Negotiating with the Taliban
Issues and Prospects

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THE CENTURY FOUNDATION PROJECT ON AFGHANISTAN IN ITS REGIONAL AND MULTILATERAL DIMENSIONS

This paper is one of a series commissioned by The Century Foundation as part of its project on Afghanistan in its regional and multilateral dimensions. This initiative is examining ways in which the international community may take greater collective responsibility for effectively assisting Afghanistan's transition from a war-ridden failed state to a fragile but reasonably peaceful one. The program adds an internationalist and multilateral lens to the policy debate on Afghanistan both in the United States and globally, engaging the representatives of governments, international nongovernmental organizations, and the United Nations in the exploration of policy options toward Afghanistan and the other states in the region.

At the center of the project is a task force of American and international figures who have had significant governmental, nongovernmental, or UN experience in the region, co-chaired by Lakhdar Brahimi and Thomas Pickering, respectively former UN special representative on Afghanistan and former U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs.

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INTRODUCTION

While many would agree that any warring army needs to know its enemy, there seems little acknowledgement of the fact that a successful negotiating process also requires a deep knowledge of the parties in conflict, of the way they function, and of their intentions and aims. This report tries to lay out how the Taliban are structured and organized, with an eye to assessing the impact of their organization and modus operandi on their willingness to negotiate and to reach a political settlement.

There is considerable controversy over the way the Taliban function, which is inevitable given the limited information available. The different points of view can be summarized (with some simplification) as follows:

- the Taliban operate as a "franchiser" business, allowing disparate groups of insurgents to display the Taliban brand while retaining complete autonomy on the ground;

- the Taliban are not organized to the same extent as the Marxist movements that had been the main worry of Western counterinsurgents until the end of the cold war, but nonetheless have a discernible organizational structure (decentralized).

As the reader will realize while going through the paper, this author tends to follow the second line of thinking. One reason for the failure to understand the modus operandi of the Taliban is the lack of in-depth studies of the 1980s jihad in Afghanistan; if such studies had been carried out, understanding the Taliban would be much easier now.

This report will discuss different aspects of the organization of Taliban in succession. One particular concern is how united (or disunited) the Taliban are; this, in a sense, is the crux of the problem. Is the control exercised by the leadership of the Taliban sufficiently strong to deliver on any negotiated settlement? Or is the control weak enough to allow for easily co-opting or buying off individual commanders, avoiding the pursuit of a settlement with the political leadership?

How the Taliban Are Organized and How They Function

How Many?

Most western estimates of the fighting strength of the Taliban by late 2009 were hovering around the 20,000–30,000 range. The difficulty of distinguishing between full-time fighters, part-timers, political cadres, and facilitators of various kinds complicate the task of estimating the number of Taliban insurgents. Given the extent of their areas of operation and their modus operandi, discussed in greater detail below, one can infer that the Taliban must have a force of full-time fighters of at least 15,000. Some thousands operate across the border with Pakistan, particularly in Khost, Nangarhar, and Kunar. A few thousand "honorary Taliban" also operate in conjunction with the movement; these usually are local strongmen who joined the movement despite lacking sufficient clerical credentials and taking with them their retinue of followers. Particularly in areas where their following is limited, the Taliban are ready to rely on this type of recruit, who otherwise would be shunned as unreliable in the traditional Taliban strongholds in the south. The Taliban also have
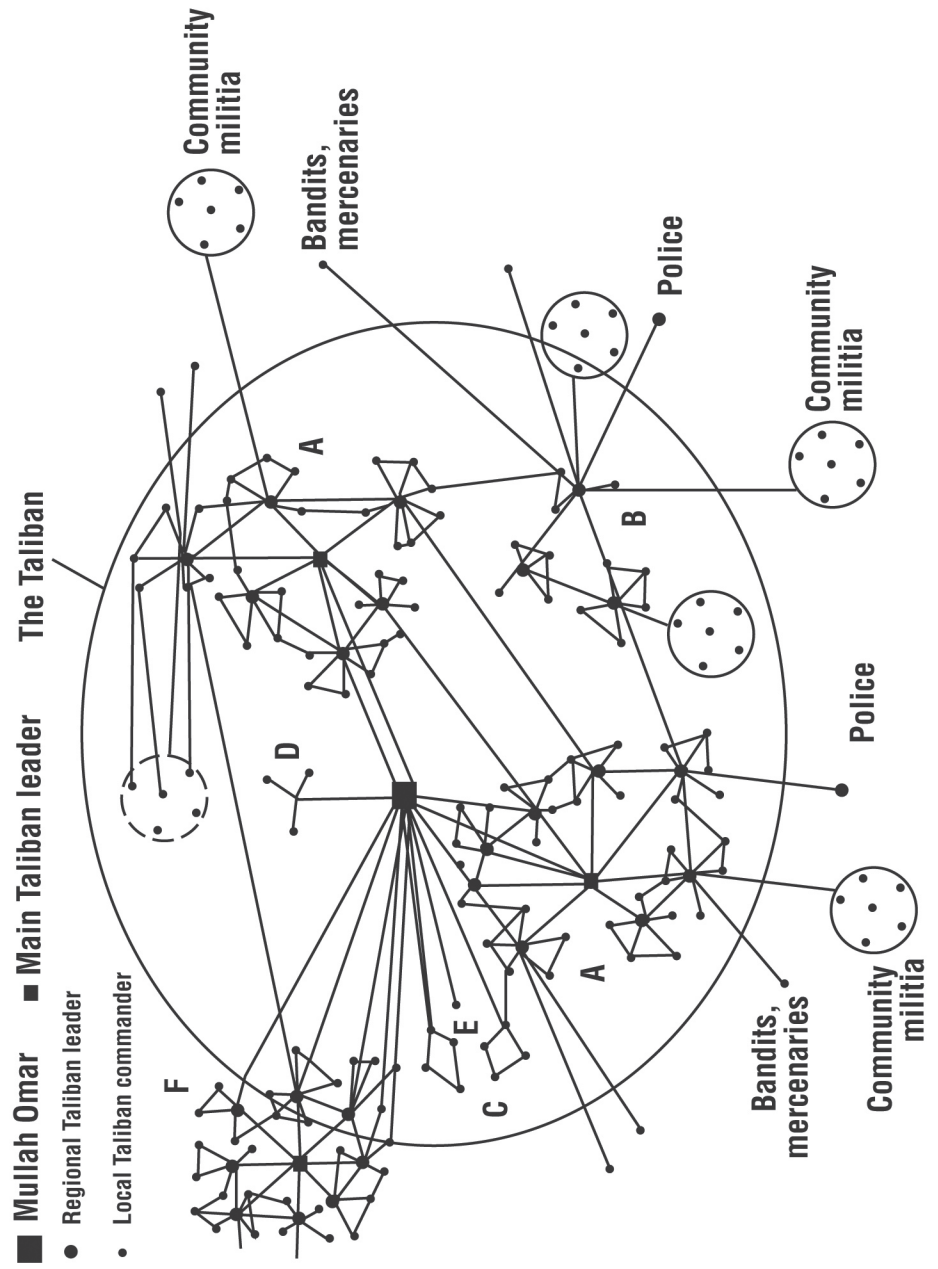
probably a few thousand political cadres who carry their message to the remote corners of the country, convincing individuals and communities to join their cause, maintaining vertical communication, and providing a degree of political structure to the movement in roles such as judges, "political commissars," tax collectors, and so on. Tens of thousands of part-time fighters, mostly organized in local militias, also compose part of the Taliban. At any given moment, only a small portion of these militias is mobilized for fighting. Finally, in most of Afghanistan the Taliban can count on facilitators such as spies, informers, and providers of food, supplies, and accommodation. Excluding the facilitators, whose number is particularly difficult to estimate, the Taliban may well count on 60,000–70,000 individuals working for them. The Taliban themselves claim at least 100,000, but there is also rotation within the ranks, with people taking shifts in the fighting.[1]

