



A Taliban Resurgence: The Destabilization of Kabul?

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November 2007**



The most recent episode of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan has entered its seventh year. Although the defeat of the Taliban regime in 2001 seemed complete and virtually effortless, the initial optimism has long since given way to a security situation which is once again seriously deteriorating. Over the past few years, the Taliban has introduced the sinister tactic of suicide bombing to Afghanistan, and maintains its alliance with international terrorists.

The movement of Koranic students that the U.S. bombed out of power has undergone a metamorphosis. NEFA Senior Investigator Claudio Franco examines the resurgent Taliban organization in Afghanistan, its new generation of leaders, and what its future intentions are—and, moreover, whether rumours of a possible split within the movement are actually credible, or just wishful thinking.

INTRODUCTION

The date October 7, 2007 marked the sixth anniversary of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. Within only days of that invasion, the Islamic Emirate began to crumble and eventually dissolved. The Taliban were routed from much of the country, while most of the surviving Mullahs took refuge outside the country, primarily in neighbouring Pakistan. The time spent in exile across the border served to prune the movement's ranks and select a hard core of loyal mujahideen who were ready to fight on and repel the infidels.

Discerning truth from fiction is hard work in Afghanistan, and a handful of Afghans sitting around a fire waiting for the biting cold of the winter to give way constitutes a formidable myth-producing machine—without any further need for a structured propaganda effort. Legend relates how the Taliban insurgency was actually ignited by a group of Arabs and Chechens, Osama Bin Laden loyalists, who attacked a police post in Paktika in 2002, marking the beginning of a new, bloody conflict. After that first operation, there was no need for the foreign fighters to engage in battle that often; “Where Arabs go first, Afghans will follow suit.” Sadly, that seems to have been the case.

At the time, nobody would have bet on the resurgence of the Taliban movement—but five years later, the Talibs are back, more determined than ever to resuscitate the Islamic Emirate, and considerably deadlier after Iraqi-style tactics were successfully grafted onto the Taliban rootstock. Afghanistan has witnessed 100 suicide bombings since January 1st this year,¹ up from a total of zero in 2002.² More than 5,200

¹ The New York Times, 29-10-2007 (Associated Press 27-10-2007), Afghan battle leaves Taliban dead

people have died in 2007, by far the deadliest year since 2001:194 were victims of suicide operations in the first six months of the year.³

In addition, since early 2005, the Afghan insurgency has rapidly evolved, relying increasingly on Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), “martyrdom” operations and car-bomb attacks, thus rendering the Coalition’s shock-and-awe potential redundant. Satellite imagery and overwhelming air-power are powerless against an elusive enemy who that avoids open, large-scale confrontation on the battlefield and strikes unexpectedly whenever and wherever the opportunity arises; a flexible, light-weight David pitched against a Goliath constrained by diplomacy and complex rules of engagement.



Figure 1: Kunar Province, the Pak-Afghan border.
(Photo: C. Franco/NEFA ©2007)

Certainly, NATO and U.S. strategists greatly underestimated the de-stabilizing potential of a Taliban insurgency simmering in the heart of Pashtunistan, a de facto autonomous territory spanning both sides of the Pak-Afghan frontier. As a result, the West is now fighting an increasingly more challenging and potentially doomed conflict, in a country traditionally marred by ethnic enmities and on the verge of becoming a narco-state. A wide-ranging, long-term commitment is the West’s only option in dealing with the Afghan insurgency, but unfortunately – with the U.S. and British militaries overstretched in Iraq and public opinion back home becoming increasingly sour - time is without a doubt on the Taliban’s side. Patience is probably the Taliban’s most effective weapon against Karzai and his Western allies.

Furthermore, Afghanistan is on the brink of becoming a full-fledged narco-state. According to U.N. figures, the share of Afghanistan’s GDP accounted for by drugs is unprecedented: over one third of the Afghan economy depends on opium, while cocaine only ever accounted for a maximum of 3% of Colombia’s GDP⁴. Endemic corruption completes the picture, with 90% of police chiefs either directly or indirectly involved in the heroin business⁵.

Experience proved two decades ago, that disengaging from Afghanistan is not a viable option. What the West needs to learn is that whatever happens in Afghanistan, be it terrorism or drug trafficking, has direct consequences in the West, not as a general rule of thumb but as the result of an incredibly convoluted international conjuncture applied to the peculiar logic of the Pashtun nation. I would reject the if possible Revising the West’s strategy in the region must be an absolute priority in order to avoid a large scale

² <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/world/AP-Afghanistan.html?ref=world>. The first suicide attack in Afghanistan was actually carried out in order to kill Ahmad Shah Massoud on September 9th 2001 in northern Afghanistan. A failed attempt followed in the eastern Paktia Province in 2002.

³ Haviland, Charles, “Afghan bombers foreigners – UN.” BBC News Online, 9/8/2007.
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6985400.stm.

⁴ Howden, Daniel. “Colombia, the real victim in failed war on drugs” in The Independent, 4-13-2006.

