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The Insurgents of the Afghan North

The rise of the Taliban, the self-abandonment of the Afghan government and the effects of ISAF's 'capture-and-kill campaign'

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Until recently, the belief was widespread that the Greater North was immune from Taliban infiltration, due mainly to two reasons:

- a) The Taliban were perceived as a purely Pashtun movement by local Western analysts and the Afghan government. This would limit their potential for recruitment to predominantly Pashtun areas, of which few exist in the Greater North of Afghanistan;
- b) In practice, the level of Taliban infiltration from southern Afghanistan and activity of other insurgent groups remained very low until 2008, compared to the south and east of Afghanistan. Attempts by the Taliban to gain support and build cells in the so-called Pashtun pockets from 2005 onwards did not translate into military actions quickly and were rated by NATO/ISAF forces and the Afghan government as a failure.

The picture changed drastically in 2008 with attacks and roadside bombs and even large-scale ambushes involving dozens of fighters in 2009. The argument that the Taliban could only attract Pashtuns became controversial. Obviously, what had looked like failing

Taliban attempts to build up local structures was in fact a patient effort of systematic infiltration, reflecting a strategy to extend their control beyond their traditional strongholds in the south. The Taliban repeated patterns of infiltration that had been utilised elsewhere in Afghanistan: They initially allocated material resources and manpower to the Greater North, sent political agents to recruit sympathetic mullahs and appeal to disgruntled Pashtuns, and installed sympathetic mullahs in local madrassas and mosques – with visible results from 2008 onwards. By early 2010, the Taliban had brought the northern half of Baghlan, several districts in the south and north of Kunduz, most of northern Takhar and parts of Faryab and Jowzjan under their military control or influence. They attacked German troops in Kunduz province and even aggressively pursued them in retreat. During the Taliban's build-up phase, ISAF contingents in the Greater North had followed a reluctant approach: avoid direct conflict, military escalation and casualties. When the situation deteriorated, they had no answer to the growing insurgency – mainly because they lacked political backing to pursue a more

aggressive counter-approach in the Western European capitals.

In the grand debate concerning Taleban strategy, including whether it exists in the first place, the Greater North bears witness that it is indeed real.

At the same time, the Taleban opened their ranks for non-Pashtuns and managed to form cells in Uzbek and Tajik areas. From 2009 onwards, the evidence that the Taleban were recruiting significant numbers of Uzbeks and Turkmen and smaller numbers of Tajiks was overwhelming. As of spring 2010, ethnically mixed groups of insurgents were reported, but as exceptions rather than the rule, in the Greater North. The Taleban leadership in Pakistan has started to appoint non-Pashtuns as local commanders in an effort to systematically install deputy district governors and district-level military chiefs all over the north. This helped them gain strength beyond the 'Pashtun pockets'. While Taleban recruitment among Pashtuns in the north often attracts elders and non-clerical elements, the clerical presence seems to be much stronger among Uzbeks and Turkmen. Tajiks (apart from Aimaqs) have so far been less involved in the insurgency, at least in terms of grassroots recruitment, perhaps because Tajik strongmen enjoy a greater Islamic legitimacy than Uzbek strongmen (linked to the secular Jombesh). In some areas, the Taleban also have used social fault lines – for example, among the Pashtuns of Baghlan, they drew the lower strata of society towards the insurgency.

A new trend in the Taleban recruitment strategy could be observed particularly in provinces dominated by non-Pashtuns, such as Aryab, Jowzjan, Sar-e Pol and Takhar, where the Taleban emphasised a religious and ideological approach rather than an ethnic one in their recruitment drives.

Perhaps the most important source of support and recruitment for the Taleban, however, is the clergy – which, as an institution, transcends ethnic divisions. Sectors of the clergy were already openly preaching against the government and foreign presence well before the Taleban surfaced in the north. Their appearance seems to have inspired

many conservative mullahs to come into the open and take positions against the government and foreign presence, which incidentally coincided with their interest to maintain their positions of unquestioned power in their communities. Where the Taleban do not have extensive community support, madrassas seem to be the main source for grassroots recruitment. According to northern notables and clerics, 70 per cent of the mullahs in the north (of all ethnic backgrounds) have been trained in Pakistan. In at least one predominantly Uzbek district in Takhar province, itinerant *tablighi* preachers from Pakistan became the main drivers of Taleban recruitment in 2009.

In the areas they controlled and influenced, the Taleban established their shadow administration, starting in the fields of justice and taxation, followed (in some cases) by education and health, with a significant impact on the lives of sections of the population. First and most importantly, their justice system delivered quick and rather non-partisan justice through their mobile courts, normally consisting of a mullah and two assistants travelling on motorbikes. All parties vigilantly respected their verdicts. Wherever Taleban had power and the human resources, they installed these courts, which have been highly praised by local interviewees in various provinces. Once the Taleban commanded influence in a certain area and had set up their court, even people from adjacent areas would turn to them. Taleban justice lacks sophistication, but offers institutional coherence: Cases are decided quickly and without demands for bribes; verdicts are respected; an integrated chain of security and justice is maintained. The Taleban followed up these justice mechanisms with 'commissions' for taxation, education and health that regulated how government-established institutions in these fields would continue working under Taleban control. While in general, the Taleban do not tolerate any employment within the Afghan government, health and education staff was explicitly exempted from this rule, at least in Kunduz province. In Kunduz, the Taleban's attitude concerning education became clear: while girls' schools were closed to the greatest

extent possible and girls were banned from participating in schooling despite occasional protests by village elders, boys' schools remained open.

The Taliban also do not seem to have a coherent anti-NGO agenda. NGOs were asked to register with Taliban authorities in various northern provinces. Whether attacks on NGOs occur seems to be related to their source of funding: USAID-funded projects were strongly opposed by the Taliban. Their more permissive attitude towards NGOs in general is directly linked to pressure from communities that are interested in NGO services.

All of the above indicates that the Taliban not only want to fight the Afghan government but to replace it. Moving north and establishing their shadow structures strengthened the Taliban's claims to be the legitimate government of Afghanistan, a nation-wide movement, and that they are fighting for more than just a region or a particular ethnic group (the Pashtuns).

Apart from the Taliban, several other insurgent groups operate in Afghanistan's Greater North. All are linked to the Taliban in one way or another. Most noteworthy is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which uses northeastern Afghanistan as a staging area to infiltrate Central Asia. The relationship between the Taliban and the IMU seems close. In contrast, Hezb-e Islami led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (often referred to as HIG) is not very active militarily in the Greater North, but often at odds with the Taliban. (An exception is Badakhshan where a comparatively stronger Hezb tolerates and supports the few Taliban active there.) In Baghlan, the Taliban defeated Hezb in March 2010. The relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda is more difficult to define because al-Qaeda has a low-profile presence in northern Afghanistan and, more generally, it is not a distinct entity here.

The arrival of US Special Operations Forces (SOF) in the Greater North had a major military impact in pushing back the insurgents. But their initial approach, to reconcile with as many insurgents as possible, has given way to an emphasis on capturing and killing as many

Taliban as possible. The long-term results of this remain unclear, as assessing its effect on the population is very difficult. In general, experienced, locally rooted commanders have either been killed or fled to Pakistan. Their replacements – from southern Afghanistan or directly from Pakistan – have no roots in the area of their deployment; are in their mid-twenties on average (compared to their predecessors who were in their mid-thirties on average); lack the skills, experience, knowledge and respect from the community; are more radical and refuse any tactical agreements with NGOs, instead killing alleged spies and blowing up infrastructural projects. This may deepen their isolation from society, but to negotiate with them one day will be more difficult than with their predecessors.

At the same time, the Afghan government was neither providing even the basic services the Taliban was nor filling the vacuum created by the ISAF campaign (carried out by SOF) that managed to push the Taliban out of areas they had recently controlled. Political calculations and manoeuvres of President Hamed Karzai and his government even strengthened the Taliban, at least in Baghlan province. There, considering Pashtuns in general as natural allies, government personalities supported (Pashtun) Hezb-e Islami cadres in conflict with the Tajik-dominated political factions, which were however already planning beyond the expected ISAF withdrawal. The government's actions backfired when the Taliban in Baghlan suspected Hezb-e Islami of clandestinely cooperating with Karzai's government and defeated them militarily in March 2010.

This contributes to a very unstable status quo, turning ISAF's presence (or absence) into the factor that decides the balance of strength between the insurgents and the government. The inherent dilemma of ISAF's present successes against the Taliban is that its presence is not sustainable indefinitely. A withdrawal of ISAF combat forces in 2014 – or at any other time – might facilitate a return of the insurgents. Furthermore, judged from its performance in 2010, doubts are justified that the Afghan government will be able to contain the insurgency on its own.

This report was produced in the course of 2010 and reflects the situation in the Greater North as of the end of autumn 2010.

INTRODUCTION

Until 2008, Afghanistan's Greater North¹ featured only a few areas of armed anti-government activities of marginal importance. The belief was that the insurgency could gain ground only in the so-called 'Pashtun pockets'. The developments of 2009–10 proved this assumption to be wrong: The insurgency spread over large parts of Baghlan, Kunduz, Faryab and Takhar provinces, and has constantly been gaining ground, at least until late 2010. The Taliban have changed their recruitment techniques to attract frustrated and discontented individuals across ethnic lines and started to follow a policy of explicitly appointing Tajiks and Uzbeks as local commanders and shadow governors.

The Taliban appear to have a clear strategy aimed at destabilising northern Afghanistan. Moving north, and thereby covering non-Pashtun areas, strengthens their claim to be the legitimate government of Afghanistan and to be fighting for the whole country, not just for an ethnic group or a specific region. The Taliban are not only fighting the Afghan government – they are seeking to replace it with their own administration. This, they do with astonishing effectiveness.

Under the surface of the conflict between the insurgents and the Afghan government, with US and ISAF forces supporting the latter, a complex network of relations and factors exists. To understand the rise of the insurgents (as well as their own internal conflicts), requires bringing other elements into that complicated equation:

- changes in the attitude of the Islamic clergy;

- tribal disputes (mainly over land);
- economic interests;
- evolving new alliances among Pashtuns;
- the struggle for local dominance between local actors, unrelated to the 'national level'.

In Western Europe and in the US as well as in the region itself, the psychological and political impact of further destabilisation of the north would be considerable. On one hand, it would force ISAF to overstretch their resources; on the other hand, it would reduce the recruitment pool of the Afghan army and police.

However, concluding that the Taliban have become very strong or even invincible would be wrong. They never were strong in northern Afghanistan – but their opponents were still weaker. In hundreds of interviews with Afghan locals, elders and officials repeatedly confirmed – and supported by circumstantial evidence – that Afghan government institutions on all levels and in most provinces neither reacted to the constant complaints of people about corruption, poor services and arbitrary behaviour, nor effectively countered Taliban advances. Taliban would expand their control, establish their authority, collect taxes, request the phone networks to be shut off at night – and repeatedly, provincial and district officials, ANA and ANP would give in. This is a government in self-abandonment.

When, in late 2009, US Special Operations Forces started, and in 2010 enormously increased, their 'capture-and-kill' operations, mainly in Kunduz and Baghlan provinces, the Taliban were militarily substantially weakened there. But the Afghan government is not becoming stronger at the same time: as if detached from any serious effort to regain control or to establish better governance, which the people desperately demand, all levels of Hamed Karzai's government lack serious commitment to establishing the government's authority. Despite constantly losing local commanders and fighters, the areas formerly fully controlled by the Taliban have not come under firm government control either, but have fallen into a vacuum in which militias and Taliban are struggling for dominance.

¹ For the purposes of this report, 'Greater North' indicates the nine northern provinces of the northeast and north. The 'north' includes Faryab, Jowzjan, Sar-e Pol, Balkh and Samangan, while the 'northeast' includes Kunduz, Baghlan, Takhar and Badakhshan. The term 'northwest' refers only to Faryab, Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol.

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Greater North was known for opposing the advancing Taleban in the 1990s. Three main groups led this opposition: Junbesh-e Milli (led by General Abdul Rashid Dostum), Jamiat-e Islami (led by Ustad Burhanuddin Rabbani and commander Ahmad Shah Massud) and a faction of Hezb-e Wahdat (led by Muhammad Mohaqqueq). Apart from the initial flirting by both Junbesh and Jamiat with the Taleban in the latter's early phases of expansion, collaboration with the Taleban was relatively widespread after they took the north in 1998 and before Operation Enduring Freedom began in 2001. Resistance was limited to Badakhshan, parts of Baghlan and Takhar and a few other pockets in more-remote areas. The Taleban did not only find a foothold among the Pashtun pockets of Faryab, Balkh, Kunduz and Baghlan (to mention just the largest) but several important Junbesh and Jamiat figures entered into deals with the Taleban and started cooperating with them, surrendering the majority of their weapons. In the Pakistani madrassas, the Taleban recruited significant numbers of Afghan Uzbeks and particularly Tajiks from Badakhshan. These recruits took over a local policing role and helped the Taleban stall any attempts at rebellion against their domination.

On top of this, sympathy for the Taleban appeared widespread among the clergy, cutting across ethnic lines. This is not surprising considering how the Taleban empowered the clergy by granting privileges to mullahs and using them as their local representatives in lieu of village elders.

Not all portions of the Greater North shared the same experience of Taleban rule. Some areas suffered extensively, in particular

- the Hazara and Uzbek communities in Mazar-e Sharif;
- some Uzbek communities in Qaysar;

- Badakhshan in general, which spent three years under a Taleban blockade in 1999–2001.

Other areas of the north, however, were hardly affected, either due to their remoteness or because their elders struck deals with the Taleban. The latter was the case particularly in many Turkmen communities, which often did not closely ally with any of the anti-Taleban factions and were mostly indifferent to who controlled the region. Even in Uzbek communities, the rejection of Taleban control was not unanimous. Apart from a minority whose views were strongly influenced by the mullahs, many communities were simply tired of the war. They would rather have peace under the Taleban than war under Junbesh. The burden of war in terms of the lives of young men was increasingly being felt.²

Northern clerical networks contributed personnel to the Taleban movement, with many known high profile appointments:

- Mawlawi Sayed Ghiasuddin, Uzbek from Badakhshan: Minister of Education and Minister of Hajj; figured among the Taleban leadership early in the formation of the movement and was a member of the Interim Shura (the quasi-government) set up by the Taleban at the time of the conquest of Kabul in 1996; he had previously been affiliated with Harakat-e inqilab-e Islami³;
- Mullah Abdul Rafiq, Tajik: Minister of Martyrs;
- Mullah Abdul Salam Makhdom, Tajik: Minister of Labour and Social Affairs;⁴
- Din Muhammad Hanif, Tajik from Badakhshan: Minister of Planning and Minister of Education;

² On the relationship between the Taleban and non-Pashtun communities, see Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taleban Beyond the Pashtuns*, The Afghanistan Papers, No 5, (Waterloo, Ontario: CIGI, 2010).

³ Barbara Elias (ed), *The Taleban Biography: Documents on the Structure and Leadership of the Taleban 1996–2002*.

<http://www.nsarchive.org/NSAEBB/NSAEBB295>.

⁴ Sayed Massud, *Posht-e pardeh kasi ast!*, Kabul, 1382, pp 47ff.

- Masihullah, Tajik from Panjshir: Minister of Transport;⁵
- Mawlawi Abdul Ghafur, Tajik: Acting Minister of Refugees and Martyred;
- Muhammad Azam Elmi, Tajik from Takhar: Deputy Minister of Mines and Industry, as well as Governor of Parwan;
- Mullah Muhammad Nasim Hanafi, Uzbek from Darzab: Deputy Minister of Education;
- Qariuddin Muhammad, Tajik from Badakhshan, occupied several junior posts in various ministries;
- Muhammad Islam, Tatar from Roy do Ab: Governor of Bamian;⁶
- Zia-ur-Rahman Madani, Tajik from Takhar: Governor of Logar;
- Mawlawi Shamsuddin, Tajik from Badakhshan: Governor of Wardak and Paktia;⁷
- Pahlawan Shamsuddin, Tajik from Keshm district (Badakhshan): Police Chief of Paktia;
- Sayed Allamuddin, Tajik: Second Secretary of the Embassy in Pakistan.

The Taliban co-opted many non-Pashtuns based on their shared educational background. Mawlawi Sayed Ghiasuddin, for example, studied in a Pakistani madrassa in the 1980s. On this basis, clerical sympathy for the Taliban was quite widespread. In particular, populations influenced by the *Deobandis*, who extensively recruited mullahs from Pakistani madrassas, tended to show sympathy for the Taliban; for example, in Warduj district where madrassas had direct links to *Deobandi* networks in Pakistan. In this district, a small Islamic emirate influenced by the Taliban was declared in the late 1990s but never formally broke away from Rabbani's government.⁸ Some Wardujis also fought on the Taliban's side. Having studied in a *Deobandi* madrassa was often the distinctive feature of Taliban supporters (as opposed to Jami'atis): in the 1990s, a Jamiati commander

in Zebak district was suspected by his colleagues of planning to defect to the Taliban because he had studied in a *Deobandi* madrassa. After his execution by Massud's men, his fighters actually went over to the Taliban.⁹

Some other Uzbek and Tajik clerics were also appointed governors, including the Uzbek Haji Rafiq. But the wider appeal of the Taliban was limited. Despite the leadership's efforts to restrain ethnically divisive behaviour, field commanders were often driven by desires for revenge against those who had caused earlier ethnic conflicts. In the case of Mazar-e Sharif, the Taliban commander in chief, Mullah Muhammad Fazel, asked permission from Mullah Omar to indulge in three days of revenge-taking following the massacre of thousands of Taliban prisoners the year before. Mullah Omar initially refused permission, but Fazel insisted and was eventually allowed six hours of free revenge.¹⁰

HOW THE POST-2001 INSURGENCY STARTED

A low level of violence that could be attributed to the insurgency had been detectable in the Greater North for some time after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. Incidents were reported as early as 2004 and seem to have mostly been the work of small teams of insurgents that had infiltrated the cities to create disruption. The only rurally based group during this early period reportedly operated in Balkh district although whether its members were genuinely politicised was never clear.¹¹ On the whole, insurgent activity in the Greater North during this period was modest. As late as 2007 (see Graph 1), the number of incidents per quarter across the nine provinces was always well below 100 even during the summer months, when the Taliban were typically more militarily active. Before that time, few believed that the insurgency would ever

⁵ Interview with Hafiz Mansur, Kabul, 6 April 2010.

⁶ He was elected MP in 2005 and assassinated in Kabul in 2007.

⁷ UN source, 2008.

⁸ Fabrizio Foschini, written communication, June 2010.

⁹ Fabrizio Foschini, personal communication, April 2010.

¹⁰ Interview with Afghan security source, Kabul, 3 October 2009.

¹¹ UN source, Mazar-e Sharif, July 2004.

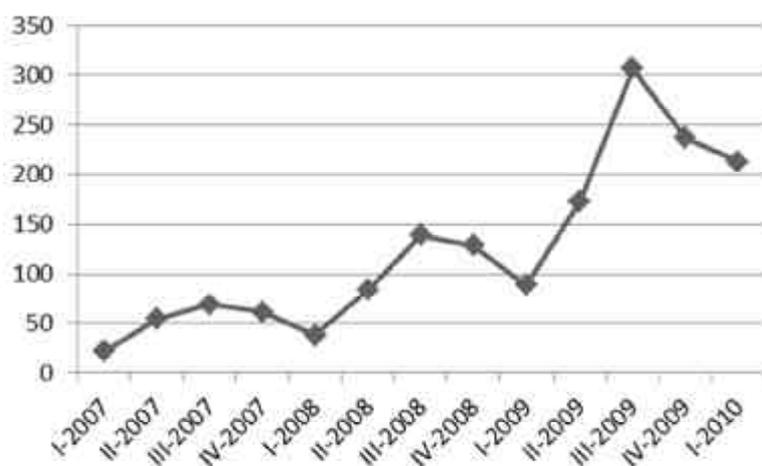
represent a serious threat in northern Afghanistan.

