reformist Deobandi agenda brought the schools' curricula closer to ultraconservative Wahhabism.⁸

Deobandi Islam, a conservative Islamic orthodoxy, follows a Salafist egalitarian model that seeks to emulate the life and times of the Prophet Mohammed.⁹ The Deobandi philosophy founded at the Dar ul-Ulum

⁵ Rashid, *Taliban*, pp. 18–19; Michael Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind: Afghanistan, Al Qaeda and the Holy War* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), p. 70.

⁶ International Crisis Group, "Afghanistan: The Problem of Pashtun Alienation," *ICG Asia Report*, No. 62, Kabul/Brussels, Aug. 5, 2003, p. 17.

⁷ Other seminaries outside the border areas that were important foundations for the Taliban included ones in Karachi (Binori Town and Jamia Farooqia) and in Lahore (Jamia Ashrafia). Similarly, there were important seminaries in Peshawar, Akora Khattack, and Quetta, which all played a pivotal role in building up the Taliban movement. See Syed Saleem Shahzad, "How the Taliban Builds its Army," *Asia Times*, Aug. 27, 2003.

⁸ Ahmed Rashid, "The Taliban: Exporting Extremism," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1999.

⁹ See Owen Bennett Jones, *Pakistan: Eye of the Storm* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002); Barbara Metcalf, "The Madrasa at Deoband: A Model for Religious Education in Modern India," *Modern Asian Studies*, February 1978; and Usha Sanyal, "Generational Changes in the Leadership of the Ahl-e Sunnat Movement in North India during the Twentieth Century," *Modern Asian Studies*, July 1998).

(Abode of Islamic Learning) madrassa in Deoband, India, in 1867 eventually became the primary producer of Ulama, or legal scholars, in India. While Deobandi madrassas have flourished across South Asia, they were not officially supported or sanctioned in Pakistan until President Zia ul Haq assumed control of the Pakistani government in 1977. The Deobandi interpretation of Islamic teachings is now widely practiced in Pakistan, with the JUI being its primary political proponent.

The Deobandi interpretation holds that a Muslim's primary obligation and loyalty is to his religion. The Deobandis oppose any kind of social caste system within Islam, to include, naturally, any monarchy. Loyalty to country is always secondary. Deobandis also believe they have a sacred right and obligation to wage jihad to protect the Muslims of any country. This obligation alone may explain some of Mullah Omar's affinity for Bin Laden and his global jihadist ambitions. Many analysts believe that had the Taliban remained in power, it was only a matter of time before they moved against "apostate" neighbors such as Uzbekistan. The Taliban had already embraced the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Uzbek regime's primary jihadist opposition.

Deobandi militants share the Taliban's restrictive view of women and regard Shia as non-Muslim. While in power the Taliban had a deliberate anti-Shia program against Afghanistan's ethnic Hazara, who are predominantly Shia, and led numerous massacres against them, killing tens of thousands.¹⁰

