

NEGOTIATING
THE BORDERS
BETWEEN TERROR,
POLITICS,
AND RELIGION

TALIBANISTAN



Edited by

PETER BERGEN

with KATHERINE TIEDEMANN

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Peter Bergen, Washington DC, August 2012.

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Introduction

Peter Bergen

NOT SINCE THE Khmer Rouge, wearing their distinctive black pajamas, emerged out of the forests of Cambodia in the mid-1970s and seized Phnom Penh, and then dragged their country back to the “Year Zero,” has so much mystery surrounded an armed group as that which attended the Taliban movement when it burst onto the world stage in the mid-1990s. Turbaned religious warriors swept seemingly out of nowhere in fleets of Toyota pickup trucks to take over much of Afghanistan, where they imposed by force their ultrapurist and unforgiving version of Islam—only to fall from power following the September 11, 2001, attacks because they refused to hand over Osama bin Laden to the United States.

At the core of the Taliban mystery is the movement’s leader, Mullah Omar. He has been photographed on only a couple of occasions, and when he ran Afghanistan he rarely traveled to the capital, Kabul, preferring instead the southern city of Kandahar, long the traditional center of power for the Pashtuns. At his residence in Kandahar Mullah Omar assiduously avoided meeting non-Muslims and most journalists. He ruled like a medieval lord, dispensing wads of cash to his acolytes from a wooden box, while using his interpretations of his dreams to guide his decisions. A man often described as humble and undereducated, Mullah Omar allowed himself in 1996 to be anointed the “Commander of the Faithful,” a rarely invoked religious title used at

the time of the immediate successors of the Prophet Mohammed and implying that he sees himself as the leader not only of the Taliban but of all Muslims everywhere.

This suggests that Mullah Omar is a religious fanatic with significant delusions of grandeur. Otherworldly he may be, but his movement, consisting of tens of thousands of religious warriors, has for more than a decade remained undefeated by the world's greatest military power.

Mystery continues to swirl around Mullah Omar today. He makes rare, opaque public statements that are released via Taliban websites and is believed to have spent the past decade in or around the southwestern Pakistani city of Quetta, as well as in Karachi, the Pakistani megalopolis on the southern coast, though no one seems to know for certain. Likewise, the degree of operational control that he exercises over his movement remains a matter of debate. Most Taliban groups continue to regard him as Commander of the Faithful, but what this means in practice is hard to decipher. That is because the Taliban movement—as this book will make clear—is both fractious and localized, composed of many, sometimes competing, factions. Some factions are close to al-Qaeda, while others disdain it; some attack the Pakistani government, while others have a *modus vivendi* with the Pakistani state and instead attack NATO forces in Afghanistan as well as the Afghan government.

Even many years after the September 11 attacks a profound murkiness surrounds the Taliban. As a measure of its impenetrability, in 2010 someone claiming to be Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, one of the senior leaders of the Taliban movement, spent months in “peace negotiations” with NATO officials, and even met with Afghan president Hamid Karzai, only later to be revealed as an impostor who was conning NATO for considerable sums of money.

Welcome to Talibanistan.

This volume seeks to clarify some of the murkiness. It begins, appropriately, in Kandahar with a chapter by journalist Anand Gopal that explains how the Taliban insurgency was first spawned in early 2002, and how it consolidated over time. The nub of Gopal's findings, which are based on dozens of interviews with members of the Taliban, including leaders of the movement, is that it was far from certain that

the Taliban would form an insurgency after the fall of their regime. Gopal explains:

The Taliban's resurgence in Kandahar post-2001 was not inevitable or preordained. The Taliban—from senior leadership levels down to the rank and file—by and large surrendered to the new government and retired to their homes. But in the early years after 2001, there was a lack of a genuine, broad-based reconciliation process in which the Taliban leadership would be allowed to surrender in exchange for amnesty and protection from persecution. Rather, foreign forces and their proxies pursued an unrelenting drive against former regime members, driving many of them to flee to Pakistan and launch an insurgency.

Gopal then describes how the Taliban over time developed in many Afghan provinces

an intricate shadow government apparatus. At the top is the shadow governor, who works closely with a body called the Military Commission. In theory, the governor directs strategy, coordinates with leadership in Pakistan, and carries out liaison with other actors in the province, while the Military Commission adjudicates disputes and serves in an advisory role. There is also a detailed district-level apparatus, including shadow district governors and, in some districts, police chiefs.

From Kandahar we move to the area on Afghanistan's eastern border with Pakistan, where the Taliban and al-Qaeda have sporadically worked together tactically for the past decade. (This is not the case in southern Afghanistan in the traditional Taliban strongholds of Kandahar and Helmand, where there is no al-Qaeda presence to speak of.) In her piece, Anne Sternsen, a Norwegian researcher, analyzes the relations between the Taliban and al-Qaeda. She bases her findings on a close reading of Arabic-language biographies of "martyred" al-Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan as well as al-Qaeda propaganda videos focusing on the Afghan war.

We then move to central Afghanistan, where Martine van Bijlert, a Kabul-based researcher who has spent more than a decade working in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, and the co-director of the Afghanistan Analyst Network—by far the best think tank involving

Afghanistan—delves into the tribal dynamics that helped fuel the Taliban in Uruzgan and Zabul. Her conclusions stem from some three hundred interviews that she conducted with a variety of local officials, Taliban commanders, and NGO workers. Van Bijlert warns that NATO's reliance on local militias to help police the two provinces may backfire.

From central Afghanistan we cross the Pakistani border into the tribal agency of North Waziristan, home to arguably the most effective of all the Taliban militias, the Haqqani Network, which has provided shelter to foreign militants, including al-Qaeda, for many years. Anand Gopal was able to interview Sirajuddin Haqqani, the reclusive and de facto leader of the Haqqani network. Together with the Waziri researcher Mansur Khan Mahsud, and aided by the New America Foundation's Brian Fishman, Gopal traces the history of the Haqqanis and the precise nature of their alliances with other Taliban groups, including Mullah Omar's "Quetta Shura."

From there we move southward to South Waziristan with Mansur Khan Mahsud as our guide. Mahsud, a member of the Mahsud tribe from South Waziristan, leads us through the labyrinth of Waziri tribal politics that has produced the leadership of the "Pakistani Taliban," which has focused much of its energies on attacking the Pakistan state. In retaliation, the Pakistani military has launched operations against the Taliban, with moderate success.

Those operations and similar ones in the northern region of Swat are detailed in the essay by Sameer Lalwani, who is studying political science at MIT. He explains how the Pakistani military has not adopted a classic "population-centric" counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine, as outlined in the US military's 2006 COIN manual (written under the direction of David Petraeus, then an Army lieutenant general and now director of the CIA) but rather has taken its own distinctive approach to defeating the Taliban, with some degree of success. For instance, when the Pakistani army was planning its attack on the Taliban in the northern region of Swat in 2009 it ordered some two million residents of the region to leave the area, a tactic that worked fairly well.

Another approach is the CIA-directed drone war in Pakistan. Although the drone campaign is generally understood as being aimed at al-Qaeda, in fact many of the strikes have targeted various factions of the Taliban. Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Pir Zubair Shah,

himself from Waziristan, provides a summary of his six years of reporting on the ground about the drone strikes. (Thanks to Susan Glasser, the editor-in-chief of *Foreign Policy*, where this essay first appeared, for permission to reprint it.)

New America Foundation's Jennifer Rowland and I then analyze the toll that drone strikes have taken on Taliban leaders and foot soldiers. All told, the 307 strikes launched by the United States in Pakistan between June 2004 and June 2012 have killed, according to some news accounts, roughly 1,600–2,400 suspected militants. Of those strikes, 70 percent have struck North Waziristan, and more than a third have reportedly targeted members of the Taliban, with at least ten of the strikes killing senior Taliban commanders as well as hundreds of lower-level fighters.

Our analysis is followed by an assessment of an opinion poll in Pakistan's tribal regions, conducted by the New America Foundation in 2010 under the direction of Ken Ballen, Patrick Doherty, and me, and in collaboration with a local NGO called the Community Appraisal and Motivation Programme. This was the first scientific poll in the tribal regions taken to probe sensitive political issues. It found that more than three-quarters of the residents of the tribal regions oppose American drone strikes.

Opposition to American policies in the region does not mean, however, that the people of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) embrace either al-Qaeda or the Taliban. More than three-quarters of FATA residents oppose the presence of al-Qaeda and more than two-thirds oppose the local Taliban groups. Indeed, according to the poll, were al-Qaeda or the Taliban on the ballot in an election, fewer than 1 percent of the residents of FATA said they would vote for either group.