In reality, the first signs of a Taliban effort (and perhaps of other insurgent groups) to penetrate Northern Afghanistan in-depth date back to 2006, at least as far as Kunduz is concerned. As always in the early stages of insurgency, evidence was fragmentary. Therefore both the Afghan government and ISAF neglected it, even though the insurgency repeated patterns already experienced in other parts of Afghanistan – and which also occurred in other northern provinces afterwards. In early 2007, a constant influx of recruiters from Pakistan with ‘money and malign words’, as one foreign observer stated, mostly clerics from various madrassas, was noticed. But their success was limited, as in the years before. Attacks on German soldiers and Afghan police often failed, due to hasty preparation; for example, IEDs were often found only half-buried next to the road. According to German military and government sources, few men were recruited. Precise numbers could not be clarified, but insurgent groups seem to exist only temporarily as operational forces. As they lacked a network of sympathisers, the few insurgents were forced to hit and run.¹²

The Taliban started investing human and other resources into the Greater North on a much larger scale in 2008, as detailed in the section about Kunduz province (below). The preliminary work of setting up local cells had reached a level sufficient to start military operations. Increasing military pressure by Western troops in southern Afghanistan caused the Taliban to move their assets north. From 2009 on, the decision of ISAF to increasingly rely on the northern route (through Russia and the central Asian republics) to supply their troops – after numerous attacks against their convoys in Pakistan – attracted further attention.

Violence started picking up in 2008 (see Graph 1). Already in spring, the number of incidents almost reached 100 and broke through that barrier that summer. It declined only slightly during the last quarter. The insurgency really took off in 2009. The number of incidents peaked at 300 in the third quarter and remained over 200 in the fourth quarter. Ominously, even the first quarter of 2010 recorded more than 200 insurgent-initiated incidents, despite being traditionally the quietest season of the year.

Graph 1
Insurgent-initiated incidents in the Greater North, 2007–10



Source: ANSO

¹² Interviews with German officials, military and civilian, between 2007 and 2009.

As of April 2010, ANA intelligence estimates put the number of insurgents in the northeast at 1,150 in 95 groups, and in the north at 872 in 75 groups.¹³ The Taleban leadership has steadily established areas of local dominance, continuing to send people to different areas, despite initial failures. Their attempts to reach out to areas with no Pashtun majority could be observed by their appointment of 'shadow governors' even for areas they did not govern during the Islamic Emirate, like the Panjshir valley or Badakhshan. How keen the Taleban are on the Greater North was shown by the dispatch of trained cadres from areas where the fighting is much more intense, such as Helmand. Already in October 2009, a German military intelligence officer confirmed their presence in Chahar Dara,¹⁴ while sources in the south confirmed that Helmandis were dispatched north.¹⁵

In the northwest, evidence of external support in terms of training, advice and leadership was scant. The low level of military activity in the area makes detecting trends difficult, with regard to the military skills and capabilities of the insurgents. According to NDS sources, from time to time one or two trainers would arrive from Pakistan and impart some training.¹⁶ However, much of the Taleban presence in the northwest is due to infiltration from Baghdis into neighbouring provinces, indicating that alongside the 'spontaneous' generation of groups of insurgents in remote areas of the region, a 'grand design' to destabilise the north exists, managed by a relatively complex organisation capable of deploying troops and cadres in areas far from their origin. These local groups seem to have formed with the encouragement and provision of incentives from the Taleban central leadership in Quetta; this would explain the more-or-less contemporary appearance of pockets of insurgency in various areas of the northwest. During 2009, these emerged in several districts of Faryab, three districts of Jowzjan and two of Sar-e Pol.

¹³ ANA intelligence source, Kabul, April 2010.

¹⁴ Interview with German officer, Kunduz, October 2009.

¹⁵ Personal communication with Martine van Bijlert, AAN analyst, May 2010.

¹⁶ Interview with UN official, Kabul, 25 April 2010.

For the whole Greater North, the higher echelons of leadership are evidently based in Pakistan or move back and forth, as highlighted by the arrest of the shadow governor of Kunduz in early 2010.¹⁷ Communication between Taleban commanders in the north and structures based in Pakistan has been frequently verified mainly by the interception of telephone communication.¹⁸ In 2010 the Taleban strategy seems focused on establishing secure areas in key locations around the Greater North.

WAYS AND METHODS OF TALEBAN INFILTRATION AND EXPANSION

The Taleban's rise has taken a similar path all over the Greater North, distinguished only by the time when their activities began. For the other groups, like Hezb-e Islami, local factors were involved, which are discussed later. But the Taleban generally started as an infiltration that slowly developed into a home-grown uprising. Armed men initially came from outside, first mainly from Pakistan, later from there and southern Afghanistan, some of them returnees. They first operated in groups of four to five fighters, mainly doing 'armed propaganda', that is, offering their services as mobile courts, collecting tax and intimidating those were unsympathetic. They would visit a particular village occasionally and never stay more than one or two nights. Among other instructions, they would tell families not to send their sons to the ANA. Kinship ties and hospitality values were exploited for the initial penetration; until individuals and communities gradually drew close to the Taleban. Criminal groups would be hired to

¹⁷ Bill Roggio, 'Pakistan Detains Taleban Shadow Governor of Kunduz,' *The Long War Journal*, 17 February 2010.

¹⁸ Personal communication with ISAF and diplomatic sources, Kabul, October 2009. Also witnessed personally by *Guardian* reporter Ghaith Abdul-Ahad when staying with Taleban in Baghlan for several days in December 2009, confirmed also by an Afghan security analyst in Kunduz, June 2010, and by German intelligence officials intercepting Taleban phone communication, interviewed October 2009.

destabilise the area.¹⁹ Political agents and preachers spearheaded the armed groups, trying to convince individuals and groups to join the movement. They – as well as fighters – mainly came from the embattled provinces in the south as well as from Pakistan. The northwest is infiltrated through Ghormach and Jawand (districts of Badghis) or areas in Ghor²⁰. In the northeast, a long supply line comes from Nuristan through Laghman, Kapisa, Panjshir and Baghlan, supported by a Gujar²¹ commander, Ghafoor Khan, whose men know all the mountain tracks of the region.²²

The spread of night letters is not necessarily related to the presence of an active Taliban front; many mullahs were issuing threats against girls' schools, for example, long before the Taliban appeared in a particular area; the mullahs might, however, have linked up with them later.²³ Once the Taliban launch their own night letters campaign, threats increase and, most importantly, start being carried out. Next, they gradually expand the size of their armed groups through local recruitment and by merging groups. At this point they start escalating military activities. In Faryab, for example, this phase began in the second half of 2009,²⁴ while in Kunduz it was already underway in early 2008.

Remobilising old Taliban

Former associates of the movement, living outside the country or lying low, and members of their families, were clearly the primary target of Taliban recruitment in the early phases. Indeed, the first leading Taliban figures in many areas of the Greater North were all old timers, even if new recruits were rising quickly through the ranks. However, the

degree of the Taliban's success in re-mobilising former associates of the movement should not be exaggerated. Even in Kunduz, where the Taliban had strong support among local Pashtuns in the 1990s, few old timers have been remobilised. Pashtun notables often seem to have opted for guaranteeing the security of their property and jobs with NGOs or the government rather than taking a risk and siding with the insurgency. Here, the difference between supporting a new government trying to expand territorial control (the Taliban in the Greater North in the 1990s) and an insurgent movement trying to subvert the government (the Taliban today) could not be more obvious. Currently, most of the recruits are therefore young men and boys as young as 14, either illiterates from villages and towns or madrassa students. The latter are most likely to emerge as 'cadres' and eventually commanders, after having been tested on the battlefield.²⁵ In the northeast, the Taliban have attracted people educated in state schools, particularly former cadres of Hezb-e Islami, the mujahedin organisation founded by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in the 1980s during the Soviet occupation.²⁶ More recently, starting in early 2010, this pattern has been heavily affected by the enormous increase of targeted killings by US Special Operations Forces; the high casualty rate among commanders has not left many old Taliban in their positions.

The clergy

The Islamic clergy is an often underestimated, but very important, source of support and recruitment, particularly for the sustainability of the insurgency. Even those local intellectuals most dismissive of the chances the insurgents have to gain a serious foothold in the Greater North admit that much of the clergy supports or sympathises with the

¹⁹ Interview with security officer, Mazar-e Sharif, April 2010.

²⁰ Interview with UN official, Mazar-e Sharif, 22 April 2010.

²¹ A small, nomadic group originating in India – similar to Europe's Sinti and Roma.

²² Interview with Afghan informer connected to the Taliban, May 2010.

²³ Interview with security officer, Mazar-e Sharif, April 2010.

²⁴ Interview with UN official, Kabul, 25 April 2010.

²⁵ Interview with AREU staff from Kunduz, Kabul, 14 April 2010. Interview with security officer, Mazar-e Sharif, April 2010.

²⁶ Interview with Afghan intellectuals, Mazar-e Sharif, 20 April 2010.

Taleban.²⁷ And the role of the clergy can never be highlighted enough because of its capillary distribution in each village and because mullahs enjoy respect among the more conservative component of the village population.

Among the clergy, support, or at least sympathy, for the aims of the Taleban seems extensive, particularly among the village mullahs. They often are afraid of losing their unchallenged traditional power to foreign influences through broader access to education, or sometimes even through a road being built to reach their village more easily. Sectors of the clergy were apparently already openly preaching against the government and foreign presence well before an armed presence of the Taleban surfaced in the north, for example in Faryab in 2003–04 and in Takhar in 2005–06. Not all the many madrassas of the Greater North (there is at least one per district) are involved in the insurgency, but some certainly are.²⁸ Students constantly flow back and forth between the villages of the Greater North and the madrassas of Pakistan, with a significant number coming back fully indoctrinated as agitators for the Taleban.²⁹ According to local notables and clerics, 70 per cent of the mullahs in the north (of all ethnic backgrounds) – and perhaps an even greater percentage of madrasa teachers – have been trained in Pakistan, which likely facilitates the spread of pro-Taleban sympathies. The actual appearance of the Taleban can only have stimulated a larger number of conservative mullahs to come into the open and take positions against the government and the foreign presence. Particularly where the Taleban do not enjoy extensive community support, the madrassas seem to be the main source of grassroots recruitment.³⁰

²⁷ Ibid. Interview with Sayed Azizullah Olfaty, a Wolesi Jirga member from Jowzjan, Kabul, 25 April 2010.

²⁸ Interview with security officer, Mazar-e Sharif, April 2010.

²⁹ Conversation with Krystóf Gosztonyi, Analysis Research Consulting, Berlin, via Skype, 18 December 2009.

³⁰ Geert Gompelman, 'Winning Hearts and Minds?: Examining the Relationship Between Aid and

The Taleban do their best to bring the clergy more and more to their side. Apart from persuasion and encouraging young, sympathetic mullahs to find employment in the villages, they proactively seek to replace mullahs who are not politically compatible with the Taleban (see Box 5 in Annex 3).³¹

Using the religious appeal of jihad and expanding their recruitment efforts beyond ethnic lines, the Taleban increasingly also use Islamic tablighi preachers who lack the formal education of the established clergy, but pursue the same ideological aim: to provide a religious foundation to the insurgency. This occurs primarily in provinces without strongly Pashtun-dominated areas, such as Takhar, and will be described in detail in the chapters on particular provinces.

Exploiting rivalries among communities

Like elsewhere in Afghanistan, rivalries among communities and competition for influence among local notables may have played an important role in paving the way for Taleban infiltration. The Taleban seem to be well informed about local politics and manoeuvre accordingly to manipulate local conflicts and drive a wedge into existing fissures. The most obvious case is the ethnic conflict between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns in Kunduz province in 2009, which particularly affected Pashtun communities holding grievances against local strongmen associated with the anti-Taleban alliance in 2001. But the dynamics seem to apply also within each ethnic group. Social and tribal fault lines have, for instance, been exploited by the Taleban among the Pashtuns of Baghlan, drawing the lower strata of society towards the insurgency. Some researchers have detected a

Security in Afghanistan' (Boston: Tufts University, January 2011). Personal communication with UN official in Kunduz, October 2006. Interviews with a mawlawi, Maimana, April 2009. Interview with intellectuals from Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol, April 2010. Interview with Syed Azizullah Sayead Olfaty, deputy secretary of the Meshrano Jirga from Jowzjan, Kabul, 25 April 2010.

³¹ Interview with TLO analyst Kabul, 5 April 2010. Interview with NGO security official in Kunduz, May 2010.

pattern of Taleban exploitation of local rivalries among Uzbeks, too. The tendency of a weaker clan in a village to side with the Taleban repeats patterns of political alignment that were already functioning in the 1980s – and probably long before that. The losers have a stronger incentive to support the outsiders: it is their chance of ‘making a revolution’.³² Some night letters recovered in Kohistan district (Faryab) hint at how the Taleban exploit local rivalries for recruitment: In Kohistan, a long-standing rivalry existed between the two halves of the district; the night letters invited villagers to pay tax to the Taleban in exchange for help in fighting the other half of the district.³³

FACILITATING FACTORS

Government inefficiency and corruption

Probably the most favourable factor for the resurrection of the Taleban is the dysfunctional Afghan government. Despite enormous financial contributions from the international community for improving its infrastructure, governmental institutions are incompetent, incapable or simply not interested in responsible governance in most fields. The core deficit lies in the justice sector: the police are notorious for corruption, and the same applies for the courts. Neither the provision of security nor the dispensation of justice is functioning, because corruption among officials is omnipresent; few can escape it even if they want to. For example, even if an honest judge tries to maintain his integrity by preventing convicts to bribe their way out of prison, the police won't protect the judge against threats.³⁴ A general mood of impunity has spread among governmental employees, making the cultivation of a sense of integrity difficult. As one Afghan-American

said, who had returned in 2005 to become head of a department in the foreign ministry (and quit in 2009 out of frustration about corruption and impunity for criminals within the government), ‘People with integrity are an error in the system. We cannot change it, and it destroys us.’ Top positions in the police and the administration are sold to the highest bidder who then demands bribes to be passed from bottom to the top. Repeatedly, villagers interviewed would say that when the ANP are called, if they ever arrive, they will first ask for money for the fuel they spent on the trip, then for lunch, then for additional payments.

Whether officials remain in their positions or lose them is not related to the quality of their performance but to a wide array of other reasons: money they pay or personal connections with higher authorities; they often depend on President Karzai's or other politicians' political manoeuvres to keep certain ethnic groups in Karzai's camp. As lamented by locals in many interviews and explained further in the sections on specific provinces (below), mismanagement is not a nuisance but a systematic pattern that springs from the political system, personally led and managed by President Karzai often down to district level, and which promotes priorities other than proper governance.

Dysfunctional institutions are one factor, omnipresent corruption another; both lead to low confidence in the government. Regardless of the Taleban presence, people do not turn to government officials to resolve their disputes. In interviews in Kunduz, Baghlan and Takhar, people told similar stories of crime cases and disputes over land, property and even within families that either could not be resolved over years or the judges ruled in favour of the highest bidder.

In general, the quality of government staff in the northwest, especially in Mazar-e Sharif, seems better in terms of capability and commitment than in the northeast, not to mention the south.³⁵ At least two provincial

³² Interview with AREU research staff, Kabul, October 2009.

³³ Interview with UN official, Faryab, April 2010.

³⁴ Even in the cases of the handlers of the suicide bomber who killed three German soldiers in Kunduz on 17 May 2007, two times suspects were arrested with the help of German investigators providing solid evidence. In both cases, they were released shortly afterwards allegedly after bribes were paid to the police.

³⁵ According to local sources, and also to German and American officials who have repeatedly tried to have high officials exchanged in Kunduz for involvement in corruption and smuggling, but never did so in Balkh province.

chiefs of police have proactively tried to contain the insurgency, namely those in Faryab and Jowzjan. But in the same provinces, commitment to the fight is not universal. Locals reported that in April 2010, a group of Taleban on motorbikes visited a gas station and refilled their tanks for free; a police check post nearby did not react. In areas most affected by the Taleban, the police are only able to secure a five-kilometre area surrounding the district centre and never push their presence beyond 10 to 15 kilometres, leaving outlying areas to the Taleban.³⁶ In northern Baghlan in April 2010, locals reported Taleban attacking a fuel truck 300 meters away from a police checkpoint. The policemen ignored the attack. Also on the road between Pol-e Khomri and Aliabad in southern Kunduz province, the police checkpoints have been deserted since May 2010,³⁷ although some were manned again in late 2010.

Even in the northwest, where the Taleban had less than 1,000 full-time militants, much of Almar, Qaysar, Darzab, Qush Tepa, Sayyad and smaller portions of Dawlatabad, Pashtun Kot and a few other districts fell under their control. The same applies to the north of Takhar where small groups of Taleban have successfully managed to bring large parts of all districts under their control; the ANP and ANA react to Taleban incursions belatedly or not at all. Even when they carry out operations, they withdraw without establishing permanent posts in the area.

Paradoxically, the Taleban's recruitment effort was greatly helped by the often-clumsy reaction of the Afghan security forces who, in some areas, would round up suspects at the first sign of roaming Taleban agents and in some cases drove them into the hands of the insurgents. This seems to be how Mullah Nadir, the best known Taleban commander in the northwest (on the border between Sar-e Pol and Jowzjan), gained his influence.³⁸

³⁶ Interview with intellectuals from Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol, Mazar-e Sharif, 20 April 2010.

³⁷ Personal observation by the authors, travelling there frequently.

³⁸ Interview with intellectuals from Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol, April 2010.

Social and economic marginalisation

High rates of unemployment, particularly in remote villages, seem to favour the Taleban. While discerning the exact reasons why people join is difficult, they do get paid – although not necessarily regularly. However, in the northwest recruitment mainly occurs among madrassa students, suggesting that cash payments are not the main driver.³⁹ Moreover, in other areas with high unemployment and poverty, as in Takhar, people seemed immune against Taleban infiltration for a long time. The offer of weapons and motorbikes likely has a greater impact among young men in search of a higher social status.

In Baghlan, social marginality seems to have played a big role. According to UN sources, the Taleban recruited largely among the descendents of the third wave of Pashtun migrants from the south, who ended up getting humble jobs and little or no land while Hezb-e Islami recruited mostly among the descendants of the second wave.⁴⁰

Factional fighting within the government

Another important trend is the collaboration with, or at least tolerance of, the Taleban displayed by sections of the Afghan state administration. In some cases this was motivated by personal inclinations of particular officials; in other cases it is simply political opportunism. The latter is the case in Baghlan province where the Taleban have enjoyed supportive tolerance for years, about which local police officers bitterly complain. This tolerance is due to factional infighting among government officials, which weakens the ability of government forces to act in a coordinated fashion.

In fact, some military officers and local government officials accuse Karzai's regime of nurturing the Pashtuns as natural allies in the current conflict with the Tajik power centre around Ustad Atta Muhammad Nur (known as Atta), the governor of Balkh, and in any

³⁹ Interview with AREU staff from Kunduz, Kabul, 14 April 2010.

⁴⁰ Interview with UN official, Kabul, 4 April 2010.

possible future conflict after a retreat of the international forces (see Box 3 in Annex 2).⁴¹ Similarly, the recently assassinated governor of Kunduz province, Engineer Muhammad Omar, was the object of accusations concerning his active support (until 2008) for the Taliban expansion in Takhar. Allegedly, until the killing of his brother by the Taliban in that very year, he had been using them as a proxy militia against non-Pashtun enemies.⁴² Pre-2008 phone conversations by Omar, tapped by German intelligence in Kunduz, reportedly show his active tolerance of Taliban.⁴³ Instances of collaboration between individuals in the state administration are reported also from Jowzjan and Faryab.⁴⁴

In Aqcha, the belief is widespread that Karzai helps the Taliban.⁴⁵ This has a demoralising effect on the security forces, who have been less than fully committed to the fight. The police of Jowzjan and Faryab are credited with a more proactive role in fighting the insurgency⁴⁶ but most ANA operations have been slow in coming and ineffective once implemented. The commitment of the ANA seems doubtful. Routine claims about 'cleaned up' districts were never confirmed by subsequent events. Some of the operations have been quite heavy-handed, resulting in the destruction of property.