ORGANIZATION: NETWORKING

The Taliban can be described as a decentralized organization (as opposed to a fragmented one). The predominant mode of organization used by the Taliban is personal networks, formed around charismatic leaders. At the lowest level, the networks consist of a local commander with a few fighters gathered around him, usually recruited personally by him on the basis of his reputation as a leader. A variable number of these small groups are networked together around a larger figure, for example a district-level Taliban leader. In turn, this network would be linked to a larger network through its leader, who would pay obedience to some greater figure, for example a province-level leader. The figures at the center of these larger networks might well be nationally renowned Taliban leaders; they might or might not be further networked around some of the top Taliban leaders.

Figure 1 illustrates in a schematic way how the Taliban are organized. The size of the networks varies widely, and not necessarily all of them follow the same three- or four-layer structure illustrated (as represented in A). Some, for example, might include only two layers (B). Because it is all about personal relations, sometimes the commander of a relatively small Taliban network might have direct relations with somebody at the top (this is reflected in C, D, and E). It is also likely that the top leaders actually might try to cultivate relations with commanders at the lower levels, in order to get some direct reporting about the situation on the ground, avoiding complete dependence on the higher levels of the net-working structure for forming a picture of the situation. At the very top, all these networks are kept together by links of personal loyalty to the Amir al Momineen, Mullah Omar. The Taliban maintain relations with groups and organizations that are external to the movement. These include small groups of bandits and mercenaries, co-opted to do "day jobs" or encour-aged to disrupt the security of areas still under government control. Also included are community militias, some of which have over time strength-ened their relationship with the Taliban and now can be considered to be integrated into the movement; some communities have lost their original leadership and might be merging fully into the Taliban. Even some police units in southern and western Afghanistan have reached deals with the Taliban and in some cases defected to them. Finally, independent orga-nizations have formed alliances with the Taliban, often very close ones (F). Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's organization, Hizb-i Islami, is one example: part of its members have been drawn into the Taliban, while the majority remain external to them. The relationship can often be turbulent, as in this case: Hizb-i Islami and Taliban often fight each other in local context, while cooperate in others. Other organizations allied to the Taliban that might have been incorporated into the movement include for example the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

Figure 1. Organization of the Taliban

Legend:
- ■ Mullah Omar
- ■ Main Taliban leader
- ● Regional Taliban leader
- · Local Taliban commander

The Taliban

A, B, C, D, E, F

Community militia

Bandits, mercenaries

Police

THE ROLE OF PERSONALITIES

As already mentioned, this type of organization is heavily dependent on a steady supply of charismatic leaders at the various levels, able to mobilize fighters on the basis of their reputation for bravery and resourcefulness. Many fighters are loyal to their commander first and foremost; this seems to be largely the dominant attitude among the part-time militias, because of their local character and of their limited exposure to Taliban indoctrination. Among the full-time fighters, many of whom are recruited in the madrassas and tend to be more indoctrinated, loyalty to the Taliban as such regarding the cause of jihad seems to be stronger. In the past, the loss of top leaders, such as Mullah Dadullah, for example, had a major impact on specific networks, but little appreciable impact on the Taliban as a whole. Individual commanders joined other networks and continued to fight. In other cases, network leaders have been replaced more or less successfully, and the network has continued to exist as such.