Hassan Abbas, a leading Pakistani political scientist and former high-ranking police officer, explains the larger political context in which the Taliban functions in northwestern Pakistan, and in particular the support it receives from a coalition of hard-line religious parties known as the MMA. The MMA's unwillingness to confront the Taliban when it controlled the North-West Frontier Province (now renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) between 2002 and 2008 enabled the Taliban to attack at will in the provincial capital city, Peshawar.

It also helped set the stage for the Taliban seizure of much of Swat in 2009, the history of which is recounted by Pashtun journalist Daud Khan Khattak, who spent considerable time on the ground in Swat while

the Taliban advanced toward the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, and were then repelled by the Pakistani military. In his chapter, Rahmanullah, a Pashtun journalist who goes by only one name, describes the structure of the Taliban factions in Bajaur, one of the seven tribal agencies along the Afghan border, and a region that has also hosted members of al-Qaeda.

Brian Fishman of the New America Foundation then analyzes all of the Taliban groups in northwest Pakistan and their various alliances and target sets. In the process Fishman points out that the practice, so common in certain circles, of separating the “Afghan Taliban” and the “Pakistani Taliban” tends to obscure as much as it clarifies.

Thomas F. Lynch III of the National Defense University was an active-duty U.S. Army officer for three decades and served as a special assistant to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In his essay Lynch makes the case that in the wake of bin Laden’s death in 2011 al-Qaeda has been strategically defeated. He considers what that means for U.S. policy in South Asia and argues that the United States should shift its focus from killing off every last al-Qaeda-affiliated leader or midlevel Haqqani Network operative in Pakistan to preventing a proxy war in Afghanistan between Pakistan and India, one in which Pakistan would back the Taliban in a civil war that pits them against elements of the former Northern Alliance supported by India.

Part of heading off such a proxy war must involve some kind of peace process with the Taliban, or at least with those elements of the Taliban that are “reconcilable.” Thomas Ruttig, a co-director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network who has spent decades working in Afghanistan, examines the history of Taliban “reconciliation” and the additional momentum that the process gained in 2010. Ruttig warns, however, that the contacts with the Taliban remain preliminary and exploratory, and that the discussions have not yet reached the “negotiations” stage. This means that even though all parties to the conflict are open to exploring a political solution they continue to fight each other. That reality lies at the heart of Talibanistan.

After more than three decades of various kinds of wars, one can only hope that the Taliban as well as other Afghan factions will tire of the endless conflict that has gripped their country and find common ground.

TALIBANISTAN

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The Taliban in Kandahar

Anand Gopal

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As Afghanistan's cultural and political heartland, Kandahar is a province of key strategic importance for foreign forces, the Afghan government, and the insurgency. A sizable chunk of the Taliban's senior leadership hails from the province, and the cultural and political dynamics of rural Kandahar shape aspects of the movement's character to this day. This study attempts to understand the Taliban of Kandahar by looking at the factors that spurred their rise and the networks and structures through which they operate. Among the findings:

- The Taliban's resurgence in Kandahar post-2001 was not inevitable or preordained. The Taliban—from senior leadership levels down to the rank and file—by and large surrendered to the new government and retired to their homes. But in the early years after 2001, there was a lack of a genuine, broad-based reconciliation process in which the Taliban leadership would be allowed to surrender in exchange for amnesty and protection from persecution. Rather, foreign forces and their proxies pursued an unrelenting drive against former regime members,



MAP BY GENE THORP OF CARTOGRAPHIC CONCEPTS, INC.

driving many of them to flee to Pakistan and launch an insurgency.

- Once the Taliban leadership decided to stand against the Afghan government and its foreign backers, they were able to take advantage of growing disillusionment in the countryside. In particular, the dominance of one particular set of tribes caused members of other, marginalized tribes to look to the insurgency as a source of protection and access to resources. The weakness

of the judiciary and police forced many to turn to the Taliban's provision of law and order, while widespread torture and abuse at the hands of pro-government strongmen eroded government support. At the same time, the heavy-handed tactics of U.S. forces turned many against the foreign presence.

- Despite popular belief, the Taliban in Kandahar cannot easily be divided into an “ideological core” and rank-and-file fighters motivated mainly by material concerns. After 2001, most senior Taliban leaders in the province accepted the new government, or at least rejected it but declined to fight against it. Most did not invoke the notion of *jihad* as an immediate reaction to the new government. Rather, only after a protracted campaign against former Taliban did many of them feel they had no place in the new state of affairs and begin to see the presence of the government and foreign fighters as necessitating jihad. And after the emergence of the insurgency, there were a number of attempts by senior leaders to come to terms with the Afghan government, yet at the same time there were very few attempts to do so on the part of rank-and-file field commanders.
- The Taliban have developed an intricate shadow government apparatus. At the top is the shadow governor, who works closely with a body called the Military Commission. In theory, the governor directs strategy, coordinates with leadership in Pakistan, and liaises with other actors in the province, while the Military Commission adjudicates disputes and serves in an advisory role. There is also a detailed district-level apparatus, including shadow district governors and, in some districts, police chiefs and district shuras.
- Parallel to this formal structure are numerous informal networks through which the Taliban make decisions and propagate influence. Although there are detailed mechanisms in place, involving the provincial shadow apparatus, to deal with battlefield strategy or intra-Taliban disputes, many times strategic decisions or punitive actions are taken through informal means. These include cases where senior leaders in Pakistan direct operations through their network of commanders in Kandahar.
- Contrary to popular perception, the Taliban in Kandahar do not appear to receive regular salaries. Rather, each commander

is responsible for raising funds for his group, which is typically done through capturing spoils in operations or collecting (sometimes forcefully) local taxes. Some funding also comes from external sources, such as merchants in Pakistan and wealthy donors in the Persian Gulf states.

- In addition to winning support from marginalized communities and offering law and order, the Taliban were able to gain influence through severe intimidation and widespread human rights abuses. Moreover, a brutal assassination campaign against anyone even remotely connected to the government—tribal elders, government officials, aid workers, religious clerics, and others—succeeded in widening the gap between the local communities and the government.
- The Taliban's rise in Kandahar after 2001 can be divided into four periods. From 2001 to 2004, the group was involved in reorganizing itself, resuscitating old networks, and forging new connections. Between 2004 and 2006, the burgeoning movement was focused on consolidating itself, while winning rank-and-file recruits outside those who had worked with the Taliban in the 1990s; it began to amass members in large numbers. A turning point came in the western part of the province in 2006, when the Taliban suffered a major battlefield loss against foreign forces in Operation Medusa. This was one factor that spurred the next phase, asymmetric warfare, between 2006 and 2009. These years were marked by the increased use of suicide bombings and roadside attacks. The year 2010 marked a new phase in the struggle. While the insurgents were still relying heavily on suicide attacks and roadside bombs, foreign troops were giving unprecedented attention to the province, and violence escalated to a level not previously seen in this war.

METHODOLOGY

The information in this study is drawn from interviews with Taliban members at all levels (including the senior leadership), Afghan government officials (including, but not limited to, district and provincial

officials, lawmakers, and intelligence officials), and U.S. and NATO military personnel (including, but not limited to, officers and enlisted soldiers in the field, and intelligence officers). This reporting is supplemented by a variety of publicly available written sources, including news articles, research monographs, and books. Some of the interviews were conducted during my work as a journalist in Afghanistan for more than two years, in which time I visited Kandahar (and many of its districts) multiple times. This reporting includes many occasions when I traveled with Taliban forces or U.S. troops in the districts, and other cases when I traveled on my own. In particular, many of the interviews were conducted during trips I made to the province in the summer of 2010.

In many instances, sources spoke on the condition of anonymity due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the tense security situation in Kandahar. Every story or anecdote from a source was cross-checked with at least one other independent source. I list the names and positions of Taliban commanders only when this information is widely known in Kandahar, or the commanders themselves gave permission to include it, or U.S. personnel indicated that they had knowledge of it.

INTRODUCTION

In the early morning hours of July 20, 2010, a group of armed men approached a home in the Mahalajat area of Kandahar city. They asked to speak to Ghulam, an employee of a nongovernmental organization. When he appeared, they declared that he was under arrest by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan for working with foreigners. They tied him and his cousin to a nearby electric pole, shot them, and left their bodies there under the moonlight for all to see.¹

It was a move as audacious as it was indicative of the Taliban's growing reach. Unlike in many other urban centers in Afghanistan, the Taliban have been able to penetrate deep into Kandahar city. In 2009 they even set up checkpoints in the heart of the provincial capital, close to the attorney general's office.² The Taliban's growing power—indeed, by 2010 they controlled most of Kandahar's districts and parts of the city—prompted plans for a major U.S. offensive in the province sometime in 2010.