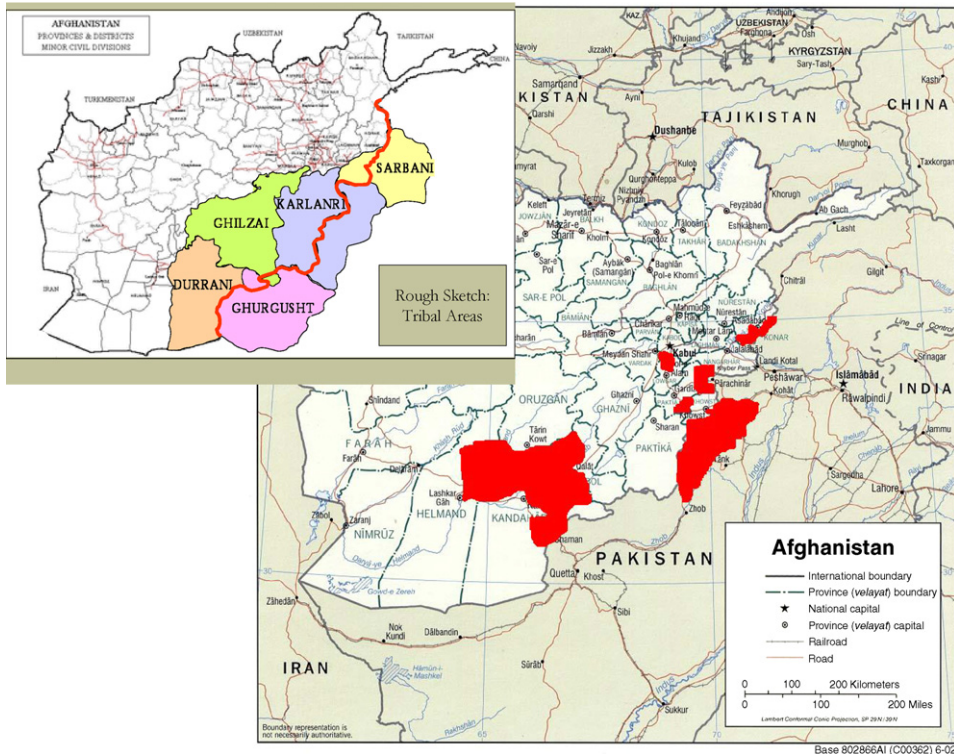
The Taliban as a Tribal Movement

While the Taliban's rise challenged many traditional tribal institutions, especially those of Afghanistan's eastern mountains, the eventual leadership of the movement consisted almost exclusively of Ghilzai Pashtuns. The Ghilzai have historically been at odds with the smaller Durrani confederation of tribes, which is currently represented to some extent in the central Afghan government. Ghilzai Pashtuns are concentrated in the southeast—in Oruzgan, Zabol, Dai Kundi and Gardez provinces, and in the Katawaz region of Paktika province—but they also have communities in the center and north of the country as a result of resettlement, both forcible and encouraged, under Durrani rule in the early twentieth century.

The importance of the Ghilzai to the Taliban and insurgency is illustrated by [Figure 1](#). The shaded section of the map shows those areas where the insurgency is the strongest—primarily areas controlled by the Taliban. These areas include the northern districts of Kandahar Province, the northeastern districts of the Helmand Province, the southern districts of Oruzgan Province, the western districts of Zabol Province, and districts in

¹⁰ Rashid, *Taliban*, pp. 77, 83, 139.

Figure 1. Pashtun Tribal Areas and Key Insurgent Strongholds, 2006



Paktika, Paktya, Gardez, Wardak, and Logar Provinces. The inset map is a rough sketch of the Pashtun tribal areas of the Durrani, Ghilzai, Ghurgusht, Karlani, and Sarbani—the five large confederations of Pashtuns, each of which traces its roots to a single ancestor. (Each of these five confederations contains scores of major tribes, or Qawms, which are perhaps analogous to Native American tribes such as the Apache or the Navajo.) Comparing the two maps, it is evident that the most intense area of the insurgency is the area dominated by the various Ghilzai tribes.

Tribalism in Afghanistan can be seen as a subset of ethno-linguistic groups, giving primacy to ties of kinship and patrilineal descent. The tribe is a kind of union of mutual assistance, with members cooperating on defense and maintaining order.¹¹ The Pashtun in particular are highly segmentary, with precise patrilineal descents first written down by the Moghuls in the fifteenth century. To truly understand the Taliban, we must thus go behind the mask of Islamism (the Taliban's opponents in the Northern Alliance were also conservative Muslims) and examine the movement as a tribal phenomenon. On closer inspection, the Taliban is neither simply a Pashtun movement nor

¹¹ See Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Oxford University Press, 1980, 2nd ed.).

Table 1. Senior Taliban Leaders

Name	Position	Tribal Affiliation
Mullah Muhammad Omar	Movement Leader	Hotaki Ghilzai
Mullah Berader	Deputy Movement Leader	Ghilzai
Mullah Dadullah Kakar	Senior Military Commander	Kakar Ghurghusht
Mullah Mohammad Hassan	Foreign Minister after 1997	Hotaki Ghilzai
Nuruddin Turabi	Minister of Justice	Hotaki Ghilzai
Alla Dad Akhund	Minister of Communications	Hotaki Ghilzai
Mohamed Essa	Minister of Water and Power	Hotaki Ghilzai
Wakil Ahmed	Personal Secretary to Mullah Omar	Kakar Ghurghusht
Sadeq Akhond	Minister of Commerce	Hotaki Ghilzai
Mohammed Rabbani	Chairman of Kabul Shura	Kakar Ghurghusht
Mullah Obaidullah	Minister of Defense	Hotaki Ghilzai

even a pan-Ghilzai movement, although its area of influence coincides closely with Ghilzai lands. It is largely led by a single tribe. Most of the senior leadership of the Taliban—with a few exceptions of Kakar tribesmen of the Ghurghusht confederation, who are close to Mullah Omar—was and is drawn specifically from Mullah Omar’s own Hotaki tribe (see Table 1).