FORMAL STRUCTURES

The Taliban do have some formal structures that are supposed to provide the movement with a visible, institutionalized leadership and predictable patterns of decision-making. The Leadership Council is the supreme organ of the Taliban; provincial leadership councils also reportedly exist. A variety of commissions, whose existence is from time to time reported in the Taliban media, might or might not function as such; the fact that they exist at least in name highlights a concern of the Taliban in projecting their image as something more than a mere patchwork of personal networks. From time to time, new formal institutional structures emerge within the Taliban to address specific problems. The networks remain clearly predominant within the movement, but formal structures seem to be struggling to emerge.[2]

COMMAND AND CONTROL

Since the beginning of their insurgency in 2002, the Taliban have been operating along a front of around 2,000 kilometers, stretching from Baluchistan to the extreme north of Pakistan (or east of Afghanistan). Their ability to use modern communication technologies as a means of command and control has been limited by American and NATO eaves-dropping and by the risk of command posts being located and attacked. The need to resort to messengers and couriers for any communication of importance has meant that the command and control structure had to be decentralized in any case.

There are four "regional commands" of the Taliban (southern Afghanistan, southeastern Afghanistan, eastern Afghanistan, western Afghanistan), which have a great degree of autonomy in planning and implementation. These do not coincide with the different networks, although is some cases they can come quite close to being the same. For example, over time, the network centered around Jalaluddin Haqqani increasingly has come close to coinciding with the southeastern command of the Taliban, although never fully matching it. There still are Taliban commanders linked to other networks, mainly based in the south even in the south-east, as well as in the east.[3]

In the early days of the insurgency, the Taliban simply appointed commanders at various level of responsibility, starting from small local commanders with ten to fifteen men following their orders. At the top of the field-command structure were "front commanders" *(*fronts are locally called *mahaz* or *dilgay*). The fronts had a predominant military role; provincial commanders seem to have existed, too, playing primarily an administrative and political role, such as being in charge of the distribu-tion of supplies, or resolving disputes among commanders or between commanders and communities, even among communities when requested.

The Taliban experienced serious problems in making the two structures work together, and contrasts between provincial and front commanders are sometimes reported, but on the whole the system seems to have managed to keep going, surviving occasional clashes.[4]

How the Taliban Have Been Expanding

Recruitment

The primary source of recruitment into the Taliban has always been clerical. From 2002 to 2005, clerics and clerical students probably formed the majority of the fighting and political cadre ranks. Whatever evidence is available on the political orientation of the clergy after 2001, it shows a rapid shift toward opposition to foreign presence in the country, particularly among Pashtuns. Mullahs preaching in favor of jihad occasionally are reported even in Kabul, but perhaps more significantly in areas of northern Afghanistan. Those clerics who remained hostile to the Taliban were removed from prominence through a campaign of intimidation and murder, which forced them to flee to the provincial centers first, and then onward to Kabul once urban centers such as Kandahar started being thoroughly infiltrated by the Taliban. From 2006 onward, the Taliban have been quite successful in expanding recruitment beyond the original clerical base. A number of communities, comprised mostly of Pashtuns and mostly in southern Afghanistan, have allied with the Taliban to fight their own little wars; some of them gradually have been co-opted deeper into the Taliban, others have cooled down the relationship after suffering heavy casualties in the fighting. In general, the Taliban always sought the approval of the elders before entering the territory of a community; however, once firmly established in a region, the Taliban often moved to

marginalize the elders, particularly those who had demonstrated independent attitudes. To the extent that elders maintained a degree of control over their communities, the option of breaking their temporary alliance with the Taliban always remained available. In some areas, this reportedly happened, although in other cases the rebellious elders were crushed. Marrying into local communities is another tactic for political penetration and presence consolidation that frequently has been reported.[5]

From 2006 onward, the Taliban also have been quite successful in recruiting portions of the disenfranchised, frustrated village youth. The motives of these youth originally might have had little do to with the ideology or the aims of the Taliban, but supported by a strong cadre of committed fighters and commanders with a madrassa background, these new recruits seem to have been socialized quite successfully into the Taliban and gradually indoctrinated ideologically.[6]

GEOGRAPHICAL AND SOCIAL EXPANSION

Two elements among the Taliban political cadre—"preachers" and "agents"—have played a key role in the penetration of the Taliban deeper and deeper inside Afghan territory. The preachers prepare the ground for the arrival of the fighters in areas not yet affected by the insurgency, but most importantly, the agents visit a region to establish the potential for mobilizing locals on the Taliban side. Relying on networks established when the Taliban were the government, the agents quickly identify potential supporters, communities, and individuals holding grudges against the government, as well as those who are hostile to the Taliban. Small groups of armed fighters then move in and recruit local fighters, while at the same time weeding out hostile individuals or groups. With this kind of knowledge, the operations of the Taliban were greatly facilitated, as was their expansion throughout the territory of Afghanistan. Map 1 (page 12) shows the gradual expansion of the Taliban from 2002 to 2009.[7]

Map 1. Taliban Expansion from 2002 to 2007

How the Taliban Are Funded

Any attempt to estimate the Taliban's revenue can never be more than guesswork. It is clear that they have both internal revenue, raised through the taxation of any kind of economic activity in areas where they are influential throughout Afghanistan and Pakistan, and external revenue, raised from sympathizers and supporters among Muslim communities worldwide. There is no hard evidence of funding from foreign states, although both Iran and Pakistan have been alleged (with some evidence) to have provided supplies or at least to have facilitated their delivery to the Taliban. Estimates of external revenue hover around $100 million per year, while estimates of internal revenue tend to exceed that figure. In total, according to the predominant estimates, the Taliban would be receiving around $250 million per year. While these

estimates are quite wild and have repeatedly been revised, some idea of the costs of waging their campaign can be inferred. As of late 2009, the cost of waging the war (maintaining the men in arms plus paying the political cadres) could be estimated at around $120–140 million per year.[8]