Examples of ineffectiveness and weak commitment abound. Along the Pol-e Khomri–Aibak road, ANP outposts were deserted for most of 2010, making travel extremely risky

for Afghans connected with the government or foreign organisations. Plans for a coordinated campaign against pockets of insurgents along this road were postponed several times, raising doubts among the locals about the commitment of the government and ISAF.⁴⁷ ANA clearing operations, such as in Sayyad, were repeated every six months but routinely achieved little as the insurgents recede without a fight. After a few villagers were accused of collaborating with the insurgents and arrested, the ANA withdrew and the insurgents came back again. The boldest step taken to contain the insurgency until mid-2010 had been the decision to build a forward operating base for the ANA in Darzab district.⁴⁸

In conclusion, all institutions of the Afghan government were steadily giving ground to the Taliban in 2009–10. Except for the ANA incursions, little resistance or even commitment to resist could be detected when the Taliban decreed that all mobile phone networks be closed at night, when girls schools are shut down after threats or when the Taliban established their dominance by collecting *ushr*.⁴⁹ The current governor of Baghlan, Munshi Majid, even admitted openly: 'In some areas under Taliban control, there is Taliban jurisdiction, I know. Maybe, this is some kind of Afghani tradition, like a *jirga*.'⁵⁰ The Taliban are gaining ground not because they are so strong – but because they meet so little resistance.

TALEBAN CONSOLIDATION AND ITS IMPACTS

Why did the Taliban strategy of destabilising larger parts of the Greater North only really start working in 2009? In part, this is due to the rather long lead-time of insurgency

⁴¹ Interview with Sanjar Sohail, editor in chief, *Hasht-e Sob*. Interview with UN official, April 2010. Personal communications with government officials, Baghlan, 2010.

⁴² Interview with former police officer from Kunduz, June 2010.

⁴³ Ralf Beste, Matthias Gebauer, Holger Stark and Alexander Szandar, 'Tot oder lebendig,' *Der Spiegel* (2009) 22, p 34.

⁴⁴ Interview with security officer, Mazar-e Sharif, April 2010. Interview with intellectuals from Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol, Mazar-e Sharif, 20 April 2010.

⁴⁵ Interview with former political activists from Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol, Mazar-e Sharif, 21 April 2010.

⁴⁶ Interview with UN official, Mazar-e Sharif, 21 April 2010.

⁴⁷ Interview with Meshrano Jirga member from Jowzjan, 25 April 2010.

⁴⁸ *The ANSO Quarterly Data Report*, 15 April 2010.

⁴⁹ One employee of Afghan Wireless, one of the large mobile phone networks, admitted that even government officials complied with switching off the networks at night and gave respective orders; interview in Pol-e Khomri, May 2010.

⁵⁰ Pajhwok Afghan News Agency, 18 April 2010.

operations. The preparatory work can easily exceed two years, even when counter-insurgency efforts do not seriously disrupt the effort. However, the changing mood in the country seems to have amplified the relative success of the Taliban in the north: the perception of government weakness, lack of direction, as well as the loss of credibility of ISAF and, more generally, the international effort in Afghanistan.

Having said this, by mid-2010 at the latest, the enforced ISAF campaign, and especially the targeted killings by US forces, disrupted the simultaneous consolidation of military and administrative Taliban dominance. Until then, the military structure was rather clear: The Greater North was under the responsibility of the overall military chief of the Taliban, Mullah Zakir. One level lower, two military regions existed: the northwest under Abdul Rahman Haqqani (originally from Ghormach) and the northeast under Sayed Qasem (Rustaq). Most appointments to positions in the Taliban shadow structures were negotiated locally, but when the regional military commissions could not fill a vacant position, Mullah Zakir intervened to make a decision. For example, in Bangi district of Takhar, the military commission of the northeast was unable to find a suitable deputy to Governor Pir Niaz Muhammad, a Pashtun; Zakir intervened to choose an Uzbek for the job. At the front level, the leadership only maintained relations with the commanders, who received cash and supplies and then redistributed them to the fighters as needed.⁵¹

By late 2010, however, the military situation – and therefore the occupancy of Taliban positions – was subject to constant change. Many commanders had been killed, arrested or ordered to return to Pakistan to secure their survival. However, the Taliban's less-visible domains of control, those of clandestine operators as well as their shadow civil administration, were less targeted and seems to have remained largely intact.⁵²

⁵¹ Interview by Afghan informer connected to the Taliban, May 2010.

⁵² Interviews with NGO security official, Kunduz, October 2010; with ANSO staff, Kabul, September

Interaction between the population and the Taliban

Most of the population of the Greater North has had no sympathy for the Taliban because of their oppressive rule in the 1990s. Even if instances of massacres were rare, people did not like the Taliban's virtue police, in charge of implementing Mullah Omar's social edicts banning 'un-Islamic' behaviour. Although the Taliban are no longer applying these notorious decrees in areas where they currently are influential, the doubt lingers on: Is this a tactical decision, or an ideological change? Still, a diffuse desire for radical political change is evident among the population.⁵³ The Taliban do not oppose NGO activities per se anymore – even activities of the National Solidarity Programme are allowed – but the Taliban collect a 20 per cent tax on any aid projects they can lay their hands on.⁵⁴ Clearly, the changing attitude of the Taliban towards NGOs is related to pressure exercised by the communities on the Taliban. As Nick Lee, director of the Afghan NGO Safety Office (ANSO) that advises aid groups on security, stated: 'The Taliban don't have a clear anti-NGO agenda.'⁵⁵

Anecdotal evidence seems to confirm this. In one episode reported from Takhar, the Taliban initially visited NGOs to threaten them but the villagers protested. The Taliban softened their stand, although they warned the NGO workers that other groups of Taliban might not be as tolerant.⁵⁶ Attacks on NGOs continue nonetheless, but seem related to their source of funding: the Taliban strongly opposed USAID-funded projects.⁵⁷ This opening-up by the Taliban to NGOs is not always well received; in Pashtun Kot (Faryab), a group of Taliban visited an NGO clinic in

2010 and with German government official, Berlin, August 2010.

⁵³ Interview with intellectuals from Jowzjan, 21 April 2010.

⁵⁴ Interview with intellectuals from Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol, 20 April 2010.

⁵⁵ Interview with head of ANSO, Nick Lee, Kabul, September 2010.

⁵⁶ *The ANSO Quarterly Data Report*, 1 May 2010.

⁵⁷ NGO and private security person staff, 24 April 2010.

early 2010 to reassure them they would not be harmed, but the doctors panicked and fled anyway.⁵⁸ More recently, however, NGO staff has been kidnapped, then released, and the NGOs were asked to register with the local Taliban shadow authorities in Faryab and other provinces.

People feel threatened by both the Taliban and the ANA. First they complain about the absence of any administration. 'There is no government in our area,' said one resident of Baghlan-e Markazi, 'but people are also afraid of Taliban, because the whole area is under their control. If someone goes to the government and comes back to his area, Taliban cause him trouble.'⁵⁹ As another local from Dahan-e Ghorī (also in Baghlan province) added after the ANA offensive *Tawhid I*: 'This government just uses the money for military operations for one hour. Afterwards, the Taliban come back to our area.'⁶⁰ The army and the police would be welcome if they established posts and a constant presence, which is not the case. Instead they come, fight – and leave.

On the one hand, several people interviewed complained about ANA soldiers searching or attacking their houses, beating and arresting people randomly and without proper reason. On the other hand, the commander of ANA Corps 203, Lal Muhammad Ahmadzai, expressed his irritation at the people constantly complaining: 'The people like to make trouble themselves. We want the people to form *arbaki* to maintain security. But the people do not want this. We need to fight against the Taliban. When there are Taliban, people do not like it; when we do operations, people do not like it; when we want them to form *arbaki*, they also don't like it.'⁶¹

Because of the perception of government weakness, important sections of the population are beginning to cooperate with

the Taliban to avoid trouble.⁶² A teacher and locally well-known Uzbek intellectual from Jowzjan says he recommends that fellow teachers establish contact with Taliban commander Mullah Nadir and come to a *modus vivendi*.⁶³ On some occasions, communities have mobilised to protect NGOs but NGO workers report that the reaction of the communities to the appearance of Taliban has been mild; rarely do they go beyond reporting Taliban raids to the police.⁶⁴ Hearing the authentic opinion about Taliban from local people is difficult, but one unique selling point for Taliban governance was mentioned frequently: their swifter and less corrupt dispensation of justice.

The ethnic dimension

The original lack of sympathy for the Taliban in the Greater North was easy to misinterpret. The ISAF and the Afghan government neglected early warnings in Kunduz and Baghlan with negative consequences. Their reluctance to acknowledge the Taliban's growth grew from disbelief of the Taliban's ability to recruit non-Pashtuns. Indeed, until recently Taliban recruitment in the Greater North seemed to be confined to Pashtun areas. But with an overall deteriorating security situation, existing conflicts within non-Pashtun groups as well as between such groups and the government or ISAF could be exploited. The increasing number of non-Pashtun fighters seems to confirm this trend (see Map 1). Evidence is mounting that Uzbeks, Turkmens, Aimaqs and, to a lesser extent, Tajiks are being drawn into the Taliban's ranks in significant numbers.

Is this merely opportunistic recruitment of uprooted elements in society? In reality, the Taliban leadership's new 'ethnic openness' is evident in their co-optation of non-Pashtun clerics into the movement, similar to what happened in the 1990s. As soon as the

⁵⁸ Interview with UNAMA official from Faryab, Kabul, 25 April 2010.

⁵⁹ Interview with local resident, April 2010.

⁶⁰ Interview with local resident, May 2010.

⁶¹ Interview of local researcher with Lal Muhammad Ahmadzai, May 2010.

⁶² Interview with UN official, Mazar-e Sharif, 21 April 2010.

⁶³ Interview with intellectuals from Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol, Mazar-e Sharif, 20 April 2010.

⁶⁴ Interview with NGO manager, Kabul, 8 April 2010.

Map 1

Ethnic composition of known Taliban fronts in the Greater North (as of summer 2010)



Legend	A	Aimaqs	MX	mixed	P	Pashtuns	Tu	Turkmens
	I	IMU	NK	not known	T	Tajiks	U	Uzbeks

Taliban emphasised a more religious and ideological approach – as opposed to ‘playing the Pashtun card’; i.e. showing ethnic discrimination – the ulama became helpful in raising the flag of jihad. They did this in their general inclination towards the insurgency, but also in activities of *tablighi* preachers, mostly young madrasa students who move from place to place, preach in mosques as well as in houses and attract mainly young followers. In northern Takhar, two such *tablighi* preachers formed the core cell of the Taliban at least in Khwaja Ghar district. Then in early 2010, the Taliban leadership decided that the fronts and the shadow government structure should be ethnically mixed, believing that ethnically monolithic fronts are less likely to cooperate with other fronts of different ethnic compositions. The recent decision to systematically appoint deputy district governors and district-level military chiefs may reflect an effort to allow more room for making appointments in an ethnically balanced way.⁶⁵

The new ethnically open appointment strategy in the military ranks of the Taliban is evident, especially for Chahar Dara district in Kunduz, where numerous accounts are told of non-Pashtuns among the ranks of the Taliban, even if most are not from Afghanistan.

Already in early 2009, at least one group of Uzbeks (from Uzbekistan) was in Chahar Dara. Apart from Afghan Turkmen and a few Afghan Tajik fighters, some Chechens reportedly have been in the area (although their influence has often been exaggerated), helping mainly with the technical improvement of IEDs. An Uzbek commander stated that they had come to Kunduz to fight ‘infidel soldiers’ in a place less dangerous than in Uzbekistan.⁶⁶

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) might have played a role in recruiting non-Pashtuns by providing Uzbek cadres for the task, which could explain why the Taliban are less effective in recruiting Tajiks. Although evidence of IMU activities throughout the Greater North is limited, some information is available: Already in early 2009, a group of Uzbek Taliban, related to IMU, was residing in Chahar Dara, led by their own commander with the *nom de guerre* Mufti Selim. The cross-border Uzbeks have the reputation as more experienced and better-trained fighters, which might explain the fierceness of the battles between Taliban and German forces in 2009 and the spring of 2010 when the attack on a team on Good Friday left three German soldiers dead. In the northwest, at least one group of IMU fighters was spotted in

⁶⁵ Interview by Afghan informer connected to the Taliban, May 2010.

⁶⁶ Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, ‘Face to face with the Taliban: ‘The People Are Fed Up with the Government,’ *The Guardian*, 18 August 2009.

the Sayyad–Darzab–Qush Tepa mountainous pocket, encompassing the provinces of Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol, although it does not appear to have collaborated very closely with the local Taliban group.⁶⁷

Local conflicts, grievances or simply offers of money have helped to recruit non-Pashtuns, and the weaker the government appeared, the easier the recruitment became. In the northwest, Taliban recruitment among Uzbeks and Turkmen in all three provinces is clearly evident, with a small number of Aimaqs being attracted as well in places such as Sangcharak, Sar-e Pol and Kunduz.⁶⁸ Having started in the remote areas of Faryab, Sar-e Pol and Jowzjan, the Taliban are now also visiting villages close to Shiberghan and not too far from Maimana. Although reports surfaced in 2008 and 2009 of old Junbesh and Jamiat commanders communicating with the Taliban and, in some cases, cooperating with them, from 2009 onwards, grassroots recruitment in the madrassas seems to have been the dominant trend.⁶⁹

In some areas, the ethnic divide is obvious. In Imam Sahib (Kunduz), for example, the Taliban are exclusively Pashtuns while the pro-government militias are Arab, Aimaq and Turkmen.⁷⁰ In general, where the Taliban have mobilised Pashtuns on the basis of their grievances against other ethnic groups, as in Kunduz, or where ethnic rivalries are strong, as in Baghlan, they are finding that handling the emerging multi-ethnicity of the movement difficult. The rift between Pashtun and Tajik commanders in Baghlan is illustrative (see Box 4 in Annex 2). The Taliban have tried to cope through a carefully balanced appointments policy, on the basis of recent decisions taken by the leadership as seen in Takhar province.

⁶⁷ Interview with Mufti Selim, conducted by Ghaiith Abdul-Ahad, (partly unpublished – see note 66 above for the printed part), April 2009; interview with notable from Sar-e Pol, April 2010.

⁶⁸ Interview with intellectuals from Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol, Mazar-e Sharif, 20 April 2010.

⁶⁹ Interviews with notables from Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol and personal communication with UN officials and NGO workers, Kabul, Mazar-e Sharif and London, March–April 2010.

⁷⁰ Interview with AREU staff from Kunduz, Kabul, 14 April 2010.

Still this practice did not entirely resolve the problem of ethnic friction; in a number of districts, shadow governors and their deputies would not go along. In Eshkamesh (Takhar), for example, tension simmered between the Uzbek district governor (Mawlawi Noor Muhammad) and his Pashtun deputy (Mullah Wazir); the latter, formerly a commander of Hezb-e Islami, was better connected with the Quetta and Peshawar Shuras than was his own boss. The military commission for the northeast had to intervene to sort out their differences.⁷¹ Significantly, however, the Taliban shadow governor of Kunduz, Mullah Salam (arrested in Pakistan in March 2010), is an Uzbek, as is his successor Mawlawi Ahmad.⁷² As of spring 2010, ethnically mixed groups of insurgents were reported, but were the exception rather than the rule in the Greater North.⁷³ Mullah Nadir (in the area of Sayyad, Darzab and Qush Tepa) has a few Pashtuns among his men, alongside Uzbeks and Aimaqs. Some mixing is also reported in Dawlatabad.⁷⁴ The natural tendency of each commander is to recruit within his social surroundings, which tend to be ethnically homogeneous.

While Taliban recruitment among Pashtuns in the north often attracts elders and non-clerical elements, the clerical presence seems to be much stronger among Uzbeks and Turkmen. For example in Takhar, travelling *tablighi* preachers from Pakistan related to the *Deobandi* school of madrassas were the main drivers of Taliban infiltration. Tajiks (apart from Aimaqs) have so far been less involved in the insurgency, at least in terms of grassroots recruitment, possibly because Tajik strongmen enjoy a greater Islamic legitimacy than do Uzbek strongmen, who usually associated at some point of their career with overwhelmingly secular Junbesh.⁷⁵ The greater availability of spoils to the Tajik

⁷¹ Interview with Afghan informer connected to the Taliban, May 2010.

⁷² NGO and private security person staff, 24 April 2010.

⁷³ Interview with security officer, Mazar-e Sharif, April 2010.

⁷⁴ Interview with Norwegian PRT, 17 March 2009.

⁷⁵ Interview with official from an international organisation, Mazar-e Sharif, 19 April 2010.

strongmen – who generally are better connected in Kabul – also likely helps them maintain a more solid patron-client relationship with the population.

The Taliban's shadow administration

The Taliban's government-like structures in areas under their control are relatively well established. They can reach beyond military dominance, depending on their sway over the area and the personnel available. A shadow governor exists in most districts where Taliban are present; in some cases the administration consists of several 'officials'. In areas either considered to be of greater importance (such as Chahar Dara) or where educated cadres are available, several commissions exist, for justice, tax, health or education (see the provincial case studies for more detail). These structures are not merely symbolic, especially in the case of the Taliban judges.

Since justice and security are in high demand but are not being delivered by the government – according to locals – the Taliban quickly recognised the popularity of their mobile courts. Those courts have already reached a level of sophistication, at least in parts of Chahar Dara in Kunduz or Khwaja Ghar in Takhar. The Taliban employ a judge in most districts, but he cannot follow up every single criminal case or dispute. To fill in, the Taliban call mullahs to the mosque and ask them to decide over a case. After that, they offer their 'services' for implementing the decision. The presence of pro-Taliban judges is confirmed in Chahar Dara district and the Gortepa area of Kunduz. On a higher level, the Taliban have one judicial commission for each region, such as the northwest, staffed by relatively prominent ulama and mullahs functioning as a kind of supreme court – this commission is the last instance of judgement and resolves those disputes which ordinary judges and commanders cannot decide.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Interview with AREU staff from Kunduz, Kabul, 14 April 2010. Interview with intellectuals from Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol, Mazar-e Sharif, 20 April 2010.

For Chahar Dara and Dasht-e Archi, but also Khanabad and Aliabad, plenty of cases were related by locals of Taliban courts solving disputes which had often lasted for years or decades. Delays were a result not only of inefficiency, but of intentional postponements by police and government judges asking for more and more bribes before finalising cases.⁷⁷ Even a member of the first Afghan parliament (2005–10) acknowledged openly the success of the Taliban courts, saying, 'When people have problems, they don't go to the government. They don't go to the police. They go to the Taliban, and the Taliban decide. There are no files and no paperwork.'⁷⁸

The same situation exists in Baghlan. As one local from Shahabudin village in Baghlan explained: 'Since there is no government, we have to go to the court of the Taliban. We need to solve our problems, no matter with whom.' Several people interviewed told how 'Taliban courts' solved cases which often had been pending for years, after judges had continuously asked for bribes, but never delivered a verdict.⁷⁹ The Taliban, according

⁷⁷ In interviews with locals in Chahar Darra, Kunduz and Qal-e Zal between 2008 and 2010, the interviewees mentioned several cases of land disputes, conflicts over water distribution and family feuds, which Taliban courts had solved. The head of the provincial 'justice commission' of the Taliban had been influential *Mawlawi* Qiamudin, who had tried in 2008 to see Governor Muhammad Omar to convince him to stop the corruption – he was not even received and subsequently joined the Taliban. He was killed by US Special Forces on 26 April 2010.

⁷⁸ MP Moeen Marastial, quoted in 'As Taliban Makes Comeback in Kunduz province, War Spreads to Northern Afghanistan,' *Washington Post*, 3 March 2010.

⁷⁹ One villager named Sardar from Baghlah-e Markazi said that years ago he bought three shops from an influential businessman who had taken the money but never turned over the shops. Taliban came to his area, put pressure on the seller, who finally gave the shops to the buyer. Another man named Muhammad Juma from Shahabudin related how his son had been struggling with his wife for ten years: 'My daughter in law is not happy with my son in one house. One time, we had a tribal jirga, one time we went to the governmental court, but no one solved this

to Baghlan villagers, organise mobile courts, come on motorcycles with one mullah and some assistants, listen to both sides and judge. No one dares to challenge their verdicts for fear of punishment. Although harsh, this system offers at least an unequivocal administration of law. Even when the Taleban in Dasht-e Archi (in Kunduz province) stoned an unmarried couple to death in August 2010, they did so at the request of the couple's families.⁸⁰ This by no means legitimises the cruel act, but it reflects the contiguity between Taleban ethos and local views in many areas.