⁵ CBS News, “Afghanistan: addicted to heroin”, 10-16-2005.

http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/10/14/60minutes/main946648_page3.shtml.

conflict complicated by narcotics, widespread corruption, and the risk of widespread ethnic conflict. A rational, well-informed revision of plans in the Pak-Afghan region cannot avoid confronting the rapid evolution of the Taliban threat across the border in Pakistan. Western strategists were certainly naive thinking Afghanistan could have been stabilized without seriously engaging in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), where the situation is rapidly deteriorating. Pakistan must play an active role in stabilizing war-torn Afghanistan but Islamabad's security services must first be reigned in, before the crisis in the tribal areas triggers a full-blown conflict. This is all the more necessary given that Pakistan possesses nuclear weapons, weapons that radical Islamists have made clear they hope to acquire. Pakistan needs support equally as much as it needs pressure on the country's establishment to address the toxic relationship in place between sectors of the country's security services and radical Islamist militants. The country's security apparatus would never be so well-funded, or considered so critical, without the existing terrorist threat. Paradoxically, a resolution of the Islamist quandary would be an anti-economical scenario for Pakistan's security services. In such a context, the lower cadres of the security services, those who are most exposed to the danger of a sudden budget reduction, should be reigned in and motivated without further delay.

THE NEXT MOVES

Winter has traditionally offered the occasion for a de facto truce, but this year intelligence sources reveal a Taliban plan to fight on during the cold season and attempt a coordinated push towards Kabul. While the extreme cold of the Afghan winter can hinder large-scale battles and conventional military operations, suicide attacks and IEDs remain a viable option for the insurgents. Two extremely lethal suicide attacks rocked the Kabul metropolitan area in October, targeting Afghan Police and Afghan Nat'l



Figure 2: Taliban operative arrested in Khost, Paktia
(Photo: C.Franco/NEFA ©2007)

National Army (ANA) recruits and causing an unprecedented number of casualties. On November 6, 2007, a Taliban suicide bomber attacked the northern town of Baghlan, killing approximately 40, including 6 members of the Afghan parliament.⁶ According to recent intelligence reports, October and November offered nothing but a taste of what is yet to come and still, any further deterioration of the security situation in Kabul would plunge Afghanistan into a state of commercial and financial paralysis, something President Karzai can ill-afford.

Throughout 2007, the Taliban steadily pressed towards Kabul, establishing a presence in Ghazni Province, south-east of the Capital, and in Kapisa, a Province situated north-east of Kabul. In other words, the insurgents are closing in on Kabul, approaching the metropolitan area simultaneously from north and south, aiming uniquely at

⁶ "40 dead in suicide blast", BBC News Online, 6/11/007.
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7081012.stm

destabilizing Karzai's Capital. According to sources close to the Taliban, they are determined to push on without the usual winter hiatus, in a break with tradition that shows the extent to which the movement has changed.

The Taliban are apparently converging on the Musayi Valley, a traditionally restive area in the Capital district known to locals and NATO personnel as "Little Helmand". Musayi appears to be the location chosen to establish hidden operating bases from where the insurgents can launch operations against Coalition and the Afghan National Army (ANA) targets in the Capital region. Additionally, the Taliban master-plan involves penetrating Lowgar Province and establishing bases in the Charkh, Pol-e-Alam, and Mohammed Agha districts. Lowgar lies between Kabul and Ghazni Province, and it is obvious that having established a presence in Ghazni, Lowgar would be the next logical step if the long-term goal is the destabilization of the Capital. Consistent with this, approximately 300 fighters are reported to have converged on the Lowgar area to join forces with local anti-Coalition elements, who are able to provide them with logistical support.

The insurgents have already established a substantial presence in the eastern provinces of Khost, Paktia, and Paktika, on the Pak-Afghan border, and they have recently expanded their activities in Ghazni Province. If they are able to establish a significant foothold in Lowgar, they would be well-placed to attack the Kandahar-Kabul artery, which begins just outside Kabul and to cut the traffic to and from the restive provinces of Paktia, Paktika and Khost. NATO will not allow them to do so, but, disrupting security in areas traditionally controlled by the government will be a result in itself. The insurgents' strategy at this time is propagating widespread dissatisfaction. A viable plan to re-establish the Islamic Emirate however exists only in the realm of propaganda.

The same is happening north and east of Kabul, where the insurgents are closing in on the administrative and financial center of the country from the north and north-east. The Taliban are well established in Kunar and Nuristan Provinces, controlling substantial swathes of mountainous territory and regularly engaging the Americans deployed in Asadabad, and *de facto* controlling several cross-border routes to and from Pakistan. Now, sources say, the Taliban are moving west from Kunar towards Kapisa, where they already have a solid foothold in the north-eastern Tagab district. From there, launching attacks on the area surrounding Kabul is easier, at least in terms of IED attacks and "martyrdom operations". Accordingly, Abdurrahman Khabibzai, a Taliban commander based in the Tagab area, is rumoured to have been involved in planning and implementing the suicide bombings that scarred the capital in early October 2007⁷. There are also continuing reports about plots to attack the Kabul-Jalalabad road, a crucial artery linking Kabul to the eastern city situated near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Establishing forward bases in Kapisa and Laghman Provinces would facilitate the task of attacking the road as it progresses through Sarobi and Maypar towards Jalalabad. Attacks on the same road in the vicinity of the capital, where several ISAF, U.S., and ANA bases are located, have already been commonplace for years.