Such plans were also an admission of the province's position as the country's political and cultural crucible, a role it has played for centuries.

The majority of Afghanistan's rulers in its history—including the current president, Hamid Karzai—have hailed from the sunbaked province. And in 1994, from the dusty riverbeds west of Kandahar city, came a group of religious students bringing a strict version of Islamic justice to the then-warring country. The Taliban, a group of mullahs largely from greater Kandahar, went on to capture most of Afghanistan. When the movement collapsed following the U.S.-led invasion of 2001, in the wake of al-Qaeda's September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington, the insurgency that eventually emerged was led predominantly by these same mullahs. Today, in many ways, Kandahar is the heart of the insurgency, and many believe that progress there is the key to the entire war.

The insurgency in Kandahar can be understood only by examining the factors that motivate it and the structures through which it operates. This study aims to do both, and in the process illustrate that the Taliban's resurgence in Kandahar was not at all inevitable; nor was it simply due to a lack of resources or will on the part of the international community.

PART 1: THE TALIBAN IN KANDAHAR: CAUSES AND MOTIVATIONS

- The resurgence of the Taliban in Kandahar was not preordained simply because the province was their “spiritual home.” Nor was it merely a result of a lack of troop presence in the early years. Rather, it was due to specific policies pursued by the Kandahar government and its American backers. A significant part of the senior Taliban leadership in Kandahar had surrendered or attempted to surrender to the Afghan government. But intense harassment left many of them with the feeling that there was no option but to flee to Pakistan and reorganize their movement. Increased troop presence would not likely have changed the dynamic, since the problem was political—the lack of a reconciliation process—rather than military.
- Once the Taliban's leadership fled to Pakistan and decided to fight against the Afghan government and foreign forces in the country, they were able to build support in disaffected

communities that were excluded from power and resources in the post-2001 world. These include, but are not limited to, second- and third-tier tribal communities such as Panjpai Durrani, victims of government abuse, victims of mistreatment by the foreign forces, the unemployed, and opium poppy cultivators (who were the target of antidrug campaigns).

ORIGINS

The leaders of today's insurgency were born into a rural, conservative, and isolated world.³ Almost all of those living outside of Kandahar city were engaged in either subsistence farming or various forms of sharecropping. There was little access to news or other media outside of the city. In village life, most locals followed the practice of *purdah*, the strict segregation of the sexes. Social mobility was limited and education offered little value to those working the land.⁴

At the time, the central government was strongest in the city, with traditional notables—*maleks*, khans, and tribal elders—holding the most authority in the rural areas. Tribal politics was deeply entwined with governance, and tribal membership often influenced one's ability to access resources and state services. Pashtun tribes such as the Popalzais, Alikozais, and Barakzais formed a sort of tribal aristocracy, with deep ties to the ruling apparatus in Kabul and Kandahar.⁵ These tribes were often given choice land, and their members usually filled the high ranks of government. In chronically underdeveloped areas such as Panjwayi, Zheray, and Maiwand, to the west of Kandahar city, the majority of the wealthiest landowners were Alikozais and Barakzais, while members of the many other less-favored tribes worked their land.

State services were limited and many Kandahari families—especially those in neglected areas like Panjwayi—sent their sons to study in *madrassas*, the religious schools that offered free room and board and the possibility of employment. This trend accelerated in the late 1970s as Pakistan financed a boom in madrassa construction throughout the border areas. After the rise of the Communists in Afghanistan in the late 1970s, the government's targeting of tribal elders and the resulting call to jihad precipitated a shift in power and prestige toward religious clergy.⁶

It is partly for these reasons that when the countryside exploded in resistance against the Soviet occupation in 1980, southern Afghanistan—and western Kandahar in particular—saw the emergence of semiautonomous mullah-led mujahideen groups. These “*taliban* fronts” typically consisted of a mullah and madrassa students and were usually nominally linked to one of the seven major mujahideen parties.⁷ Many (but certainly not all) of these mullah-commanders came from underserved regions such as Panjwayi and marginalized tribes such as the Noorzais. Some hailed from a long line of mullahs, and some were orphans. As Mullah Abdul Salaam Zaeef, a 1990s-era Taliban official who fought in these fronts against the Russians, explains, the taliban fronts were often more religiously strict than other mujahideen factions:

Fighting alongside the taliban meant more than just being a *mujahed*. The Taliban followed a strict routine in which everyone who fought alongside us had to participate, without exception. We woke before sunrise to perform the *fajr* or morning prayer in the mosque... we would recite *Surat Yasin Sharif* every morning in case we were martyred that day.... Apart from dire emergencies during operations or enemy assaults, the mujahideen were engaged in [religious] study. Senior Taliban members would teach younger seekers, and the senior *mawlawis* would instruct other older taliban members.... Not all the fronts worked in this manner, but we were taliban and this was our way. We wanted to stay clean, to avoid sinning, and to regulate our behavior.⁸

Associated with some taliban fronts were taliban judges, religious clerics who would adjudicate disputes on the basis of their interpretation of Islamic law, or *sharia*. Given the frequent squabbles between commanders over spoils, the fractious nature of tribal society, and the failure of the state to deliver judicial services to the countryside, the need for an effective justice system was paramount. The taliban courts were extremely popular for this reason, and they remain so even today.

From the embers of the anti-Soviet insurgency emerged the core leadership of today’s insurgency. Many of those who later served on the Quetta Shura, the movement’s senior leadership body based in Quetta, Pakistan, served in the Taliban fronts, as Table 1.1 shows.⁹ Upon the Soviet exodus, Kandahar fell into chaos as mujahideen commanders from the seven major parties carved up the province for themselves. By

TABLE 1.1 A Sample of Commanders of Taliban Fronts in Kandahar in the 1980s and Their Positions in the Post-2001 Insurgency

Commander	Tribe	Origin	Position in insurgency
Mullah Muhammad Omar	Hotak	Kandahar and Deh Rawud, Uruzgan	Supreme leader/figurehead
Mullah Beradar	Popalzai	Deh Rawud, Uruzgan	Leader of the Quetta Shura, 2006–2010
Mullah Hassan Akhund	Babar	Soonzi, Arghandab	On-and-off member of the Quetta Shura and military shuras
Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour	Ishaqzai	Band-i-Timor, Maiwand	Leader of the Quetta Shura, 2010
Tayeb Agha	Sayed	Jelabor, Arghandab	On-and-off member of the Quetta Shura and financial committee, envoy of Mullah Omar
Mullah Dadullah	Kakar	Char Chino, Uruzgan	Member of the Quetta Shura and military shuras, frontline commander as well, killed in 2007
Hafiz Majid	Noorzai	Sperwan, Panjwayi	Member of the Quetta Shura, 2010

1994, tales of rape and plunder became widespread, prompting Taliban commanders, who had been sitting aside during this civil war, to rise up against these warlords. These Taliban commanders saw their role as restorative (rescuing jihad from the hands of rapacious commanders who were using it for their own ends) and judicial (halting the conflict-fueled breakdown of society by installing their interpretation of Islamic law).

Kandaharis and Afghans from neighboring provinces dominated the resulting Taliban movement and government. To this day, greater Kandahar has provided the bulk of the Taliban's leadership.

2001–2006: CAUSES FOR THE TALIBAN'S RESURGENCE IN KANDAHAR

The Taliban were initially greeted with enthusiasm by the Pashtun-dominated war-torn south. The Taliban mullahs were already well respected in rural Kandahari society, as described above. Once the Taliban were in power, some of their strictures went against the grain of traditional rural Pashtun society, such as the banning of music, but others fit neatly with the prevailing culture, such as their approach toward women.

By the close of the 1990s, however, unending war, joblessness, and underdevelopment had eroded the Taliban's support in rural Kandahar. When U.S.-led forces invaded in 2001, the Taliban were little match for the overwhelming American firepower, and the population seemed unwilling to side with the failing government against the foreigners. Kandahar city fell on Dec. 7, 2001, prompting Mullah Omar and other senior Taliban leaders to flee to Pakistan. The former mujahideen commanders Gul Agha Sherzai, of the Barakzai tribe, and Mullah Naqib, a leader of the Alikozais, feuded for control of the city (much as they had in the early 1990s, before the Taliban's emergence).¹⁰ The U.S. forces backed Sherzai, and within two days of Kandahar's fall he was appointed governor. Over the next few years, Sherzai and his network of commanders would do much to alienate the population and spark the Taliban's resurgence.

