

Who Are the Taliban?

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If there is an exact location marking the West's failures in Afghanistan, it is the modest police checkpoint that sits on the main highway twenty minutes south of Kabul. The post signals the edge of the capital, a city of spectacular tension, of blast walls and standstill traffic. Beyond this point, Kabul's gritty, low-slung buildings and narrow streets give way to a vast plain of serene farmland, hemmed in by sandy mountains. In this valley in Logar province, the American-backed government of Afghanistan no longer exists.

Instead of government officials, men in muddied black turbans with assault rifles slung over their shoulders patrol the highway, checking for thieves and "spies." The charred carcass of a tanker, meant to deliver fuel to international forces farther south, sits belly-up on the roadside. The police say they don't dare enter these districts, especially at night, when the guerrillas rule the roads. In some parts of the country's south and east, these insurgents have even set up their own government, which they call the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the name of the former Taliban government. They mete out justice in makeshift Sharia courts. They settle land disputes between villagers. They dictate the curriculum in schools.

Just three years ago, the central government still controlled the provinces near Kabul. But years of mismanagement, rampant criminality and mounting civilian casualties inflicted by Western forces have led to a spectacular resurgence of the Taliban and related groups. According to Acbar, an umbrella organization representing more than 100 aid agencies, insurgent attacks have increased by 50 percent over the past year. Foreign soldiers are now dying at a higher rate here than in Iraq.

The worsening disaster is prompting the Afghan government of President Hamid Karzai and international players to speak openly of negotiations with sections of the insurgency. But who exactly are the Afghan insurgents? Every suicide attack and kidnapping is usually attributed to "the Taliban." In reality, however, the insurgency is far from monolithic. There are the shadowy, kohl-eyed mullahs and head-bobbing religious students, of course, but there are also erudite university students, veteran anti-Soviet commanders and poor, illiterate farmers. The movement is a melange of nationalists, Islamists and bandits that fall uneasily into three or four main factions and many subfactions. The factions have competing commanders with differing ideologies and strategies, who nonetheless agree on one essential goal : kicking out the foreigners.

It wasn't always this way. When US-led forces toppled the Taliban government in November 2001, Afghans celebrated the downfall of a reviled and discredited regime "We felt like dancing in the streets," one Kabuli told this writer. As US-backed forces marched into Kabul, remnants of the old Taliban regime split into three groups. The first, including many Kabul-based bureaucrats and functionaries, simply surrendered to the Americans; some even joined the Karzai government. The second, comprising the movement's senior leadership, including "Commander of the Faithful" Mullah Omar, fled across the border into Pakistan, where they remain to this day. The third and largest group-foot soldiers, local commanders and provincial officials-quietly melted into the landscape, returning to their villages to wait and see which way the wind would blow.

Meanwhile, the country was quickly being carved up by warlords and criminals. On the brand-new highway connecting Kabul to Kandahar and Herat, built with millions of Washington's dollars, well-organized groups of bandits would regularly terrorize travelers. Last year "thirty, maybe fifty criminals, some in police uniforms, stopped

our bus and shot [out] our windows”, said Muhammadullah, the owner of a bus company that regularly uses the route. “They searched our vehicle and stole everything from everyone.” Criminal syndicates, often with government connections, organized kidnapping sprees in urban centers. Often, those few who were caught would simply be released after the right palms were greased.

Into this landscape of violence and criminality rode the Taliban, promising law and order—just as they did when they first formed in the mid-1990s, when they were welcomed by many Afghans as relief from the rapacious post-Soviet warlords. Within two years after the 2001 invasion, the exiled leadership, based in Quetta, Pakistan, began reactivating networks of fighters who had blended into Afghan villages. They resurrected relationships with Pashtun tribes. (The insurgents, historically a predominantly Pashtun movement and mostly concentrated in the country's south and east, still have very little influence among other minority ethnic groups like the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hezaras.) With funds from wealthy Arab donors and training from ISI, the Pakistani intelligence apparatus, they were able to bring weapons and expertise into Pashtun villages.

In one village after another, the Taliban drove out the remaining minority of government sympathizers through intimidation and assassination. Then they won over the majority with promises of security and efficiency. They implemented a harsh version of Sharia law, cutting off the hands of thieves and shooting adulterers. They were brutal, but they were also incorruptible. Justice no longer went to the highest bidder. “There's no crime anymore, unlike before,” said Abdul Halim, who lives in a district under Taliban control.