The same applies to the long-standing security alert in place on the Maypar electrical plant, again on the Kabul-Jalalabad axis. The insurgents know very well that this sort of high-profile attack would affect the government's morale, and their strategy suggests they are making plans for the long term. According to recent estimates, the

⁷ The Guardian, 2-10-2007 "13 killed in Kabul bus bombing"

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/afghanistan/story/0,,2181801,00.html>

Two Police buses were targeted by suicide bombers in the span of 4 days, between September 29th and October 2nd 2007, killing 43 people and injuring several others.

Taliban can rely on a fighting force of approximately 10,000 men, but only 3,000 would be well-trained, full-time fighters while the rest stand by and weigh in occasionally, a perfect arrangement to fight a low-intensity war but definitely not enough to take a well-defended Capital city of over 4 million. Since 2001 however, the capital has been at the center of a relatively booming economy and until recently, the calm experienced in Kabul since the collapse of the Islamic Emirate was certainly the jewel in Karzai's crown. The Taliban leadership is aware the insurgents cannot afford to threaten the Capital at present, but they seem to have devised an effective strategy to drain the Coalition's resources and to wear down the government's morale. Wreaking havoc in Kabul and its environs, or further depriving Kabul of electricity for instance, means killing the country's economic growth, and with this, killing the one hope Karzai has to keep the country together.

The Taliban strategy is mainly focused on a rational use of widespread suicide attacks. In order to carry out such operations in Kabul, the insurgents are reportedly aiming to establish temporary operating bases in a number of districts in and around the metropolitan area, surrounding the capital with units dedicated to "martyrdom" operations and utilizing increasingly sophisticated IED attacks. In fact, according to recent NATO intelligence, these interim bases are manned mainly by suicide operatives on stand by to strike at the city. Reportedly, operatives assigned to targets situated in the Kabul suburban area will launch operations from bases set up in Khaki Jabbar (Kabul), Maydan Shar (Wardak), Mohammed Agha (Lowgar), and Deh Sabz (Kabul). The "martyrs" with orders to strike inside the capital will operate from safehouses located in Kheimat, Kote Sangi, Paghman, and Deh Sabz. The suicide bombing campaign appears to be coordinated by a certain Mir Saheb Khan, who in turn imparts instructions to four area commanders based around the Capital.



Figure 3: A bomb-making lesson, Kabul Province 2007
(Photo: C. Franco/NEFA ©2007)

Consistent with these reports, earlier this year NEFA was able to film a secret concealed Taliban training facility in an unknown locale, only 35 kilometres approximately from Kabul, not far from Paghman.⁸ A NEFA investigator filmed a group of suicide recruits being trained to build IEDs; the group was assigned to operate exclusively within Kabul's walls. According to a military commander interviewed by NEFA in May 2007, the Taliban active in Kabul appear to be more selective than their southern counterparts concerning the use of suicide operatives, who are regarded as

⁸ NEFA Foundation/NBC Investigative Unit, September 11, 2007
<http://video.msn.com/v/us/v.htm?g=b4866af1-60e0-4ffb-bbc9-f807e1d503ae&f=34&fg=rss>

“exceptional weapons for exceptional targets” and are not employed daily to strike at minor objectives as in the southern provinces.⁹

Western sources in Kabul are especially concerned by the involvement of al Qaeda in plotting and executing attacks on the capital. The organization is allegedly providing the Afghan insurgents with training and funds, and more importantly, al Qaeda is providing the expertise to organize and handle the underground network of cells infiltrated in and around the capital. Al Qaeda's contribution to the Kabul campaign is extensive, according to a source close to the Afghan National Department of Security. The units preparing attacks on the Capital are so secretive that the members of a cell don't know about the existence of the others, and furthermore, each cell's members do not know anything that is not directly relevant to their own operation. Only the bomber knows the target, and even he is only told at the very last minute. Generally, a handful of suicide recruits travel from Pakistan with a handler and are then hidden in a safe house until they are assigned to a specific operation. Such a degree of professionalism cannot be expected without extensive training in mounting covert operations, certainly available to the insurgency through the involvement of al Qaeda's international operatives, who have been known to maintain a network in the Kabul area for years.

Cooperation between Afghan insurgents and foreign fighters is also occurring in a region well-known for being a hotbed of Islamist violence, the Kunar-Nuristan area. A relatively unknown outfit called “Jaish al-Salafiah” seems to have established itself among Afghan insurgents, with considerable support from those Arabs who settled in the heavily forested province years ago. It is unknown yet to what extent this organization has spread in the area, but it is interesting to note that an attempt is being made to establish a Salafist foothold in a region of the Muslim world which is, in terms of radical ideology, a Deobandi stronghold. A substantial, long-term Arab presence in the area might have attracted Salafi funds, but the main player in the area remains Kashmir Khan, a veteran Hizb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG) commander. A scourge of the Taliban in the civil war years in the late 1990s, Kashmir Khan, joined his erstwhile enemies in 2001, following the arrival of Western troops in Afghanistan. Kashmir Khan is surrounded by Arab and Pakistani fighters who closely guard access to the area, which remains by and large a HIG-Taliban stronghold.