Estimating the trend in Taliban revenue-raising with any precision is even harder; however, it is clear that revenue has been growing due to the expansion of Taliban influence, from very little in 2002 to a good half of Afghan territory in 2009. It is an open secret that Afghan companies, including some of the larger ones, gradually have started paying taxes to the Taliban in order to be allowed to operate without threat. According to my communications with UN and Afghan government officials, it is also common for companies implementing reconstruction and development contracts to pay the Taliban. As a percentage of total revenue, therefore, internal revenue certainly has been rising. At the same time, the decline of the conflict in Iraq both in terms of its virulence and of its place in the horizon of Muslim public opinions around the world probably has led to a redirection of funding away from Iraq and toward Afghanistan. The Taliban are now a well-known and popular brand among large segments of the Muslim world and seem able to beat even al Qaeda in terms of fund-raising. In 2002, by contrast, it is likely that most of the external funding accruing to the Taliban would have come from al Qaeda and other jihadist groups rather than directly from the original donors. External funding therefore is likely to have been growing too, but not as much as internal revenue-raising.

CONSEQUENCES OF THEIR ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE ON INTERNAL COHESION

HOW COHESIVE ARE THE TALIBAN?

The different networks that comprise the Taliban have somewhat different ideological leanings and allegiances, with some groups being more radical than

others, or closer to the Pakistani armed forces and intelligence services, or again closer to trans-national jihadist networks such as al Qaeda. This means that some "regional commands," dominated by a particular network, might have a different leaning than another. For example, the "southeastern command" is dominated largely by the Haqqani network as already explained, which has very close relations with Pakistani Army and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's intelligence agency. This closeness is not appreciated by most other Taliban networks, who are either hostile to the Pakistani authorities *tout court* (what used to be known as the Mullah Dadullah network) or at the very least are unwilling to be controlled by the Pakistanis. In turn, the Haqqani network in particular has been trying to contain the antagonistic attitude of some of the more radical Pakistani Taliban leaders such as Baitullah Mehsud and his successors toward the Pakistani armed forces; Mullah Omar himself has made efforts to rein them in, although not as proactively. Some Pakistani Taliban leaders even have been supporting the Pakistani armed forces against Baitullah and other radical figures.[9]

These different strategies and attitudes have led many observers to describe the Taliban as a very fragmented movement, with no overall strategy, aims, or command-and-control structure. In particular, the Haqqani network often is described as an insurgent movement that is separate from the Taliban, in the same league as the Hekmatyar faction of Hizb-i Islami—which some-times cooperates with the Taliban and sometimes does not, but is certainly organizationally distinguished from them (as discussed above). Undoubtedly, since Serajuddin Haqqani—the son of the elderly Jalaluddin, from whom the network originated—has de facto taken over from his father, there has been tension with Mullah Omar. Still, this tension has not led to anything like a formal split in the Haqqani network. Over the past two years, the network has been greatly expanding its area of operations, from its usual Loya Paktya theater toward Kabul first (Wardak, Logar provinces), then toward the east (Nangarhar, Kunar), and then southward (Ghazni). Such expansion occurred largely through the cooptation of local commanders previously associated

with other networks, and it is interesting to point out that it does not seem to have given origin to any opposition from or friction with other networks, including those closest to Mullah Omar, which had been operating in all of these regions. This is clearly not the reaction one would expect if the Haqqani network was seen by the Taliban leadership in Quetta as a separate, competing organization.[10]

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

The exact extent of the influence of non-Afghan jihadist groups over the Taliban is not easy to establish. The presence of cadres of al Qaeda seems to be at a low level nowadays; U.S. sources estimate that around one hundred al Qaeda fighters remain in the whole of Afghanistan. This might reflect a weakening of al Qaeda or a change in tactical attitudes, reflecting the realization that Arab operatives were of little use inside Afghanistan. Al Qaeda still seems to play a role in providing training to Taliban fighters. Similarly, some Pakistani jihadist organizations, such as Lashkar-e Taiba, also are believed to be providing training to Taliban fighters in the southeastern and eastern regions. The Taliban leadership has been sending signals that its relationship to al Qaeda is not necessarily close; at the same time, intercepted documents, whose authenticity is difficult to verify, point toward a much closer relationship.[11]

The Taliban relationship with Pakistan also is difficult to define with precision, despite being undeniable. The Pakistani army clearly sees the Taliban as a useful tool for its geopolitical ambitions in Afghanistan, but among the Taliban, the Pakistani patron is far from being popular. Apart from Haqqani and his network (always the closest to the Pakistanis), the other networks more tolerate Pakistani influence than appreciate it. Since 2005, there also has been a rise in Iranian links with the Taliban, mostly in the form of support for individual Taliban commanders, usually a handful in each southern province and stronger support in the west. Initially, the Iranians limited themselves to providing medical supplies and limited quantities of weaponry and ammunition, but

since 2008, there appears to have been a significant increase in supplies and, most noteworthy, the provision of training to groups of Taliban inside Iran. It is unlikely that the Taliban ever will trust Iran, with which they had very troubled relations in the 1990s, but diversifying sources of support and logistical supply lines is certainly in the Taliban's interest. It also is unlikely that the Iranians will acquire significant influence over Taliban decision-making.[12]

INTERNAL CRISES AND FACTIONAL FRICTION

The Taliban are neither exempt from internal crises and friction nor able to divine their strategy without a trial and error process, which is typical of every political decision making. Some cases of friction have already been mentioned above, but it is possible to identify at least three crises faced by the Taliban after 2002. There might well have been more, but as it will be understood, information is hard to come by. Particularly for the first years of the neo-Taliban insurgency, little information about internal developments was coming out.

