

The Taliban

The Taliban have often been labeled as the Afghan Government and America's greatest enemy in Afghanistan. This is only partially true; the Taliban are not as united as some might think, and in the end their divisions may prove their downfall more than any kinetic operation or government negotiations. Either way, after six years, it is clear that kinetic operations alone will not defeat them. As opposed to their rapid ascension to power in the mid-1990s, the Taliban at this point is committed to a "protracted war."¹

The Taliban ideology is a schizophrenic distortion of *Pashtunwali* ("the Way of the Pashtun," the Pashtun moral code) and fundamentalist Islam. Often times, the Taliban itself confuses the two, and this confusion is part of the larger divide in the Taliban: is it a jihadist organization, or a Pashtun one?

Born supposedly in 1994, during a particularly tumultuous time in Afghan history, the Taliban went on to control Kabul in 1996 and had five years in which they ruled Afghanistan tyrannically with a crude mixture of theocratic intolerance, ethnocentrism, and anarchic brutality. Women were cruelly treated in a legal system that disqualified their testimony and made rape, unless witnessed by four corroborating males, the same as adultery and therefore punishable by death. Ethnic and Islamic minorities were cleansed, and development was all but ceased as the youth were turned out of secular education to memorize the Qur'an and females forced out of public life altogether.

The Taliban mythology cites their creation as a reaction to the injustices that were perpetrated during the mujahedin era of Afghan politics. In 1992 the Najibullah socialist regime was finished, and Afghanistan was divided between rival warring factions. In the Southern Pashtun homelands these divisions were most critical, with a plethora of armed bands competing for territory. At one point, it was rumored that there were twenty-odd checkpoints between Kandahar and the Pakistani border at Spin Boldak, a distance of less than 100 kilometers. At one checkpoint two girls were taken from their vehicle and assaulted. A local village mullah was called upon to rescue the girls, and together with thirty compatriots, he did. This brought him and his band to the notice of the transport cartel in Quetta, who had been severely hindered by the anarchic state across the border. The mullah was Mullah Omar, and the transport cartel began to fund his militia in order to drive away the others. Within three months it had rolled on to capture twelve Southern provinces with little or no resistance. At some point it is assumed Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) came to notice the village mullah and his rag-tag bunch of Islamic student/fighters (*Taliban*) and began to lend support.² The Taliban rose to power as a popular movement, at least in the Pashtun homelands. They brought stability, law and order, albeit at a cost. Still, crime by individuals plummeted and male civilians could venture out of their homes in relative freedom, provided they were bearded and attended regular prayers.

¹ *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, U.S. Army & Marine Corps, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

² Michael Griffen, *Reaping the Whirlwind: Afghanistan, Al Qaeda and the Holy War*, London: Pluto Press, 2003.



The only known photo of Mullah Omar

Little is known about Mullah Omar. He is one-eyed, as a result of fighting during the anti-Soviet campaign. Only one photo of him is known to exist, and even during the five years he ruled the nation as *amir*, he is known to have only made two trips to Kabul, preferring instead to rule from Kandahar. He is from the Hotaki clan of the Ghilzai supertribe, the largest Pashtun confederation. Traditionally, the Ghilzai have been denied leadership positions in Afghanistan by the less-numerous Duranni Pashtuns (all the kings of Afghanistan since 1747 and President Hamid Karzai are Durrani Pashtun). After fighting the Soviets he returned to his native district near Kandahar and ran a *madrassah* (religious school). In 1996, five months before capturing Kabul, he not only touched but wore the supposed cloak of Mohammad (PBUH) in Kandahar. This invested him with a divine legitimacy in the eyes of many rural, uneducated Pashtuns. To further cement his status, he called a gathering of *ulema* (Muslim scholars and community figures) to crown him *Amir al-Momineen* (“Leader of the Faithful”).³ Since 2001 he has been in hiding.

The Taliban are driven by two competing interests: the desire to re-conquer Afghanistan and the desire to reestablish a caliphate. The first is Pashtun-centric, the second more al Qaeda inspired. The danger of each wing to the Taliban is that the Pashtun-centrists may be amenable to cooption in a new Afghanistan, and that the jihadists with a more global view may be marginalized into criminals and simple terrorists.