Figure 4: Taliban Fighters in Kunar and above, the area's prohibitive mountains
(Photo: C. Franco/NEFA ©2007)

THE NEW FACE OF THE TALIBAN

⁹ NEFA Foundation/NBC Investigative Unit, September 11, 2007
<http://video.msn.com/v/us/v.htm?g=b4866af1-60e0-4ffb-bbc9-f807e1d503ae&f=34&fg=rss>

The ability to evolve and adapt to a 21st century conflict has probably been the Taliban's crucial most significant weapon since 2001. The infrastructure of the Taliban Emirate was methodically erased in order to give birth to an effective and loose organization specifically trained to fight a prolonged guerrilla war.

According to several analysts, the Taliban are no longer a homogenous group of theology students trained in Pakistan, but a complex "ensemble" of fundamentalist zealots, foreign fighters, unemployed youths indoctrinated by Deobandi (or Salafi) militant clergy, and militiamen funded by drug barons and incorporated within the movement to fight against the common enemy. In a mere handful of years, they have succeeded in turning around a military infrastructure that was conceived in the first half of the '90s in order to fight traditional large-scale battles against a similar enemy. Nowadays, the Taliban favour terrorist-type tactics like suicide bombings and kidnappings, and have become proficient in their use of the media in order to win the hearts and minds of the Ummah, the global Muslim community.



Figure 5: Mujahideen testing an explosive device near Kabul, May 2007
(C. Franco/NEFA ©2007)

They have been so successful in re-organizing the insurgency that a European intelligence source has recently confirmed that young European-born recruits are now opting to fight in Afghanistan instead of Iraq¹⁰, although this may be partially explained by the fact that Iraqi insurgents have virtually stopped recruiting volunteers, and only allow trained operatives and suicide bombers to join their ranks. Analysts estimate that at least 300 foreigners are fighting full time with the Taliban, after training with al Qaeda

militants and instructors in Pakistan's tribal areas.¹¹ Their success is not merely in terms of public relations if, as a British commander recently stated, "The Government and NATO control at best 20% of southern Afghanistan."¹²

However, the last 12 months have been far from easy for the insurgency; the much-awaited summer offensive never materialized, and in May this year, the movement lost its self-declared top operational commander, Mullah Dadullah Akhund, who was killed by the Coalition during a visit to his family in southern Afghanistan. Dadullah was



Figure 6: Mullah Dadullah Akhund in April 2007
(Photo: NEFA ©2007)

¹⁰ Burke, Jason. "Taliban plan to fight through winter to throttle Kabul" in The Observer, 10/29/2007.

¹¹ Rhode, David. "Foreign Fighters of harsher bent bolster Taliban", in The New York Times, 10-30-2007
http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/30/world/asia/30afghan.html?_r=1&ref=world&oref=slogin

¹² Walsh, Declan, "Violence in Afghanistan has soared by 30%, UN report says", The Guardian, 10-4-2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/afghanistan/story/0,2182996,00.html>

a significant figure in the movement's post-2001 evolution. Operating out of Miramshah (in Pakistan's FATA), he succeeded in attracting the attention of the Western media through a series of ruthless high profile operations. In March 2007, he managed the kidnapping of Daniele Mastrogiacomo, an Italian reporter, and his two Afghan employees, a local journalist and a driver. Dadullah beheaded both Afghans and released the Italian after a lengthy negotiation that resulted in the liberation of Dadullah's brother Mansour and four other Taliban prisoners. The negotiation with the Italians was conducted entirely by telephone from Miramshah, Waziristan. The fixer's beheading was duly filmed and circulated by Dadullah's men as a warning to Afghan "collaborators". Following Dadullah's death, Mansour was summarily named as his brother's successor and is now leading the Taliban against British forces in Helmand, commanding his troops, according to widespread reports, from the comfort of his safe-house in Miramshah.

Mullah Dadullah cemented the Taliban's relationship with al Qaeda in public, praising the terrorist organization during high-profile interviews with the Western media. He was the most diligent of the Taliban's commanders in terms of carrying out al Qaeda's instructions concerning the inevitability of switching over from traditional guerrilla warfare tactics to suicide bombing operations as the insurgency's main weapon. Martyrdom operations quickly became his trademark, and with the financial help of al Qaeda, he focused on training large numbers of recruits for this type of warfare. Interviewed by NEFA in April 2007, Dadullah boasted to have recruited 1800 potential martyrs, although his estimate sounds overly optimistic.