THE VICTORS' HUBRIS AND FAILURE OF RECONCILIATION

Just as Kandahar was falling, fissures appeared in the Taliban movement. As most of the government was crumbling—Kabul and other major cities had fallen, leaving just Kandahar, Helmand, and Zabul provinces still under Taliban control—some of Mullah Omar's chief

lieutenants secretly gathered and decided to surrender to the forces of Hamid Karzai.¹¹ This group included Tayeb Agha, at one point Mullah Omar's top aide; Mullah Beradar, a former governor and key military commander; Sayed Muhammad Haqqani, the former ambassador to Pakistan; Mullah Obaidullah, the defense minister; Mullah Abdul Razzaq, the interior minister; and many others.

The group, represented by Obaidullah, delivered a letter to Karzai—then en route from Uruzgan to Kandahar city, one of the Taliban's last-standing urban strongholds.¹² The letter accepted Karzai's recent selection at the Bonn Conference as the country's interim leader and acknowledged that the Islamic Emirate (the official name of the Taliban government) had no chance of surviving. The Taliban officials also told Karzai that the senior leaders who signed the letter had permission from Mullah Omar to surrender. That same day, Taliban officials agreed to relinquish Kandahar city, and opposition forces successfully entered the city forty-eight hours later. The surrendered Taliban leaders continued to exchange a number of messages with the new government to work out the terms of their abdication.

The main request of the Taliban officials in this group was to be given immunity from arrest in exchange for agreeing to abstain from political life.¹³ At this juncture, these leading Taliban members (as well as the rank and file) did not appear to view the government and its foreign backers as necessitating a 1980s-type jihad. Some members even saw the new government as Islamic and legitimate.¹⁴ Indeed, Mullah Obaidullah and other former Taliban officials even surrendered to Afghan authorities in early 2002.¹⁵ But Karzai and other government officials ignored the overtures—largely due to pressures from the United States and the Northern Alliance, the Taliban's erstwhile enemy.¹⁶ Moreover, some Pashtun commanders who had been ousted by the Taliban seven years earlier were eager for revenge and were opposed to allowing former Taliban officials to go unpunished.¹⁷ Widespread intimidation and harassment of these former Taliban ensued. Sympathetic figures in the government told Haqqani and others in the group that they should flee the country, for they would not be safe in Afghanistan. So the men eventually vanished across the border into Pakistan's Baluchistan province. Many of the signatories of the letter were to become leading figures in the insurgency. Mullah Obaidullah became a key deputy of Mullah Omar and one of the insurgency's leading strategists, playing

an important role in rallying the scattered Taliban remnants to rebel against the Americans.¹⁸ Sayed Muhammad Haqqani is an important participant in the Taliban's political activities. Tayeb Agha has been a leading member of the Taliban's financial committee and has served on the Quetta Shura, in addition to being one of Mullah Omar's envoys. Mullah Beradar became the day-to-day leader of the entire movement. Mullah Abdul Razzaq, based in Chaman, Pakistan (across the border from Spin Boldak), is an important weapons and cash facilitator for the Taliban and has ties to the Kandahar insurgency.¹⁹

The alienation of leading former Taliban commanders in Kandahar would become a key motivating factor in sparking the insurgency there. Kandahar's governor, Gul Agha Sherzai, had initially taken a conciliatory attitude toward former Taliban figures. But his close ties with U.S. special forces, who often posted rewards for top Taliban leaders, as well as isolated attacks against the government and the possibility of exploiting his position for financial gain, eventually led to a retaliatory approach. The provincial government began to harass former Taliban commanders, usually midlevel military figures, who had remained behind in Kandahar. A group of Sherzai's commanders—Khalid Pashtun, Zhed Gulalai, Karam, Agha Shah, and others—became synonymous with abuse. Some of these men had a role in provincial government: Khalid Pashtun was Sherzai's spokesman, for example, and Karam was an official of Afghanistan's intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security (NDS).

These commanders targeted men formerly associated with the Taliban, often torturing them in secret prisons, according to numerous tribal elders, government officials, and Taliban members. Famous in the Mushan village cluster of Panjwayi district, for instance, is the case of Mullah Ahmad Shah. Shah, a former Taliban official and military commander who had surrendered, was at home in the early months of the Sherzai government. Karam and his men arrested Shah and some others on charges of having weapons, took them to a Kandahar city NDS prison and tortured them. Hajji Fazel Muhammad, who led a group of tribal elders from Panjwayi to the city to try to secure their release, recalled the scene at the prison:

We met them in jail and saw that their feet were swollen. Their hands and feet had been tied for days, and they told us that the

prison guards would roll them around on the ground. They also beat them with cables. [The prisoners] were begging us to tell the guards to just kill them so that they could be put out of their misery.²⁰

Shah was kept in custody for about three weeks, until his family members purchased weapons simply to hand over to the authorities to get him freed. But the men were arrested again and Shah's family was forced to sell all of their livestock so they could pay a bribe to the authorities. A short while later, Shah and others were arrested for a third time and held for forty-four days, until immense pressure from tribal elders brought about their release. Shah and his brothers soon fled to Pakistan, joined the burgeoning Taliban insurgency, and returned to Panjwayi as Taliban fighters. Today Shah is the head of the Taliban's main court in Mushan. His brothers Qari Allahuddin and Qari Muhammad Sadiq, along with two other siblings, are also Taliban commanders active in Panjwayi.²¹

Similar stories across Kandahar's districts abound. Hajji Lala, a prominent Taliban-era commander who went into retirement after 2001, was repeatedly harassed by Zhed Gulalai, Habibullah Jan (a Zheray strongman), and other government forces for nearly a year. He eventually decided to flee to Pakistan and join the insurgency, then served as a key commander in Kandahar province until he was killed in action.²² In some areas this trend was particularly grievous. Elders in Panjwayi district, for instance, estimate that nearly every former midlevel Taliban commander, along with their relatives and friends, fled Afghanistan in the first years of the Sherzai government and are now in the insurgency. Table 1.2 lists some of the most prominent insurgent commanders in Kandahar who are in this category.

In some cases, former Taliban members did not survive to be able to fight again. The NDS prison chief Karam arrested Mullah Abdul Razziq Baluch, an imam of a prominent mosque in the Sperwan area of Panjwayi district, and took him in for questioning. Baluch held Taliban sympathies during the previous regime but had accepted the new government. A delegation of tribal elders went to Kandahar city to negotiate his release, but they were simply shown Baluch's discolored, badly bruised body. The prison officials told them that he had committed suicide.²³

TABLE 1.2 Taliban Commanders in Kandahar Who Rejoined After Harassment by Afghan Officials or U.S. Forces

Commander	Area of Retirement	Current Area of Operation	Reason for Rejoining Taliban
Malim Feda Muhammad	Panjwayi	Panjwayi-Zheray and Pakistan	Abused by Americans
Hajji Lala	Kandahar city	Dand, Kandahar city, Maiwand	Harassed by Zheray strongman Habibullah Jan; Lala is believed to have been killed
Mullah Ahmad Shah	Panjwayi	Panjwayi	Tortured by Sherzai's forces
Qari Allahuddin	Panjwayi	Panjwayi-Zheray	Brother of Ahmad Shah
Mullah Saleh Muhammad Akhund	Panjwayi	Panjwayi-Zheray	Harassed by Sherzai's forces
Kaka Abdul Khaliq	Panjwayi	Panjwayi-Zheray	Harassed by Sherzai's forces
Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur	Maiwand	National	Harassment of other former Taliban
Mullah Muhammad Akhundzada	Panjwayi	Panjwayi-Zheray	Harassed by Sherzai's forces
Mullah Rashid	Panjwayi	Panjwayi-Zheray	Harassed by Sherzai's forces
Mullah Abdul Khaliq	Zheray	Panjwayi-Zheray	Harassed by Sherzai's forces
Khalifa	Zheray	Panjwayi-Zheray	Harassed by Sherzai's forces

The failure to grant amnesty to Taliban figures who had abandoned the movement and accepted the new Afghan government had repercussions far beyond the specific individuals targeted. Soon a sense began to develop among those formerly connected to the regime, from senior officials to rank-and-file fighters, that there was no place for them in the post-2001 society.²⁴ In the Band-i-Timor area of Maiwand, for instance, former civil aviation minister and leading Taliban official Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour had accepted the new government and was living at home.²⁵ But the violent drive against former Taliban by Sherzai's network and U.S. special forces led Mansur to realize it would be foolish to stay in Afghanistan. "He said that this government wouldn't let him live in peace," recalled lawmaker Ahmad Shah Achekzai, who had met him during that time. "It wasn't a surprise to us when he finally fled to Pakistan and rejoined the Taliban."²⁶ Today Mansur is a leading figure in the movement and one of the replacements for captured Taliban leader Mullah Beradar.²⁷

Even after fleeing to Pakistan, large segments of the leadership were still open to returning to Afghanistan and abandoning the fight. In 2002, for instance, the entire senior leadership except for Mullah Omar gathered in Karachi, Pakistan, for a meeting organized by former Taliban officials Mawlawi Arsala Rahmani and Mawlawi Abdul Sattar Siddiqi.²⁸ The group agreed in principle to find a way for them to return to Afghanistan and abandon the fight, but lack of political will on the part of the central government in Kabul and opposition from some sections of the U.S. leadership meant that such approaches were ultimately ignored.²⁹ In each of the following two years another delegation representing large sections of the Taliban leadership traveled to Kabul and met with senior government officials, but again nothing came of these overtures because of the lack of will from the government side.³⁰

INEFFECTIVE AND DIVISIVE GOVERNANCE

By 2005, much of the Taliban's old guard—at the leadership and field commander levels—had decided to stand against the Afghan government. During those years, a concomitant process of systematic

marginalization of broad sections of Kandahari society led to widespread disillusionment with the government and foreign forces, giving the Taliban leadership a rank-and-file force. Government institutions were predatory and divisive, corrupt to the core, and completely ineffective in meeting basic needs.