There is historical precedent for this. The Ghilzai have traditionally been hostile towards the Durrani, who have held power in Kabul for most of the last three hundred years and provided all of Afghanistan’s kings. Only three times have the Ghilzai seized national power from the Durrani: in 1721, when Mir Wais took power; in 1978, after a coup against Mohammed Daoud by Marxist military officers, who immediately handed over power to the Marxist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan leader Nur Mohammed Taraki;¹² and again in 1996, when Mullah Omar came to power. Both Mir Wais and Mullah Omar are of the Hotaki tribe. Afghans have an immediate and intimate relationship to historical events: the events of 1721 are not forgotten to the Ghilzai, and the anti-monarchist Deobandi Taliban movement was at some level also a recreation of the triumph of the Hotakis over the hated Durrani monarchs. Significantly, when the Taliban first became powerful, its instinct was not to march immediately on the capital, but to subdue, coopt, and subjugate the Durrani of Kandahar and Helmand Provinces. When the Taliban seized control of Kabul, the exiled King Zahir Shah, a Durrani, was not invited to return from Italy. This dynamic is still at work today: the priority

¹² The competition and distrust between the Ghilzai and the Durrani played a major role in the split of the PDPA between the *Khalq* (People) faction, led by Taraki and representing Ghilzai Pashtuns and the *Parcham* (Banner) faction, led by Babrak Karmal and representing the Durrani Pashtun. See Henry S. Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union* (Durham: Duke University, 1985, 2nd ed.)

of the resurgent Taliban in 2006 is not driving northeast towards Kabul and bringing down the Karzai government, but rather focusing on first establishing political dominance over Durrani lands in Kandahar and Helmand Provinces. Clearly more is at work here than a simple, radical Islamist movement bent on seizing national power.

The Sociological Basis of the Taliban

Tribal politics and Pakistani support do not fully explain how the Taliban was able to seize control so effectively. To gain power, it drew unconsciously on a universally understood cultural phenomenon among the frontier Pashtun,¹³ one that the British and later the Pakistanis encountered over and over again: the charismatic mullah movement. Mullah Omar is the archetype of this phenomenon, a cyclical pattern of insurrection which manifests itself about every thirty years in the Pashtun belt. Indeed, such leaders have often gained powers on the frontier during times of social distress.¹⁴ These charismatic uprisings were so common, in fact, that the British dubbed them “mad mullah movements.”

There have been many. A similar figure to Mullah Omar, Mirza Ali Khan—a Tori Khel Waziri who was known to the West as the Fakir of Ipi—led first British and then Pakistani security forces on a frustrating chase around the frontier for thirty years.¹⁵ Protected by his Pashtun tribal supporters in the hills, much as Mullah Omar is today, he was never caught. The Mullah of Hadda, as noted by David Edwards, provoked the Great Pashtun Revolt of 1897 through mysticism, parlor tricks, and promises to turn British bullets to water.¹⁶ Akbar Ahmed has studied the emergence of a charismatic Mullah in Waziristan who, like Mullah Omar, challenged state legitimacy.¹⁷ Ahmed argues that the Mullah of Waziristan also used mysticism to gain legitimacy, much like Mullah Omar did thirty years later, and challenged Pakistan’s attempt to modernize the FATA.

Omar joined this rogues’ gallery of politicized insurgent mullahs by means of a politico-religious stunt that is of enormous importance to the Taliban movement. In so doing, he became the epitome of Max Weber’s definition of the charismatic leader, who has:

¹³ See Vanni Cappelli, “The Alienated Frontier: Why the United States Can’t Get Osama bin Laden,” *Orbis*, Fall 2005.

¹⁴ For a seminal treatment of the subject of charismatic leadership and political organizations, see Alfred de Grazia, *Political Behavior* (New York: Free Press, 1965), also published at www.grazian-archive.com.

¹⁵ Dupree, *Afghanistan*, pp. 480, 487, 491–2.

¹⁶ David B. Edwards, *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California, 1996).

¹⁷ Akbar S. Ahmed, *Resistance and Control in Pakistan* (London: Routledge, 1991). Also see Akbar S. Ahmed, *Religion and Politics in Muslim Society: Order and Conflict in Pakistan* (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

... a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader. ...¹⁸

The event was Omar's removal in 1994 of a sacred garment believed by many Afghans to be the original cloak worn by the Prophet Mohammed from its sanctuary in Kandahar, and his wearing it while standing atop a mosque in the city. Whereas Omar had been a nonentity before this piece of religious theatre, the audacious stunt catapulted him to a level of mystical power (at least among the 90 percent of Pashtuns who are illiterate) and resulted in his being locally proclaimed *Amir-ul Momineen* (the Leader of the Faithful).¹⁹