Dadullah's brutal tactics, although effective operationally, contributed to a severe strain in the relationship between the ambitious mullah and the rest of the Taliban leadership, who were less than anxious to be associated with al Qaeda to such a compromising extent. The end result is a less than cordial relationship between the group controlled by Dadullah's brother Mansour, whose leadership appears to be operating out of Miramshah, and the 10-man council allegedly based in Kuchlak, 12 miles north of Quetta, in Pakistan's Baluchistan province. However, these two groups are hardly "warring factions", and theoretically, both still swear allegiance to Mullah Omar. We are speaking here of a diffused movement that has always had its share of problems with hierarchy, coordination, and setting up a viable chain of command. Very often, internal divergences of this kind don't evolve into insurmountable divisions, as the parties involved are largely independent and very loosely affiliated. Rumours of a possible split between the two souls of the movement are widespread and credible. Something is definitely happening within the Taliban, but neither of the two factions can realistically do without the other and both have an interest in keeping the movement united for the time being.

Mullah Omar, on his part, rarely makes public appearances and he is rumoured to impart orders and directives through the increasingly important Mullah Berader, a key commander from Helmand married to the sister of Mullah Omar's wife. Two important lieutenants of the charismatic one-eyed cleric, Mullah Akhtar Usmani and Mullah Obaidullah were respectively killed and detained¹³ between late 2006 and early 2007, and the arrests seriously disrupted the group's obscure chain of command. The much-publicized "Summer Offensive" was never a credible operation after Obaidullah, the Taliban Defence Minister, and Akhtar Usmani, a key strategist, were put beyond harm.

¹³ Gall, Carlotta, "Pressed by US, Pakistan seizes a Taliban chief" in New York Times, 3/02/2007.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/02/world/asia/02taliban.html>

However, well-placed sources maintain that someone within the Quetta group would be ready to consider peace negotiations and on October 15, the British press¹⁴ reported that a letter signed by a handful of important Taliban commanders from Helmand had reached Hamid Karzai. The letter was reportedly delivered through former Taliban ambassador Mullah Zaeef and the Islamic Emirate's former foreign minister, Mullah Mutawakil, both of whom have joined the Government's reconciliation program. According to The Guardian, the letter contained a set of demands to Karzai's government, including the control of ten provinces, a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops, and the liberation of all Taliban prisoners held by the Government. The letter was probably sent in response to Karzai's recent offer of peace talks. However, it was not taken very seriously by the government, although the two emissaries used can certainly be considered credible go-betweens. The existence of several back-channels of communication between the insurgents and the government was also recently confirmed by a source involved with the peace initiative. However, the main obstacle to further negotiations seems to be the Coalition's continued presence in the country, which is also, paradoxically, the single most important factor in guaranteeing at least some measure of stability in the country.

Ironically, in their confrontation with the Coalition, the Taliban's strategy seems to have grown more similar to that employed by their former enemies, the mujahideen factions, who triumphed against the Soviet military, and who were swept away by the Taliban in 1996 after engaging in years of bloody and futile civil war. In their southern heartland, the Taliban are in fact fighting a guerrilla war similar to the one the Mujahideen won in the 1980s, and the contribution of many veterans of that conflict to the Taliban cause has certainly helped them in their war in the south.

For instance, says a veteran Jihadi commander based in London, the insurgents are still clearly influenced by the Pakistani advisors of the mujahideen who insisted on keeping the enemy engaged in a constant, low-intensity, guerrilla war. The Taliban, like the Mujahideen, don't want a conventional, open, all-out confrontation. They are not trying to drag the enemy out of the trenches, but to wear them out, in due time, with patience. And given that war among the Pashtun tribes can easily become a perfectly sustainable way of life, patience is something the Taliban have endless reserves of to draw upon. They have no promises to keep to an electorate; they are not forced to ship their casualties home in secrecy in the dead of night; they do not have to fear political commentators and opposition parties. Neither are they short of funds, with generous donations and a series of record opium harvests guaranteeing a steady flow of income over the best part of the last 5 years. With financial obstacles out of the way, the Taliban can afford to be patient. And besides, war means employment in the most isolated rural areas of the country's east and south.

A perfect example of the Taliban strategy can be seen in the district of Sangin, in Helmand province, which has passed from Taliban hands to the British several times in the last two years, and each time has been re-taken by Taliban fighters. The British have deployed 5000 troops in Helmand; well-armed and specifically trained for the harsh territory, they can certainly be considered a serious player in the province, but they have never managed to hold Sangin for more than a few weeks at a time.

The Taliban, on the other hand—supported by the drug barons who have enormous interests in the district—have also been advancing, only to withdraw again when the British decide it is time to come back. The military situation is so well-balanced that in 2006 the British accepted negotiating a short-lived truce with the Taliban, a deal

¹⁴ Declan Walsh and Sami Yousafzai, "Taliban sets out demands to Afghan president", The Guardian, October 15 2007. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/afghanistan/story/0,,2191310,00.html>

brokered by local tribal elders for the protection of the civilian population. If the British are nervous about the numerous casualties they have suffered in Sangin, the Taliban



Figure 7: Opium farmers in Shinwar and Nangarhar
(Photo: C.Franco/NEFA ©2007)

commander for Helmand Province, Mansour Dadullah, seems perfectly at ease with the continuous killing: “We are fighting a war and obviously every warring faction is trying to extend their territory. Sometimes the British make gains, and sometimes we manage to conquer the area.” And at the moment, claims Mansour, the Taliban have the upper hand, “Apart from the Governor’s office, the rest of the district is under our control.” Mansour knows that a new Islamic Emirate is not yet just around the next corner, but what matters, according to the movement’s Islamist ideology, is to carry on the fight on the path of Jihad and possibly to achieve martyrdom. Victory, from this point of view, is a legacy for sons and nephews one day to inherit, and not a target for tomorrow. Time is probably the insurgents’ most significant strategic advantage.