Tribes

One of the biggest social changes following the fall of the Taliban was a reversion to the rule of the traditional tribal leadership.³¹ Pashtun tribes are generally divided into hundreds of subtribes and clans, with many of the classifications and groupings varying in different parts of the country. The scores of tribes and clans in southern Afghanistan are roughly grouped into two confederations, the Ghilzais and the Durranis, with the latter subdivided into the Zirak and Panjpai confederations.³² In traditional Kandahari society, the Zirak tribes, which include the Barakzais and Popalzais, formed a sort of tribal aristocracy. The years of Soviet occupation and the subsequent Taliban rule had upset this trend—the Taliban included many Panjpai Durranis and Ghilzais in the ranks of leadership.

After 2001, Gul Agha Sherzai's governorship brought many of his fellow Barakzai tribesmen into positions of power. Similarly, the presence in the presidential palace of Hamid Karzai and in Kandahar of his half brother Ahmed Wali Karzai, who in the early years formed a second locus of power in the province, led to the promotion of the Popalzais. In certain regions or government functions, particular tribes would dominate. The Alikozais had early influence over the security apparatus, for instance, while certain Achekzais held key positions in Spin Boldak district.³³ The Barakzais were heavily involved in the business sector in Kandahar city and neighboring Dand district, a historical trend that was amplified by security and logistics contracts coming from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to Sherzai's network.³⁴

Meanwhile, other tribes were largely excluded from positions of power and resources. Table 1.3 shows that Panjpai Durranis (Noorzais, Ishaqzais, Alizais, Khogiyanis, and the Mako) make up about 27 percent of the population but account for only 10 percent of the government positions. The numbers are rough, considering the immense challenges in surveying populations in Afghanistan. Regardless of exact figures,

TABLE 1.3 Tribal Percentages in Government and Population at Large

Tribes	Percentage of Government Positions	Percentage of Kandahar Population
Zirak Durrani	69	61
Other	13	8
Panjpai Durrani	10	27
Ghilzai	8	2
Popalzai	24	20
Achekzai	19	9

Note: numbers are rounded.

Source: Interview with a tribal elder from Panjwayi, Kabul, July 2010.

there is an acute sense among the Panjpai Durrani that they are being excluded in the post-2001 arrangements. “Show me a single Barakzai in jail,” said one Noorzai elder from Panjwayi. “It’s only our people who get arrested.”³⁵ This may not necessarily be true, but it is born from an observation that Barakzais and Popalzais have more government connections and are able to use these networks to free their arrested relatives.

The numbers in Table 1.3 obscure the district- or village-level differences that are most important in understanding the relationship between tribal dynamics and the insurgency. In Panjwayi district, where Noorzais and Ishaqzais make up the bulk of the population, before 2008 every single district governor was a Zirak Durrani. The majority of the chiefs of police were Alikozais. Similar imbalances characterize other key districts, even today.

Although tribal structure has eroded significantly thanks to thirty years of war, with tribes or clans rarely acting as cohesive units any longer (if ever), tribal identity is still an important mechanism through which individual interests are negotiated. In southern Afghanistan’s system of largely informal networks, a shared tribal or clan background with the holders of power means access to state services, resources, and more. Thus the privileging of Zirak Durrani at the expense of the rest of the population was a major factor in alienating Panjpai Durrani and others from the center.³⁶

A disproportionate number of Panjpai Durrani and other alienated groups formed the recruiting base for the Taliban. This continued a historical trend that was briefly described above; Zirk Durrani dominated the governance structures, held access to the state's services and business channels, and made up a huge share of the landowning class, while second-tier tribes disproportionately produced mullahs and lower-rung jihadi commanders who later become the backbone of the Taliban movement. After the Taliban's defeat, the Zirk Durrani-dominated government viewed entire tribes, such as the Noorzais and Ishaqzais, with suspicion, which partly fueled their exclusion from power and their harassment by authorities. This in turn led large numbers of individuals from these tribes back to the Taliban.

The population of Spin Boldak, for instance, is split nearly evenly between Achekzais and Noorzais, but Achekzais have control over key parts of the border trade and count among their number the influential Border Police commander Abdul Razziq, one of the most powerful men in the province.³⁷ Although Noorzais in the district are not nearly as disadvantaged as they are elsewhere in Kandahar, their weakness in regard to control over the border trade and their second-tier status in relation to the center means that they contribute far greater numbers to the insurgency in the district than the Achekzais. Table 1.4 lists the key Taliban commanders active in Spin Boldak district today; nearly all are Noorzais.³⁸

At times, government policies actively exacerbated tribal tensions and imbalances. In 2006, the provincial government ordered Commander Abdul Razziq's largely Achekzai militia and police force into the Noorzai-dominated Panjwayi district to quell a growing number of insurgents. The Noorzais and Achekzais have a historical rivalry, probably originating in attempts to control the lucrative border crossing of Spin Boldak.³⁹ News spread quickly of Razziq's arrival. "People began to say that Razziq was here to kill every Noorzai he could find," said one Noorzai elder from the district. Noorzai tribesmen rallied to fight against their invading rival; some accounts say that Noorzais from neighboring districts and even Helmand province came for backup. The Taliban quickly amassed a force of their own, portraying their moves as a defense of the Noorzais. The combined force ambushed Razziq's men as they crossed from the Panjwayi district center toward Sperwan, inflicting many casualties. Razziq's forces eventually retreated, and the ranks of the Taliban swelled with fresh recruits

TABLE 1.4 Prominent Taliban Commanders Active in Spin Boldak

Commander	Tribe	Role
Mullah Abdul Razzaq	Achekzai	Quetta Shura member
Mullah Ataullah	Noorzai	Commander
Mullah Amin Kamin	Noorzai	Commander
Mullah Jabbar	Noorzai	Former shadow district governor
Mullah Hayat Khan	Noorzai	Commander
Mullah Muhammad Amin	Noorzai	Shadow district governor
Mullah Muhammad Hashim	Noorzai	Commander
Mullah Raouf	Noorzai	Shorabak district governor, Spin Boldak commander
Mullah Muhammad Issa Akhund	Noorzai	Influential commander in a number of districts

eager to defend the Noorzais against further government oppression. “In our area, the Taliban went from 40 people to 400 in just days,” recalled Neda Muhammad, a Noorzai elder.⁴⁰

Similar tales made the rounds in local communities. In an interview with journalist Graeme Smith in Quetta, one insurgent explained that “In Kabul, all of the government officials are northerners or Popalzai . . . that is why there are problems. There is no justice.” He added: “These tribes took Kandahar by force. . . . This is the main reason we fight.”⁴¹

Other factors contribute to the Taliban’s tribal makeup. Traditionally second-tier tribes such as the Noorzais and Ishaqzais have turned to smuggling and illicit trade because opportunities in the legal realm were meager. Criminality and insurgencies often have a symbiotic relationship, and in the post-2001 years many prominent smugglers developed ties with the Taliban. Also, over the years a large number of clerics and spiritual healers have populated the ranks of the Ishaqzai tribe in western Kandahar, leading them to develop close ties to the traditional religious clergy. These bonds persisted through the anti-Soviet insurgency and strengthened with the emergence of the Taliban. Finally, Sayeds,

patrilineal descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, are considered by Afghans a separate tribe, and in southern Afghanistan they have historically played a role in conflict mediation. The role of the Taliban in conflict mediation in the 1980s and 1990s led to a natural alliance and overlap between these groups, and today in Panjwayi and Zheray districts a disproportionate number of Taliban commanders are Sayeds.