In the few areas where the Taleban already have (or had until recently) a firm hold, their shadow government went further than just a judiciary – as was the case in Chahar Dara. The Taleban also seem to make an effort to keep discipline among their commanders and prevent arbitrary behaviour. In Kunduz, at least one commander was removed because of arbitrary killings in 2009 or 2010. Also, at least one district governor was removed because of allegations that he mishandled Taleban cash.⁸¹ The Taleban also use frequent travellers between the Greater North and Pakistan as couriers, to carry communications between the leadership and the people in the field.⁸²

Usually the district shadow government has a judge (or a head of a justice commission). In Khwaja Ghar, even a Taleban shadow attorney has been appointed; this judge has studied at the law faculty of Balkh University in Mazar-e Sharif. People explain this exceptional circumstance as due to the high level of education in Khwaja Ghar and the Taleban

success in recruiting individuals who are educated beyond the usual level.⁸³

By and large, the Taleban finance themselves through *ushr*.⁸⁴ Individual commanders also receive financial support from or via Pakistan. The 'tax collection' system receives considerable attention by the Taleban in the northeast at least: they established a dedicated commission for *ushr* (tax) collection, presided over by an individual of honest reputation. *Ushr* collection achieves two purposes: to generate income and to foster the perception among the people that it is the Taleban who are the government, since they collect taxes. *Zakat* is also collected. As the Taleban integrate themselves into the local economy, they immunise themselves against the impact of economic upturns: the better the harvest, the higher the *zakat*.⁸⁵ By contrast, in Baghlan at least, Hezb-e Islami drew their financial support from owning land and fuel stations.⁸⁶

Signs of serious Taleban investment in the region are the establishment of a military hospital in the mountains of Chal and Eshkamesh (Takhar) and the development of a network of UHF (ultra high-frequency) repeaters, which allows them to rapidly coordinate attacks and movements while staying dispersed.⁸⁷

In some areas, like Chahar Dara, the Taleban have established additional commissions, such as for health and education. One of their purposes seems to be hijacking government structures and bringing them partly under Taleban control. Medical personal as well as teachers and headmasters are paid by the Afghan government (or by contracting NGOs),

problem within ten years. Taleban solved it in two days. I went to them, told them the whole story, they asked for a small jirga with people from both sides and decided: She has to stay with my son! They are not corrupt and no one can challenge their decision.' Interviews were conducted by a local researcher, April 2010.

⁸⁰ According to the district chief of police, quoted in *tagesschau.de*, 16 August 2010.

⁸¹ Conversation with Krystóf Goztonyi, London, 17 February 2010.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Local researcher, Taloqan, July 2010.

⁸⁴ A 10 per cent tax mainly on crops and, to a lesser extent, on income and profits. The amount each farmer pays is calculated from the size of his arable land.

⁸⁵ Interview with Olfaty, Meshrano Jirga member from Jowzjan, Kabul, 25 April 2010.

⁸⁶ Interview with Rasool Khan, head of provincial council of Baghlan province, Pol-e Khomri, June 2010.

⁸⁷ Interview with Afghan informer connected to the Taleban, May 2010. Interview with UN official, Mazar-e Sharif, 22 April 2010.

which is explicitly accepted by the Taleban, but the Taleban exert control over them. When the Taleban of Kunduz recently announced that no employment with the Afghan government would be tolerated, health and education staff were explicitly exempted. As for education, they seem to make a clear distinction: girls' schools have been closed to the greatest extent possible, and girls banned from schooling despite occasional protests of village-elders. Boys' schools remain open and representatives of the education commission make sure teachers and students show up on time.⁸⁸

OTHER INSURGENT GROUPS IN THE GREATER NORTH

Al-Qaeda, Hezb-e Islami and the IMU are all present in the Greater North. The same is the case with the so-called Haqqani network, which, however, is so much a part of the Taleban organisation that drawing a clear distinction between it and the Taleban is impossible – at least in the Greater North. Group affiliations and loyalties fluctuate. Commanders often switch sides with their groups or possibly even carry multiple affiliations. According to ISAF, the recently killed Abu Baqir in Imam Sahib was a commander of the Taleban as well as of al-Qaeda.

IMU

Because of its politically sensitive character, the presence of the Özbekistan Islomiy Harakati (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) in the Greater North has been the object of much speculation. A map (see Map 2) recently released by the US Department of Defense (DoD) shows three IMU pockets in the Greater North: central Kunduz, Shulgara (Balkh) and Qaysar-Pashtun Kot (Faryab). According to ANA intelligence sources, 500 foreign fighters were in the Greater North in April 2010, mostly from the IMU, but also including Pakistanis and others.⁸⁹ Some ISAF sources

place the number of IMU militants at no more than 200.⁹⁰

The research carried out for this paper produced a somewhat different picture (see Map 1). The IMU is present in Kunduz (but further north than indicated by the DoD), and also in Takhar, in the Darzab-Qush Tapa-Sayyad pocket, around Mazar-e Sharif and in Faryab. The main IMU militant concentrations seemed to be in Faryab and Kunduz – but even in these cases, only groups of a few dozen of people each at most. In Kunduz, alongside an autonomous IMU group, the presence of some Taleban trainers is also reported, of which two were believed to be Arabs (on evidence gathered from radio intercepts). In Faryab, IMU and some insurgent groups seem to closely cooperate: two separate groups were identified at the early stages of infiltrating this province from Ghormach, one of Pashtuns targeting Almar and one of mostly Uzbeks and Turkmen targeting Qaysar; it is not clear what the role of IMU was in this case, but their presence was reported. As of 2010, the IMU reportedly had a political representative in Faryab, Hafizullah, supposedly an Afghan citizen. Groups turning up elsewhere seem to have been even smaller, often a single team of ten to twelve fighters. In the Darzab-Qush Tapa-Sayyad pocket, for example, a small group of IMU fighters operated for some time; they did not merge with Mullah Nadir's Taleban group, but kept a separate camp and only met occasionally for discussions. The group did not raise tax from the population, contrary to the Taleban, but was nonetheless well equipped. Some arrests of IMU-linked Uzbeks from Jowzjan were also reported.⁹¹

Reports by the Afghan security forces suggest that, at least in Kunduz, IMU commanders are integrated into the Taleban's command structure.⁹² Reports of IMU assistance are

⁹⁰ ISAF analyst, 2010.

⁹¹ Interview with private security company analyst, Kabul, 17 April 2010.

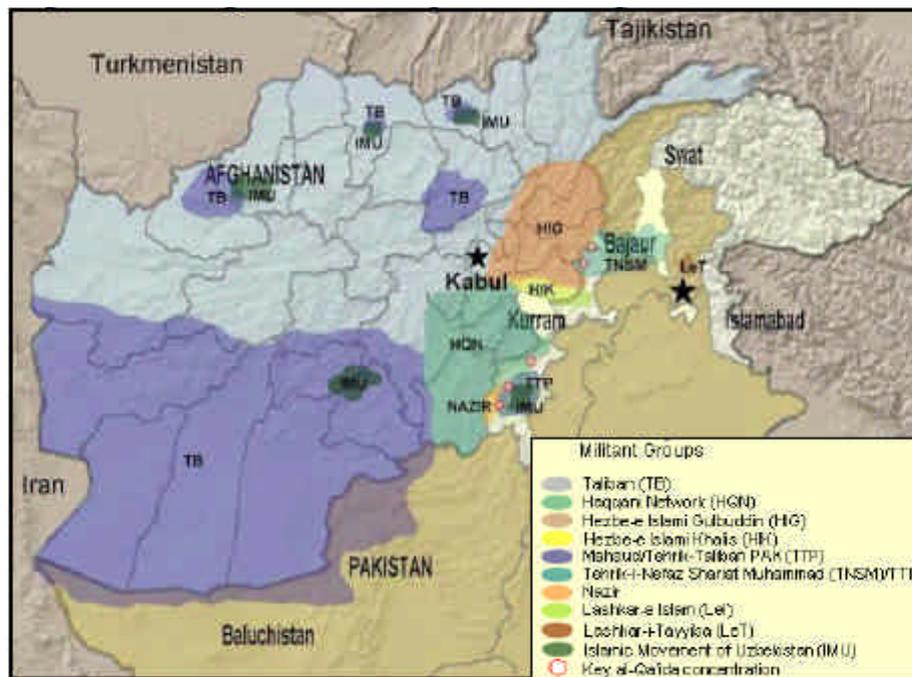
⁹² Interview with intellectuals from Jowzjan, Mazar-e Sharif, 21 April 2010. Interview with UN official, Kabul, 4 April 2010. Interview with foreign diplomat Kabul, 7 April 2010. Interview with UN official, Kabul, 25 April 2010. Interview with UN

⁸⁸ Interview with Afghan security analyst, Kunduz, June 2010.

⁸⁹ ANA intelligence sources, Kabul, 26 April 2010.

Map 2

Different insurgent groups in Afghanistan, according to US sources



Source: Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan Report to Congress in accordance with section 1230 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 (Public Law 110-181), as amended.

coming from Pakistan, consisting of training and advice and the ad hoc despatch of cadres; the IMU might also have assisted recent efforts to intensify and improve Taliban activities in Badakhshan, particularly in Keshm.⁹³

Hezb-e Islami

Hezb-e Islami (Hezb) was founded during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s and played a key role in the civil war but lost its position as a key political or military factor during the Taliban regime. After 2001 and the fall of the Taliban regime, one part of Hezb formed a legal arm which was officially registered as a party and has MPs and several governors as members, while another arm led by its charismatic and ruthless founder Gulbuddin Hekmatyar continues to attack

foreign forces as well as ANP and ANA. At the same time, the Hekmatyar faction is negotiating with representatives of President Hamed Karzai, who during last year's election campaign, praised Hezb-e Islami in even warmer words than the Taliban.⁹⁴

According to anecdotal evidence and numerous references in interviews with high-ranking US military personnel, Afghan intelligence officers, local observers and journalists, Hekmatyar's group seems to be considered both by the Afghan government as well as by the leadership of the US military as a means of winning over disgruntled or opposition Pashtuns and breaking the Taliban hegemony over them.⁹⁵ As one US officer claimed already in early 2009: 'Hekmatyar is a son of a bitch. But we can make him our son of a bitch.'⁹⁶

official, Mazar-e Sharif, 21 April 2010. Personal communication with British journalist, Kabul, September 2010.

⁹³ Interview with Afghan informer connected to the Taliban, June 2010.

⁹⁴ 'Our friends and dear brothers,' H. Karzai during a campaign speech in Gardez, Paktia, July 2009.

⁹⁵ Personal communication with UN official, Kabul, October 2010.

⁹⁶ Interview in Kabul, April 2009.

When it comes to fighting on the ground, the picture in the north is very heterogeneous: While in Kunduz and Takhar strong Taleban and a weak Hezb-e Islami are cooperating, a comparatively stronger Hezb-e Islami in Badakhshan tolerates and supports the few Taleban there. In Baghlan however, an increasingly tense coexistence erupted in open fighting in several villages in the north of the province in early March 2010, leading to around 60 casualties (approximately 25 Taleban and 35 Hezb fighters) as well as the total military defeat of Hezb in the province. Numerous sources have mentioned various reasons (see the 'Baghlan' section below), but beyond the growing competition between the two groups⁹⁷ in an environment with an extremely weak ISAF presence, the main reason for the Taleban to fight their former allies is distrust over Hezb's relations with the government.⁹⁸

Al-Qaeda

It is hard to identify what 'al-Qaeda' really means today, because the organisation has morphed. At the same time, it is generally believed to be a globally organised, highly sophisticated terror network. But what does 'al-Qaeda' mean in the context of northern Afghanistan? International terrorism experts (who might be suspected of having developed a symbiotic relationship, depending professionally on the continuing existence and danger of al-Qaeda) are not the only ones who claim that al-Qaeda has relations with the Taleban. Afghan security analysts and Taleban in Northern Afghanistan confirm its existence in some areas under Taleban control – but their definitions of al-Qaeda have little in common.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ The outbreak of such factional fighting between Taleban and Hezb could also be observed in the province of Wardak in Nerch district in August 2010.

⁹⁸ According to a local journalist in Pol-e Khomri; to Rasool Khan (head of provincial council of Baghlan province) and to Zabiullah Ehsas, Pahswok-correspondent for the north, Mazar-e Sharif, May and June 2010.

⁹⁹ Interviews with member of a foreign intelligence unit, Kunduz, June and July 2010.

In general, the role of the few foreign al-Qaeda cadres in northeastern Afghanistan is seen as supporting the local Taleban and offering services such as management, mapping and professional planning.¹⁰⁰ According to various sources, four small al-Qaeda bases existed in the north before autumn 2010: in Gortepa (Kunduz), in Baghlan-e Jadid, in Balkhab (Balkh) and in Sheberghan.¹⁰¹ Whether the latter ones still exist in 2011 is unclear; those in Kunduz and Baghlan have been dismantled. The groups included some Afghans mainly from the south and east, but the majority were foreign fighters from Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Chechnya whose jihadi careers took them to a variety of hotspots. Several men are said to have stayed and fought with the Taleban in the Pakistani Swat valley and in Waziristan before coming to Afghanistan.¹⁰² Apparently one of the main qualifications for being considered al-Qaeda – instead of Taleban – is to have spent time at such places (mainly Waziristan) or to be a foreigner or both. Not every foreigner (or even Arab), however, necessarily needs to be an al-Qaeda member.

While the fighters from Pakistan often are Afghans who either spent years in refugee camps or studied at one of the madrassas there, the largest group of original foreigners seem to be Uzbeks who left Uzbekistan to escape the pressure and brutal repression by President Islam Karimov's regime; they tend to belong to the IMU. The often-mentioned Chechens' numbers seem to be exaggerated. As opposed to the Uzbek presence, for which there are many indications, little proof of Chechen presence exists.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Baseer Tahseen, a leading local journalist from Kunduz, June 2010.

¹⁰¹ Interview with former UN official, Faizabad, July 2010. Interview with Afghan NGO security analyst, Kunduz, June 2010.

¹⁰² Various interviews with Afghan security officials, local journalists and a member of a foreign intelligence unit, Kunduz, June and August 2010.

¹⁰³ On 17 January 2010, Afghan officials in Kunduz announced that two Chechens were killed among several other militants during a joint ANA/NDS operation in Chahar Dara district without providing

The number of foreign fighters and the structures of their groups are hard to determine because they rapidly fluctuate. Some foreigners come for several weeks or months to give religious lessons¹⁰⁴ or train fighters how to build more-elaborate IEDs. Although they have considerably more military experience than many local Taliban, they do not join in most the attacks and fighting. Instead, they stay aloof and contribute to operational planning, partly because they lack language skills to communicate with Afghans. Another distinction mentioned several times is their elitist behaviour. 'They do not eat with us,' one local Taleb from Chahar Dara scoffed about the al-Qaeda cadres: 'They think we are stupid farmers.'¹⁰⁵ Also the al-Qaeda cadres do not collect *ushr* or ask villagers for food but seem to have enough money simply to buy food from shops. An intelligence source in Kunduz estimated the number of al-Qaeda in the Gortepa area at around 30 fighters. The two known leaders were Pashtuns, probably from southern Afghanistan, a young man named Hazafar for the southern part of the province and Abu Shuaib for the northern part. In other areas, for example Takhar, no organised al-Qaeda-presence is known and only a few foreign fighters were mentioned, who, in most cases, only come temporarily, as trainers and instructors.¹⁰⁶

What has been confirmed from various sources but vehemently denied by Taliban spokespersons is a – possibly growing – gap between the more radical, less locally rooted al-Qaeda cadres and the Taliban

commanders.¹⁰⁷ The old Taliban commander, Mawlawi Roshan, who was arrested by German Special Forces in Kharoti village of Gortepa district in a night raid on 21 September 2010, was known among Afghan and German intelligence personnel since 2008 as interested in negotiations with the Afghan government and the German military. Subsequently, Roshan had increasingly been sidelined and disarmed and, according to people close to him, afraid of being assassinated by foreign jihadis. Two other Taliban commanders from the Haqqani network in Kunduz are supposed to have been disarmed by al-Qaeda recently. According to the then governor of Kunduz, Engineer Muhammad Omar, they too had been interested in starting peace talks with the Afghan government. 'Nine other commanders in fear of being disarmed have buried their weapons and fled to Pakistan,' Omar claimed in fall 2010.¹⁰⁸ The case of Mawlawi Roshan hints that at least in part these claims are true.

Graph 2 illustrates the ongoing violence in the provinces of the Greater North. Among them, Kunduz has been steadily leading in levels of violence. But by 2009, Faryab and Baghlan also emerged from the pack. Only in Badakhshan has the level of incidents decreased, while in Samangan violence has not shown any sign of significantly taking off. Despite strong seasonal cycles – the winter always sees fewer attacks – the remaining provinces of Balkh, Jowzjan, Takhar and Sar-e Pol showed an upward trend.

any additional information about how they came to this conclusion.

¹⁰⁴ As one *Mawlawi* Sirajudin has done who, in February and March 2010, stayed for four weeks in Chahar Dara, encouraging local Taliban and madrasa students to become suicide bombers, before he returned to Peshawar in Pakistan.

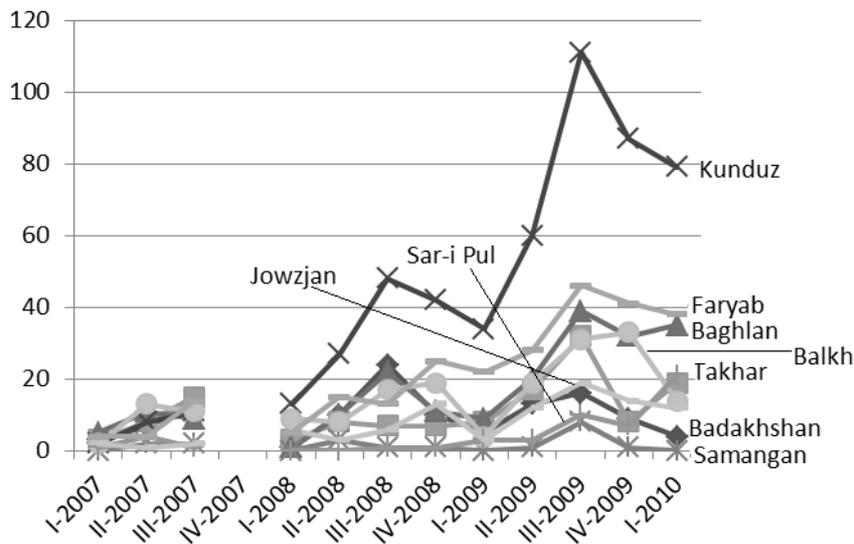
¹⁰⁵ Interview with a taleb from Chahar Dara, Kunduz, December 2009.

¹⁰⁶ According to an interview with an NDS officer in Kabul, August 2010, their role is confined to improving IEDs and providing candidates, mostly from Pakistan, for suicide attacks.

¹⁰⁷ Governor Omar, quoted in *Central Asia Online*, 7 September 2010.

¹⁰⁸ *Central Asia Online*, 7 September 2010, see: http://centralasiaonline.com/cocoon/caii/xhtml/en_GB/features/caii/features/main/2010/09/07/feature-03.

Graph 2
Insurgent-initiated attacks, province by province



Note: No breakdown is available for the third quarter of 2007.

Source: ANSO

COUNTER MEASURES – ISAF, AFGHAN SECURITY FORCES AND THE MILITIAS

The relations between ISAF on one side and Afghan government agencies and ANA/ANP on the other can be described as erratic. ISAF officers frequently have complained about the low morale and corruption within ANA/ANP. In turn, Afghan officers and government officials, especially the governors, either complain about a 'too soft' ISAF approach (as the former Kunduz governor Muhammad Omar frequently did)¹⁰⁹ – or about ISAF being too aggressive, particularly when US forces conduct night raids.

