

## Afghanistan: The Taliban

THE TALIBAN ARE AN ISLAMIST GROUP OPERATING in southern Afghanistan from bases in northwestern Pakistan. They are mainly Pashtun, an ethnic group native to southern Afghanistan who ruled great empires in Afghanistan before the colonial age. The Taliban are the primary force behind the Afghan insurgency and are responsible for much of the violence in Afghanistan today — especially in the south, where Canadian troops are deployed.<sup>1</sup> This paper will provide a basic overview of the Taliban's origins, current status, political structures, military tactics, and prospects for negotiations.

### Origins

**Rise to power: 1994–2001.** The Taliban emerged in Kandahar province as a popular movement against the crime, violence and corruption of the warlords who divided Afghanistan after the Soviet military occupation ended in 1989.<sup>2</sup> The movement was started in 1994 by religious students under the leadership of Mullah Muhammad Omar, a local mullah and veteran commander of the anti-Soviet resistance. Although the early leadership was from Kandahar, the bulk of the movement was drawn from *madrassas* (religious schools) in the Pashtun areas along the mountainous border with Pakistan. These students were indoctrinated with the puritanical and violent religious views of the Taliban, and provided them with a seemingly limitless supply of naive but religiously zealous recruits.<sup>3</sup> Bolstered by their growing ranks and popular support, the Taliban set out to gain control of all of Afghanistan.

The Taliban's early progress was remarkable. Within weeks of their formation, they had captured Kandahar, the second largest city in Afghanistan. By early 1997, they had captured 22 provinces, including Kabul, where they implemented what has been characterized as the most extreme regime of Islamic law in the world.<sup>4</sup> By 2001, the Taliban had gained control of 90% of Afghanistan, pushing the remaining warlords

into a corner of the northeast. The early popularity of the Taliban derived from their leaders' pledge to root out corruption and bring peace to Afghans. Later, their grip on power was consolidated by the stability of their organization and by the fear instilled by brutal tactics.

**2001–2007.** In October 2001, Operation ENDURING FREEDOM drove the Taliban from power. The anti-Taliban warlords, backed by the United States' air power and Special Forces, inflicted enormous losses on the Taliban defenders. The remaining Taliban, including the leadership, fled across the border into Pakistan to regroup, rearm, and replenish their ranks in the "Pashtun belt."

From 2002 to 2005, as NATO forces swept through western Afghanistan and American units hunted al-Qaeda in the east, many observers considered the Afghan insurgency to be a "spent force."<sup>5</sup> There were 158 coalition combat deaths during that period,<sup>6</sup> whereas the Taliban lost a disproportionate number of fighters in failed counterattacks. Facing declining numbers and morale, the Taliban reoriented their strategy. Reports indicate that the Taliban spent 2005 regrouping and learning new terror tactics and communications strategies, such as digital propaganda<sup>7</sup> from Iraqi insurgents who gave "terror workshops" in Pakistan.<sup>8</sup>

In the spring of 2006, a resurgent Taliban initiated their first strategic offensive to take back Kandahar, their former stronghold. Over the spring and summer of 2006, counteroffensives fought and led by Canadians, such as Operation MEDUSA, denied the Taliban control of the south. Despite these setbacks, the Taliban continue their attacks against NATO forces, and have gained back a considerable presence in Afghanistan's southern provinces. In November 2007, the Senlis Council reported that "54 per cent of Afghanistan's landmass hosts a permanent Taliban presence."<sup>9</sup>

## World view

The Taliban world view is dominated by three interconnected factors: an extreme and puritanical interpretation of Islam, the *Pashtunwali* (the Pashtun tribal code that governs values such as honour, justice and hospitality), and a generation of ongoing war. Some have denounced the Taliban's human rights abuses as exemplifying radical Islam, but Taliban punishments are drawn largely from *Pashtunwali*, not Islamic law.<sup>10</sup> In fact, among those most disturbed by the Taliban's behaviour were Muslims, since the Taliban actions added to the negative portrayal of Islam in the world.<sup>11</sup> Among non-Pashtun Afghans, the Taliban's rule over western and northern areas of Afghanistan was largely viewed as an imposition of Pashtun values upon non-Pashtun peoples.<sup>12</sup>