What is known of the Taliban subsequent to this event conforms exactly to the "mad mullah" pattern of social mobilization. Furthermore, once in power, Taliban power was (and is) concentrated exclusively in the person of Mullah Omar, another characteristic of the phenomenon—and contrary to traditional Pashtun *shura* (consensus) politics. As Rashid has observed, Omar ultimately made all the decisions within the Taliban, and no one dared act without his orders.²⁰ Today, Mullah Omar issues statements of encouragement to his field commanders, rather than operational orders, exactly as did the Mullah of Hadda.²¹ Thus, unlike most insurgencies, which are not centered in the personality of a single leader, the Taliban's center of gravity, in Clausewitzian terms, is not Taliban foot soldiers or field commanders or even the senior clerics around Omar, but Omar himself. Because it is a charismatic movement socially, if Mullah Omar dies, the Taliban, at least in its current incarnation, will wither and die. The mystical charismatic power that came from wearing the Cloak of the Prophet is not something transferable to a second-in-command. Unfortunately, because this phenomenon is so alien to Western thinking, U.S. analysts instead generally interpret the Taliban in terms more compatible with Western logic.

Labeling the Taliban an Islamist movement, a drug gang, or any of the other revolving-door euphemisms often used, including lately "anti-government militia," is misguided. Understanding the Taliban more precisely could enable better U.S. military Information and Psychological Operations, for example, or insights into the human terrain by U.S. and NATO forces, and would

¹⁸Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation*, translated by A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), pp. 358–59, 362.

¹⁹The cloak of the Prophet Mohammed was folded and padlocked in a series of chests in a crypt in the royal mausoleum at Kandahar; "myth had it that the padlocks to the crypt could be opened only when touched by a true *Amir-ul Momineen*." Joseph A. Raelin, "The Myth of Charismatic Leaders," *T&D*, March 2003.

²⁰Rashid, *Taliban*.

²¹Edwards, *Heroes of the Age*.

suggest a realignment of reconstruction priorities to isolate the movement and prevent further mobilization.

A Deteriorating Situation in Afghanistan

More than 340 American soldiers and Marines have been killed in action in Afghanistan.²² While the overall level of conflict in Afghanistan has not yet approached that experienced in Iraq, the last few years have witnessed an acceleration of increasingly deadly attacks that have begun to graft insurgent tactics in Iraq onto classic mujahideen-style guerrilla warfare.²³ In the first five months of 2006, there was a 200 percent increase in insurgent attacks compared to the first five months of 2005. Indeed, late May 2006 saw the deadliest week in the country in five years. Lutfullah Mashal, the former Afghan Interior Ministry spokesman, observed in May 2006 that “Taliban fighters no longer rely solely on hit-and-run tactics by small groups of guerrillas. Instead, the Taliban have been concentrating into groups of more than 100 fighters to carry out frontal assaults on government security posts.”²⁴ The Taliban is thought to have at least 12,000 fighters controlling areas in the provinces of Oruzgan, Helmand, Zabol and Kandahar.²⁵

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 control of the Taliban. Said Jawad, Afghanistan’s ambassador to the United States, 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.”²⁶

Taliban insurgents and their Al Qaeda allies are gaining strength. There have been numerous attacks in 2006 in areas other than the south and east, suggesting that the Taliban has expanded the scope of its operations and is taking the war to the north. Cross-border operations from Pakistan are commonplace. NATO, which assumed operational control of the war in 2006, requested more troops to fight the insurgency in September; U.S. troop levels are expected to at least remain at their current level.²⁷

Another source of concern is that recent insurgent attacks include the use of suicide bombings, a tactic previously unknown in Afghanistan and rare

²² For current figures, see www.icasualties.org.

²³ Griff Witte, “Afghans Confront Surge In Violence: Foreign Support Seen Behind Attacks That Mimic Those in Iraq,” *Christian Science Monitor*, Nov. 28, 2005.

²⁴ Ron Synovitz, “Afghanistan: Upsurge of Violence Reflects New Taliban Tactics,” *Eurasia Insight*, May 26, 2006.

²⁵ Center for International Issues Research, *Daily Arabic Media Report*, May 25, 2006.

²⁶ “Taliban, Al-Qaeda regroup in Afghanistan, defying U.S. strategy,” *Onlinenews.com*, May 19, 2006.

²⁷ Anne Gearan, “NATO adding troops in Afghanistan,” AP, Sept. 21, 2006.

because of a cultural aversion to suicide,²⁸ and improvised explosive devises (IEDs), which demonstrate a significant level of coordination with Iraqi insurgents and growing technological sophistication. The great majority of the recent suicide attacks appear to have been “outsourced” to non-Afghans, most often to Punjabis from the south of Pakistan and young foreign Islamists.