Bad cooperation and communication between ISAF and Afghans occur relatively frequently. In autumn 2010, ANA battalions repeatedly refused in the last minute to deploy in joint operations with a German unit that was established exactly for that purpose, to 'mentor' and 'partner with' the ANA. Incidents of friendly fire causing ANA casualties – as in

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Governor Omar, Kunduz, 7 December 2009.

the killing of six Afghan soldiers on 2 April 2010 – have compounded the situation.¹¹⁰

The 2010 deployment of several thousand US troops to the region was unpopular among at least some key officials and several powerbrokers. Governor Atta in Balkh, in particular, expressed his dismay at the decision. Atta was already known to have sometimes precarious relations with Swedish and German forces in the north.¹¹¹ Some sources indicated that the strengthened ISAF presence in the north during summer 2010 was often not welcome among the local population, even though ISAF mostly restricted itself to mentoring the ANP. Accusations emerged that the 'aggressive' US approach with an enormous increase of targeted killings might be counter-productive.¹¹²

Measuring the impact of exclusive ANA operations (such as those under the

¹¹⁰ Interview with security officer, Mazar-e Sharif, April 2010, and with ISAF source, April 2010.

¹¹¹ Interview with UN official, Mazar-e Sharif, 22 April 2010. Interview with Meshrano Jirga member from Jowzjan, 25 April 2010.

¹¹² Email communication with security official based in northern Afghanistan, August 2010. Email communication with UN official, August 2010.

codename Tawhid in Baghlan) is difficult, because ANA troops would often move into an area and leave again quickly without establishing any permanent presence, followed by an immediate return of the insurgents. In some cases, irregular forces were involved on the government side. When, for example, parts of Chahar Dara district were re-taken from the Taleban in October 2010, the US-sponsored militia of former Northern Alliance commander Mir Alam carried out most of the fighting.¹¹³

The militias

The powerbrokers of the Greater North are usually associated with anti-Taleban groups such as the former mujahedin *tanzim* of Jamiat-e Islami, Junbesh-e Milli and Hezb-e Wahdat-e Islami. Therefore, one would expect them to act as a bulwark against the Taleban, rather than as a conduit for Taleban infiltration. Indeed, initially the growing Taleban threat had been mostly met by the (more or less spontaneous) formation of local militias, usually linked to 'retired' commanders and local powerbrokers like Mir Alam of Kunduz, Mutaleb Beg, Subhan Qul, Piram Qul and Qazi Kabir of Takhar, Fathullah and Auraz Zabet of Faryab and others. However, this has not always been the case. At least in Kunduz many of these militias were negotiating influence-sharing and non-belligerence deals with the Taleban by spring 2010¹¹⁴ – despite which, by late 2010, they used the opportunity of the militarily weakened Taleban to fight and defeat them.

Local acceptance for these militias varies substantially. Where militias are rooted within homogenous communities, particularly in places where the Taleban during their rapid expansion had harassed local communities, acceptance is high – as in Qal-e Zal district of Kunduz province where the local population begged the prominent mujahedin commander Nabi Gechi to give up his fish-shop at the

Uzbek border and return to lead their militia. On the contrary, in Imam Sahib (also Kunduz) near the Tajik border, militias of various ethnic groups quickly started to harass people of other ethnic backgrounds and most people despised them.¹¹⁵ The local militias in Kunduz province, often identifying themselves as *arbaki* (which traditionally only existed in southeastern Afghanistan) in a quest for legitimacy, challenged the Taleban militarily and might have reduced their ability to recruit among the non-Pashtun minorities. In Dasht-e Archi, a district in northern Kunduz with a mixed population, militias clashed with the Taleban in late 2009 and temporarily limited their influence. In Qal-e Zal district, Nabi Gechi's homogenous Uzbek militia achieved the same.¹¹⁶

In Kunduz almost all the militia are Turkmen, Tajik or Uzbek. Few of the successful efforts to set up militias occurred among Kunduz's Pashtuns, the main exception being some groups in Khanabad district, mostly linked to Hezb-e Islami. Even UNAMA has accepted the development as inevitable, advising Afghan authorities to bring militias under some supervising structure.¹¹⁷ Local authorities often dislike the militias,¹¹⁸ with the exception of the NDS, which has been actively involved with some of them, such as in the Gurziwan and Belcheragh districts of Faryab.¹¹⁹ NGOs also dislike the militias and have reported harassment at their hands.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ After a case of murder and a case of rape, serious complaints reached the governor of Kunduz province, Muhammad Omar, who in October 2009 called for a jirga of *arbakai* commanders and elders in Khanabad to urge them not to steal and not to harass the people.

¹¹⁶ According to a local journalist and to an analyst with the German Risk Management Office, Kunduz, May 2010.

¹¹⁷ Conversation with independent analyst Krystóf Gosztonyi, 28 January 2010. Interview with Olfaty, MJ deputy secretary from Jowzjan, Kabul, 25 April 2010. Email communication with security officer based in northern Afghanistan, August 2010.

¹¹⁸ Interview with official of an international organisation, Mazar-e Sharif, 19 April 2010.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Interview with NGO manager, Kabul, 8 April 2010.

¹¹³ Interview with NGO security official, Kunduz, October 2010; confirmed by Afghan researcher from Chahar Dara, October 2010.

¹¹⁴ Interview with TLO analyst, Kabul, 5 April 2010. Interview with Afghan informer connected to the Taleban, May 2010.

Map 3
Known locations of semi-official militias in the Greater North



Note: elaboration by the authors

A targeted Taliban assassination campaign against the more proactive militia leaders in the first half of 2010 might encouraged deal making with the insurgents: Auraz Zabet in Daulatabad was assassinated in April 2010, Ghulam Hussein in Imam Sahib in August.¹²¹ In Qal-e Zal, widely held to be a militia success story, the Taliban went back in July 2010 and the district governor who had sponsored the militias was killed.¹²²

Several of the powerbrokers behind the militias, however, have conflicts with the Kabul government and see the appearance of the Taliban in the north as an opportunity to gain leverage vis-à-vis Kabul. They are not interested in decisively defeating the Taliban, even where this is feasible, because that would once again reduce the leverage they have gained. Privately, several of them admit informal relations with the Taliban and their disinclination to participate in a decisive effort to defeat them.¹²³ Some of these militias are also reportedly engaged in cross-border smuggling.¹²⁴ Rapidly, militias have adopted a more defensive approach, fortifying their villages with ISAF and ANP help. There, they impose taxes on the local population. Some of

the militias are in the process of achieving government sponsorship and are to be placed under the control of the ANP. However, during 2010, payments expected from the government were often delayed, which surely encouraged their indulgence in indiscriminate taxation. Doubts exist about the police's capability to supervise the militias, to say the least; taxation might not end even once regular government payments start.¹²⁵

Infighting among militias in Kunduz, for the control of trafficking routes, has already been reported.¹²⁶ Unintended consequences of empowering *arbaki* can be observed in the formerly calm province of Samangan where groups of Hazara formed Taliban cells as an act of self-defence against Uzbek *arbaki*, who used their power trying to dominate Hazara communities.¹²⁷

The militias' influence rose sharply in Kunduz province when the military balance shifted after the relentless capture-and-kill campaign of the US SOF weakened the Taliban's military dominance in some of their former strongholds in autumn 2010.

Collaboration with the Taliban is not unheard of even among powerbrokers who have not

¹²¹ 'Unknown Armed Men Kill 6 in Northern Afghan province,' *Xinhua*, 8 August 2010. Email communication with UN official, August 2010.

¹²² '11 Afghan Police, district Chief Killed in Attack,' *The Associated Press*, 11 July 2010.

¹²³ Interview with Afghan informer connected to the Taliban, May 2010.

¹²⁴ Email communication with security officer, northern Afghanistan, August 2010.

¹²⁵ Interview with UN official, Kabul, 25 April 2010. Interview with security officer, Mazar-e Sharif, April 2010.

¹²⁶ Interview with private security company analyst, Kabul, 17 April 2010. 'Rogue Militias Abuse Rural Afghans,' *al-Jazeera*, 12 January 2011.

¹²⁷ Interview with western intelligence official, Mazar-e Sharif, January 2011.

yet been involved in the new militias. In a few cases in Faryab, Baghlan and Takhar, small local strongmen with backgrounds in Junbesh, Jamiat and Hezb-e Islami have established relations with the Taliban. Some have fought on the Taliban side already.¹²⁸ They might be joining the Taliban to express their disaffection after their factional leaders and the government marginalised them, at least in their interpretation of events. This happened in particular among those who were not appointed to positions of influence and power or who could not integrate into the government-linked networks, which control illicit drug trafficking. These former commanders join the Taliban with their retinue of armed men and are therefore ready to start violent activities straight away. They tend to be the least reliable Taliban recruits, however. In Baghlan, for example, many of them have 'reconciled' with the government, thanks to NDS intervention.¹²⁹

Potentially, more strongmen may join the insurgency, given the multitude of illegal armed groups¹³⁰ across the Greater North, some of them known to oppose the government because they do not have good connections within it or because of rivalry with whoever is better connected with the government. In some areas, a single one of them going over to the Taliban could alter the balance of strength in favour of the insurgents. One example is Najib Tufan in Gurziwan district; some of his men are believed to maintain active relations with Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami. Other sources believe that both main strongmen in Gurziwan, Tufan (an Uzbek) and Mullah Akbar (a Tajik) are maintaining links with the Taliban

to keep the local balance of power.¹³¹ In Chahar Dara, Hezb-e Islami supporters reportedly actively help the Taliban, as are members of Juma Khan Hamdard's and of Mawlawi Ebadi's old Hezb-e Islami networks in Jowzjan and Balkh.¹³²

After a phase in 2009 and early 2010 when most of the newly found militias lacked funding and military successes against the Taliban, some in Kunduz and Takhar (having received more financial support in 2010 and benefiting from the weakening of the Taliban) were able to re-capture areas such as Chahar Dara, Qal-e Zal and parts of Khwaja Ghar in Takhar. At the same time, however, they quickly became unpopular because they looted and forced villagers to pay *ushr* to them.¹³³

The impact of ISAF

Before 2009, a range of European ISAF forces in northern Afghanistan only reluctantly interfered in the political situation. Germany has deployed the largest contingent of soldiers yet, with up to 5,350 soldiers on duty in Afghanistan in late 2010. The regional commander of RC North is a German major general. This official hierarchy, though, has undergone de facto modifications since the US forces entered the arena with thousands of troops in the context of the 'surge'.

Besides the German soldiers, smaller contingents of Swedish (running the PRT in Mazar-e Sharif, Balkh province), Norwegian (running the PRT in Maimana, Faryab province) and Hungarian troops (running the PRT in Pol-e Khomri, Baghlan province) are present, as well

¹²⁸ Interview with Afghan intellectuals, Mazar-e Sharif, 20 April 2010. Interview with security officer, Mazar-e Sharif, April 2010. Interview with UN official, Mazar-e Sharif, 21 April 2010.

¹²⁹ Personal communication with independent analyst Krystóf Gosztanyi, London, 17 February 2010.

¹³⁰ The term indicates all non-state armed groups that are not recognised by state institutions; they may or may not carry out violence acts against state agents.

¹³¹ Interview with UN official, Mazar-e Sharif, 21 April 2010. Email communication with UN official, August 2010.

¹³² Interview with UN official, Kabul, 4 April 2010. Hamdard is currently governor of the southeastern province of Paktia but he remains more interested in his area of origin in Balkh province; Maulawi Ebadi is the most prominent former commander of Hezb-e Islami in Jowzjan.

¹³³ The people of Khwaja Ghar, for example, had welcomed the formation of a local militia in July 2010, but complained bitterly about its behaviour only three months later. According to interviews with elders in Khwaja Ghar, July and October 2010.

as some Belgian, Croatian and Mongolian units integrated into the local PRTs.

Operations take place without non-US participation in the area of responsibility of the German forces, often near the PRT. US officers have described the German role variously as 'complementary'¹³⁴ or as that of junior partners.¹³⁵ US officers assure that they inform the German command of RC North about exclusive US operations. But how detailed these briefings are, and if the German commander could stop any planned SOF operation, remains unclear, although these operations take place under the ISAF mandate.

As long as the situation remained comparatively calm in the north, the troops' home governments could defend as appropriate the restrained approach of all contingents deployed there. Since the violence increased, however, two major changes have become visible: first, these troops are helpless to counter the insurgency and, second, the newly arrived US forces have an enormous impact, especially the Special Operations Forces with their frequent clandestine capture-or-kill missions. The Germans have been restricted mainly by caveats (which were modified in 2009) and still do not launch operations with the intention to kill. Meanwhile, the Hungarians in the very volatile province of Baghlan neither have the means in terms of personnel, equipment and money nor the rules of engagement to do more than what is euphemistically called 'force protection' – to guard themselves and their camp (see details in Annex 2, Baghlan case study).

Most of the newly arrived 4,000 US soldiers (mainly from the 10th Mountain Division),¹³⁶ as well as the re-designated bulk of the German forces in the new ASB¹³⁷ unit, are

¹³⁴ Lieutenant-Colonel Russel Lewis in 'Fuck the Taliban,' *German Press Agency*, 13 July 2010.

¹³⁵ Interview with high-ranking US officer, Mazar-e Sharif, July 2010.

¹³⁶ According to the US DoD press release 'Officials Note Low Insurgent Morale in Afghanistan,' 25 August 2010.

¹³⁷ ASB is the Ausbildungs- und Schutzbataillon (battalion for training and protection), which

intended to train and mentor Afghan security forces. They are having limited success because several times Afghan ANA sent to join operations' contingents simply did not show up, or the Afghan Ministry of Defence explicitly forbade its officers to join German troops in a planned operation, without giving any reason.¹³⁸ Instead, the SOF operations have had the largest impact on the situation. While they were little advertised, and were even classified in the beginning, they are now proudly and regularly presented to the public as success stories.

The other side of COIN – 'capture-and-kill-operations'

According to various sources, between December 2009 and October 2010 at least 17 Taliban commanders and dozens of fighters were killed in Kunduz province. Two more commanders are known to have been arrested. Most of these operations took place near the German PRT, although without any German involvement.¹³⁹ Contrary to what happened in other parts of Afghanistan, Special Forces operations in Kunduz seem to have carefully prepared and led the killing or capture of the intended targets. No local protests were reported, as has happened in similar operations. According to official ISAF information, between 8 May and 8 August 2010, 365 'insurgent leaders' were killed or captured, mostly by SOF, all over Afghanistan.¹⁴⁰ According to the ISAF spokesperson in Kabul, 'the increases in troop strength and continued growth in capability allowed coalition forces to conduct 83 per cent more kinetic operations in July 2010 than

functions as a quick reaction force. It was officially established on 3 August 2010.

¹³⁸ 200 ANP officers were supposed to 'partner' with German forces in the Tawhid III offensive, but were banned from participating shortly before the operation, according to *spiegel.de*, 25 August 2010, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,719584,00.html>.

¹³⁹ According to German officers, several interviews, Kunduz, 2009–10.

¹⁴⁰ U.S. Department of Defense press release, 25 August 2010, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=60579>.

we initiated in July 2009.¹⁴¹ For the Greater North, the increase might even be higher, since no such targeted killings occurred before March 2009. Taskforce 373, composed of the US Army's Delta Force and the Navy Seals, normally conduct these SOF operations. They operate mostly at night in small helicopters, which are quiet and can easily land on small patches.

Afghan commandos, trained and deployed exclusively by US forces, and ANA elite units that operate separately from regular ANA units accompany Taskforce 373 attacks.

All over Afghanistan, the number of SOF operations has increased constantly over the last years: In 2009, they rose from 100–125 to 500 a month and in June 2010 to 1,000 a month.¹⁴² Again, this does not absolutely reflect the situation in the Greater North, which saw no such operations before 2009 at all. Currently a complete new Special Operations Base is being built for US\$ 25–100 million near Mazar-e Sharif, based on the US Central Command's 'Integrated Global Presence, Basing Strategy and Master Plan'.¹⁴³

The hubs of the SOF operations in the north are located in the districts of Chahar Dara and Kunduz centre as well as in northern Baghlan. The Taliban stronghold of Dasht-e Archi in northern Kunduz has come under several SOF attacks, but nevertheless became the safest haven for insurgents by the end of 2010. Twice in September 2010, Takhar province experienced the first SOF operations. In one, the Taliban district commander of Derqad (at the border with Tajikistan) was killed. In the other, the campaign convoy of a candidate for parliamentary election was targeted on 2 September 2010, obviously as result of dubious intelligence. In this incident, ten people died, including Zabet Amanullah, the target person. He had been with the Taliban during their regime but years ago had tried to convince other commanders to desist from fighting. For that, he had been imprisoned and tortured by the ISI in Pakistan some years ago

and had lived in Kabul ever since. He had been accompanying the candidate, his nephew. In a rare consensus, the district and provincial governor as well as ANP and ANA sources confirmed that Amanullah had nothing to do with the accusations voiced by ISAF and that bombing the campaign convoy had been a total mistake.¹⁴⁴ ISAF, however, continues to adhere to its initially released version of a successful attack against a 'senior IMU member' and 'deputy shadow governor of Takhar'. Indications are that a powerful mujahedin commander from Khwaja Bahauddin, who had been involved in a feud with Amanullah, might have tipped-off the ISAF forces.

Aside from cases of misjudgement, the question remains about the long-term effects of such a capture-or-kill campaign. Undoubtedly, for a time, eliminating Taliban commanders weakens the insurgents' operational capabilities to launch sophisticated attacks, as commanders with tactical skills, experience and local knowledge cannot be replaced quickly and easily. Indeed, since mid-April 2010, the campaign has led to a sharp decline of sophisticated operations against German troops in Kunduz province. In addition, in Kunduz province – other than in Takhar – US intelligence and the implementation of operations have become much more accurate. According to a source familiar with the planning of those operations, the US has very successfully managed to plant informers with the local Taliban.¹⁴⁵

The targeted killings have changed the composition of the Taliban leadership and several other factors in Kunduz province dramatically. At least half the commanders in charge before early 2010 have been killed and most of the remaining ones have moved to Pakistan, at least temporarily. In autumn 2010, the third generation of Taliban commanders within a year was installed. In Baghlan, by May 2010, four shadow governors

¹⁴¹ Press briefing at ISAF headquarters in Kabul, 25 August 2010.

¹⁴² 'Targeted Killing Is New U.S. Focus in Afghanistan,' *The New York Times*, 2 August 2010.

¹⁴³ EurAsia.Net, 6 July 2010.

¹⁴⁴ More on this episode in a separate forthcoming AAN Briefing Paper by Kate Clark: 'The Takhar Bombing: The Parallel Worlds of US Intelligence and Afghan Politics.'

¹⁴⁵ Interview with an Afghan intelligence source, Taloqan, September 2010.

were killed or captured within a few months. Their successors tried to control the situation remotely from Pakistan, which, at least according to US military sources, led to discontent among rank-and-file Taliban.¹⁴⁶

In Chahar Dara district, the Taliban leadership commission was an established institution in early 2009, able to reside in the same compound for weeks. Seven checkpoints had to be passed to reach it; no ANA unit would dare to attack and the Taliban obviously were not afraid of any ISAF incursion either. The authors could meet Mullah Shamsuddin, the powerful military commander of Chahar Dara, for an interview. By late 2010, all Taliban commanders in Kunduz province were constantly on the run. Shamsuddin was said to spend his nights 'every four hours looking for a new tree to sleep under', according to a local source. In September, he moved to Pakistan as well and a very young and more aggressive district commander recently replaced him.¹⁴⁷

In the end, these operations might have unexpected outcomes because they foster an

undesired structural change at the mid and lower levels of the local Taliban leadership. This already can be observed in Kunduz where established local commanders are taken out and replaced by Quetta-designated commanders from the south or from Pakistan. The newcomers tend to be less considerate of the needs of the local population. The commanders from outside also have little authority to negotiate on behalf of the local population. They have little or no traditional authority to speak on behalf of the tribe or the village – their only legitimation is the jihad. Thus the conflict tends to become more brutal and agreements less likely.

In the north, first signs of that increased brutality could be witnessed as six ANP officers were assassinated in Imam Sahib on 5 August 2010 and eight ANP officers in Kunduz on 27 August 2010. While much in the Taliban's purely military control was lost, at the same time, despite all the killings, the extent of the more subtle political Taliban control in many areas in the north did not change.