It has been noted that the Taliban seem to renounce modernity, yet are not averse to using modern technologies such as rocket launchers and wireless radios. The Taliban do not reject modernity per se. Rather, the combination of *Pashtunwali* and the puritanical version of Sunni Islam that they practise forbids anything deemed, by a strict standard, to be "un-Islamic." Hence, the Taliban forbid movies, for example, and require men to grow beards because they believe these actions to be consistent with a "true" Islamic society. At the same time, modern weapons such as AK-47s are considered tools by which they may advance God's will through armed struggle. Again, this illustrates an important distinction: the Taliban reject contemporary Western values of democracy and human rights not because they are modern, but because they are Western and by that token un-Islamic and therefore illegitimate. This concern for religious legitimacy is reflected in all aspects of Taliban life, including official decision-making and policy.

Others, however, argue that the Taliban's decisions are not driven purely by religious fundamentalism. The Taliban's destruction of the "idolatrous" Buddhist statues at Bamiyan in the spring of 2001 is generally seen as a prime example of fanaticism. A different interpretation, however, is offered by Sayed Rahmathullah Hashimi, a former envoy of the Taliban government. In 2001, the Taliban faced a harsh winter and a drop in income resulting from the cessation of opium production. At

the time, a UNESCO delegation visited the Buddhas in Bamiyan and offered the Taliban money to restore them. "The Taliban asked the European delegates if the money that they were intending to spend on statues could not be spent instead to save Afghan children dying from malnutrition. They were told this money was only for statues."<sup>13</sup> By this account, the Taliban, in a fit of moral outrage, decided to destroy the statues, which were now considered "harmful."<sup>14</sup>

Thus, like most political groups, the Taliban encompass a spectrum of world views. Although religious concern is undeniably an important element of that spectrum, pragmatic concerns cannot be discounted either — the implication being that material interests may provide a point of entry to discussions with the Taliban in the future. It remains to be seen, however, whether religious conviction will always trump the possibility of compromise.

## Political structures

The Taliban's informal but powerful hierarchical structure fuses Islamic concepts of leadership with Pashtun tribal tradition. At the top of their political structure is Mullah Omar, who leads the Taliban with both religious and political legitimacy. Beneath Omar, decisions are made by consultative tribal structures called *shuras*, which bring together leading figures in a governing council.<sup>15</sup> During Taliban rule from 1994 to 2001, the "supreme shura" headed by Mullah Omar was based in Kandahar. Reporting to the supreme shura was the military shura, which took military decisions, and the government shura, based in Kabul, which made administrative decisions. These shuras appropriated funds and weapons for field commanders and money for government ministries, and set up Islamic courts of law.<sup>16</sup> Although their decision-making was structurally linear, the shuras were also informal and very loosely organized, varying in size and membership.

Hidden away in the unadministered tribal regions of Pakistan, the Taliban leaders are shrouded in even more obscurity than before. They are believed to have set up parallel political structures and governing shuras in Quetta, in the Pakistani province of Balochistan.<sup>17</sup> From there, direction is given to Taliban fighters in southern Afghanistan, although there is reportedly very little direct contact between leaders

in Pakistan and fighters in Afghanistan. Some sources indicate that Mullah Omar issues orders to commanders by means of handwritten letters.<sup>18</sup> Other sources have suggested that the leadership has, to some extent, been sidelined by individual commanders in insurgency efforts.<sup>19</sup> Still more unclear is how the current political structure resembles that of the pre-2001 Taliban, as well as the nature of the coordination between the leaders, fighters and support networks.<sup>20</sup> What is clear, however, is that although the Taliban have lost nearly 1,000 fighters and commanders against NATO forces in 2007 alone,<sup>21</sup> the violence has not declined and the core leadership remains secure. As Afghanistan expert Barnett Rubin notes, "few insurgencies with safe havens abroad have ever been defeated."<sup>22</sup>

### **The neo-Taliban and the grassroots**

Before they were ousted from power, the Taliban were estimated to have 30,000 to 40,000 fighters. Much of this original force was destroyed during the American-led invasion. Some reports indicated that as many as 10,000 Taliban fighters were killed during the battle for Kandahar alone.<sup>23</sup> Subsequent defections from formerly Taliban-allied militias added to this attrition, creating large gaps in the Taliban's ranks.

