


[WRITE for ATol](#)
[ADVERTISE](#)
[MEDIA KIT](#)
[GET ATol BY EMAIL](#)
[ABOUT ATol](#)
[CONTACT US](#)

Read us in Chinese at

亞洲時報

 Search: [Archive](#) [ASIA TIMES](#) by keyword

go

[Front Page](#)  
[Greater China](#)  
[China Business](#)  
[South Asia](#)  
[Southeast Asia](#)  
[Japan](#)  
[Korea](#)  
[Middle East](#)  
[Central Asia](#)  
[World Economy](#)  
[Asian Economy](#)  
[IT World](#)  
[Book Reviews](#)  
[Letters](#)  
[Forum](#)

 War and  
 Terror

 The Complete  
 Spengler

 The Complete  
 Henry C K Liu

 The Best of  
 Pepe Escobar

## South Asia

Jun 9, 2009

### Taliban put on a 'friendly face'

By Philip Smucker

SHARANA, Afghanistan - A white Toyota with tinted windows screeched to a halt in the Khojak Baba district of Kandahar City. Armed men forced a prominent fuel dealer, Haji Mohammed Sadiq, into the car and sped off. Weeks later after a ransom payment of US\$250,000 in a "dead drop" to local Taliban officials, Sadiq was released, said Naseem Pashtun, the Afghan-American owner of the Red Mountain newspaper in Kandahar, who with other Afghan businessmen had petitioned the government to no avail to help with Sadiq's release.

Although the Taliban today remain widely unpopular with war-wary Afghans, the insurgent group has managed to ensconce itself through stealth and slippery tactics in big Afghan cities and remote villages, where it ruthlessly pursues its political and economic interests.

The Taliban are so omnipresent, albeit often covertly, in many



Let's build a smarter planet.

join us at [ibm.com/think](http://ibm.com/think)

cities, towns and villages that many Afghans have surrendered with resignation to the group's intimidating ways, said Afghans.

"A lot of officials and businessmen have fallen in line with the Taliban and their interests," said Pashtun, 36. "The holdouts are fewer and fewer, but they are being targeted one at a time."

### Do You Know Your Credit Score?

FREE score.ca

TransUnion.

640

EQUIFAX

618

Experian

635

[Click Here to See Yours!](#)
[Print this article](#)
[Email this article](#)
[Currency converter](#)
[Comment on this article: Go to](#)


### RELATED ARTICLES

[FM mullahs spread the Taliban's word](#)  
 (Jun 4,'09)

[Fighting the wrong fight in Afghanistan](#)  
 (Jun 3,'09)

[Al-Qaeda spreads its tentacles](#)  
 (May 30,'09)

[Taliban stuck between anvil and hammer](#)  
 (Jun 28,'09)

### READERS' PICKS

1. [Obama lays his Likud trap](#)
2. [Dollar's fate written in history](#)
3. [The audacity of hope, from Cairo](#)
4. [Dollar's wounds reopen](#)
5. [Iran nuclear leaks](#)

### What is your 2009 Credit Score?

 Excellent  
 750 - 840

 Good  
 660 - 749

 Fair  
 620 - 659

 Poor  
 340 - 619

 I Don't Know  
 ???

[Find out INSTANTLY!](#)

FREE score.ca

Pashtun has been threatened by both the Taliban and Afghan government officials, who do not like his newspaper's critical view of a deteriorating situation and so he prefers, he said, to spend most of his time now in the United Arab Emirates.

"Many in the government and the business community provide favors for the Taliban and it is difficult to know who does and who doesn't, which makes it almost impossible to 'tip off' the authorities about the Taliban's activities or whereabouts for fear of betrayal," he added.

Over the past four years, the Taliban have gradually stepped up their level of intimidation and coercion across Afghanistan. Phone and text message threats as well as "night letters" warning persons not to cooperate with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and US forces have been common, often accompanied by kidnappings and outright assassinations in the same regions.