The insurgents conscripted fighters from the villages they operated in, often paying \$200 a month—more than double the typical police salary. They adjudicated disputes between tribes and between landowners. They protected poppy fields from the eradication attempts of the central government and foreign armies—a move that won the support of poor farmers whose only stable income came from poppy cultivation. The areas under insurgent control were consigned to having neither reconstruction nor social services, but for rural villagers who had seen much foreign intervention and little economic progress under the Karzai government, this was hardly new.

At the same time, the Taliban's ideology began to transform. “We are fighting to free our country from foreign domination,” said Taliban spokesman Qari Yousef Ahmadi. “The Indians fought for their independence against the British. Even the Americans once waged an insurgency to free their own country.” This emerging nationalistic streak appeals to Pashtun villagers, who have grown weary of the American and NATO presence.

The insurgents are also fighting to install a version of Sharia law. Nonetheless, the famously puritanical guerrillas have moderated some of their most extreme doctrines, at least in principle. Last year, for instance, Mullah Omar issued an edict declaring music and parties—banned in the Taliban's previous incarnation—permissible. Some commanders have even started accepting the idea of girls' education. Certain hardline leaders such as the one-legged Mullah Dadullah, a man of legendary brutality whose beheading binges reportedly proved too much even for Mullah Omar, were killed by international forces.

At the same time, a more pragmatic leadership started taking the reins. American intelligence officials believe day-to-day leadership of the movement is now in the hands of the politically savvy Mullah Brehadar, while Mullah Omar retains a largely figurehead position. Brehadar may be behind the push to moderate the movement's message in order to win support. Even at the local level, some Taliban officials are tempering their older policies in order to win local hearts and minds. Three months ago in a district in Ghazni province, for instance, the insurgents ordered all schools closed. Tribal elders appealed to the Taliban's ruling religious council in the area; the religious judges reversed the decision and reopened the schools.

However, not all field commanders follow the central injunctions. In many Taliban-controlled districts such amusements as music and parties are still outlawed, which points to the movement's decentralized nature. Local commanders often set their own policies and initiate attacks without direct orders from the leadership. The result is a slippery movement that morphs from district to district. In some Taliban-controlled districts of Ghazni province, an Afghan caught working for a nongovernmental organization would meet certain death. In parts of neighboring Wardak province, however, where the insurgents are said to be more educated and understand the need for development, local NGOs can function with the guerrillas' permission.

Never short of guns and guerrillas, Afghanistan has proven fertile ground for a host of insurgent groups in addition to the Taliban.

Naqibullah, a student with a sparse beard in soft, measured tones, was not quite 30 when he met this writer. Naqibullah (his nom de guerre) and his friends at the Kabul University are members, of Hizb-i-Islami, an insurgent group led by warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and allied with the Taliban. Naqibullah's circle of friends meet regularly in the university's dorms, discussing politics and watching DVDs of recent attacks: Over the past year his circle has shrunk: Sadiq was arrested while attempting a suicide bombing. Wasim was killed when he tried to assemble a bomb at home. Fouad killed himself in a successful suicide attack on a US base. "The Americans have their B-52s," Naqibullah explained. "Suicide attacks are our versions of B-52s." Like his friends, Naqibullah had considered becoming a B-52. "But it would kill too many civilians." Besides, he had plans to use his education. He said, "I want to teach the uneducated Taliban."

For years Hizb-i-Islami fighters have had a reputation for being more educated and worldly than their Taliban counterparts, who are often illiterate farmers. Their leader, Hekmatyar, studied engineering at Kabul University in the 1970s, where he made a name for himself by hurling acid in the faces of unveiled women. Hekmatyar established Hizb-i-Islami to counter growing Soviet influence, and in the 1980s his organization became one of the most extreme fundamentalist parties as well as the leading mujahedeen group fighting the Soviet occupation. Ruthless, powerful and anti-Communist, Hekmatyar proved a capable ally for Washington, which, along with the Saudis, funneled billions of dollars and tons of weapons through the Pakistani ISI to his forces.

After the Soviet withdrawal, Hekmatyar and the other mujahedeen commanders turned their guns on one another, unleashing a devastating civil war from which Kabul, in particular, has yet to recover. One-legged Afghans, crippled by Hekmatyar's rockets, still roam the city's streets. However, he was unable to capture the capital, and his Pakistani backers eventually abandoned him for a new, even more extreme Islamist force rising in the south: the Taliban.