After their retreat to sanctuaries in the Pashtun belt in Pakistan, the ranks of the Taliban were rebuilt by what the Senlis Council describes as a "loose coalition comprising Afghans loyal to the former Taliban regime, disenchanting and nationalist Pashtuns, religious conservatives, criminal gangs, opium traffickers, and a new generation of Pakistani and Afghan scholars educated in the madrassas along the Pakistan-Afghan border. This coalition of supporters can be described as the neo-Taliban."<sup>24</sup>

With the resurgence of the Taliban and the offensive in 2006, this "neo-Taliban" gained a new dynamic: a split between ideological and non-ideological ranks. Although the leadership and rank-and-file fighters are drawn from the same extremist ideological mould, more pragmatic actors have joined the Taliban. These are the "grassroots Taliban," the local tribal chiefs, ex-mujahedeen and mullahs who may have "sat on the fence in the intervening years" but "are continually balancing the options in terms of what is best for them and their

followers."<sup>25</sup> This swelling of Taliban ranks can also be interpreted as alliances of convenience with the local population, fuelled by factors such as political marginalization, lack of opportunity, and corruption.<sup>26</sup> It is also fostered by a perception of growing Taliban momentum: those who believe the Taliban will retake Afghanistan are more likely to support the winning party.

This dynamic has been noted by the Afghan government, which has attempted – with mixed success – to bring these "moderate" Taliban elements into the political process by distinguishing between "good" and "bad" Taliban.<sup>27</sup> The International Crisis Group notes, "The one potentially positive factor lies in the fact there is little coherence and cohesion among the different groups – and even sometimes within the group – involved. As time goes on, these internal contradictions will likely increase. Some, however, fear that this could lead to a competition to prove oneself and one's group the most radical."<sup>28</sup>

### **Negotiating with the Taliban**

In September 2007, President Karzai raised the possibility of negotiating a power-sharing agreement with the Taliban. The Taliban leadership refused, saying they would never negotiate while foreign troops remained in the country.<sup>29</sup> The rationale for Karzai's reconciliation strategy was to isolate the Taliban's extremist core from their moderate elements, whose reasons for fighting are less ideological and more pragmatic. Reconciliatory overtures began in 2004, when amnesty initiatives were started by the American and Afghan governments,<sup>30</sup> although it was only in 2007 that the prospect of actual power-sharing was put on the table. In the spring of 2007, the Afghan senate (Meshrano Jirga) went as far as to pass a bill calling on the Karzai government to open direct negotiations with the Taliban.<sup>31</sup> Although these reconciliatory gestures have consistently been rejected by the Taliban leadership, a number of lower-ranking fighters have responded positively to reconciliation and have disarmed.<sup>32</sup>

The Afghan government's strategy of reconciliation follows the general feeling of the Afghan people. A recent poll conducted in Afghanistan by the Environics Group revealed that while a large majority of Afghans held "very to somewhat negative" views of the Taliban (73%

nationally, 67% in Kandahar), “a strong majority (74%) of Afghans nationwide (and 85% in Kandahar) strongly or somewhat support negotiations between the Karzai government and the Taliban.” A majority of Afghans (54% nationally) would even support a “coalition government” with the Taliban. According to these results, although most Afghans do not support the Taliban, they recognize that their political inclusion may be necessary for peace. Among advocates of negotiations is former UN Special Envoy to Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, who reflected: “One of my own biggest mistakes was not to speak to the Taliban in 2002 and 2003. It was not possible to get them in the tent at the Bonn conference because of 9/11. ... But immediately after that, we should’ve spoken to those who were willing to speak to us.”<sup>33</sup> In September 2007, NATO itself expressed interest in talks with the Taliban, many of whom they believe are willing to lay down their arms.<sup>34</sup> As for Canadians’ perspective on this question, 63% of respondents to a 2007 Strategic Council poll indicated that it would be “a good idea” for Canada to negotiate with the Taliban.<sup>35</sup>