The wild and largely unregulated tribal areas on Pakistan’s northern border play an extremely important role in the insurgency, as they do in Kashmir and in the rising unrest that challenges Pakistani security forces and governmental authority all along the frontier. They provide a steady source of recruits, a safe haven for senior leadership, and a base of operations and training for the Taliban, Al Qaeda affiliates, and, to a lesser degree, HiG.²⁹

The Afghanistan-Pakistan Border Problem

For decades Afghanistan’s neighboring states have produced disenfranchised groups such as Uyghurs, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and other Islamists who have used the country for guerrilla training and an operating base. The most important foreign actors in Afghanistan’s affairs have come from Pakistan’s western border provinces, especially the NWFP, Baluchistan, and the FATA. Pakistan has long sought to exert influence in Afghanistan in order to achieve “strategic depth” on its northern border in the event of any conflict with India.³⁰ Successive Pakistani governments have promoted Islamic radicalism to subvert Pashtun and Baluch nationalist movements and further their ambitions in Afghanistan and Kashmir. Also important is the fact that Afghanistan’s Pashtun population spills over into Pakistan’s FATA as well as NWFP. Jihad, drugs, and gunrunning have long been the main sources of livelihood for many of the Pashtuns living in the FATA.³¹ Afghan refugee camps and thousands of madrassas opened by the JUI provide a steady flow of recruits for the Taliban and other radical groups.

The minimal U.S. troop presence in the south means that the rugged, porous, and often ill-defined 2,450 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

²⁸ Griff Witte, “Suicide Bombers Kill Dozens in Afghanistan, Violence in South Is Seen as Message to NATO,” *Washington Post Foreign Service*, Jan. 17, 2006. For a chronology of suicide bombings in Afghanistan, see www.rferl.org.

²⁹ On Feb. 19, 2003, the U.S. government formally designated Hekmatyar as a “specially designated global terrorist” under which designation terrorists and terrorist-related institutions are subject to financial and other sanctions. See Kenneth Katzman, “Afghanistan: Post-Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy,” CRS Report for Congress, Dec. 28, 2004.

³⁰ See Vanni Cappelli, “Containing Pakistan: Engaging the *Raja-Mandala* in South-Central Asia,” in this issue of *Orbis*.

³¹ See James D. Medler, “Afghan Heroin: Terrain, Tradition, and Turmoil,” *Orbis*, Spring 2005.

tribesmen in the region. By mid-2005, in the strategically vital border province of Paktika, for example, which has a population of some 700,000 people and shares a 400 km border with Pakistan, the United States had only two companies of light infantry and no engineers or aviation assets. In the summer of 2005, the fledgling PRT in Paktika was dismembered due to personnel shortages. A vestigial civil affairs remnant, its Civil Military Operations Center (CMOC), was co-located with a maneuver company.

President Karzai and Foreign Minister Rangin Dadfar Spanta recently blamed the ISID for Taliban attacks in Afghanistan. Kabul claims that Pakistani security forces chase Al Qaeda terrorists within Pakistan but make little effort to arrest Taliban fighters or stop them from crossing the border into Afghanistan.³² This lack of cooperation has similarly frustrated the United States. 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 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.³³

In 2004, after negotiating with tribal spokesmen, Pakistan responded to rising FATA Islamic militancy with an unprecedented deployment of a reported 70,000 troops to the border area. In Baluchistan, this force is led by the Pakistani paramilitary Frontier Corps and regular army elements from Pakistan's 12th Corps. The Pakistani campaign in the FATA, especially in the North and South Waziristan Agencies, is being conducted by a battalion-plus Special Operations Task Force and elements of the Pakistani Army's 11th Corps, aided by the paramilitary Scouts units of the Frontier Corps indigenous to those agencies. While such troop levels greatly exceed the total number of U.S. and Coalition forces in Afghanistan, the actual relationship between Pakistan's campaign and the U.S. war on terror is controversial and unclear, as suggested by Pakistan's Gen Tariq Majid, the army's chief of general staff: "We are not fighting America's war in the FATA. It is in our own interest. We're fighting this war because, unfortunately, there have been fallout effects in Pakistan from the instability in Afghanistan."³⁴ 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. This most recent "peace agreement" basically represents a formal Pakistani surrender to the Waziris

³² Synovitz, "Afghanistan: Upsurge of Violence."

³³ Eric Schmitt, "Springtime for Killing in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, May 28, 2006.

³⁴ Rober Karniol, "Plugging the Gaps," *Jane's Defense Weekly*, Mar. 22 2006.

and their humiliating retreat from Waziristan, which is now for all intents and purposes an independent country with an independent foreign policy. The *Telegraph* and other sources report that Mullah Omar played a “key” role in brokering this deal. Indeed, Lateef Afridi, a tribal elder and former Pakistan national assembly member, suggests that the Waziri would not have signed the agreement if they had not asked been by Mullah Omar. “This is no peace agreement, it is accepting Taliban rule in Pakistan’s territory.”³⁵ This agreement will likely embolden the Taliban to launch even more lethal attacks in Afghanistan.