Because of these two divergent goals, the means are often similarly disparate. This is precisely what causes the friction in Taliban tactics: is it a terrorist organization, or an insurgent force. Ideally, it is thought, the Taliban would like to perform as an insurgent force, but it lacks the popular support and resources to make that possible. After 2001, a massive reorganization was called for within the Taliban leadership; it had been knocked out of government, was on the run, and not even the local population in the southeast, from whence the Taliban sprung, would support them. A combination of war-weariness, combined with altogether too recent memories of Taliban brutality prevent the Taliban from achieving any real legitimacy as popular “movement.” One of the hardships of insurgencies is that insurgents are generally free to make promises that cannot be kept, whereas governments must be seen as good to their word. The Taliban, because it actually has been in power, does not enjoy this advantage as much as other insurgent groups might.⁴

Since 2001, the Taliban has relied a great deal on terrorist tactics. This is ironic, as it was precisely as a result of such tactics used by the Taliban’s guest, al Qaeda, that their time in power was ended. Unfortunately, this has encouraged greater cooperation between the Taliban and al Qaeda, and a sharing of tactics. The first recognized suicide bombing in Afghanistan took place on September 9, 2001, wherein disguised al Qaeda operatives killed Ahmad Shah Masood, the “Lion of Panjshir” and leader of the Northern

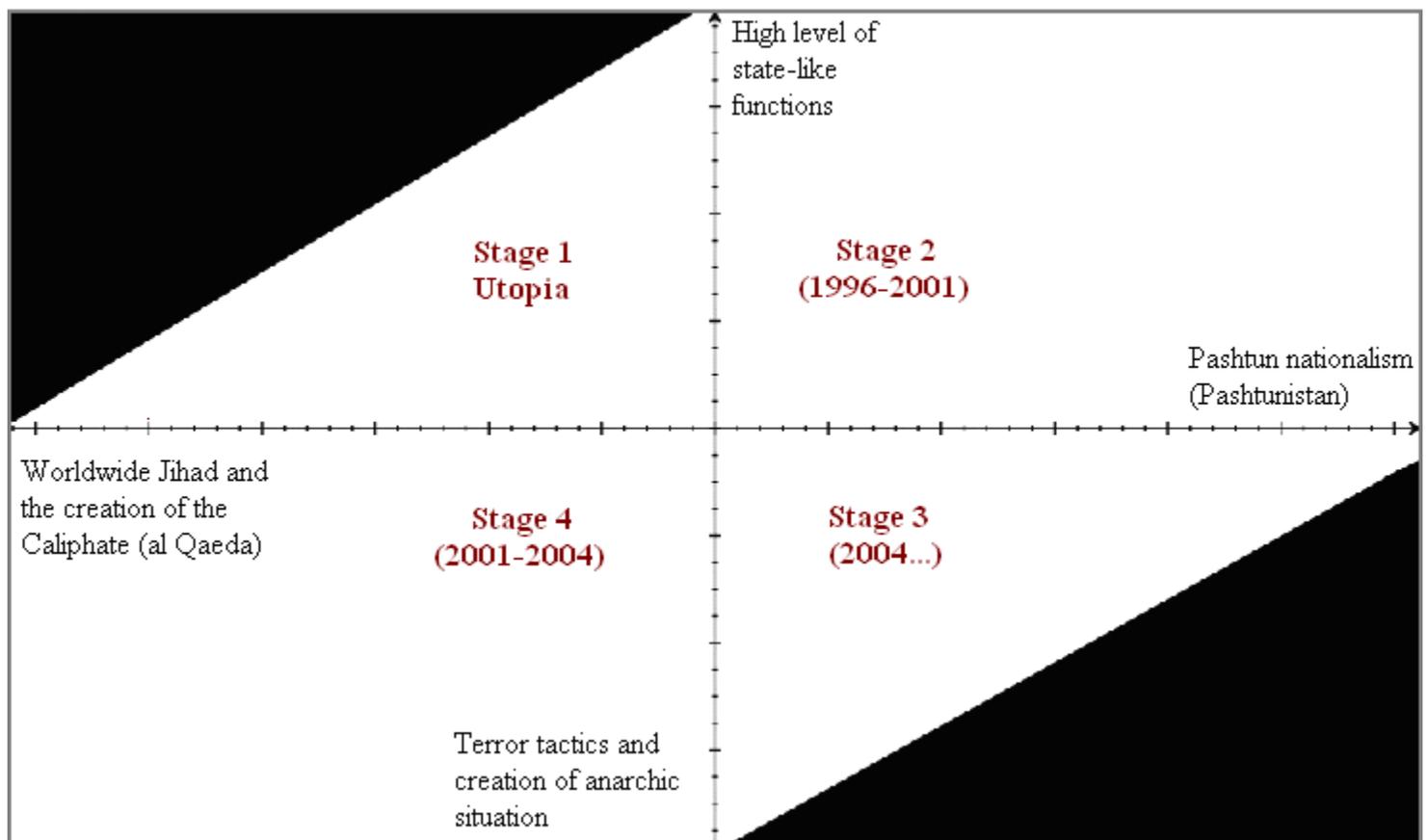
³ Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan,” *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs* 51, No. 1, 2007 2006.