Box 1

SOF operations killing or capturing Taliban commanders in Kunduz province between December 2009 and October 2010

This list is probably incomplete. It details US Special Operations Forces (SOF) operations in Kunduz in which either killed (in most cases) or captured Taliban commanders. With the flight of surviving commanders (such as the military commander of Chahar Dara, Mullah Shamsuddin), roughly two thirds of the echelon in 2009 are not alive or in charge anymore. According to local intelligence sources, the third appointment of new Taliban commanders in Kunduz this year was made in September 2010.¹⁴⁸

15 December 2009. A UN Special Forces operation in Sarak-e Bala area in Chahar Dara killed Taliban commander Qari Ihsan (Ullah). He was supposedly behind the attack on a German patrol in June 2009 when three German soldiers drowned in a canal, after their vehicle had fallen into the river next to the road.

5–6 January 2010. In an overnight operation US Special Forces in Chahar Dara killed Taliban Commander Baz Muhammad and two fighters. . . .

¹⁴⁶ Interview with high-ranking US officer, Mazar-e Sharif, June 2010, confirmed by local sources close to Taliban in Baghlan, June 2010.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Taliban-sympathiser from Isa Khel, Chahar Dara, June 2010.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with local NDS source, Kunduz, September 2010.

Box 1 (continued)

16–17 February 2010. In an overnight operation US Special Forces in Zadran village in Chahar Dara killed Taleban commander Qari Zabiullah (the brother of Mawlawi Enayatullah, the shadow district governor of Imam Sahib) and arrested three fighters.

March 2010. In an overnight operation US Special Forces attacking with helicopters in Sarak Bala in northern Kunduz killed Taleban commander Mullah Rahmat and two fighters.

9 April 2010. In an air strike US Special Forces attacking with helicopters in Qush Lich and Sar Bala area in northern Kunduz killed two Taleban commanders, Mullaghi and Agha Jan.

23–24 April 2010. In two overnight air strikes US Special Forces killed two Taleban commanders. First they attacked the villages of Kohdaman and Chaghdar, killing Commander Mullah Silab, the shadow district governor of Qal-e Zal district, and approximately a dozen fighters. Two suspected Taleban were arrested. In the second operation in Dash-e Archi, they killed Taleban commander Mullah Hamza and 13–15 fighters.

26 April 2010. In an operation in Dasht-e Archi near Alchin bridge, around noon US Special Forces killed the designated Taleban governor for Kunduz province, Mullah Yaar Muhammad, alias Mullah Noor Muhammad, who originated from Helmand, and five fighters. Mullah Noor was returning to Chahar Dara from the Jazana ceremony to condole the death of Mullah Hamza and using his mobile phone, which obviously enabled his attackers to locate him. One week later Taleban forced the closure of the large mobile phone networks in Kunduz province.

29 April 2010. In an overnight operation, US Special Forces attacking with helicopters in Ghor Tepa area in northern Kunduz killed Taleban commander Mullah Daud and one of his bodyguards and detained five fighters. Mullah Daud had just succeeded Mullah Silab, who was killed in six days earlier.

13 May 2010. In two overnight operations in Gul Bagh village in Chahar Dara and in Gortepa area in northern Kunduz, US Special Forces captured Taleban commander Mullah Din Muhammad and killed 26–41 fighters.

19 June 2010. In an overnight operation in Gortepa area in northern Kunduz district, US Special Forces killed Taleban commander Mullah Abdul Razaq and eleven of his fighters. Mullah Abdul Razaq was accused of masterminding IED attacks and roadside bombings in different areas of the province, including one on 16 June, in which two US soldiers died.

23 June 2010. In an air strike US Special Forces attacking Nahr-e Sufi village in Chahar Dara killed six to eight Taleban fighters, injured five and damaged three houses, but didn't manage to capture or kill their owner, Taleban commander Allah Muhammad, alias Pahlawan ('the wrestler').

26 June 2010. In an air strike US Special Forces attacking with jetfighters in Bagh-e Shirkat area in northern Kunduz killed Taleban commander Mullah Osman and seven of his fighters.

15 July 2010. In an air strike US Special Forces in Dasht-e Archi killed three Taleban commanders: Qari Latif, Qari Dost Muhammad and a third commander with the name 'Dr. Hussein'. Two to seven fighters were also killed. According to US intelligence, Qari Latif had been responsible for the suicide attack against the Ariana guesthouse in Kunduz which resulted in the death of seven aid workers in July 2010.

16–17 July 2010. In an overnight operation in Zarkharid area in northern Kunduz, US Special Forces killed the supposed al-Qaeda commander Suhrab and five militants associated to him. According to Kunduz governor Muhammad Omar, Suhrab was a foreign national. . . .

Box 1 (continued)

21 July 2010. In an overnight operation, US Special Forces, attacking with helicopters in Qara Khani (or Gharaw Qishlaq) village in Chahar Dara, detained Taleban commander Mullah Qazi as well as two other suspects and killed two to eight fighters. Mullah Qazi was accused of masterminding IED attacks in Chahar Dara

16 August 2010. In an air strike US Special Forces in northern Kunduz killed commander Abu Baqir while he was travelling in his car. He was said to be a commander of Taleban and of al-Qaeda as well.

16 September 2010. In an overnight operation, US Special Forces in the village of Saraq-e Balak in Chahar Dara killed Taleban commander Juma Gul Hamdul and seven fighters.

20–21 September 2010. In an overnight operation, SOF killed Taleban sub-commander Nasruddin in the village of Lala Maydan in Aliabad, Kunduz.

11 October 2010. In an overnight operation, SOF killed Taleban commander Shirin Agha in Chahar Dara together with one of his fighters.

CONCLUSION

The insurgency in the Greater North has picked up pace since 2008, bringing more and more areas under the Taleban's control by late 2010. In this process, the Taleban have incorporated other local elements, such as the IMU or al-Qaeda (which in northern Afghanistan, however, has little in common with the Western clichéd image of an international high-end terror group). Only their relation with Hezb-e Islami oscillates between cooperation and open warfare, depending on the local specifics. Hezb is under some external pressure, and aspires to recover some of the influence and power it enjoyed in some areas during the 1980s, becoming therefore a competitor rather than an ally of other insurgent groups.

The year 2010 has witnessed the sharpest rise in insurgent attacks since 2001, but also their military decline since summer due to the technically highly successful US campaign of targeting commanders. Particularly in their strongholds in Kunduz and Baghlan provinces, the military equation has changed dramatically in autumn 2010, giving way for Afghan forces – mainly militias often called *arbaki* – to re-conquer areas formerly held firmly by the Taleban.

The northwest, in comparison, has seen little change. There, the Taleban have not come under systematic military pressure and still seem to be led by a small number of charismatic mullahs. The loss of some key leaders could do serious damage to the insurgency in these areas, as it did in western Afghanistan in 2009.¹⁴⁹ This was the case in Gurziwan in spring 2010: when commander Hashim Kaikar was killed, his group dispersed. In the whole northwest, Taleban military cadres are rather few, an estimated two dozen; the rest are young, inexperienced fighters or mercenary elements.¹⁵⁰ However, if undisturbed, it is only a matter of time before the 'inexperienced fighters' can take the lead, endowing the Taleban with hundreds of additional cadres to spread the insurgency.

Where the insurgents find penetration difficult, as in the case of Badakhshan, this does not seem to be due to an innate hostility towards the movement led by Mullah Omar, but to local conditions which advise local powerbrokers to keep the war away from a province. Ethnic borders alone, as described, represent no effective barrier, since the Taleban have successfully managed to

¹⁴⁹ Antonio Giustozzi, 'Herat: quando i Talebani reclutano i Tagiki,' *Limes* (2010) 2.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with intellectuals from Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol, Mazar-e Sharif, 20 April 2010.

integrate (mainly) Uzbek fighters and establish cells in non-Pashtun areas.

Reconciliation efforts have shown minor results in the Greater North. Since the beginning of spring 2010, only a few Tajik commanders in Baghlan and small groups in Kunduz – most noteworthy Taleban commander Qari Mir in southern Chahar Dara – switched sides. Others who were inclined to reconcile have come under pressure from remaining Taleban commanders and have reportedly been disarmed or forced to flee by Taleban and al-Qaeda. If true, this would suggest effective Taleban counter-intelligence. Most of the new generation of Taleban commanders, however, show little sign of considering reconciliation seriously. In the northwest, commanders have approached the government for reconciliation but put forward conditions that are difficult to accept, such as sacking rivals from the local administration, releasing prisoners, stopping all military operations and giving assurances that authorities will not interfere in the tax collection. This can only be read as a sign of self-confidence and of the belief in the inability of a weak government to ever cope with the crisis. But this may change once SOF operations start in the northwest as well.

On the other hand, President Karzai is clearly edging towards negotiations with the armed opposition. This has a demoralising impact on government officials in the north, who are mostly aligned with anti-Taleban groups that participated in Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001. Distrust and suspicion of Karzai's motives are also fed by the behaviour of some government officials, who, at least in 2008–09, were perceived as quite tolerant towards Taleban infiltration in the context of empowering Pashtuns in general.

This study of the Greater North has thrown some light on the Taleban as an organisation. Their tendency to take the demands of the communities into account seems to have come from the top leadership in Pakistan. The Taleban leadership's aim is not only to fight the Afghan government and its allies but to replace it – therefore they need to generate a positive picture of themselves among the

population and do not have the recourse of open terror.

The US Special Forces' successful targeting of Taleban commanders is already fostering a structural change of the mid- and low-level local Taleban leadership; established local commanders are killed, captured or forced to flee and are replaced by Quetta Shura-designated commanders from the south or Pakistan. The newcomers tend to be less considerate of the needs of local populations. The question remains about what long-term effect this will have: will it really break the link between the insurgents and the population – and hurt the Taleban politically – or will it just make the conflict more brutal? Young commanders are under constant threats to their power, which forces them to prove themselves and establish their position with demonstrative acts of violence: to kill alleged spies, blow up infrastructure and enforce rigid control. Furthermore, the impact on future negotiations is likely to be negative as the Taleban leadership struggles to restrain the young and radical new field commanders. Moreover, the inability or unwillingness of the central and provincial governments to establish control and provide services to areas where the Taleban have been pushed out already undermines one of the central aims of such a counter-insurgency strategy.

The possible future of areas controlled by Taleban commanders of the next generation can already be seen in Kandahar where bombings, assassinations and abductions have reached unimaginable heights in 2010. Criminal gangs and Taleban groups are more entangled than before. According to foreign analysts living in Kandahar, the main factor behind this increased brutality is the shake-up of the insurgents command structure, which has opened the way for all kinds of militia leaders to claim their turf.¹⁵¹

In general, although they have lost some military clout, the Taleban, on a less visible level, still maintain a degree of control over communities and generate respect or fear in

¹⁵¹ According to Felix Kuehn and Alex Strick van Linschoten who co-authored *My Life with the Taliban* with Abdul Salam Zaeef (Columbia University Press, 2010).

many parts of the Greater North. They obviously are a resilient organism that can endure and suffer setbacks without becoming paralyzed.

Thus the current security situation in the Greater North can be summarised as a triangular equation – with the ISAF forces, the insurgents (mainly Taleban) and the Afghan government with its security forces as members – which does not add up because the latter is not filling the vacuum created by the ISAF campaign. With the exception of Balkh province, the Afghan government in northern Afghanistan remains in a state of self-abandonment that, in an endless loop of cause and effect, allows the insurgents' continued rise.

Hence an unstable status quo is created. The inherent dilemma of ISAF successes is their quick expiry date (by 2014). The American credo of gaining leverage over the Taleban to bring them to the negotiating table on American terms misses the point: Whatever is to be negotiated has little chance to last if the Afghan government is to enforce the implementation of the ensuing agreement. With the balance of power fundamentally shifting after ISAF forces withdraw between 2011 and 2014 (and the mandate changing for remaining units), all factions will consider their strength and capabilities and options for new alliances which possibly will be in stark contrast to the current constellation. One can see such a political landscape resemble, in some ways, the situation that emerged in northern Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989.

ANNEX 1 PROVINCIAL CASE STUDY, KUNDUZ

When the Taleban rose to power in the late 1990s, the Pashtuns of Kunduz were their natural allies while many Tajiks and Uzbeks fought against them. When Kunduz fell in 1997 and became their stronghold in the north, it became known as the 'Kandahar of the North'.

Pashtuns were not part of the original population. Their (often-forced) migration into

Kunduz started in the nineteenth century and continued in various phases. Even today most northern Pashtuns consider themselves *naqilin*, immigrants, and remember precisely the provinces and the tribes they originate from.¹⁵² The seeds for the Taleban's strength were planted during the 1980s jihad when commanders increasingly built their political constituencies along ethnic lines.

From 1998, the late Mullah Dadullah, a Pashtun from Uruzgan, was the powerful Taleban commander of Kunduz. Until the fall of their government, nearly the whole province remained under his control. Only Dasht-e Archi district in the northeast was sometimes taken over by the Northern Alliance. In contrast, Chahar Dara – the epicentre of Taleban activities today and the first district in the northeast completely under their control – represented a strong Taleban powerbase within the province. The Taleban's last stand, in November 2001, took place here.

When the victorious Northern Alliance took over Afghanistan with the blessing of the US government in late 2001, the balance of power in the country turned, to the detriment of the Pashtuns. The former masters became the underdogs. A 2002 Human Rights Watch mentioned the 'widespread abuses including killings, sexual violence, beatings, extortion and lootings' of Pashtuns at the hand of 'three main ethnically-based parties and their militias', all non-Pashtun, 'who are taking advantage of the vulnerability of unprotected . . . Pashtun communities'.¹⁵³

Although the situation eased over the coming years, strong feelings of deprivation grew among poor Pashtuns in rural areas, who had difficulty getting jobs in the new administration.¹⁵⁴ A contributor to unrest was the conflict among Pashtuns themselves who, often after decades in Pakistani refugee

¹⁵² Marcel Mettelsiefen and Christoph Reuter, *Kunduz, 4. September 2009 – Eine Spurensuche* (Hamburg: Verlag Rogner & Bernhard, 2010), p 10.

¹⁵³ Human Rights Watch, *Paying for the Taleban's Crimes: Abuses against Ethnic Pashtuns in Northern Afghanistan*, HRW Afghanistan Reports (April 2002) 14, No 2.

¹⁵⁴ As mentioned in numerous interviews with locals in Chahar Dara between 2007 and 2009.

camps, returned to Kunduz to find their land taken by other Pashtuns, and by Tajiks or Uzbeks, who refused to give it back.

Still, Kunduz province remained calm. Only in 2008 did clear signs of unrest appear: hundreds of new fighters and commanders arrived, mainly in Chahar Dara district. The Greater North started appearing as a land of opportunity, attracting IMU-cadres (from Uzbekistan and Pakistan) and Taleban and other jihadists (from the Swat valley and FATA, the tribal areas of Pakistan). The enemy – the German troops in charge of the Kunduz and Badakhshan Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) who held supreme command of the Regional Command (RC) North in Mazar-e Sharif – appeared weak. As the commander of the Uzbek Taleban-group in Chahar Dara, Mufti Selim, phrased it in mid-2009: 'Here it is safe. The Germans don't dare to fight.'¹⁵⁵

Indeed, the German military in charge of Kunduz tried to avoid an escalation of conflict and casualties. However, it had no plan on how to respond to a changing environment. After the first successful suicide attack against a German patrol, in the Kunduz bazaar in May 2007 that left three soldiers dead, few patrols ventured into the city or the province for weeks. The build-up of Taleban strongholds in the districts went largely unnoticed. Even when German intelligence officers reported increased activities to their headquarters, political will to take action did not exist. Under German Chief of Staff General Wolfgang Schneiderhan, the intelligence officer in charge of Kunduz was replaced twice out of the rotation schedule for being too blunt in his reports.¹⁵⁶ Ignoring the Taleban was the de facto German strategy.

In 2008, the Germans might have stemmed the growing Taleban power and violence with a more-forceful approach. But this would have put the lives of German soldiers in even greater risk – and risked losing the 'hearts and minds' of the Afghan population. The caveats

that limited the mandate of the German ISAF troops and restricted their space for manoeuvre prevented any riskier approach. At the same time, the Germans did not reach an arrangement with the Taleban, despite several attempts by local insurgent commanders to negotiate a mutual agreement via middlemen or, in some cases, even through direct meetings with German intelligence officers.¹⁵⁷ According to one of the middlemen, these overtures were the result of pressure by local communities; they, and the commanders involved, considered a deal more promising than continued fighting. The commanders wanted help, financial support and projects for themselves and their communities. The German side, however, dragged its feet and finally simply ignored the overtures, until in 2009 they stopped being made.¹⁵⁸

During 2009, Kunduz emerged as the epicentre of insurgent activity in the Greater North. Already in 2008, security sources counted 40 insurgent groups there, with 580 members. From that autumn onwards, they coalesced into groups of up to 20 men. The following spring, Kunduz exploded in a wave of violence that did not abate even during winter. Despite two years of incubation, the destabilisation caught local authorities and local power brokers by surprise.

By early 2009, the Taleban completely controlled the largely Pashtun district of Chahar Dara. Elders had been threatened or even killed if they resisted the newly grown force of immigrant and locally recruited Taleban. The police frequently came under attack; they retreated to their heavily fortified headquarters. In spring 2009, the Taleban started multiple attacks on German forces in Chahar Dara for the first time, using IEDs, suicide bombers on motorcycles and small arms. Some fights lasted for hours and, in at least one case, Taleban followed the retreating Germans to the PRT.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ According to Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, a reporter for *The Guardian*, who visited Chahar Dara in June 2009.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with German government official, Kabul, July 2010.

¹⁵⁷ According to interviews with Afghan middlemen, Kunduz and Kabul, and with German officials, Kunduz, Kabul and Berlin, 2009–10.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Interviews with German officers, PRT Kunduz, October and December 2009.

Box 2**Taleban shadow government in Chahar Dara**

Chahar Dara has the most-advanced administration, consisting of 'Kamissyuns' – a linguistic relic of the years of Soviet occupation – for military, justice, education, taxation and health affairs.

Most interesting is the education commission, where Taleban and governmental structures overlap. Since late 2009, Mullah Naim (who left for Pakistan in autumn 2010), a director of a Minibus company under the old Taleban government, was its head. He reportedly monitored the schools in the district constantly. Teachers who did not show up in time were warned not to neglect their duties. Students who did not attend lessons for three days were visited at home. The governmental curricula had not been changed so far. English, chemistry and biology were still taught. Some NGOs, like the Swedish Committee, were permitted to visit the schools they supported. However, all this applies to boys' schools only; girls' schools have been closed since the Taleban took over.¹⁶⁰

The health commission, consisting of elders and commanders, gives some protection to health workers and doctors against accusations that they are government employees. A functioning health infrastructure provides the Taleban with means to treat their own wounded.¹⁶¹ Remarkably, both teachers and medical personnel paid by the Afghan government or NGOs are accepted and integrated into these structures. This contradicts the widespread Taleban credo that they do not permit any Afghan to work for the Afghan government.

Besides Chahar Dara, pockets of Taleban support in Kunduz were found in Pashtun communities around the province: Lala Maidan in Aliabad, parts of Imam Sahib and Dasht-e Archi districts as well as the Gortepa area of Kunduz' central district. Taleban recruitment among non-Pashtuns was limited, although the presence of a group of Tajiks and of some Uzbeks and Turkmen was reported.¹⁶²

Thus, the Taleban consolidated their presence and shadow government mostly in Chahar Dara and Gortepa (see Box 2). In Chahar Dara, they collect taxes, giving out receipts and are (with their mobile courts) the most important judicial institution. Furthermore, they gained such momentum during their initial wave of expansion in 2009, that practically all of Kunduz was affected by the insurgency. The extent of the Taleban administration depends, however, on the amount of control and the availability of people with at least rudimentary qualities to fill posts.

The emergence of local militias – sponsored by leading power brokers and often officially

armed and registered by the Afghan intelligence and paid through community taxation – pushed the Taleban back (mostly in non-Pashtun areas) in Khanabad, Aliabad and Qala-e Zal. Even so, the Taleban maintained control over Pashtun communities. As of 2010, they reportedly were collecting taxes in Azqala, just 10 kilometres from Kunduz town.¹⁶³ The Afghan government lost its grip and the local population seems either unwilling or afraid to change sides.