The border areas are not the only driver of Pakistan’s strategic view of Afghanistan. Its perception of an ongoing threat from India has helped shape its Afghanistan policy. Having a friendly and controllable neighbor on Pakistan’s western border is critical, allowing Pakistan to focus on its eastern border with India. Afghanistan has also been influenced by Pakistan’s strategy towards India-controlled Kashmir. One veteran Pakistani observer suggests that “the Kashmir issue became the prime mover behind Pakistan’s Afghan policy and its support to the Taliban.”³⁶ Camps in Afghanistan created during the anti-Soviet jihad have been used to train Kashmiri guerrilla forces. Pakistan has used these jihadist forces as a bargaining chip with India in an attempt to gain more autonomy and even independence from India for Kashmir.

Postconflict Reconstruction and the Rise of the Taliban Phoenix³⁷

Afghanistan today is in danger of capsizing in a perfect storm of insurgency, terrorism, narcotics,³⁸ and warlords. Benign neglect by the United States since Spring 2003 has brought Afghanistan back to the brink of state failure. Washington has shortchanged Afghanistan in both personnel and resources. The deployment of U.S. troops and NATO International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) dedicated to the stabilization of the countryside represented the lowest per capita commitment of peacekeeping personnel to any postconflict environment since the end of World War II. The ratios of peacekeepers to citizens in the missions in Bosnia and Kosovo, for example,

³⁵ Massoud Ansari and Colin Freeman, “Omar role in truce reinforces fears that Pakistan ‘caved in’ to Taliban,” *Telegraph*, Sept. 9, 2006. Also see Tarique Niazi, “Pakistan’s Peace Deal with Taliban Militants,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Oct. 5, 2006.

³⁶ Rashid, *Taliban*, p. 186.

³⁷ Much of the analysis presented here is based on the authors’ observations while in Afghanistan periodically over the years 2002–05. During 2005, Chris Mason served as the political officer for the PRT in Paktika.

³⁸ The UN estimates the annual income of Afghanistan’s opium industry at \$2.5 billion. The opium industry represents the largest source of income in Afghanistan. And the country produces 85–90% of the world’s heroin. Quite simply, Afghanistan is a narco-state. See UN Office on Drugs and Crime and the Government of Afghanistan’s Counter Narcotics Directorate, “Afghanistan Opium Survey, 2005,” November 2005.

were 1:48 and 1:58, respectively. For the first three years in Afghanistan, the comparable figure hovered near 1:2000. Today, with an increase in U.S. force levels and a major reinforcement of the ISAF mission, it is roughly one peacekeeper to every 1,000 Afghans (1:1000).

The number of ISAF personnel deployed after the December 2001 Bonn Agreement on rebuilding Afghanistan was completely inadequate to fill the security vacuum left by the retreating Taliban, which gap was quickly filled by warlords and drug lords, many of whom have since donned national police uniforms to facilitate narco-trafficking.³⁹ As bad as they are, however, the numbers alone do not tell the whole story. Most of the U.S. Special Forces soldiers who best understand counterinsurgency were soon pulled out of Afghanistan to serve in Iraq and elsewhere. Aviation assets have also been drawn down to minimal levels. Because of the lack of helicopter assets, quick-reaction forces throughout much of the south are forced to respond to the scene of minor Taliban attacks in Humvees. With an average overland speed of 5–10 miles an hour (over rocky trails that have not improved), Taliban guerrillas are usually long gone from their “roadblock-and-run” attacks before U.S. forces arrive, which emboldens the insurgents, demonstrates to the locals our inability to protect them, and demoralizes the police, few of whom are willing to try to hold off hardened and heavily armed Taliban veterans for several hours with poor-quality weapons and the standard 30 rounds of issued ammunition.

Even more damaging to the effort to stabilize Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban was the shockingly low level of committed funding to rebuild a country laid waste by twenty-five years of war. The Karzai government was well into its third year in office before cumulative U.S. expenditures on reconstruction and development passed the \$1 billion mark. The aid budget for Afghanistan for 2006 was less than \$700 million. After subtracting the one major reconstruction project undertaken, the repaving of the Kabul to Kandahar road, annual U.S. aid to Afghanistan over the last five years has averaged just \$13 per Afghan. The United States is spending more money every 72 hours on the war in Iraq than it is spending on Afghan reconstruction this year.