The first known crisis dates back to 2007. The fast expansion of the Taliban in 2006–07 brought them in contact with more communities, including many not as conservative as the remote mountain ones which had initially hosted the insurgents in 2002–05. The social edicts of Mullah Omar, dating back to the 1990s but still implemented by the forces of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, wherever they were in control after 2001, created a backlash among the population. The ban on music, for example, proved very unpopular. The crisis was serious enough to prompt Mullah Omar to issue a fatwa allowing the field commanders to decide on the implementation of his social edicts in the areas under their control. The large majority of the commanders seems to have opted for the more liberal attitude, in line with the demands of local communities.[13]

A second crisis occurred in 2008, when the Taliban expanded further and very rapidly to areas away from their old strongholds in the south. The discipline of the Taliban collapsed, particularly along the main highways in Wardak

and Logar, and looting became commonplace. The leadership had to intervene in a decisive manner to prevent a degrading of the image of the Taliban as a party of law and order. A number of Taliban commanders were disciplined and even executed to bring order back.[14]

A third crisis occurred in February 2010, and it is difficult to assess it because of the short period of time that has elapsed. Certainly, it resulted in a number of important figures of the movement, including Mullah Omar's deputy, Mullah Baradar, being arrested by the Pakistani services. The arrests had been preceded for some months by insistent rumors of a rift between Baradar and Omar, despite their close personal relations. The rift might have started over appointments, but became serious once a divergence over possible negotiations emerged. The crisis might also have to do with the emergence of a new generation of younger, sometimes better-educated members of the movement who are beginning to climb up the career ladder and increasingly play a role in managing the organization. This might have created friction with some of the older leaders, particularly those seen as not sufficiently keen on the fight. The arrests paved the way for the promotion of the new generation; Mullah Zakir, one of the rising stars among the Taliban, was soon promoted to take Baradar's place as Mullah Omar's deputy.[15]

Afghan and Pakistani Taliban

The Pakistani Taliban often have been seen as something separate from the movement led by Mullah Omar, and in turn seen as fragmented internally. To some extent, the distinction between Afghan and Pakistani Taliban is arbitrary. As explained earlier, there are different trends and tendencies within the movement (as is the case in many insurgencies and political organizations), but none of these coincide exactly with the Durand Line (the border between the two countries). The Haqqani network, for example, has been for years very influential in parts of the Federally Administered

Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan, particularly Waziristan, even if it never fully controlled the region, and its position within the Miran Shah shura (North Waziristan) seems to have weakened in 2009. Many Taliban commanders in Waziristan offered their allegiance to Haqqani in the past. The Baitullah Mehsud network, by contrast, could be described as entirely based in Pakistan, but it entertained close relations with Mullah Dadullah and his network in the past, and still might have links to individual Afghan commanders who had been part of Dadullah's network. Moreover, there is strong evidence, based on intercepted communications, that Baitullah always continued to acknowledge Mullah Omar as his leader and that Baitullah's network considered itself an integral part of the Taliban movement. Mullah Omar, as the leader of the movement as a whole, avoids siding too closely with any particular network. So although Mullah Omar is against confronting the Pakistani armed forces in the FATA and in the rest of Pakistan as Baitullah wanted, and is at the same time against surrendering to Pakistani interference and control over the movement as Haqqani has been doing, he has exercised pressure on fellow leaders only within certain limits. He clearly does not want to alienate important components of the movement, and might even have seen some use in using the more radical wing, once led by Baitullah Mehsud, to increase his leverage vis-à-vis the Pakistani security establishment. Mullah Omar seems to have presented himself to the Pakistanis as the only figure who can restrain Baitullah's network from getting even more violent and confrontational, and might have played a role in the truces negotiated between the Pakistani army and the Pakistani Taliban in the past.

TALIBAN "GOVERNANCE" IN AFGHAN TERRITORY

THE JUDICIARY

Except for minor efforts by the Taliban in the education and health sectors, consisting of attempts to provide some health care in remote areas and

to improve the quality of some madrassas, their civilian administration practically boiled down to the establishment of a separate judiciary. As of late 2008, a Taliban-appointed judiciary operated only in the two dozen districts where they were confident of their territorial control; a Taliban-appointed judge would have been at great risk in any area where the Kabul government was strong or the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) were conducting Operation Enduring Freedom. In other areas where the Taliban operated, but were not in full control, they usually invited the population to refer to specific Qazis (religious judges) that were acknowledged to be respectable and strict enough. Because of the collapse of the state judiciary, the population in general seemed to appreciate this option; in the province of Ghazni in 2008, for example, not a single case was being brought to the state judiciary anymore. Many villagers might have seen the Taliban-sponsored judges as just part of the customary law system that, according to some surveys, attracted 80 percent of the cases even before the current conflict began. In some tribal areas, the Taliban even sponsored the recourse to tribal law—certainly an innovation from their point of view, as they had opposed the practice when they were in power in Kabul. This sponsorship of independent judges implied some risk for the Taliban, in the absence of any real capacity for supervising their work; the Taliban-sponsored judges in Ghazni were reported eventually to have become as corrupt as the state ones, with significant damage to the image of the movement of Mullah Omar. By and large, however, the provision of judicial services and dispute resolution by the Taliban, whether through trained judges or through the Taliban field commanders, proved to be a winning card for the insurgents.[16]