The campaign, blessed by the one-eyed Taliban leader Mullah Omar, has had the effect of expanding the insurgent group's "footprint" across the east and south of the country and well into the west and northwest, said Waheed Mozhadah, a respected Afghan historian and Taliban expert, who also served as a Foreign Ministry advisor for the Middle East to the Taliban in the late 1990s.

Mozhdah said that the Taliban began their major thrust - under the radar - about five years ago, almost three years after a US-backed military offensive had pushed most of them underground or over the border into Pakistan. At first, fighters, often operating out of sanctuaries in Pakistan, were reluctant - for operational security reasons - to bed down with the local population.

"Then, slowly but surely, they started trying it and they were accepted, even staying the evening in villages," he said. With one eye on the movements of US and NATO forces, Taliban fighters started launching military strikes from Afghan villages and recruiting more local fighters to bolster their ranks. "Now, they don't think twice about it because many of their fighters are from these villages they sleep in at night."

The Taliban's broader strategy to embed themselves with the local population has paid considerable dividends, according to Pashtun and Mozhadah. Coalition and Afghan forces began to launch major sweeps of the countryside, which sometimes led to aerial bombings of several "suspected" villages at a time. Taliban fighters would melt into the local farming communities and - in addition to Afghan civilian casualties from air strikes - the wrong "suspects" would be rounded up, angering locals, but also serving to enhance the Taliban's own recruiting pool.

In most cases, Afghans in the Pashtun countryside were "not terrified" of the Taliban despite their reputation for brutality, said Mozhadah. Indeed, they remembered that the Taliban had come to power in the mid-1990s as an antidote to raging chaos and wartime horror sown by greedy Afghan warlords. "You have to remember that the Taliban are not really outsiders in the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan and eventually a lot of villages - particularly in the south - had their own Taliban again from local families," added Mozhadah, who insists he left the Taliban when they were in power because of his abhorrence for their brutal rule.

Even today, the Taliban use beheading and hand severing, which it terms sharia - or Islamic - law, to force its will on locals. But

['linked to Israel'](#)

6. [Principal over principle](#)

7. [Wrong venue for Obama's Muslim speech](#)

8. [Hezbollah waits for its moment](#)

9. [Foiled Chinalco rethinks future](#)

10. [Obama can dream an AfPak dream](#)

(June 5-7, 2009)

Ads by Google

[How to Make Electricity](#)

Don't pay for electricity, when you can simply make it on your own.

[Power4home.com](#)

[Arabian Nights](#)

And Other Middle East Myths

Commentary:

[www.cincinnatusblog.com/arabian](http://www.cincinnatusblog.com/arabian)

[Find a Financial Advisor](#)

Find Independent Financial Advisors  
Free Consultation  
No Obligation!

[www.AdvisorWorld.com](http://www.AdvisorWorld.com)

[Loose Leaf Tea](#)

Buy Loose Tea and Accessories  
Shipping in North America

[www.Loose-Tea.net](http://www.Loose-Tea.net)

EndDuchenne.org

Parent Project  
Muscular Dystrophy

according to a recent International Crisis Group (ICG) analysis of the group's tactics, "The insurgents' strategy is not to use indiscriminate violence but rather to prevent citizens from accessing already limited government services, and to target and isolate the international community" and the Afghan government.

To outsiders, however, the violence does look to be indiscriminate. American military officers from Nuristan in the northeast to Paktika in the southeast described the Taliban's brutality in stark language. Afghans "are slaughtered every day for working with us and their government, even if they are only related to someone who is simply trying to feed their family", said one senior US intelligence officer, who said Afghans he knew personally had been murdered by the Taliban. "They are unprotected and slowly slaughtered for even the mere presumption of US support."

Pashtun, the newspaper owner, said the Taliban have succeeded, particularly in the city of Kandahar, to sow mistrust. Through word of mouth, phone calls, text messages - and an Internet website that is up and down due to the US government's continued efforts to block it - the Afghan Taliban, still headed by Omar, a known associate of Osama bin Laden, are able to communicate their threats and even mark Afghan officials and businessmen they do not like for assassination.