Frequent turnovers of personnel, lack of local funds, a cumbersome approval process for projects implemented by U.S. headquarters in Bagram, the absence of construction oversight and quality control, inadequate vetting of contractors, and endemic corruption have combined to waste much of what was spent. The PRT effort has provided a laboratory for U.S. Army Civil Affairs experimentation, but their numbers are absurdly inadequate. With an approximate overall troop-to-task ratio of one PRT in Pashtun areas for every 1 million Pashtuns, the strategic impact is negligible. In 2005, in the lawless Paktika

³⁹ In November 2005, CBS News quoted a “senior U.S. drug enforcement official” at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul as saying that he believed “90% of the district police chiefs in Afghanistan are either involved in the production of opium or protecting the trade in some way.”

province, where no international organizations will operate, eight American civil affairs enlisted reservists and two mid-career transfer civil affairs majors were responsible for all rural development and reconstruction in an area the size of Vermont and New Hampshire combined with a population of 700,000 people whose living conditions are largely unchanged since biblical times.

With a miniscule Commander's Emergency Response Program budget, what any ten soldiers can accomplish amounts at best to a few grains of sand on the beach. In 2005, the entire province of Paktika had only a handful of buildings not made of adobe, fewer than a dozen high school graduates, and no telephones or paved roads. There were two antiquated clinics and two doctors. Officially, the province has 352 elementary schools for boys, but only 40 actual school buildings. The rest of the "schools" were simply patches of open ground in the village where the sixth graders taught what they knew to the first graders. Few if any girls went to school. Ten civil affairs personnel with three Humvees and a few hundred thousand dollars could change little. In fact, in the first four years of the Karzai government, the U.S. government had not built a single school or clinic anywhere in the province. To make matters worse, due to manpower shortages, the PRT in Paktika and seven others have now been effectively disbanded, with their support elements redeployed to other duties, and the handful of civil affairs soldiers of the CMOC rolled together with combat maneuver elements onto shared firebases, where they are generally the lowest priority for missions and assets. In these cases, the PRTs, originally designed as independent, free-standing civil-military affairs institutions, no longer exist. The stated mission of the PRT, to "extend the reach of the Afghan national government to the rural areas," is itself a case of Kafkaesque spin, because specific Afghan PRT involvement is extremely rare. Hence, their missions, for the most part, lack any Afghan government component. The inevitable failure of this low level of peacekeeping and reconstruction to effect any meaningful improvement in the lives of the people in the rural south has created an angry environment of unfulfilled expectations. As much or more than the Karzai government's inability to extend its writ beyond Kabul, this gap between expectation and reality is what has opened the door to the resurgence of the Taliban.

Assessing the Afghan Insurgency and Counterinsurgency

The Taliban, unlike Kabul, intuitively understood that the center of gravity was satisfying the rural Pashtun. They knew there was a window of opportunity for Karzai to gain rural Pashtun support, and they were quick to capitalize on the U.S. Department of Defense's failure to understand this. Indeed, the DoD saw the aftermath of the Taliban's withdrawal south of the border as a simple matter of subtractive math: "Kill the existing insurgents and terrorists until the number reaches zero and the war is over." But an attempted

war of attrition in this context is a nonstarter. For its part, the Taliban today is conducting a brilliant defensive insurgency. They have deployed enough low-level fighters to intimidate the NGOs and international organizations into withdrawing their personnel from the south. By night, Taliban mullahs travel in the rural areas, speaking to village elders. They are fond of saying, "The Americans have the wristwatches, but we have the time." The simple message they deliver in person or by "night letter" is one of intimidation: "The Americans may stay for five years, they may stay for ten, but eventually they will leave, and when they do, we will come back to this village and kill every family that has collaborated with the Americans or the Karzai government." Such a message is devastatingly effective in these areas, where transgenerational feuds and revenge are a fabric of the society. The insurgency has recently regained major footholds across the southern region of the country in areas ranging from Helmand to Ghazni.

Combined with the lack of any tangible reason to support either the Americans or Karzai, the villagers either remain neutral or provide assistance to the guerrillas. U.S. forces have often accelerated this process through culturally obtuse behavior, unnecessarily invasive and violent tactics, and a series of tragic incidents of "collateral damage" which are inevitable in wartime. U.S. forces deploying to Afghanistan still receive only minimal cultural awareness briefings, if any, and this training is usually the lowest priority on the checklist of requirements to be crossed off before deployment. Few, if any, can speak a word of the Pashto language. They primarily rely on trilingual young Tajik interpreters to communicate with Pashtun elders, a major source of miscommunication.