⁴ *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, U.S. Army & Marine Corps, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Alliance. This can be viewed as an ipso facto gift from al Qaeda to the Taliban. From then until the Taliban rebound in 2004-2005, suicide attacks remained few in number and primarily perpetrated by foreign elements (i.e. Pakistani Punjabis).⁵ In recent times, however, the number of suicide attacks has increased exponentially, and their lethality has as well.

The Taliban was forced into a corner after 2001, and could only exist as a terrorist organization. Hence the large army groups they had previously besieged the Northern Alliance with rapidly deteriorated to squad sized units. By 2005, however, they were again fielding company-sized units, and by 2006 battalions. After 2004 they also began to overrun districts regularly. The districts were never held for very long, but long enough to kill suspected coalition sympathizers and impress a soon-wavering local population.⁶ From a terrorist force on the run to destabilizing presence to a rebel army seems to be their strategic vision. This follows Che Guevera’s observation that ‘insurgents themselves can create the conditions necessary for government overthrow.’⁷

Fig 1 - Taliban Trajectory



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⁵ *Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan (2001-2007)*, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, September 9, 2007.

⁶ Gen. Barry R. McCaffrey (Ret.), “Memorandum: Academic Report – Trip to Afghanistan and Pakistan,” June 3, 2006.

⁷ *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, U.S. Army & Marine Corps, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

What the Taliban wants is a return to its pre-9/11 status (Stage 2). After 9/11 it elected to use terror tactics (Stage 4), as they were the only means available for the Taliban to destabilize the countryside and create the anarchic conditions which led to the first Taliban rule. Since increased operations in 2004, and the stabilization of rear areas in Pakistan, the Taliban has moved increasingly into Stage 3, wherein terror hit-and-run and suicide tactics are still employed, but the movement begins to identify itself with its Pashtun base and cultivate support there. In Pakistan, raging against a military dictatorship allied with the West and led by a non-Pashtun has earned the Taliban, al Qaeda, and other assorted militants more credit than in Afghanistan, where there is a democracy led by a Pashtun. Throughout a successful insurgency it is necessary to delegitimize the government.⁸ The Taliban strategy in Afghanistan, therefore, has been to separate the government from the people, to destroy or prevent development works, and create a scenario in which the only government presence most Pashtuns are likely to see is an armed one.

One of the successes the Taliban has had in this respect is with opium. Afghanistan is awash in opium, providing 93% of the world's total opiate product.⁹ Up to half of Afghanistan's Gross Domestic Product is as a direct result of this pernicious trade,¹⁰ although only a third of that, one billion U.S. dollars, is for cultivation. That leaves two billion U.S. dollars for transport, refinement, and smuggling, something the Taliban has been more than willing to take part in.¹¹ In Afghanistan, thirteen percent of the population is directly involved in the opium trade, and many more dependent on its ancillary benefits.¹² By offering to protect the crop, and hiring local men to do so at pay rates much higher than the Afghan National Army, the Taliban has ensured that in many areas government inspectors, eradication forces, and coalition forces are unwelcome. By creating an environment that gives many rural people a stake in a lack of governmental presence, the Taliban has ensured anti-government sentiment in many places. Additionally, the revenues raised, although difficult to estimate, must give the Taliban much need influence and arms.

A second strong point of the Taliban of late has not been in Afghanistan at all, but in Pakistan. The Taliban has long enjoyed local sympathies in Pakistan. In a concerted effort to ensure a safe-haven in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) similar to what many mujahedin enjoyed during the anti-Soviet campaign, they have beaten the Pakistani military to a standstill and forced the government out of many of the tribal

⁸ *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, U.S. Army & Marine Corps, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

⁹ *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2007*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, August 2007, www.unodc.org/pdf/research/AFG07_ExSum_web.pdf (accessed September 1, 2007).