It is important to mention that despite these trends, the Taliban is not a tribal movement as such. Some commentators have called the Taliban a “Ghilzai insurgency” or tribal rebellion, but the reality is far more complicated.⁴² The movement seeks to win recruits from all tribes and plays upon whichever grievances are relevant in a particular area or moment. Thus in Panjwayi it supported Noorzais against the marauding Achekzai militia, but in Maiwand it supported Khogiyanis against Noorzais when a dispute over land rights emerged and the local government backed the latter group.⁴³ And there are a number of important Zirak Durrani Taliban commanders, such as Kandahar’s current shadow governor, Mawlawi Muhammad Issa (a Popalzai).

Moreover, tribal identity itself is quite complicated: locals rarely use the names of confederations such as “Ghilzai” or “Zirak Durrani” in self-identification.⁴⁴ Rather, the operational unit of identity is the tribe, as with Noorzai, or more often the subtribe, such as Gurg.⁴⁵ Clashes or rivalries between subtribes can be just as frequent as those between tribes. The Taliban deftly plays on such rivalries, often to its advantage. Indeed, the Taliban in Kandahar should more properly be seen as a nationalist Islamist insurgency that feeds on and manipulates tribal imbalances and rivalries to its own ends.⁴⁶

Governance

From the examples of torture and extrajudicial killing given above, it should be clear that governance was a major problem in the post-2001 years. A series of corrupt and predatory government officials, from district governors and police chiefs all the way up to the provincial governor, regularly robbed or imprisoned locals. Asadullah Khaled, who served as Kandahar governor from 2005 to 2008, kept a secret prison and even personally tortured and administered electric shocks to captives.⁴⁷ Mullah Maqsud, a district governor of Maiwand, joined with U.S. forces in a series of disastrous raids that killed many civilians

and is blamed for the deaths of key figures in the community. Hajji Saifullah, also at one time a district governor of Maiwand and later of Panjwayi, is widely accused of stealing aid funds and destroying the poppy fields of rivals to boost the profitability of his own fields.⁴⁸

As mentioned above, security officials were notorious for abuse. One Kandahar city resident recalls a scene he witnessed involving Karam, the NDS prisons chief:

Once we were walking on this road [near the center of Kandahar city] when a man on a motorcycle bumped into Commander Karam's vehicle. Karam's men jumped out of the car and started beating this man. He was almost killed, in front of everyone, and then they took him and threw him into the NDS prison. The elders came and tried to convince Karam to release the man but he refused. He spent the night in jail just for bumping his car.⁴⁹

One Noorzai tribal elder in Maiwand recounted the following story:

Hajji Gul Ahmad, one of my brothers-in-law, was taken by Akhundzada and Manay [two of Sherzai's commanders]. They had arrested him and I went to Kandahar city and met Hajji Niamat⁵⁰ [formerly a Sherzai associate now connected to Ahmed Wali Karzai] and he took me to my brother-in-law. He opened the door and I saw him sitting on the ground. His hands and feet were tied together and he was bruised. He had barely eaten in six days. I went crazy! I said what is this? What crime did he commit? Hajji Niamat said that if I wanted him to be released, I would have to pay. In the evening I paid 2 million Pakistani rupees (roughly \$20,000) and they released him.⁵¹

Many Kandahar residents say that the government became even more pernicious after Sherzai left and Ahmed Wali Karzai, President Hamid Karzai's half brother, consolidated his hold over the province. Many locals accused him of running Kandahar like a mafia don, saying he vetted nearly all government appointees, dominated the licit and illicit trade networks, and ruthlessly sidelined opponents.⁵²

Poor governance also meant a plodding bureaucracy, riddled with corruption. Even simple administrative tasks would be fraught with difficulty, and many Kandaharis sought to avoid dealing with the government whenever possible. In some cases, fraud and mismanagement

had dire consequences. In the southern district of Shorabak, for instance, repeated fraud in the various national elections since 2004 pushed many away from the government. In 2005, one of the most respected leaders of the Bareetz tribe (which dominates the district⁵³), Hajji Muhammad Bareetz, ran for parliament. He recalls that:

I won more than 40,000 votes here and even the media announced me as the winner, but Karzai and his family here—I mean his brother—stopped me from going to parliament by using fraud. After this many of my tribesmen got disgusted with the government and joined the Taliban. They even told me to join the Taliban, but I’m too old. I can’t live that kind of lifestyle anymore.⁵⁴

The experience left a bitter taste in their mouths, and in 2009 the tribal leadership decided to oppose Karzai and support his opponent, Dr. Abdullah. But on election day, provincial officials shut down the polling centers, detained the district governor, and used Abdul Razziq’s forces to stuff ballots, robbing the Bareetz tribe of their vote.⁵⁵ Since the election, locals report, provincial officials have not been treating them well, largely because of their attempted betrayal of Karzai in favor of his rival. “So many more people have fled the area or joined the Taliban since then,” Hajji Bareetz said.

Policing

Hand in hand with broken government was a notoriously corrupt police force. International actors and the Afghan government generally paid little attention to coordinating efforts to build a viable police force in Kandahar in the early years after 2001. Although some international agencies and governments did focus on police development, the CIA, U.S. Special Forces, and others were backing militias (such as Sherzai’s). Furthermore, lucrative contracts to Sherzai and Karzai, or their associates, funded militias and delegitimized police institutions. An ISAF study estimated in 2010 that only about half of the police forces in Kandahar are under the command of the provincial police chief: “The rest are influenced by Kandahar’s power brokers and tribal leaders. When the provincial governor recently instructed him to replace a district police chief in Panjwayi, the Provincial Chief of Police’s orders were countermanded after local power brokers intervened.”⁵⁶

Another study found that police in Kandahar were typically paid less than private security forces, and what resources they did receive were meager:

On 31 January 2004, 300 ANP [Afghan National Police] were deployed to Kandahar in one of the first deployments of centrally trained police to a province. Within the unit, high levels of optimism about their training and pride for their symbolic representation of the central government were reported. The arrival of the ANP in Kandahar led to considerable disappointment—they were accommodated in the remains of the Kandahar Hotel, given little ammunition and sent to guard UN compounds, rather than engage in policing. The 260 deployed were also undersupplied in terms of weapons, vehicles and accommodation, which prompted 100 to desert.⁵⁷

Under such conditions, police corruption and predation became endemic. There are many legendary tales of police brutality in Kandahar, from simply shaking down motorists at checkpoints to much worse. In one well-known incident in Panjwayi, a police officer demanded goods from a shopkeeper in the district center. When the shopkeeper refused, the policeman shot and killed him and absconded with the goods.⁵⁸

The Taliban would begin to position themselves as protectors of the population against the police. At the same time, they cultivated ties with certain police officials, which they exploited to purchase weapons or cooperate in smuggling.

Judiciary

The role of dispute resolution in Pashtun society cannot be emphasized enough. Rural Afghan society is largely informal, meaning that there are few records of land holdings, particularly after decades of war in which documents were destroyed and many people fled, leaving their land behind. Disagreements over land ownership, water access, grazing rights, and other issues are very common, usually between tribes, clans, or family members (such as second cousins). Moreover, under the current circumstances, in which the state is extremely weak, corrupt, or nonexistent (as in much of Kandahar), criminality often goes

unpunished. Historically, this has led large segments of the population to support the implementation of sharia, particularly those sections of Islamic law that can be applied punitively or to resolve conflicts.⁵⁹ The popularity of the Taliban courts of the anti-Soviet insurgency is a good example in this regard. Researchers Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, in their study of the relationship between al-Qaeda and the Taliban, cite one appraisal of the courts:

[T]he Islamic courts were very strict and would even sentence commanders or field leaders if they did something wrong. One time, a battle took place between two commanders so they went to court and asked for its ruling. The judge decided to arrest them both and beat them up before throwing them in jail. This judge and his court gained great respect in the Kandahar area because of that.⁶⁰

In post-2001 Kandahar, the Taliban's judicial services (discussed in more detail in the next section) became one of the key advantages the movement had over the state. In some instances, the problem is simply a paucity of judges: In Kandahar city, for instance, there are only nine judges out of eighty-seven possible slots.⁶¹ Where there are judges, the system is laboriously slow, ineffective, and very susceptible to bribery. Moreover, Taliban threats in recent years have forced many judges to flee to Kandahar city, further eroding judicial services in the districts and increasing reliance on the insurgents.