At the strategic level, the Taliban is fighting a classic "war of the flea,"⁴⁰ 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. The advent of suicide attacks is particularly alarming. The Taliban is getting American forces to do exactly what they want them to do: chase illiterate teenage boys with guns around the countryside like the dog chasing its tail and gnawing at each flea bite until it drops from exhaustion. The Taliban, however, has a virtually infinite number of guerrilla recruits pouring out of the Deobandi madrassas and growing up in the Pashtun Afghan refugee camps in northern Pakistan. It could sustain casualties of 10,000 or more guerrillas a year for twenty years without any operational impact. Indeed, the Pashtun, who make up 100 percent of the Taliban, have a saying: "Kill

⁴⁰ See Robert Taber, *War of the Flea: The Classic Study of Guerrilla Warfare* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac, 2002).

one enemy, make ten.” Thus, the death in battle of a Pashtun guerrilla invokes an obligation of revenge among all his male relatives, making the killing of a Taliban guerrilla an act of insurgent multiplication, not subtraction. The Soviets learned this lesson as they killed nearly a million Pashtuns but only increased the number of Pashtun guerrillas by the end of the war. The Taliban center of gravity is Mullah Omar, the charismatic cult leader, not teenage boys or mid-level commanders, and no amount of killing them will shut the insurgency down.

The priority of U.S. effort is still what the Taliban desires, on the so-called “kill/capture mission,” and the U.S. Army spends much of its time on battalion-sized sweep operations (e.g., Operations Mountain Thrust, Medusa, Red Wings, and Pil). Although few if any insurgencies have ever been won by killing insurgents, this remains the primary strategy. Indeed, media reporting of the conflict in 2006 indicates an increasing U.S. return to the success metric of body counts, a haunting and disturbing echo of the same failure in Vietnam. In short, the United States is losing the war in Afghanistan one Pashtun village at a time, bursting into schoolyards full of children with guns bristling, kicking in village doors, searching women, speeding down city streets, and putting out cross-cultural gibberish in totally ineffectual InfoOps and PsyOps campaigns—all of which are anathema to the Afghans.

Conclusion

Without a major change in counterinsurgency strategy and a major increase in manpower, equipment (particularly aviation assets), and especially reconstruction funding, the United States may lose this war. Today, the momentum—particularly in the counterinsurgency and the counternarcotics efforts—is running the wrong way. It is still possible to win—to create a slowly developing yet stable, conservative Islamic democracy in Afghanistan, one generally free of terrorism—but not with the current resources and tactics. The Taliban has numerous advantages, including comprehensive knowledge of the local culture, language, and tribal hierarchies of which U.S. forces are ignorant; a virtually inexhaustible supply of recruits and money; mountainous terrain that favors the insurgent; centuries of successful experience in guerrilla warfare against Western powers; patience; domination to the point of supremacy in Information Warfare, and perhaps most importantly, ready sanctuary in much of northern Pakistan.

Major changes in the way the United States is doing business are needed immediately, but even with them, the United States cannot do it alone. It needs not just the energetic support of NATO but a sustained commitment from NATO to the hard business of counterinsurgency, a type of warfare in which NATO has had little training and almost no experience. The UN, NGOs, and the donor nations must do more as well. And Afghanistan’s northern and

western neighbors must continue to avoid the urge to excessively meddle in Afghan affairs or risk a future of Islamist terrorism exported from Afghanistan.

But the key to success or failure in Afghanistan lies below its southern border, in northern Pakistan. As long as insurgents are virtually free to cross the border at will and Pakistani Frontier Corps elements aid and abet their movements, the insurgency cannot be shut down in Afghanistan. As the Soviets learned, the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan cannot be easily closed. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf must stop trying to appear to be the ally of the United States in the war on terror while seeking to curry political favor with its worst proponents in the NWFP, Baluchistan, and the FATA. Thanks to ill-conceived Pakistani policies of encouragement and appeasement, fundamentalist Islam in the border region may now be too powerful to stop, but it's not too late to try. President Musharraf must assert national control there and act boldly to shut down the major insurgent movements across the border before the situation spirals completely out of control.

For its part, the United States must begin to fight smarter and stop following the Taliban playbook. A complete change in counterinsurgency strategy is required, and all U.S. soldiers must become cultural and language warriors with months, not minutes, of training in both language and culture before deployment. Quantum improvement is required in this area; already in 2004 Human Rights Watch had released a scathing report on the conduct of American military personnel and the Afghan National Police,⁴¹ which are an almost unmitigated disaster of corruption, warlord cronyism, and incompetence.

Despite extreme poverty, a landmine-littered landscape, massive corruption, a fledgling government whose authority outside of Kabul is very limited, an ongoing insurgency, a shattered economy, booming opium production, and a host of other daunting problems, Afghanistan remains geosstrategically vital. The United States cannot repeat its post-Soviet withdrawal abandonment of the country or fob the mission off on NATO, or the results will be disastrous once again. By abandoning Afghanistan once, the United States allowed the country to become a refuge for terrorist groups to recruit, train, and wage war against the West. The effect on Afghanistan, the region, and the rest of the world was dramatic and terrifying. This time, if we leave—or lose—the results will be even worse.



⁴¹ See HRW, "Enduring Freedom Abuses by U.S. Forces in Afghanistan, March 2004.