GOVERNORS

As early as 2003, as soon as they started controlling significant chunks of Afghan territory, the Taliban started introducing an additional layer of organizational structure on the ground. Initially, this took the form of the appointment of pro-

vincial governors, and then, from about 2006, the appointment of district governors, "chiefs of police," judges, and a few other less-important positions. In practice, making the new structure work proved very difficult. Even where the Kabul government's presence was weak, the "governors" found it difficult to impose their will over the "front commanders," who also continued to mediate disputes on their own. Other times, the "governors" were judged by the leadership to be too accommodating with local communities and elders, and therefore were removed. Although the Taliban proved quite good at imposing their own law and order in the areas they controlled, it usually did not happen through a specialized police force, which did not really exist, but rather through their system of informers, front commanders, and local militias. The Taliban assign some of their local militias to the task of "policing" a specific territory. They indeed claim to have over 30,000 such police forces around Afghanistan, but that figure should be taken with a grain of salt; it could be their own estimate of the strength of their part-time militias in areas under their stable control. The "police" enforce the decisions of the judges and maintain some order. In the areas of conflict, the role of police and judges is played by the local Taliban commander.

Often, the Taliban also would negotiate ad hoc agreements with local communities, or among communities, acting as a broker to allow pro-Taliban communities to bypass longstanding rivalries and cooperate in the interest of the jihad against the foreigners. Some of these agreements were remarkably sophisticated. Such agreements often collapsed, leaving a bitter taste of governance in Afghanistan in the mouth of the Taliban cadres, but by and large the Taliban seem to have greatly benefited from their ability to mediate disputes between individuals and communities; it could be argued that such ability is a main source of legitimacy for the Taliban.[17]

The repeated reshuffles, the competition over the position of governor (which occurred in a number of cases), and the recent decision to reform the system, taken in early 2009, all point toward the conclusion that the Taliban leadership was taking this structure rather seriously. Although that initial effort was far from successful, from early 2009 onward there seems again to be an attempt to inject a new energy

into the institution-building process by the Taliban, with various commissions being created or old commission being re-staffed. The appointments seem to have been made with a more meritocratic approach, as opposed to the previous tendency to rely largely on personal relations.[18] A few districts where the Kabul government had no presence whatsoever, such as Gizab in Uruzgan, seemed to be run by the Taliban district governor.

During 2009, moreover, the Taliban started establishing a more sophisticated structure, bypassing the personal networks, whose representatives were however incorporated into the new structure. In particular, a commission in charge of appointments in the governance structure was instrumental toward achieving a more professional attitude in making appointments. The commission reportedly invited a fixed number of hosts from each district to Pakistan to interview them, in order to assess the situation in the localities. Remarkably, there were fixed rules about who was to be interviewed, in order to represent fairly the pro-Taliban and neutral populations. The first indications in spring 2009 were that the complaints about the leadership and its ineffective management, as well as its failure to show up in the field regularly, abundant until a few months earlier, largely had ceased. The complaints, listened to through the ISAF communications monitoring network, therefore might have been related to the flawed network-based command and control system; the growing risk to Taliban commanders had made it increasingly difficult for the leaders to travel inside Afghanistan and therefore to maintain the network to the extent that it would be effective in resolving disputes, maintaining discipline, and exercising a strong influence. The establishment of a more institutionalized system therefore might have been a response to the crisis and an attempt to resolve this dilemma.[19]

The Taliban also developed a provincial management structure in the shape of provincial commissions, centered in Pakistan but whose heads would often travel to Afghanistan or call individuals to their quarters. It would appear that these commissions had, in some cases at least, quite a high degree of influence and power, particularly in the provinces bordering Pakistan, where communications and supervision were easier.[20]

PROVISION OF SERVICES

Even at its best, no Afghan state has ever provided much to the districts, so the Taliban, who were fighting a war and should be expected to prioritize the military effort, not surprisingly were not investing massive resources in the civilian administration. There is no indication that the Taliban are directly providing services such as health or education, although they might be sponsoring some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and some religious madrassas, including, in the case of the latter, with the provision of some support. In 2007, the Taliban announced a $1 million budget to support education in the areas under their control.[21] However, there seems to have been an evolution in the Taliban's thinking with regard to the provision of basic services to the population. Starting in 2006, reports started to surface about Taliban attempts to recruit medical staff, usually through the offer of incentives but occasionally even forcefully, to serve in the countryside. While the primary purpose in this case might be offering treatment to wounded Taliban fighters, it would appear that the Taliban also were trying to offer some medical services to the population of the areas under their control.[22]

With regard to education, too, an evolution is clearly detectable. While in the early years of the insurgency, the Taliban opposition to state education was uncompromising, in 2008–09 a new trend emerged. In some areas, the Taliban made deals with local school headmasters, allowing teaching to continue, but with changed curricula and the incorporation of mullahs among the school staff, tasked to monitor the proper behavior of the teachers. In such cases, it would appear that the Ministry of Education pays for these teachers. According to the ministry, as of March 2009, eighty-one schools previously closed for security reasons had reopened and were functioning under this regime of shared control in Kandahar, Helmand, and Uruzgan provinces. Remarkably, about 15 percent of the pupils attending those schools were reported to be girls, whereas the Taliban previously had been resolutely opposed to the education of girls in state schools. The campaign against the schools was most definitely one of the most unpopular aspects of the Taliban. That the Taliban

decided to modify their policies in this regard can be taken as an indication of some sensitivity to public opinion.[23]