COALITION FORCES ACTIVITY

Many Kandaharis insist that the foreign coalition forces have been a source of insecurity. The perceptions of the government mentioned above also fall upon the foreign troops, since foreigners are largely seen as being the real power in the country. Sections of the military, such as the U.S. Special Forces, actively supported strongmen and militias, undermining state-building efforts. Men like Ahmed Wali Karzai and Gul Agha Sherzai were largely made through the support—financial and political—of the United States. U.S. forces also worked closely with strongmen such as Karam, one of Sherzai's

commanders, to hunt down former Taliban, and they helped create a perverse incentive system in which such commanders would hand over suspects on dubious grounds or simply arrest people to extract money.⁶² The foreigners were caught in a complex system that they didn't fully understand and often fell prey to local rivalries. They frequently failed to distinguish between friend and foe, in the process creating many enemies.

In Panjwayi and Zheray districts, the heartland of today's insurgency, the case of Malim Feda Muhammad is seared into the consciousness of many Taliban fighters. Muhammad, a schoolteacher when the Russians invaded, joined the mujahideen and became a famous commander in the greater Panjwayi area. He joined the Taliban movement in its early days and later became a frontline commander in the north. After the Taliban's fall, he retired from political life back to Panjwayi. But U.S. forces captured him and sent him to their detention facility at Kandahar Airfield, and he was released only after intensive intervention by tribal elders. One NDS official who visited him after his release recalled that:

I went to his home. For weeks he had been hiding in the house, too ashamed to come out and talk to people. Finally I convinced his son to let me see him. He looked like a disaster. He hadn't been sleeping well. He started to tell his story of how he was humiliated, stripped naked, beaten, and how they put dogs on him while he was in that state. He was crying and asked how he could possibly live in Afghanistan with any dignity.⁶³

It is difficult to verify Muhammad's claims, although they fit with other testimonies of abuse at the Kandahar prison from that time. Still, for our purposes—to understand the motivations and ideology of the insurgency—the fact that other Taliban and the community in general *believe* his story is what is important. Many of the Taliban and tribal elders interviewed in Panjwayi repeated his tale as an example of why people were standing against the Americans. Muhammad eventually fled with his family to Quetta, where he rejoined the Taliban and today commands a number of fighters in the Panjwayi and Zheray areas.⁶⁴

In the northern district of Shah Wali Kot, Taliban fighters, locals, and elders tell the story of Mullah Sattar Akhund, a former Taliban

official who was living at home during the early years after the movement was ousted. One Taliban commander recalled that:

In that first year of the Karzai government Mullah Sattar was in retirement. But the government kept coming to his house and questioning him or searching his house. Sometimes he was going out during the day and would come home at night to sleep. One of those days the Americans came and searched his house. They came again and again and searched his house, and it turned out to be a big shame for him. The people in his village started to gossip about his family. Finally his mother got very angry and told him, “You are bringing shame upon our family! Either defend us from this or run away. She gave him the family weapon, a Sakeel⁶⁵ from the old days, and told him to use it. The next time the Americans came he started firing at them, and he got many people in the village to fire at them. The Americans called for an airplane, which finally came and bombed the house. Later on they arrested all of the surviving adult male family members and many were taken to Bagram. They took the heart out of the village. We knew that we had to fight them and so we joined the Taliban.⁶⁶

Along with the arbitrary arrests and abuse, night raids by special forces and targeted assassinations played a significant role in turning many against the foreign presence. The case of Hajji Burget Khan in particular had lasting negative effects. Khan was one of the best-known leaders of the Ishaqzai tribe, which has hundreds of thousands of members in Kandahar, Helmand, and elsewhere.⁶⁷ In 2002, U.S. forces raided his home in the Band-i-Timor area of Maiwand, killing him and leaving his son a paraplegic. “They took the women and children and put them in a *bawaray*,” a type of shallow well, recalled one prominent Noorzai elder from the area. “It was a shock to us. We had lost our leader and even the women were mocking us, saying that despite our big turbans we could not protect our community. The Americans also arrested a number of relatives of Hajji Burget Khan and shaved their beards and cut their hair,” a humiliating act for a Pashtun man.

The killing of Hajji Burget Khan is often cited as the single most important destabilizing factor in Maiwand district and other Ishaqzai areas. Three Taliban commanders from the region interviewed for this report all mentioned the killing as one of the main factors that led them

to join the insurgency. Afghan government officials concede that it had disastrous effects in the area. It is unclear why Khan was targeted; he was very old at the time—most put his age over seventy—and was not a member of the insurgency. He had a son who was with the Taliban during the 1990s but had since retired. And like many other Ishaqzai and Noorzai elders in the area, he may have had ties to drug traffickers. But the most likely explanation is that the commanders with whom U.S. forces had allied had seen Khan as a rival.

News of his death even had effects on other tribes and districts. “We heard about Hajji Burget Khan’s murder,” said one elder in Shorabak district. “It was enough to convince many people the foreigners and the government were our enemy.” Khan’s paraplegic son moved to Quetta, where he became a Taliban facilitator, while his brother became a leading commander in Helmand.⁶⁸

The killing was notorious throughout Kandahar province, but nearly every district had similar stories. In Zheray, for instance, foreign forces killed two influential religious scholars, Mullahs Abidullah and Janan, causing many of their followers to join the insurgency.⁶⁹

One Taliban commander in Zheray gave his reasons for joining.

There were so many examples in the last nine years of the foreigners’ methods. During last Ramadan, it was 12:15 a.m. and the Americans invaded a house of my relatives in Hazarujj Baba.⁷⁰ They killed an innocent 18-year-old boy named Janan who was sleeping under a net. They left his body there while they searched the house, and dogs began to gnaw at him. In the same month, in the Nar-i-pul area, they raided the house of Mawlawi Ahmadullah. They killed him, took one of his brothers with them, and tied the wives to each other and left them as they searched the house. When we arrived later, we could not untie the women with our hands and we had to use a stick [because of Pashtun customs that forbid contact between members of the opposite sex who are not relatives or married]. What were we to do after these sorts of things? So I joined the Taliban.⁷¹

Furthermore, there were a number of high-profile incidents in which airstrikes killed a sizable number of civilians, such as the 2008 bombing of a wedding party in Shah Wali Kot.

JOBLESSNESS, POPPIES, AND OTHER CAUSES

A number of studies have found a positive correlation between low income level and insecurity.⁷² “Insecurity” here generally means Taliban presence, although areas with just the Taliban (or just pro-government forces) are generally much more secure than areas with both. With few jobs, occasional drought, and landlessness, many rank-and-file insurgents are at least partially motivated by money.⁷³

As the government began to eradicate the opium poppy fields of poor farmers, the Taliban portrayed themselves as these farmers’ protectors. Poppy eradication has played a significant role in pushing locals in Maiwand district, for instance, into the insurgency in order to safeguard their lands and income.⁷⁴ During cultivation season, the Taliban often join with local farmers to expel government agencies such as the Poppy Eradication Force, and in areas under Taliban control locals are usually free to pursue the activity.⁷⁵ In Graeme Smith’s landmark study of the Taliban for the Canadian *Globe and Mail* newspaper, one insurgent explained that previously “they were cutting them [poppies] down, but now those areas are controlled by mujahideen and now they cannot cut them down.”⁷⁶

Sometimes the motivations to join the insurgency are subtler than those outlined above. As the Taliban grew during the period 2004 to 2007, communities that were not aligned with the insurgents would join the movement simply to protect themselves from insurgents. These communities would then exert pressure on neighboring areas, until they too joined.

In some cases, joining the Taliban allows disaffected young men to step outside of traditional roles in society. Rural Pashtun culture places extraordinary emphasis on age and experience, so that even thirty-year-olds can be considered “youth” and have little or no part in decision making. But a twenty-five-year-old Taliban commander wields far more power and authority than any elder in the community, which can be intoxicating in such a society.

Finally, some individuals or communities join or temporarily align with the Taliban simply as a means to project power and influence in personal disputes. A family feuding with another might throw its support to the insurgents as a way to gain leverage. In a number of cases, communities have sought an alliance with the Taliban to give them

an upper hand in disputes over such issues as land or water rights.⁷⁷ Similarly, communities have been known to use the insurgents to side against Kuchis (Pashtun nomads), whose migration to or settlement in an area typically causes tensions.⁷⁸ Others use Taliban membership as a means to carry out criminal activity. By no means is all of the violence in Kandahar province due to actual antigovernment insurgents; drug mafias, feuding commanders, rival families, and key government power brokers are also sources of instability, although their actions are usually attributed to the Taliban. In short, in a militarized society with a nearly complete breakdown of the rule of law and the absence of the state, the Taliban movement is a potent weapon for individuals and communities looking to settle scores and further personal agendas.