A crucial, unifying figure within the movement is Maulvi Jalaluddin Haqqani, a veteran of the anti-Soviet Jihad and a former Taliban minister, who has transferred his networking ability and wealth to the cause of the neo-Taliban insurgency. Haqqani is based in Miramshah, in North Waziristan, and for decades has controlled territory on both sides of the border, well into Khost and Paktia Provinces. Haqqani, a long-time bin Laden acquaintance, controlled Khost and the Zhawra (or al Zawhar Kili) cave complex and he hosted bin Laden’s al Farouk training facility. The United States targeted the al Zawhar, al Farouk, and al Badr training camps near Khost in 1998, with a Tomahawk missile attack ordered in retaliation for the bombing of the US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam. The training facilities were all allegedly being used by al Qaeda¹⁵.

Jalaluddin is now said to be ill. However, his sons Sarajuddin and Nasir Ahmad, and his bother Ibrahim, still command a great degree of respect. The Haqqanis are among the few figures who are universally respected across the various jihadi factions,

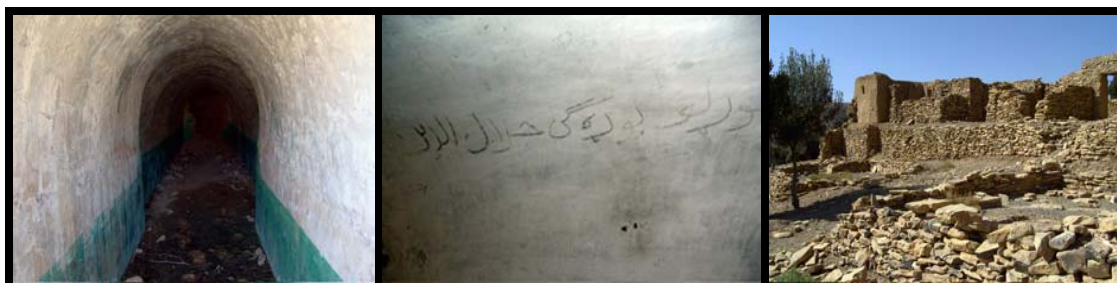


Figure 8, from the left: the entry of the tunnel system at the al Zawhar training facility, Khost, the remnants of the camp and graffiti in support of Jalaluddin Haqqani.

(Photo: C. Franco/NEFA ©2007)

¹⁵ Coll, Steve. “Ghost Wars” London: Penguin, 2004,. (409-410 Penguin paperback edition.)

and they are the single most important existing link between al Qaeda's leaders and the Taliban, in particular the faction close to the Dadullah family, whose leaders are often Haqqani's guests in the Miramshah area. Siraj Haqqani, according to a source close to the Taliban leadership in Kandahar Province, is the only leader that all field commanders obey. He has personally funded so many operations that field commanders are literally dependent on him. Ibrahim Haqqani, Jalaluddin's younger brother, liaises with the Arab and Chechen militants based in Waziristan and has apparently focused on dispatching suicide operatives to Afghanistan via Khost and Paktya Provinces.

JUST DADULLAH'S BROTHER?

Morale seems high among the group's leaders. Interviewed by NEFA in late September 2007, Mansour Dadullah sounds as aggressive as ever, evidently convinced of eventual victory for his cause. "We have effective control of four southern provinces: Kandahar, Uruzgan, Zabul, and Helmand; and Paktia, Paktika, Kunar, and Laghman are also mostly with the Mujahideen," Mansour says. Mansour Dadullah also boasts openly of his relationship with al Qaeda's leadership: "Praise be to Allah, they [bin Laden and al Zawahiri] are safe and sound. Sheikh Osama sent me a written message when Haji Mullah [Dadullah] was martyred, and I have received an oral message from Dr Ayman al Zawahiri recently; they are both fine." Mansour confirms that al Qaeda is fighting under the Taliban flag in Afghanistan: "Whoever is fighting [the Coalition forces] in Afghanistan today is doing so under the command of our Amir al Momineen Mullah Omar. This includes everyone deployed in the country."

Mansour's proximity to al Qaeda's position was also confirmed, in September 2007, by the release of a video produced by As-Sahab, al Qaeda's media arm, featuring Mansour Dadullah sitting with al Qaeda leader Mustafa al-Yazid, AKA Sheikh Saeed, who took the opportunity to pledge bayat¹⁶ (an oath of allegiance) to Mullah Omar on video.¹⁷ On October 31, 2007 al Qaeda released a second As-Sahab video in which al-Yazid is depicted visiting Mansour's base. A lengthy interview with the Taliban commander constitutes the core of the video, clearly conceived to boost Mansour's standing and popularity and to establish him as a key figure at a time of potential divergence within the movement. As-Sahab's video is a clear sign of support for Mansour's faction within the movement, and the sort of high-profile media operation reportedly loathed by the more discrete leaders based in Quetta.