¹⁰ Ahmad Masood, "Portfolio," *Reuters*, May 6, 2006, http://photos.reuters.com/Pictures/galleries/showcases/showcase_slide.asp?storyID=632996269337031250&urlStr=/pictures/&directory=/configData/Pictures/&edition=US (accessed November 14, 2006), "Poppy profits fuel Taliban," CNN, May 22, 2007, <http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/05/21/afghan.drugs.ap/index.html> (accessed June 1, 2007), and Priya Abraham, "Where Poppies Grow," *World Magazine*, 12 May 2007, <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/12924> (accessed May 7, 2007).

¹¹ *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2007*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, August 2007, www.unodc.org/pdf/research/AFG07_ExSum_web.pdf (accessed September 1, 2007).

¹² *Afghanistan Opium Winter Rapid Assessment Survey*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, February 2007, http://www.unodc.org/pdf/research/2007_ORAS.pdf (accessed March 15, 2007).

areas, most noticeably Waziristan.¹³ Until the Taliban is denied these areas of sanctuary, they cannot be defeated.

The Taliban is not as united as its leaders would like. Beginning with the inclusion of suicide tactics, previously unknown in Afghanistan, and most recently with President Karzai's offer of peace talks, the Taliban has been divided for some time.¹⁴ Mullah Dadullah, the Taliban's former military chief killed in May 2007, was a major proponent of terrorist tactics, and to have neutralized such a high-level target it is thought coalition forces must have had inside information on his whereabouts, indicating fissures in Taliban leadership. Karzai's 2007 attempt at negotiations with the Taliban also induced disagreement in Taliban ranks. Eventually the Taliban set forth absurd preconditions for talks, but the delay in their reply and the dissent within the leadership was evident.¹⁵

Much has also been made of the tiers of Taliban membership; the first tier consisting of the leadership and hardened warriors, many of whom came of age fighting the Soviets. The foreign fighters of al Qaeda would also fit in this tier; far from home and dedicated to jihad, they are often well-trained and well-disciplined.

The second tier consists of the trigger-pullers, the young men hired to guard poppy fields during the growing season, and the farmer browbeat into laying an IED. They are often uneducated locals, or mis-educated boys from sympathetic madrassahs across the border in Pakistan. While not overly competent fighters, their numbers and dedication makes them worrisome.

Finally, a third tier might be added: locals, mainly Pashtuns, who are personally invested in the fight. These are the fighters who have no ostensible ideological qualms with the government, nor affinities for the Taliban, but benefit from a lack of government control in their area, such as opium growers. Some nomadic groups, such as the Kuchi, are hesitant to have their grazing lands restricted and may see themselves as better off without a strong central government. Others may fight because their kin were injured at the hands of coalition or government forces, for *badal* ("revenge") under the *pashtunwali* system or other personal reasons. The Taliban if possible would like to foster more of these animosities towards coalition and government troops in the tribal areas, but so far it has met with mixed success, and in some places direct opposition by locals.

The Taliban is dug in for a long war. An oft quoted expression of theirs is "the Americans may have the watches, but we have the time."¹⁶ Hoping that political will in the NATO alliance will dry up, the Taliban seems to think that as long as they don't lose, as long as they keep up pressure on coalition and government forces, and keep security

¹³ "Pakistan 'Taleban' in peace deal," *BBC News*, September 5, 2006,

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/5315564.stm (accessed October 25, 2007).

¹⁴ Graeme Smith, "Taliban split by offer of peace talks from Karzai," *Globe & Mail*, October 1, 2007, http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/Page/document/v5/content/subscribe?user_URL=http://www.theglobeandmail.com%2Fervlet%2Fstory%2FLAC.20071001.AFGHAN01%2FTPSStory%2FTPIInternational%2FAsia%2F&ord=330222&brand=theglobeandmail&force_login=true (accessed October 26, 2007).

¹⁵ "Aghanistan's Taliban: War without end," *The Economist*, October 25, 2007, http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story_id=10026465 (accessed October 25, 2007)

¹⁶ Thomas H. Johnson, "On the Edge of the Big Muddy: The Taliban Resurgence in Afghanistan," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 2, 5, Spring 2007, http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/CEF/Quarterly/May_2007/Johnson.pdf (accessed September 5, 2007).

and development from Southern Afghanistan, victory is theirs. Such a victory would be disastrous for Afghanistan and the wider world. Religious and ethnic sectarianism, gynophobia, and cultures of death anywhere threaten everywhere.