So certain of their own growing strength, the Taliban have embarked in the past two months on a broad national effort to enhance their own organizational structure and address the concerns of Afghans who are unhappy with their own leadership.

"People - some of them supporters - have actually come to the Taliban to complain about why the group is burning so many schools and taking massive bribes from contractors," said Mozhdah, who has written a book about the Taliban. He said that even Taliban backers are disturbed by the notion that the insurgents they admire are seen by the broader public as in league with criminal gangs that engage in kidnappings for ransom.

The complaints have sparked a new effort to rework the group's image, said the Afghan historian. In an unusual move, Omar's brother, known in Taliban circles simply as "Mullah Brother", has renounced the group's past policies of burning hundreds of schools, complaining that it merely increases illiteracy. In addition, Mullah Omar, sounding more like an ecclesiastical bridge-builder than a brutal ideologue, has called on Afghans to respect the country's different religions and their varied messages, said Mozhdah.

In addition, new commanders have been appointed in different parts of the country, often in a "musical chairs" reshuffling of commanders from one area to another. (Such moves are common for the country's legitimate government as well.)

Lutfullah Mashal, 36, the Afghan governor of Laghman province, said in a phone interview that Taliban leaders had been shifted from Ghazni province, and had stepped up attacks on government compounds, hitting the local prison twice in recent weeks. "We believe the new commanders are loyal to Jallaludin Haqqani and they have likely been ordered here by more senior Taliban commanders," he said.

Mozhdah said the jury is still out on whether the field commander shake-up will bring more success to the Taliban's overall operations. "In Afghanistan, the thinking usually is that folks in

one region don't accept outsiders," he said. "But the Taliban managed this to a degree when they were in power and it succeeded to limit the amount of corruption within the group."

Another reason for the effort to put on a slightly "friendlier face", however, according to Mozhdah, has been the organization's recognition that US President Barack Obama is stepping up the US military involvement in Afghanistan, sending in some 20,000 new troops this summer.

"The Taliban want to build good relations with the Afghan population for the long fight ahead," he said. "They think the Americans are not here just to eliminate al-Qaeda, but that they are also here for an economic fight."

Analysts who have closely observed the Taliban's revival as a guerrilla force say that the group has consolidated its power and is likely to continue to challenge the US and NATO forces for supremacy in villages as well as in cities.

The ICG recommends that Western and Afghan forces take on the Taliban on its own turf, amid the broader Afghan population. "US security forces must [also] focus on securing and protecting population centers," reads a recent report by the group, advising against "large-scale sweeps through areas with a limited Afghan institutional presence".

The analytical group stated in the same March report that "while such sweeps may temporarily disrupt some insurgent networks, their effectiveness is limited against an enemy that can disperse or disappear into the civilian population. Areas that are not permanently secured provide propaganda victories to the insurgents who [when they return] may retaliate against the local populace."

Nevertheless, the deeper Taliban insurgents ensconce themselves across the country, even in the remotest hinterlands, the more difficult it will be for NATO to dislodge them in the long war ahead.

**Philip Smucker** is a commentator and journalist based in South Asia and the Middle East. He is the author of *Al-Qaeda's Great Escape: The Military and the Media on Terror's Trail* (2004). He is currently writing *My Brother, My Enemy*, a book about America and the battle of ideas in the Islamic world.

(Copyright 2009 Asia Times Online (Holdings) Ltd. All rights reserved. Please contact us about [sales](#), [syndication](#) and [republishing](#).)

**All material on this website is copyright and may not be republished in any form without written permission.**

© Copyright 1999 - 2009 Asia Times Online (Holdings), Ltd.

**Head Office:** Unit B, 16/F, Li Dong Building, No. 9 Li Yuen Street East, Central, Hong Kong

**Thailand Bureau:** 11/13 Petchkasem Road, Hua Hin, Prachuab Kirikhan, Thailand 77110