Mansour follows the trail forged by his brother, who pioneered the Afghan use of suicide bombers. Among his recruits, he claims, there are several Western volunteers ready to strike targets in the USA, the UK, and other European countries, such as France and Germany. The training of Western operatives, says Mansour, will continue and increase in accordance with the late leader's plans. The Taliban have learned a great deal about their enemy since 2001. Now they know who to target in order to take advantage of the divisions in NATO's heterogeneous forces, and they are fully aware of the conflict's impact on Western public opinion.

Mansour's own description of his new role in the organisation leaves it unclear as to whether he has also replaced his brother as one of the chief strategists for the movement, or only as the regional military commander for Helmand Province. Mansour

¹⁶ Bayat is a Koranic term sanctioned in Koran, 48:10. The term is used to describe allegiance to an Emir or Shaikh or to the lineage of a Sufi order. Al Qaeda members reportedly pledge bayat to Osama bin Laden when they join the organization. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/intro/islam-sufi.htm>

¹⁷ As-Sahab Media Foundation. "The Power of Truth." September 19, 2007. <http://www.alhesbah.org/v/showthread.php?t=83577>.

was introduced to the Western public through a stunt designed to cast the new leader as a key figure within the insurgency. The Taliban staged a graduation ceremony for “martyrdom” recruits allegedly assigned to strike targets in the West. Mansour was filmed addressing the recruits, and the young volunteers were shown issuing on-screen threats to their assigned target nations. The footage was circulated in the Western media in June¹⁸, and the Taliban released their own cut of the video in August 2007. Interestingly Mullah Dadullah, too, was introduced to the Western media through a video which depicted the veteran commander addressing a group of suicide bombers. It was the first time “martyrdom seekers” were presented openly as the Taliban military campaign’s weapon of choice, and Dadullah gained instant notoriety.

Relatively young and inexperienced, Mansour, as a 38-year-old, newly-appointed leader, would have been an unknown quantity, but for the family connection to his notorious elder brother. The bombers' convention served its purpose well, however; the video, probably conceived by Mansour's faction as a propaganda tool, successfully portrayed him as a key player on the Afghan stage. The ceremony itself was clearly a carefully staged event, and it seems possible that most of the bombers filmed with Mansour were “extras” recruited from among the idle youth of Miramshah.



Figure 9: Mansour Dadullah, September 2007
(Photo: NEFA ©2007)

OTHER PLAYERS: ARE WARLORDS PREPARING FOR ANOTHER ROUND OF FIGHTING?

While the Taliban are slowly progressing towards the capital, all is not well in the more stable northern areas. Sources in Kabul Police HQ say there is widespread concern about a number of warlords formerly associated with the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance illegally hoarding weapons. The government-backed disarmament programme has virtually ground to a halt in several areas of the north, and prices on the black market have been rising for months with growing demand, demonstrating that even private individuals are growing nervous with the Taliban’s recent advance. Rebel operations in the country’s north are becoming increasingly common, and this has triggered widespread anxiety over a potential growth in ethnic tensions. The Taliban are a Pashtun-dominated movement and traditionally in Afghanistan, when the enemy draws too close, it is their ethnicity and not their political creed that really counts.

Several senior Government figures linked to the former Northern Alliance are clearly nervous about Taliban-linked militias being increasingly active in their own areas, and they do not feel able to rely on Government forces to keep the insurgents at bay. Most of the NATO forces deployed in the country’s north and west are German or Italian, and both countries are constrained by constitutional caveats that restrict their operational potential and ability to take part in combat. “They are surrounding us and everybody knows that we don’t have international protection. Should we disarm just

¹⁸ ABC News, “Inside a Taliban graduation”, 6/18/2007. <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/popup?id=3290410>

when the enemy is getting closer?” asks a high-profile figure close to Karzai’s government, a moderate until mere months ago. Consistent with this general trend, according to NATO officials quoted by the New York Times, a sizable local militia has been organized in north-western FRIBA Province in response to the growing Taliban presence in neighbouring Badghis.¹⁹

In addition, in spring 2007, there were reports of Taliban operatives attempting to buy weapons from dealers based in the Panshvir Valley, the heartland of the Northern Alliance-dominated north and home of the late Ahmad Shah Massoud, arch-enemy of the Taliban. The Panshvir Valley is a notorious hub for arms dealers, and massive stockpiles of weapons and ammunition of all kinds are allegedly hidden throughout the valley. The disarmament program has managed to recover approximately 85,000 weapons and dismantle almost 300 “private” militias but the most powerful warlords are still capable of mobilizing hundreds, if not thousands, of fighters when necessary.