Prospects of a Settlement

Taliban Attitudes toward Negotiations

As mentioned already, the recent divergences among Taliban leadership over the pace and substance of possible negotiations with ISAF and Kabul might be at the source of the Taliban internal crisis of February 2010. While it seems obvious that the minority of Afghan Taliban more closely linked to al Qaeda and other international jihadist groups would oppose a political settlement, after the death of Mullah Dadullah in 2007, this component of the movement has been quite marginal inside Afghanistan; the series of defeats and the loss of several of its more prominent leaders have also weakened the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which had in a sense taken the leadership of the radical wing of the Taliban. Although information concerning the attitude of the rest of the Taliban is scant, their positioning during 2009 seemed to indicate at least some interest in negotiations: consultations with elders and mullahs in the refugee camps of Pakistan, attempts to improve the image of the Taliban, particularly in terms of concerns for the plight of civilians caught in the crossfire, and so on. The unofficial Taliban "representatives" in Kabul, formally reconciled with the Kabul government, but believed to remain in contact with their old colleagues, claim that the Taliban would negotiate subject to some key conditions being met.[24]

The Taliban seem to see themselves as gradually gaining the upper hand in the military confrontation and as having so far successfully counteracted the military surge chosen in Washington. They probably see the incipient Dutch and Canadian withdrawals as the first signs that the enemy front is disintegrating.

They probably also see the growing gap between president Hamid Karzai and his circle on one side and their former allies of Jamiat-i Islami on the other as an encouraging development. The Taliban can correctly claim to have been able to inflict growing casualties on the enemy, while maintaining that their own casualties were roughly stable, an indicator of increased military efficiency. The Taliban also harbor hopes to increase their base of support further inside the country. While the extent of sympathy for the Taliban is at present probably somewhere around 10–15 percent of the Afghan population, the Taliban report encouraging signs of some initial success in recruiting among non-Pashtuns (such as Uzbeks, Aimaqs, and Tajiks). On the other hand, there are some indications that the Taliban leadership is upset and disappointed by the limited advances of the Taliban so far in a key Pashtun province, Nangarhar. There are also indications that in specific areas the Taliban have been feeling the increased military pressure that followed the increased commitment of foreign troops and the expansion of the Afghan armed forces. The overall perception of the situation is nonetheless a positive one as far as the Taliban are concerned.

Taliban Demands

The Taliban seem immovable with regard to at least a symbolic gesture toward a withdrawal of foreign troops as a precondition for the opening of any serious negotiations. This is also what they demand in public: chasing foreign troops out of the country is the main motive of their propaganda. Another foremost precondition that they are imposing is some kind of recognition of the Taliban as a legitimate interlocutor (hence dropping the "terrorist" label). In practice, it is unlikely that they would be satisfied with only those preconditions. Some constitutional rearrangement and some form of power-sharing also would rank high among their demands, as well as the integration of their armed force within the national armed forces. The Taliban do not appear likely to accept the current Afghan constitution, even in a revised form; certainly they would demand a greater role for Islamic law in legislation, and a consequent

Islamization of the judiciary. In terms of power-sharing, Afghan government officials have been hinting that President Karzai is ready to offer a number of governorships and ministerial position to the Taliban in the event of a reconciliation, but the Taliban do not seem to be interested in joining Karzai's system. In the existing presidential system, Karzai could undo any appointment as he wishes, offering no guarantee to the Taliban that a deal would be respected in the medium and long-term. The Taliban also are very worried about the attitude of the Afghan security forces, mostly staffed with bitter enemies of the Taliban. In the absence of a thorough purge and reform of the existing security forces, the Taliban would not want to disarm, but would insist on maintaining their armed force as mobilized, either openly or in some disguised form. A financial package also might emerge as essential to a political settlement, particularly if the Taliban had to renounce to at least some of the revenue they currently gather. The Taliban leadership would insist on a financial scheme benefiting the movement as a whole, as opposed to or in combination with individual packages.[25]

The network-based character of the Taliban structure makes it all the more important for them to move cautiously with regard to negotiations; the leadership would not want the single networks or individual commanders to move towards talks in sparse order. The movement then would risk disintegrating. The leadership will also want to stress aspects of any settlement which would facilitate its tasks of keeping the Taliban together: as mentioned above, a financial settlement and the integration of the military force.

TALIBAN RELATIONS WITH OTHER GROUPS

As far as negotiations and reconciliation go, the Taliban seem to be trying to coordinate their actions with other insurgent groups, particularly Hekmatyar's Hizb-i Islami, according to a Pakistani journalist who had exchanges in March 2010 with both Taliban and Hizb-i Islami representatives. Pakistani army sources indicate that the Pakistani authorities also are putting pressure on the two groups to move

toward negotiations in a coordinated way. The Taliban have very close relations with a number of jihadist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Jihad Union, which probably would not be very happy in the event of a settlement, but their weight inside Afghanistan still is limited. There have been a number of reports about Taliban contacts with various figures belonging to the mujahidin groups of the 1980s; such contacts seem to have been meant to sound out the possibility of alliances, both in terms of dragging them toward the jihad and in terms of possible alliances during a post-settlement transitional phase, but nothing specific is known about these contacts.[26]