Since 2009, the seemingly relentless rise of the Taleban has undermined governmental and ISAF control, first in the rural areas, isolating the district centres from Kunduz city. During 2009, the German forces' rules of engagement changed to a less-reluctant approach; i.e., soldiers were permitted to shoot once they had proof of the hostile intent of a perceived enemy.¹⁶⁴ Before, they were only allowed to shoot back after coming under fire, causing them sometimes to wait in front of Taleban until the latter fired the first shot. However, they still had to conduct raids on compounds

¹⁶⁰ *Spiegel online*, 20 May 2009.

¹⁶¹ Interviews with German officers, PRT Kunduz, April and June 2010.

¹⁶² Abdul-Ahad, 'Face to face with the Taleban' (FN 66).

¹⁶³ Interview with AREU staff from Kunduz, Kabul, 14 April 2010; NGO and private security person staff, 24 April 2010.

¹⁶⁴ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7 December 2009.

and capture missions with Afghan forces in the lead. This rarely led to any catches. Killing missions were, and are, banned.

By contrast, the arrival of US forces in 2010 had a major impact on the military situation, as the Special Operation Forces started targeting the Taliban directly. While the Taliban had been the most faithful users of the newly established mobile phone networks, for communicating internally as well as with their vast networks of informers, they now forced operators to shut down at night. Since early May 2010, all four major companies switch off their networks in Kunduz province and the northern districts of Baghlan between six or seven P.M. and six A.M. This radical measure – which has been used in southern provinces for years – reflected the Taliban's increased fear of local informers. To underline the seriousness of their demand, they threatened to blow up transmission towers and implemented this threat in at least four cases in Kunduz province.¹⁶⁵ Only in January 2011, due to reduced Taliban pressure, have the companies dared re-open their networks at night.

Until September 2010, the Taliban still controlled the same areas they had one year earlier. The following winter, they were forced to retreat from southern Chahar Dara and came under pressure in the rest of the province. In southern Chahar Dara, the militia of Mir Alam took control. Through April 2010, the Taliban favored laying large ambushes. After April, they changed their tactics, increasing their use of IEDs. In late August and September, several senior commanders and heads of commissions left to Pakistan. Weeks later it was claimed that the Quetta Shura had ordered all senior commanders to leave the area to avoid death.¹⁶⁶ Some low-ranking Taliban commanders surrendered to the security forces in October, the most important being Qari Zia, who controlled about a dozen villages with several dozen fighters. He and his

men changed sides but he was arrested later for murder and imprisoned in Kunduz.¹⁶⁷

Still, commanders who surrendered, fled or were killed were replaced, but they are much younger, in their mid-twenties on average, and either come from southern Afghanistan or directly from Pakistan and hence are not rooted in the communities, like their predecessors. This led to several changes: Tacit agreements between Taliban and NGOs to continue with infrastructure projects requested by communities have come to a halt. They have blown up a bridge connecting Chahar Dara with the western part of Kunduz, despite appeals by local elders not to destroy this important connection.¹⁶⁸ The Taliban have assassinated two alleged spies.¹⁶⁹

However, the area of control and dominance where the Taliban can threaten or kill people and demand obedience has not shrunk much. According to locals, this is mainly because the Afghan government is reluctant to establish a functioning administration in retaken areas.

The government has neither improved services nor tried to regain territory and hegemony. Government authorities did not resist the closure of girls' schools and the enforced nightly shutdown of mobile phone networks. Kunduz is an example for the whole of Afghanistan: ISAF can defeat the Taliban locally, but the Afghan government is not stepping in to form a viable alternative. Militias are holding the newly conquered ground temporarily but, according to locals, combine the negative aspects of the regular Afghan security forces and the Taliban: They extort taxes, press families to offer their young men for recruitment and have a reputation for looting. An extremely unstable status quo is created, which will not last after current ISAF military activities draw down.

¹⁶⁷ *Xinhua*, 19 October 2010; according to a witness of the first meeting between Qari Zia and German officers from the nearby PRT, Zia's first question was whether the Americans now would erase his name from their list of commanders to be killed.

¹⁶⁸ Interview with members of two foreign NGOs active in Kunduz, Mazar-e Sharif and Kunduz, October 2010.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with NGO security official, Kunduz, November 2010.

¹⁶⁵ *Deutscher Depeschen Dienst*, 8 May 2010.

¹⁶⁶ Interview with Afghan security official and with Taliban-sympathiser from Chahar Dara, Kunduz, October 2010.

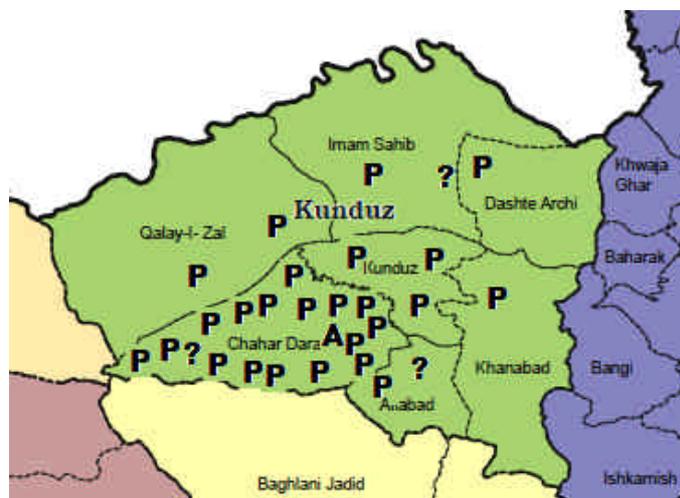
Table 1
Structure of Taleban leadership in Kunduz, as of October 2010

SHADOW PROVINCIAL GOVERNOR	<i>Mawlawi Asadullah</i> (appointed September 2010)
ALIABAD	<i>Mawlawi Naim</i> , shadow governor of Aliabad and simultaneously head of the education department of Chahar Dara <i>Madad</i> , Pashtun from the village of Isa Khel Amanullah, Aliabad <i>Qor Nazir Muhammad</i> , no details known
CHAHAR DARA	<i>Mawlawi Abdul Wali</i> , shadow district governor, Pashtun, appointed September 2010 <i>Mullah Namatullah</i> , military commander (replacing Mullah Shamsuldin), Pashtun, appointed September 2010 <i>Allah Mir</i> , Pashtun from Chahar Dara <i>Habib</i> , Pashtun from Chahar Dara, is said to be frequently in Baghlan <i>Male Malang</i> , Pashtun from the village of Kharoti Payeen, Chahar Dara <i>Mullah Pacha Mir</i> , Pashtun from the village of Qaryatim, Chahar Dara <i>Mullah Ihsanullah</i> , Pashtun from the village of Isa Khel, Chahar Dara <i>Zia</i> , Aimaq from the village of Qari Qassab, Chahar Dara <i>Madad</i> , Pashtun from the village of Gul Bagh, Chahar Dara <i>Mawlawi Abdul Shukur Alam</i> , Pashtun from Gortepa, approximately 26 years old, commands half a dozen men in Southern Chahar Dara; he has a reputation as a very aggressive commander, unpopular among the people <i>Qari Shafiq</i> , a former shoe-seller and popular commander from Western Chahar Dara, left in January 2010 for Pakistan and has refused to return <i>Mullah Rustam</i> , Pashtun, commands about 20 men in Southern Chahar Dara, former Hezb-e Islami follower, is said to be appointed as shadow-governor of Khanabad <i>Mullah Abdul Salam</i> , Pashtun from Southern Chahar Dara, commands about five men; he has a reputation as a strong fighter with little planning-skills, builds his reputation mainly on his name <i>Qari Zabi</i> , Pashtun from Southern Chahar Dara, Zadran tribe, brother of Qari Muhammad Nabi, commands about 10 men; was in charge for the abduction of the British journalist Stephen Farrel and his Afghan assistant Sultan Munadi on 4 September 2009 connected with the bombing of the two kidnapped fuel-trucks the night before; is believed to be the commander-in- <i>chief</i> for Southern Chahar Dara now while Shamsuldin concentrates on Northern Chahar Dara <i>Mullah Wazir</i> , about 30 years old, Pashtun, commands about 15 men mainly in the village of Isa Khel; reputed as a sovereign and calm commander <i>Qari Ismail Nur</i> , Pashtun from northwestern Chahar Dara, cousin of Commander Bas, recruited by Shamsuldin, commands more than 15 men, survived (supported by Shamsuldin) an attempt by the Quetta Shura to replace him due to his young age, but it is unclear if he is still in command or has been replaced by Ahmed Shah <i>Commander Karim</i> , around 42 years old, Pashtun from Kharoti village near Omar Khel, former mujahedin commander and Hezb-e Islami follower, commands about 32 men in several villages along the banks of Kundur river; has the reputation to be powerful, but not very active <i>Qari Naqib</i> , approximately 27 years old, Pashtun from Jadaran village, commands about 15 men; known to be reluctant to fight, has recently moved to Baghlan

Table 1 (continued)

IMAM SAHIB/ DASHT-E ARCHI	<i>Metu</i> , Pashtun, shadow governor of the district, former mujahedin commander <i>Mawlawi Enayatullah</i> , Pashtun from the Zadran tribe, currently said to be in Pakistan for several months <i>Mullah Zaher</i> , Taleban commander in Dasht-e Archi
KHANABAD	<i>Mawlawi Zahir</i> , Pashtun from Gortepa, replaced <i>Mawlawi Nurullah</i> , who was killed by abarkai in May 2010; he is said to be the shadow governor of Khanabad, but spends most of his time in Gortepa
KUNDUZ	<i>Mullah Alaudin</i> , military commander, Pashtun, appointed September 2010 <i>Mawlawi Dost Muhammad</i> , Pashtun from the village of Nawabad, approximately 38 years old, commands 15–25 men; he has the reputation to be rather calm, well educated, not too religious <i>Qari Sidiqullah</i> , the brother of <i>Mawlawi Osman</i> , who was killed by US special forces in June 2010. Sidiqullah, Pashtun from Gortepa, took over Osman's fighter as well as his widow and allegedly was one of the masterminds behind the suicide attack on the Ariana guest house in Kunduz in July 2010
QAL-E ZAL	<i>Mullah Ghulam</i> , military commander of the district, Pashtun from Yan Ghorak village, commands 40–50 men <i>Mullah Obaidullah</i> , Pashtun from the Southern part of Qal-e Zal, former deputy of the provincial shadow governor Mullah Salam, commands about 100 men, mostly his tribals; he is said to commuting often between Qal-e Zal, Gortepa and Chahar Dara
AL-QAEDA COMMANDERS	<i>Qari Ghulam Hazarat</i> , Arab, Chahar Dara Qari Akhtar Muhammad, Pashtun, the deputy of Qari Ghulam Hazarat

Note: A number of other commanders, among them the skilled military commander of Chahar Dara, Mullah Shamsuddin, and Qari Ala Muhammad, a Pashtun from northwestern Chahar Dara, known as BM 82 or Pahlawan (wrestler) for his physical appearance, his aggressiveness and his frequent attacks on German forces, have moved to Pakistan to avoid being killed or captured.

Map 4**Taleban commanders in Kunduz**

Legend P Pashtun A Aimaq
? Unknown

ANNEX 2 PROVINCIAL CASE STUDY, BAGHLAN

Baghlan was once one of the most industrialised provinces of Afghanistan with cotton and textile industries, a large coal mine and the country's largest sugar factory. As a result, thousands of Pashtuns came to the area in the last century. The first waves of *naqilin* arrived in the early twentieth century, before attempts to industrialise Afghanistan, as part of the royal governmental strategy to settle supposedly loyal Pashtuns within overwhelmingly Tajik and Uzbek populations. The first Pashtun immigrants quickly rose in the local hierarchy, often became wealthy, and integrated comparatively well. While the next groups of Pashtun immigrants also found jobs in the governmental and private enterprises' administrations, the latest arrivals often ended up as lowly paid workers in various factories.¹⁷⁰

During the post-1973 revolutionary upheavals, social status shaped political affiliations. The first immigrants remained politically neutral; those who had achieved middle class status often joined Hezb-e Islami, while many workers became 'lumpenproletariat' when they lost their jobs after the factories were closed or destroyed during the civil war – they later formed the core of the locally recruited Taliban. As a result, northern Baghlan, particularly Baghlan-e Jadid, Dahan-e Ghorri and Pol-e Khomri districts (which are predominantly Pashtun), became a Hezb-e Islami stronghold in the 1980s. After 2001, the insurgency consisted mainly of Pashtun Taliban (but with also some Tajiks and Gujurs) and Hezb-e Islami.

Thus it was no surprise when, in 2008, Baghlan became one of the more troublesome provinces in the Greater North, with potential to exceed Kunduz because of its long tradition of ethnic rivalry and political instability. While mostly Pashtun Taliban had controlled the province until 2001, all posts in the post-war

order were given to Jamiat and mostly to Tajiks, even in predominantly Pashtun districts. By 2009, Baghlan was acquiring strategic importance for the Taliban, as the northern supply route leading through Baghlan became ISAF's second artery after the Pakistan route became increasingly insecure.

The first group of post-2001 Taliban in Baghlan were mostly Tajiks. The most prominent was Mawlawi Dad-e Khoda who, Taliban sources claimed, had 300 men at his orders; in 2008, the Afghan security services attributed 200 armed men to his group. Its members were initially recruited in Nahrin and Andarab districts and later in Khost-o Fereng. Among Pashtuns, support for the Taliban was discrete during 2007–08, and little evidence exists of the preparation of armed activities. Religious figures were known to act on behalf of the Taliban in Baghlan-e Kohna, Baghlan-e Jadid and Doshi while Hezb-e Islami was reported to be reorganising in Baghlan-e Jadid and Dahan-e Ghorri.¹⁷¹

As in Kunduz, the build-up of Taliban in the northern half of Baghlan, mainly along the lines of Pashtun settlements, had gone largely unnoticed. The Hungarian ISAF troops that had taken over the PRT in the provincial capital of Pol-e Khomri in 2006 from the Netherlands had neither the resources nor the political will to control – or even patrol – large parts of the province. According to the head of the provincial council, Muhammad Rassul Khan, in the beginning 'the Taliban were not very strong in Baghlan but it was the weakness of the government [and its allies] that supported them.'¹⁷²

Due to the ISAF troops' inactivity, the Taliban expanded undisturbed in the northern districts of Baghlan-e Markazi, Baghlan-e Jadid and Burqa. When on 24 November and 4 December 2009 several hundred Taliban attacked the house of Baghlan-e Jadid's district Governor Amir Gul (affiliated with Hezb-e Islami), as well as several police checkpoints in the district, few reported these attacks.

¹⁷¹ UN official, 5 April 2008.

¹⁷² Interview with Rassul Khan, Pol-e Khomri, June 2010.

¹⁷⁰ Interview with UN official, Kabul, April 2010.

Box 3**Rivalry and competition within the Afghan state**

The Kabul government's support of Pashtuns in the province, to expand their share of power at the expense of the Tajiks, exacerbated its own weakness. Local Tajik officials believe that Kabul considers the local Pashtuns as its natural allies in its current conflict with the Tajik power centre around Ustad Atta, the governor of Balkh province, and in a potential wider conflict after international forces withdraw. This mindset is pronounced in Hezb-e Islami that – albeit weakened – maintains an armed presence in parts of the northeast. The last three governors of Baghlan, including the incumbent, are known Hezb supporters. President Karzai personally intervened several times to have Amir Gul, a former Hezb commander, released from the US prison in Bagram where he was held after he was found with suicide bomber vests, belts and explosives and arrested. Today, Amir Gul is district governor of Baghlan-e Jadid, the province's most troublesome district, appointed directly by President Karzai.¹⁷³

According to several ANA and MOI (Ministry of the Interior) sources, Karzai as well as former interior minister Hanif Atmar have treated radical Pashtuns gently.¹⁷⁴ When, for example, in late 2009 the police in Pol-e Khomri confiscated a truck with flour owned by Mullah Yunus, a Taleban commander, MOI reportedly gave orders to release the truck and driver. And, during the elections in August 2009, MOI ordered police to surrender to attacking Taleban even when they were outnumbering them.¹⁷⁵

One case is the rise and fall of Baghlan's former police commander Kabir Andarabi. A former high-ranking member of Najibullah's security forces, he was deployed to Pol-e Khomri in 2009 and explicitly announced his intentions to campaign for Karzai in the presidential elections. Soon after his arrival, the province's security situation deteriorated. Several times in October 2009, Taleban surprisingly easily captured police vehicles. In January 2010, information about a police patrol was obviously leaked, leading to the deaths of eight policemen in an ambush, again with vehicles captured. Several police officers were arrested shortly after but quickly released. According to different sources, 19–30 police cars were lost altogether.¹⁷⁶

Local officials report that after Minister Atmar's decision to finally sack Andarabi, he met resistance from the ruling family. Presidential brother Mahmud Karzai intervened personally to keep Andarabi in his position,¹⁷⁷ who earlier had helped to suppress workers' protests in Pol-e Khomri's cement factory and coal mine, both owned partly by Mahmud Karzai. According to sources, Mahmud Karzai was strongly interested in good relations with the Taleban in order to protect his companies. In an interview with a local news agency, the ANA commander of Northern Afghanistan, General Murat Ali Murat, criticised the provincial government for their leniency towards the Taleban on the record: 'The Taleban improve in Baghlan because the government of Baghlan supports the Taleban.'¹⁷⁸

Finally, a high-ranking US officer in northern Afghanistan, who spoke under condition of anonymity, aired his frustration: 'We arrest people; the NDS lets them run away. Now I immediately inform the world: This guy is captured! So they can't let him escape quietly!'¹⁷⁹ Provincial Council head Muhammad Rassul Khan sums it up: 'The government supports the people who fight against the government. This is very irritating indeed.'¹⁸⁰

¹⁷³ Interviews with Sanjar Sohail, editor in chief of *Hasht-e Sobh* daily (Kabul), and with UNAMA official, April 2010.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with high-ranking MOI official in Kabul, June 2010: 'Atmar actively supported mainly Hezb-e Islami and spared Taleban.' Interview with police officers in Pol-e Khomri, February 2010.

¹⁷⁵ Interview with police officers in Pol-e Khomri,

October 2009.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, and according to Muhammad Rasool Khan, head of the provincial council of Baghlan, interviewed in June 2010.

¹⁷⁷ Interview with former high-ranking NDS-officer in Pol-e Khomri, June 2010, confirmed by former ANA general in Kabul, June 2010.

¹⁷⁸ *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 3rd of Hamal, confirmed by Zabihullah Ehsas, the interviewer.

¹⁷⁹ Interview in Mazar-e Sharif, July 2010.

¹⁸⁰ Interview in Pol-e Khomri, June 2010.

The under-equipped and under-staffed Hungarian PRT in Pol-e Khomri has for years been restricted by national caveats to act 'only (in) self defense'.¹⁸¹ Patrols are limited to the vicinity of the PRT compound. German officers from the neighbouring PRT in Kunduz complained in late 2008 that 'there is no cooperation with the Hungarians.'¹⁸² At the same time, the Taliban do not directly attack the Hungarians. High-ranking US officers and Taliban commanders use identical words to describe the situation: both call the Hungarians troops 'irrelevant'.¹⁸³ American forces, operating in Baghlan since 2009, as well as German forces who started to operate in Baghlan as part of their newly extended mentoring mission with the ANA, do not conduct joint missions with the Hungarian troops.¹⁸⁴ The impression of ISAF being absent has changed, however, with the arrival of US troops. These are mainly Special Operations Forces who have been conducting 'capture-or-kill' missions in the province since 2010.

For some time, the peculiar situation in Baghlan offered a glimpse of the future conflicts of Afghanistan, particularly how alliances against foreign forces and the Afghan government fall apart, once the common enemy is – at least temporarily – gone. In early March 2010, suddenly heavy clashes erupted between Taliban and Hezb-e Islami fighters around the village of Dand-e Shahabudin between Pol-e Khomri and Baghlan-e Markazi close to the old sugar factory. As *Time* magazine humorously described it, 'the Taliban and allied insurgents are skipping the formality of NATO to leave'¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ UNDSS Provincial Assessment, 20 April 2008.

¹⁸² Marc Lindemann, *Unter Beschuss: Warum Deutschland in Afghanistan scheitert* (Berlin: Econ Verlag 2010), p.126.