In the ‘90s, Afghanistan was literally torn to pieces by warring factions motivated, at least partially, by ethnic hatred and the ghost of an ethnically motivated civil war. Since 2001, one of Karzai’s priorities has been to negotiate a balanced “social contract” – or an equal subdivision of power and resources - between Pashtun, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, and several other minor ethnic groups. Karzai’s own mandate was the result of a complex arrangement between the majority Pashtun tribes, representing 68% of the country’s population, and the groups represented by the Northern Alliance, who had somehow defeated the Taliban.

Resentment and fear are an explosive mix in such a complex context and the growing Taliban presence in areas dominated by rival ethnicities is not reassuring. The last thing the country needs at the moment is an inter-ethnic arms race driven by panic. Such an occurrence would probably catalyze most of the Pashtun around whoever is able to defend their cause and in that case, the Taliban could easily become a serious contender. It may seem a far-fetched hypothesis, however, it has happened already in Afghanistan, and not long ago. The U.S., Britain, and NATO should renew the effort towards disarmament and reconciliation, and this must be a priority, not a futile exercise. It is imperative to maximize the scope of the Western influence in the country to curb a potential arms race immediately rather than later.

CONCLUSIONS

Karzai’s most urgent problem is probably the disillusionment of the Pashtun population, the government’s only authentic powerbase since the days of the Bonn Conference, and certainly the most important entity on the Afghan political stage. In 2002, Karzai and his allies had an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen their relationship with Afghanistan’s Pashtun majority. However, the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance was an essential interlocutor, given that they were the one faction who had resisted the Taliban advance between 1996 and 2001. It has never been easy for Karzai to please his supporters, with the former Tajik warlords within his cabinet on one hand, and his own Pashtun powerbase, which has grown increasingly disaffected and responsive to Taliban propaganda, on the other. Following the rapid growth of the Taliban phenomenon in Pakistan’s FATA and North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), the Pashtun are witnessing their once-dominant ethnic grouping being cornered on one

¹⁹ Semple, Kirk “Afghan ex-militia leaders hoard arms”, The New York Times, October 27, 2007-10-27
http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/28/world/asia/28weapons.html?_r=1&oref=slogin&ref=world&pagewanted=all

side by a Western-supported government filled with influential Tajik ministers, while on the other they are sidelined by Pakistan's Punjabi-dominated army.

Popular support for the Pashtun cause has become gradually more widespread since 2001, with the Taliban and Hekmatyar's extremist outfit being the only actors who stand for the Pashtun cause. The Pashtun population in the rural areas of both countries are broadly supportive of some sort of armed protest against their respective governments. Kabul and Peshawar are not yet experiencing a Pashtun nationalist epidemic, but the West's allies are certainly losing significant ground and have been consistently doing so for years. The truth is that among the Pashtun majority, not many especially like the Taliban or Hezb-e-Islami, but they are growing to loathe Musharraf and Karzai.

Besides, the extreme mobility of the insurgents across the border is demonstrating a fact that the international community has ignored since the West re-engaged with Afghanistan following 9/11: the Durand line is worth less than the ink it was traced with because Pashtunistan, de facto, does exist. It doesn't end at Torkham, but stretches from the Indus River to Kabul, a homogeneous entity which cannot be divided with any end result other than a completely porous border. This widespread nationalist sentiment does not immediately translate into political terms, though, and stating that the Pakistani Taliban are the same thing as their Afghan counterparts would be a serious mistake. The Pakistani Taliban is made up of a confederation of radical warlords, each holding limited swathes of territory. They received their ideological training mostly from extremist clerics in Pakistan, and tribal allegiance continues to play an important role among them. However, the ideology is the same, and the Pakistani Taliban have reportedly sworn loyalty to Mullah Omar.

In October 2007, on the occasion of the NATO meeting in Noordwijk, Netherlands, NATO pledged more men, resources, and a long-term commitment. The main obstacles are national caveats preventing countries such as France, Italy, and Spain from engaging in combat operations, or even deploying in high-risk areas. These countries cannot deploy fighting units in Helmand or Kandahar Province, for instance, without complicated constitutional arrangements, leaving Britain, Canada, and the Netherlands to deal with fighting the enemy in the south and the east. The resurgent Taliban are proving to be a difficult enemy to deal with, and NATO's complex dynamics are not helping the cause. The British, although over-stretched, have pledged to stay in the country for at least a decade.²⁰

A complete disengagement from Afghanistan—as the U.S. did when the mujahideen factions pushed the Soviets out and collapsed into pointless civil war—is never easy and seldom safe for those who leave. Leaving the Taliban free to harbour bin Laden for just under six years resulted in a spectacular series of terrorist plots. As for drug trafficking, the real problem comes when the drug mafia decides that being charitable is a good thing, and the beneficiary happens to be someone with a penchant for beheadings who regards opiates as the Taliban's very own nuclear weapon.²¹

²⁰ Evans, Micheal. "Armed Forces are so overstretched they will need a decade to recover" in The Times, 11/05/2207. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/newspapers/the_times/monday/?days=Monday

²¹ NEFA Foundation. May, 10 2007. Interviewed by NEFA, Mullah Dadullah stated: : "*Besides, we can not disclose information about this [opium/heroin production] because this is like a nuclear weapon for us to use abroad.*" <http://www.nefafoundation.org/multimedia-intvu.html>