Most Hizb-i-Islami commanders defected to the Taliban, and Hekmatyar fled in disgrace to Iran, losing much of his support in the process. He remained in such low standing that he was among the few warlords not offered a place in the US-backed government that was formed after 2001. This, after a fashion, was his good luck. When that government faltered, he found himself thrust back into the role of insurgent leader, and, playing on local frustrations in Pashtun communities just as the Taliban have done, he slowly resurrected Hizb-i-Islami.

Today the group is one of the fastest growing insurgent outfits in the country, according to Antonio Giustozzi, Afghan insurgency expert at the London School of Economics. Hizb-i-Islami maintains a strong presence in the provinces near Kabul and in Pashtun pockets in the country's north and northeast. It assisted in a complex assassination attempt on President Karzai this past spring and was behind a high-profile ambush that killed ten NATO soldiers last summer. Its guerrillas fight under the Taliban banner, although independently and with a separate command structure. Like the Taliban, its leaders see their task as restoring Afghan sovereignty as well as

establishing an Islamic state in Afghanistan. Naqibullah explained, "The US installed a puppet regime here. It was an affront to Islam, an injustice that all Afghans should rise up against."

The independent Islamic state that Hizb-i-Islami is fighting for would undoubtedly have Hekmatyar, not Mullah Omar, in command. But as during the anti-Soviet jihad, the settling of scores is largely being left to the future.

Blowback abounds in Afghanistan. Erstwhile CIA hand Jalaluddin Haqqani heads yet a third insurgent network, this one based in the eastern border regions. During the anti-Soviet war, the United States gave Haqqani, now considered by many to be Washington's most redoubtable foe, millions of dollars, antiaircraft missiles and even tanks. Washington was so enamored of him that former Congressman Charlie Wilson once called him "goodness personified."

Haqqani was an early advocate of the "Afghan Arabs," who in the 1980s flocked to Pakistan to join the jihad against the Soviet Union. He ran training camps for them and later developed close ties to *Al Qaeda*, which developed out of the Afghan Arab networks toward the end of the anti-Soviet war. After 9/11 the United States tried desperately to bring him over to its side, but Haqqani said he couldn't countenance a foreign presence on Afghan soil and once again took up arms, aided by his longtime benefactors in ISI. He is said to have introduced suicide bombing to Afghanistan, a tactic unheard of here before 2001. Western intelligence officials pin the blame for most of the spectacular attacks in recent memory—a massive car bomb that ripped apart the Indian embassy in July, for example—on the Haqqani network, not the Taliban.

The Haqqanis command the lion's share of foreign fighters operating in the country and tend to be even more extreme than their Taliban counterparts. Unlike most of the Taliban and Hizb-i-Islami, elements of the Haqqani network cooperate closely with *Al Qaeda*. Moreover, foreigners associated with the "Pakistani Taliban"—a completely separate organization that is at war with the Pakistani government—and various Pakistani guerrilla groups that were once active in Kashmir also filter across the border into Afghanistan, adding to a mix that has produced what one Western intelligence official calls a "rainbow coalition" that fights US troops. The foreign connection comes naturally, as the leadership of the three main wings of the insurgency is believed to be based across the border in Pakistan, and all insurgent groups are flush with funds from wealthy Arab donors and benefit from ISI training.

But the Afghan rebellion is mostly a homegrown affair. Foreign fighters, especially *Al Qaeda*, have little ideological influence on most of the insurgency, and Afghans keep their distance from such outsiders. "Sometimes groups of foreigners speaking different languages walk past," Ghazni resident Fazel Wali recalled. "We never talk to them, and they don't talk to us."

Al Qaeda's vision of global jihad doesn't resonate in the rugged highlands and windswept deserts of southern Afghanistan. Instead, the major concern throughout much of the country is intensely local: personal safety. In a world of endless war, with a predatory government, roving bandits and Hellfire missiles, support goes to those who can bring security. In recent months, one of the most dangerous activities in Afghanistan has also been one of its most celebratory: the large, festive wedding parties that Afghans love so much. American forces bombed such a party in July, killing forty-seven. Then, in November, warplanes hit another wedding party, killing around forty. A couple of weeks later they hit an engagement party, killing three.

"We are starting to think that we shouldn't go out in large numbers or have public weddings", said Ghazni resident Abdullah Wali who lives in a district of Ghazni where the insurgents have outlawed music and dance at such wedding parties. It's an austere life, but that doesn't stop Wali from wanting the Taliban back in power. Bland weddings, it seems, are better than no weddings at all. □□□ [Source : *The Nation*]