Canada’s official position on the issue has been consistently against negotiations until the Taliban “renounces violence,” as Foreign Minister Maxime Bernier stressed in early October 2007.<sup>36</sup> The US government is also staunchly opposed to direct negotiations with the Taliban. Critics of cutting a deal with the Taliban argue that any power-sharing settlement would be problematic for many reasons, including the significant risk that the Taliban would try to retake the country once foreign forces have left. Ideological differences would also be a major faultline: current Afghan and Taliban leaders espouse arguably irreconcilable world views on issues such as the relation between mosque and state, as well as on the status of women. Still, many argue that reconciliation and negotiations offer the best chance for peace against an insurgency that many say cannot be defeated by force of might alone.

### **Military and political strategy**

The Taliban’s military strategy follows two main streams: guerrilla warfare and terrorism, although the Taliban have proven themselves capable of launching conventional frontal attacks.<sup>37</sup> Rarely able to “hold” cities or to directly confront NATO fire-

power, the Taliban usually infiltrate an area, blend in among the local population, use vicious hit-and-run tactics against NATO forces, and intimidate the local population once NATO troops leave.<sup>38</sup> This ability to infiltrate and intimidate has led to reports that the Taliban have de facto control over large areas in the south — nearly half of Afghanistan— where Taliban-style laws are being enforced. General Mohamad Zahir Azimi, spokesman for the Afghan ministry of defence, conceded that large areas of the south are under Taliban control.<sup>39</sup>

Like many astute guerrilla strategists, the Taliban understand that the foreign forces in Afghanistan will not likely be defeated militarily. Their strategy in recent times, therefore, has been to politically agitate the populations of the Coalition countries so that they press their governments for withdrawal. For example, the Taliban employ the extensive use of roadside and suicide bombs similar to those used by the Iraqi insurgency. From 2002 to 2005, there were no Canadian deaths caused by improvised explosive devices (IEDs). In 2006, IEDs accounted for 17% of Canadian deaths, and from January to November 2007 this number rose to 83%.<sup>40</sup> The Taliban understand that each of these deaths deals a blow to the political will of Western nations whose forces are deployed in Afghanistan.

The Taliban also place great importance on swaying the hearts and minds of the population through a mixture of mercy and cruelty. To this end, they attack “soft targets” for shock value, kidnapping workers with non-governmental organizations, assassinating members of Parliament, and executing Coalition collaborators and Afghan government supporters. At the same time, the Taliban’s propaganda tactics focus on demonizing government and NATO forces while emphasizing the discipline and moral fibre of Taliban fighters. The international release of the Taliban code of regulations, which portrays Taliban fighters as honourable men who do not steal or cheat the population, is evidence of this sophistication.<sup>41</sup> The Taliban also compete with the central government in aid efforts. They offer financial support to local people whose homes were destroyed and protection against widely unpopular poppy eradication policies.<sup>42</sup> The Taliban have even earmarked money for development, and in early 2007 announced \$1 million dollars to build schools.<sup>43</sup> These benefits for local

populations, mixed with cruelty toward potential collaborators, may not win hearts but can effectively influence minds.

### If the Taliban return

If the Taliban were to take power again, a number of outcomes could result.<sup>44</sup> Some scholars forecast a civil war between the ideological and non-ideological elements of the Taliban. Others point to conflict between the Taliban and other insurgent groups, as well as a return to civil war with the North Alliance warlords. Given these possible scenarios, longer-term peace in Afghanistan should the Taliban regain power is an unlikely prospect.

**Jason Yung**

Political and Social Affairs Division

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