TALIBAN IDEOLOGY

A number of commentators have divided the Taliban into an “ideological core” and a rank and file motivated primarily by material concerns. The actual role of ideology is much more complicated, however, as the recent history of Kandahar shows. Initially, much of the Taliban in the province—from the senior leadership to the rank and file—fell into two categories: they either accepted the legitimacy of the new government or they rejected it but did not feel that fighting against it was appropriate or possible. Senior leaders such as Mullah Akhtar Mansur, who today has a leading role in the Quetta Shura, had made peace with the government in the early years. Scores of others were in similar positions. This indicates that many Taliban did not take up arms simply as an exercise of the principle of jihad or expulsion of foreigners, as many Taliban would later try to portray it, but rather because it was the only viable alternative for individuals and groups left without a place in the new state of affairs. In other words, initially it was not the existence of a new government per se that drove these former Taliban back, but the *behavior* of that government. Likewise, initially it was not the presence of foreign troops as such that spawned opposition from these former Taliban, but the *behavior* of those troops. This is in contrast to groups such as al-Qaeda, which viewed the presence of foreign troops on Afghan soil ipso facto as justification for

jihad. For these reasons, it took some time for the Taliban to regroup, for former leaders to grow disaffected and flee to Pakistan, and for the various factors that alienated communities to play out. Sizable opposition did not emerge until 2003, and the insurgency did not gain significant momentum until after 2004, when community after community began falling to the Taliban.

This is not to say that ideology does not play a role—only to call attention to cause and effect. After finding themselves on the wrong side of the new regime, former Taliban leaders and affected individuals understood their misfortunes by viewing the government as un-Islamic.⁷⁹ They explained the actions of foreign troops by viewing them as an occupying force, bent on robbing Afghanistan of its sovereignty, culture, and religion. And many among the rank and file were attracted to the movement because it provided the most viable means of protecting themselves or accessing resources and power. Indeed, a study of insurgents and insurgency-affected areas commissioned by Britain's Department for International Development (DFID) found that radicalization (i.e., viewing the conflict in jihadist or religious terms) often took place *after* an individual joined the insurgency.⁸⁰ Therefore it is not accurate or helpful to divide the Taliban into “moderates” and “ideological,” as motivations are a complex interplay of structural causes (social, political, and economic) and ideology. Very few field commanders in Kandahar have reconciled with the government despite growing opportunities to do so in recent years, yet at the same time a number of senior leaders have made approaches to the government.⁸¹

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that the ideological justifications—Islamic culture under attack, foreigners' desire to convert Afghans, the loss of sovereignty and the desire for self-determination, and so on—have little to do with those of transnational jihadist movements. In interviews with Taliban commanders and senior leaders for this study, not a single person made an appeal to international jihad or pan-Islamism. This reinforces the finding of the DFID survey of Taliban fighters, in which the report's author writes that opposition to foreign troops is “due to a perceived attack on Islam but it is an attack that is perceived to be happening within the country by foreign forces. There was little evidence of common cause being made with Islamist movements outside Afghanistan.”⁸²

PART 2: THE TALIBAN IN KANDAHAR: STRUCTURE AND TACTICS

- The Taliban's chain of command and decision-making processes are neither simple nor straightforward. A formal network exists in Kandahar, from the shadow governor and Military Commission down to district governors and local judges. In theory, provincial and district political leaders direct military efforts in their respective areas, although actual decisions to carry out small-scale attacks, involving one or a few groups, are left to field commanders. Larger-scale efforts fall under the supposed control of prominent regional commanders and the provincial leadership. In reality, however, most attacks take place with little input from higher levels. Moreover, the Taliban's formal structure in Kandahar sits in parallel with informal networks that tie commanders back to specific leaders in Quetta. Prominent leaders over the border there have networks of commanders that extend throughout Kandahar province. Many decisions are made through these informal channels, bypassing the formal structures.
- The Taliban's response to increased Western attention to Kandahar province was to do the same themselves. Assassinations, roadside bombings, and complex attacks have hit record highs in Kandahar in 2010. The insurgent strategy of targeting anyone even remotely associated with the government, and the foreign forces' strategy of reaching out to tribal leaders and their incipient militia programs, have made it very difficult for locals to remain neutral in this conflict. Many tribal leaders today are left with only two choices: flee to a government stronghold like Kandahar city or Kabul, or align completely with the insurgents.

STRUCTURE OF THE KANDAHAR TALIBAN

Although initially accepting the legitimacy of the new Kabul government, or at the very least viewing it as an entity that they could not oppose, Taliban members eventually came to view the actions of the

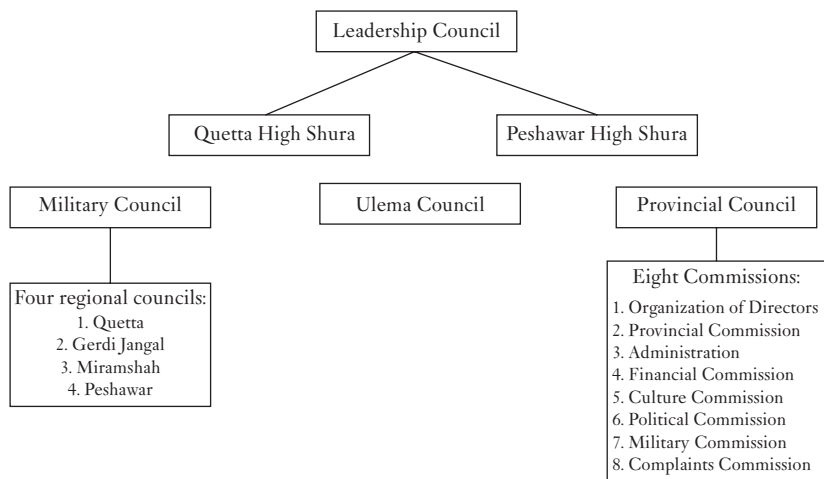


FIGURE 1.1 Taliban Leadership Structure

Note: The material for this section is based on dozens of interviews with Taliban in Kandahar, 2008–2010, unless otherwise noted.

government and the foreigners as necessitating jihad. By 2003, the majority of the old-guard senior leadership had relocated to Quetta or Peshawar, Pakistan, and launched a formal body to oversee the nascent insurgency. That body, which came to be known as the Quetta Shura, would closely direct strategy on the ground, as well as facilitate the transfer of funds, persuade erstwhile comrades to rejoin, and direct propaganda efforts. Over the years, the leadership developed an elaborate structure of sub-shuras and committees to meet the growing organization's needs, as depicted in Figure 1.1.⁸³ Like other Afghan groups, however, the Taliban operates as much through informal networks as it does through formal ones. It is important to realize the limits of looking at the organization through a purely Western understanding of command and control.

THE SHADOW GOVERNMENT

The Taliban's initial antigovernment organizing was done entirely through informal networks, but as the insurgency grew it began to develop a formal shadow administration alongside these networks. Today, every province in the country has a centrally appointed shadow

governor, although in some areas (such as Panjshir) this is purely a titular role. In theory, the provincial council (see Figure 1.1) together with the leadership council makes appointments, but often the reality is more blurred. Senior leader Mullah Abdul Qayum Zakir, who is mostly involved with military affairs, has also made political appointments, for instance.⁸⁴ The shadow governor's role is to oversee all activities in the province, act as liaison with Quetta, manage conflicts between commanders, and interact with non-Taliban actors, such as international agencies, government officials, and construction companies. As in the era of the Taliban government, governors are rotated often, and it is rare to find one who has been in his post for more than a year. This is likely done for security reasons, but also to ensure that these governors do not develop an independent power base.

As of August 2010, Kandahar's shadow governor is Muhammad Issa, a Popalzai from the Gawarai area of Arghistan district. During the anti-Soviet insurgency, he fought in a Taliban front under Mullah Muhammad Ghaus, who would later become the Taliban's foreign minister.⁸⁵ In the Taliban government, Issa worked as a finance officer under deputy leader Mullah Muhammad Rabbani. In the post-2001 years, before being promoted to shadow provincial governor, he worked closely with Mullah Beradar and was at one point the district governor of Arghistan.⁸⁶

Working with the shadow governor is the Military Commission, a council of four to six members that helps direct provincial affairs. In theory the governor and Military Commission plan operations, but in practice lower-level commanders often take their own initiative and the leadership bodies have more of a ceremonial role. In some areas the provincial leadership wields considerable authority; when two commanders in Wardak province sparred recently, for example, the Military Commission and shadow governor were able to banish them from the province. But Kandahar's proximity to Quetta, and the long-standing ties between its commanders and the senior leadership across the border, mean that most important decisions are made outside of the province.

A number of mawlawis (religious clerics) are supposed to be associated with the Military Commission, which doubles as the supreme judicial body for a province. "Ideally, the Military Commission should not also do court activities," explained one Taliban commander from