The advances of the Taliban toward the various groups of mujahidin have not achieved much so far, which is unsurprising at this stage. How the different mujahidin parties would behave in the event of a withdrawal of foreign troops, even a planned one, remains to be seen; the Taliban could campaign on a platform of "law, order, and Islam" which the mujahidin would have difficulties in counteracting. The remnants of the old Shura-i Nezar network (commander Ahmad Shah Massud's followers) are the most hostile to the Taliban. Professor Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, who has strong links to Saudi Arabia, is probably the most amenable to a settlement with them; the other old mujahidin sit somewhere in between. However, the situation is very fluid, and Pakistani diplomats and intelligence services have been actively trying to bridge the gap between the different Islamist fundamentalist groups, particularly since 2009 and increasingly so in 2010. Despite many rhetorical statements to the contrary, President Karzai appears not very keen on a negotiated settlement, which certainly would threaten his position; he appear to prefer the reconciliation of individual Taliban leaders or of single networks, which he would then find much easier to control and manipulate. Karzai's public invitations to negotiations and initiatives for the Peace Jirga planned for June 2010 are more likely to put off the Taliban leadership than to kick off a negotiating process.[27]

Prospects of a Coalition Government

A settlement achieved in the presence of an ascendant Taliban would have to include a coalition government with Taliban participation, at least for a phase. Such a coalition would be unlikely to be all-inclusive, or even widely inclusive. In fact, it is difficult to see how it would be possible to have a functioning government that included representatives of all factions, ranging from the secular progressives to the Taliban. The Taliban probably would try to maneuver and form a more restrictive coalition, incorporating like-minded groups (that is, Islamic fundamentalist and Islamist groups); this also seem to be the desire of the Pakistani army and ISI. Even that might not lead to a very functional government, given the gap between the abilities of the likely partners in the coalition and the administrative demands that the system established in Afghanistan after 2001 imposes. Such a government also probably would not be very representative of the different regions and ethnic groups and sects, not to mention gender. However, considering that the present government is not very functional either, nor necessarily very representative, it still might be seen as an acceptable option, both internally and externally, as long as it brings the war to an end.

If the Taliban were to be weakened substantially in another round of fighting, they probably would become more accommodating in their demands, but it seems premature to speculate about this at this stage.

NOTES

1.   For a discussion of Taliban numbers in 2006, see Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). Various estimates have been circulated in the press, coming from various intelligence sources.

2.   See ibid. for a discussion of Taliban organizational structures.

3.   See Thomas Rüttig, "Loya Paktia's Insurgency," in *Decoding the New Taliban,* ed. Antonio Giustozzi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 57ff.

4.   See for example Martine van Bijlert, "Unruly Commanders and Violent Power Struggles: Taliban Networks in Uruzgan," in *Decoding the New Taliban,* 155ff.

5.   See Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*.

6.   Personal communication with UN officials, Kabul, 2008.

7.   The map is based on reports of Taliban attacks and other activities by mass media and the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO), as well as on United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) security maps of Afghanistan.

8.   For an earlier estimate, see Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop,* 97.

9.   See Claudio Franco, "Developments in the Jihadi Resurgence in Pakistan: January 2008," NEFA Foundation, March 5, 2008.

10. Personal communication with UN and ISAF officials, as well as Afghan security officers, Kabul, Gardez, and Khost 2008–09.

11. Personal communication with analyst who meets regularly with Pakistani and Afghan Taliban, London, 2009; Richard Esposito, Matthew Cole, and Brian Ross, "President Obama's Secret: Only 100 al Qaeda Now in Afghanistan with New Surge," ABC News, December 2, 2009, http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/president-obamas-secret-100-al-qaeda-now-afghanistan/story?id=9227861.

12. On Iranian policy toward the Taliban, see among others Sajjan M. Gohel, "Iran's Ambiguous Role in Afghanistan," *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 3 (March 2010).

13. Personal communication with Claudio Franco, 2009; Tom Coghlan, "The Taliban in Helmand: An Oral History," in *Decoding the New Taliban*, 140.

14. Personal communications with Tom Coghlan and other journalists and analysts, 2009.

15. On the 2010 crisis, see Thomas Rüttig, "The Taliban Arrest Wave in Pakistan: Reasserting Strategic Depth?" *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 3 (March 2010).

16. Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop,* 111; *Decoding the New Taliban,* 51–52, 111, 113, 115, 140, 148–49, 168, 182, 187, 188 for aspects of the Taliban judiciary in various parts of Afghanistan.

17. Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop,* 111ff; van Bijlert, "Unruly Commanders and Violent Power Struggles," 163, 165ff; personal communication with U.K. Department for International Development official, Kabul, May 2008.

18. Personal communication with official of Agha Khan Foundation, Kabul, 2008, and with UN officials, 2009.

19. Personal communications with UN officials, ISAF officers, NGO managers, and former Islamist activists, Kabul, March–April 2009.

20. It is not clear when the Provincial Commissions were created. See *Decoding the New Taliban* for examples from different parts of Afghanistan.

21. Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop,* 104–05.

22. Ibid., 111.

23. "Afghanistan: Dozens of Schools Reopen in Volatile South," *IRIN*, March 26, 2009; Antonio Giustozzi, *The Politics of Education in Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghan Analysts Network, 2010 forthcoming).

24. Personal communications with ISAF official, 2009; personal communication with "reconciled" Taliban in Kabul, 2006–09; Alissa J. Rubin, "Taliban Overhaul Image to Win Allies," *New York Times*, January 20, 2010.

25. Diplomatic sources contacted by this author, 2009; personal communication with Afghan government officials, 2009 and 2010.

26. Personal communications with intellectuals linked to the mujahidin parties, Kabul, 2009, and with UN officials, Kabul, 2009.

27. See Talatbek Masadykov, Antonio Giustozzi, and James Michael Page, *Negotiating with the Taliban: Toward a Solution for the Afghan Conflict* (London: Crisis States Research Centre, January 27, 2010).

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