¹⁸³ Interview with a high-ranking US officer in July 2010. Interview with Taliban commander Bur Jan by phone, April 2010.

¹⁸⁴ To get access to Pul-e Khumri and to interview the officers there, the authors tried since April 2010, received various excuses, but were denied access. Even written questions could not be answered, since 'their content was classified' (for example, the answer to the question for the number of Hungarian soldiers in Pul-e Khumri).

¹⁸⁵ *Time* magazine, 8 March 2010.

and instead attacked each other. In the morning of 6 March 2010, Taliban from several districts, reinforced by fighters from Chahar Dara district in Kunduz, attacked Hezb-e Islami in their former stronghold. 'When Hezb-e-Islami fighters realized that the Taliban had them surrounded and outgunned, they made a desperate call to the authorities, declaring that they were switching sides to join the government and asking for reinforcement to be sent — and fast.'¹⁸⁶ The fighting lasted two days and ended with a total defeat of Hezb. According to the deputy commander of the provincial police, Zalmay Mangal, 35 Hezb-e Islami-fighters and 15 Taliban died.

The fighting broke out for two reasons: first, a conflict arose about which group is authorised to collect *ushr* from villagers, the main source of income for both groups. Second, the Taliban suspected that Hezb was secretly negotiating with the Karzai government for military support in exchange for their political backing. The Taliban leadership was particularly afraid that the new Baghlan governor, Munshi Majid, would clandestinely form an alliance with Hekmatyar's party, so they started their attacks prior to his appointment.

Government support came late, was insufficient and could not prevent defeat. Some 70 Hezb fighters fled the area and received asylum at the district police headquarters in Pol-e Khomri and then relocated to a private building, provided mainly with food by UNAMA and USAID until July 2010.¹⁸⁷ Since the March clash, the local Hezb-e Islami group has not recovered and remains weak in the province while the Taliban control more than half of the districts most of the time. ANA offensives like 'Tawhid I' and others that have been conducted since

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ Interview with Muhammad Munib Dai, Baghlan program director of Afghan New Beginning Programme, July 2010. According to him, 20 of the fighters there joined the Taliban in the meantime. About 50 Hezb fighters were still in the building. Thirty of them handed their weapons, mostly AK-47s, to the police.

Box 4**Ethnic rivalry among the Taleban in Baghlan**

The growth in strength of the Pashtun fronts in Baghlan and their ability to secure support from the Taleban leadership alienated the old Tajik commanders. Dad Khoda, the main Tajik commander in Baghlan (based in Pakistan as of spring 2010), maintained good relations with the IMU, but refused to cooperate with the leading Pashtun Taleban, Mullah Ruhollah. He demanded to be appointed military commander of the province and to have separate lines of supply from those of Ruhollah and his men.¹⁸⁸ A group of Tajiks from Badakhshan however reportedly continues to operate around Pol-e Khomri with the Pashtuns.¹⁸⁹

April 2010 have only temporarily managed to change the equation of power.

Non-Pashtun districts of Baghlan have increasingly come under Taleban influence for two main reasons. On one hand, traditional recruitment methods seem to have changed; while the Taleban are less directly involved, clerics play a more important role. On the other hand, disputes over land and pasture rights sometimes date back decades. Until recently, the Taleban kept out of these conflicts but increasingly a quarreling party will ask them to get involved to strengthen the disputant's position – as happened in the Nahrin, Tala wa Barfak and Burka districts.¹⁹⁰

In Baghlan especially, giving precise numbers of Taleban fighters is difficult because no faction seems sure of the loyalty of its men. Taleban have been joining Hezb-e Islami and vice versa since March 2010 and even *arbaki* militias have been entering tacit agreements with Taleban.¹⁹¹ Hence, the number of Taleban fighters is given as between 300 and

1,000 in the whole province (as of October 2010), concentrated on Baghlan-e Jadid, Dand-e Ghori and Pul-e Khumri. The numbers of fighters from southern Afghanistan as well as from other countries remain low, ranging from 10 to 20. They are said to be mostly Uzbeks and Arabs, giving training to the local Taleban on how to build IEDs or set traps.¹⁹²

In Baghlan, as in Kunduz, since early 2010 the Taleban have enforced a nightly closure of the mobile phone networks to prevent informers from passing on locations of fighters and commanders to ISAF or Afghan forces. While in Kunduz, the four major companies reopened in early 2011, at least two, including Roshan, remain closed in Baghlan.

The two main groups of Taleban in Baghlan operate in the north of the province (Pashtuns) and around Nahrin, Khost o Ferenj and the Andarab valley districts; they may move around if challenged by enemy military operations (see Map 5).¹⁹³

¹⁸⁸ Interview with Afghan informer connected to the Taleban, May 2010.

¹⁸⁹ NGO and private security personal, 24 April 2010.

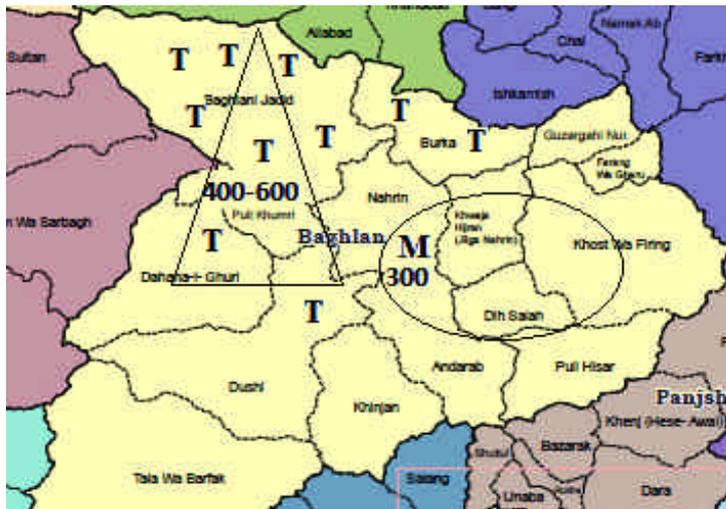
¹⁹⁰ Interview with local researcher from Nahrin, Pul-e Khomri, June 2010.

¹⁹¹ Worth mentioning in this context are the two (former) main commanders of Hezb-e Islami in Baghlan-e Markazi, Mirwais and Atiq; both joined the Taleban in early 2009 after falling out with the district governor of Baghlan-e Jadid, Amir Gul, before they re-joined Hezb-e Islami shortly before the fighting erupted in March 2010.

¹⁹² Mentioned in various interviews with police officials, local journalists and an ex-NDS-officer from Baghlan between May and July 2010.

¹⁹³ Imam-e Sabz (also known as Imam-e Duzd or Imam, the robber), commander in Nahrin who is said to keep a close relation with Hezb-e Islami. He was mentioned in numerous interviews as a mere criminal and as leader of a criminal gang in 'UNDSS Provincial Assessment Baghlan,' 20 April 2008.

Map 5
Main groups of Taleban in Baghlan



Notes: The geometric shapes indicate the main areas of Taliban activity and the numbers indicate the number of insurgents; M indicates mixed groups (Taliban and others armed groups).

Table 2
Structure of Taleban leadership in Baghlan, as of October 2010

GOVERNOR OF THE TALEBAN SHADOW GOVERNMENT	<i>Mullah Ruhollah</i> , a Taleban commander from Helmand, who was appointed shadow governor in June after four predecessors were captured or killed by US forces within several weeks.* Due to their experience, he prefers to 'remote-control' operations from Pakistan.
HEAD OF MILITARY OPERATIONS	<i>Mullah Yunus</i>
HEAD OF INTELLIGENCE	<i>Mullah Saleh</i> , a former Taleban commander, who lived after 2001 for five years in Pakistan and frequently commutes between Baghlan and Pakistan
COMMANDERS	<i>Mullah Lal Khan</i> , a.k.a. Mullah Lal-e Din, a commander from the Ahmadzai tribe, a commander in Dand-e Ghor <i>Bur Jan</i> , a commander in Pul-e Khumri <i>Mawlawi Salim</i> , <i>Mawlawi Abdulhai</i> , <i>Qari Obaid</i> , <i>Mullah Sattar</i> , <i>Mullah Jabar</i> , <i>Mullah Akhtar</i> , commanders in Baghlan-e Jadid, <i>Imam-e Sabz</i> (a.k.a. Imam-e Duz, i.e. Imam the Robber), commander in Nahrin (who is said to keep a close relation with Hezb-e Islami), mentioned in numerous interviews as a mere criminal** <i>Mullah Ghayur</i> and <i>Qari Fedayi</i> , commanders in Burqa <i>Mullah Jabar</i> , commander in Doshi <i>Dad Khoda</i> , Tajik commander, currently based in Pakistan

Most interesting is the case of *Mullah Naim*, one of the most experienced Taleban commanders and a former mujahedin commander whom US forces captured in June 2010. Contrary to other cases, the order came to take Naim alive.

* According to the report 'PR # 2010-01-001,' issued by US forces media department in Mazar-e Sharif, 1 June 2010

** Also mentioned as leader of a criminal gang in 'UNDSS Provincial Assessment Baghlan,' 20 April 2008

ANNEX 3 PROVINCIAL CASE STUDY, TAKHAR

No Taleban groups were operational in Takhar and very few attacks took place before 2010.¹⁹⁴ Common wisdom was that this province is calm (which was correct) and will remain so (which is unlikely, as shall be explained). The small Pashtun presence – 10 per cent of the overall population, immigrated since the 1950s – in this predominantly Uzbek (44 per cent) and Tajik (42 per cent) province led to the belief that it would be ethnically immune from Taleban infiltration.

Since the fall of the Taleban regime, Takhar has remained under the often-brutal control of former mujahedin commanders who rule like feudal lords. Qazi Kabir exemplifies their position above the law; he prevented Pashtun refugees' attempts to return from Pakistan to their land in Khwaja Bahauddin district in Northern Takhar in 2006 by imprisoning more than 80 families in an old castle. For years, all attempts by the police and the Kabul government were simply ignored to the benefit of local Uzbek and Tajik commanders.¹⁹⁵ Other cases of arbitrary behaviour include murder, rape, the theft of land, kidnapping and forced marriages. Between 2005 and 2008, this led to numerous demonstrations against those commanders – but not one was removed.

This situation is one in which the Afghan government has proven inefficient for years. As one local inhabitant was quoted in a recent study on Northern Afghanistan:

For every problem we have a solution, but for these problems [corruption and bad governance] we do not have any. We can only

solve the problems if we have a good government. Three years ago we had no Taleban; but now Taleban exist. So the situation is getting worse. If we compare the corruption to how it was three years ago, right now people request bribes *openly*. If any person has a problem and he goes to a government department, if he brings money, he can solve the problem; if he does not he cannot solve the problem. [Paying bribes] is like a law.¹⁹⁶

Consequently, we face the paradoxical situation that Taleban control and heavy-handed Taleban governance, which initially led to the rise of power of the commanders, now could help the Taleban to regain control because people tend to see them as a minor evil compared with the current rulers. These tensions have existed since 2002 but did not lead to the rise of the Taleban earlier. They had left the province in 2001 in a state of vulnerability, providing fertile ground for any viable alternative to the oppressive status quo. Still the Taleban only flourished once they infiltrated this province from outside again. People obviously had patience and hope for the Afghan government to improve their situation. This indicates that social and economic marginalisation alone is not sufficient to trigger the insurgency.

The penetration of insurgents in Takhar can be divided into two phases:

- a preliminary one when the Taleban largely co-opted local armed gangs linked to Jamiat in the southern and central districts of the province;¹⁹⁷ and
- a more-advanced phase when the Taleban moved core units into the northern part of the province.

During the first phase, only a handful of Taleban were in Takhar. In early 2010, a group of 60–100 fighters entered the province from Kunduz and settled in the woods at the triangle between Derqad, Yangi Qala and Khwaja Bahauddin districts. They included Pashtuns and Tajiks from Takhar, Pashtuns from Helmand and a few foreign fighters. As

¹⁹⁴ The few reports that can be found note the following: the attack against a police checkpoint in the district of Kalafgan in July 2008 when the Taleban commander Mullah Osman was killed; the killing of a local Taleban commander in Dasht-e Qala (*Afghan Voice Agency*, 15 October 2009).

¹⁹⁵ Jan Koehler and Kristóf Gosztónyi, 'PCA Analyse Nordafghanistan,' Berlin: Analysis Research Consulting, February 2010, p 95.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Interview with private security company analyst, Kabul, 17 April 2010.

Box 5**Patterns of recruitment in Takhar**

In Khwaja Gar district, for a whole year starting in 2009, two Uzbek preachers roved, preaching jihad against the 'infidel occupiers of Afghanistan', 'Christian and Jewish missionaries' and the Afghan 'puppet-government'. Undisturbed by police and local officials they recruited young followers mainly from a madrassa in the village of Qoroq. This madrassa, Dar-ul Ulum Rahmaniya, was supposedly part of the network of Fazlul Rahman, a prominent cleric in Pakistan. According to various sources in the area, the two Uzbeks had come from Waziristan. Likewise, one Tajik and one Chechen had been preaching at the madrassa in Qoroq. Their activities were even more surprising considering that the people of Khwaja Gar had severely suffered from Taleban attacks in 2000 when the frontline was crossing that district.¹⁹⁸

After one year, they had formed a group of 40 fierce young followers (all of whom were Uzbeks except three or four Pashtuns) who in April 2010 attacked a police convoy in with the deputy head of police was travelling from Khawaja Bahawudin in the area of Kaflatan. Four policemen were wounded and in the following fight the Taleban escaped to neighbouring Dasht-e Archi district. A group of elders and fathers of the young militants followed them to persuade them to return and refrain from joining the Taleban. Once they reached the area, some more senior Taleban recited verses from the Quran, praised the holy duty to wage jihad and obviously convinced the delegates to give up their sons and return empty-handed. None of the sons returned.¹⁹⁹

recently as April 2010, another Taleban front of 40–60 men formed in Khwaja Ghar.²⁰⁰

The geographical character of Takhar eases infiltration by Taleban fighters and agents: they can easily cross to their stronghold in Dasht-e Archi in northwestern Kunduz from Chitral (Pakistan) via Nuristan and Badakhshan as well as from Tajikistan. As a result, their presence in Takhar is strongest in the northern districts.

As of late, the Taleban have favored appointing Uzbeks to positions in the northeast, presumably to achieve a mobilising impact. The head of the Taleban commission in the northeast was an Uzbek from Rustaq,²⁰¹ who had served as a bodyguard of Mullah Omar in Kandahar in the 1990s and then as a military commander in the north. The military commander of Takhar is either Mawlali Alem,

an Uzbek from Kalafkan, or Mullah Rashid, a Tajik from Dasht-e Archi (reports conflict) – but in any case, not a Pashtun. Other members of the commission included Mawlawi Abdul Ghafur (Tajik), Mawlawi Mohsen (Tajik from Farkhar) and Mawlawi Shabir Ahmad (from Badakhshan). The analysis of district governors and military commanders seems to reflect this pattern.

The predominant path of recruitment in Takhar has nothing to do with Pashtun pockets and investing on ethnic conflicts but is based on religious indoctrination that easily crosses ethnic lines (see Box 5). In this, it is similar to patterns in the northwest, as we shall see in the relevant case studies below.

During summer 2010, fighting intensified in Khwaja Gar and other districts of northwestern Takhar, Khawaja Bahawudin, Yangi Qala and Derqad. On 16 July around 100 to 200 Taleban attacked the area of Mintshekur and Jaukada in Khwaja Gar; district governor Mullah Omar called the provincial headquarters of the ANP for urgent help. 'But their only answer,' he recalls, 'was, "We have to get orders from the MOI in Kabul. And today is Friday, no one will pick up

¹⁹⁸ Interview with Mullah Omar, district governor of Khwaja Ghar, July 2010.

¹⁹⁹ Interview with local journalist, Taloqan, June 2010.

²⁰⁰ Interview with security officer, Mazar-e Sharif, 18 April 2010.

²⁰¹ Sayed Qasem, who was arrested in June. By October no replacement had been announced.

the phone there." Hence no one came, and we had to fight the Taliban with the local police and the two dozen men of our Abarki. Which I opposed to set up for a long time, but now we have no other choice. The government is doing nothing to rescue us.²⁰²

This conclusion was heard repeatedly from interviewees in Takhar (and other provinces): the Taliban do not succeed because they are strong – but because the government is weak. In contrast, the Taliban call for and get support on short notice from neighbouring districts and even provinces, as happened on 16 July 2010 when the local insurgents received re-enforcement from Imam Sahib, Gortepa and Dasht-e Archi in Kunduz.²⁰³

In May 2010, the Taliban commission of Takhar reportedly succeeded in bringing over to the Taliban side the Kuchis of Kunduz and Takhar, after negotiating with their leaders. Typically the Kuchis were rewarded with financial support and military supplies by the commission. The new focus on Uzbeks might have contributed to the emergence of relatively significant groups of Uzbek insurgents in Rostaq and Khwaja Ghar in recent months. Taliban sources no longer mention the original areas of activity in central Takhar; their focus seems now to be the north, including Chah Ab where they established a new front in early spring 2010.²⁰⁴

Clearly, the Taliban strength in the areas of the early fronts in the central and southern parts of the province declined.²⁰⁵

Although violence has reached unprecedented levels in northwestern Takhar, the insurgents' main interest is still clearly to establish their presence, control the population, raise taxes and recruit new members. Control over smuggling routes might have been why the new front was located in the northern part of the province, near the border with Central Asia. The insurgents have reportedly been negotiating agreements with smugglers: protection in exchange for financial support and help in getting militants across the border.²⁰⁶ According to a high-ranking intelligence official in Kabul, the Takhar Taliban's funding comprises of collecting *ushr* and its share in drug smuggling (35 per cent each) as well as financial support 'from Pakistan' (30 per cent) which can mean from the ISI or from other sources in the Gulf who channel their money through Pakistan.

Similar to Kunduz, but on a lower scale, SOF operations in Takhar started targeting and killing Taliban commanders in September 2010. In October, an ANA offensive was launched resulting in an unconfirmed number of insurgents killed and several low-ranking commanders surrendering to Afghan forces.

²⁰² Interview with Mullah Omar, district governor of Khwaja Ghar, July 2010.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Interview with Afghan informer connected to the Taliban, May 2010.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

Table 3
Structure of Taleban leadership in Takhar, as of October 2010

Taleban fighters number 300–400 in Takhar province. The exact number is difficult to establish as fighters often move between districts and provinces. Hence details and positions are only listed for five districts, although Taleban are active on a lower scale in other districts as well.

SHADOW GOVERNOR	<i>Mawlawi Muhsin</i> , a.k.a. Haji Khalid, originally from Farkhar district and presently based in Pakistan from where he gives his directions via phone
DEPUTY SHADOW GOVERNOR	<i>Mawlawi Abdul Alim</i> , originally from Kalafgan district
MILITARY COMMANDER OF TAKHAR	<i>Mullah Rashid</i> , Tajik, resides in Dasht-e Archi
HEAD OF INTELLIGENCE	<i>Mullah Musar</i>
KHWAJA BAHAWUDDIN	<i>Qari Sarrajuddin</i> , a.k.a. Qari Omar, ex-district shadow governor, 25–27 years old, Tajik, originally from Badakhshan, studied in Pakistan. He was killed in November 2010 during an airstrike. His close associate and probable successor <i>Mullah Juma</i> a.k.a. Mawlawi Khali, was arrested by ANP on 6 November in Ganda village of the same district. Currently the identity of the district shadow governor is unknown. <i>Mullah Ghafur</i> , military commander, 42 years old, Pashtun, was a small commander under Massoud against the Taleban regime until 2001 and changed sides recently (according to other information he fought WITH the Taleban until 2001). Most of the approximately 50 fighters in the district are Uzbek, a minority Pashtun.
DARQAD	<i>Qari Abdul Rashid</i> , district governor, no details known, since September 2, 2010, after the former commander Atallah was killed in an US air strike. <i>Mawlawi Sardar</i> , military commander, 40 years old, a Gujar (mostly nomads, a small Pashtun-related minority) <i>Mawlawi Halim</i> , sub-commander Although only about 45 Taleban are in the district, they control 80 per cent of the area and even ANA preferably travels by helicopter to the district centre
YANGI QALA	The replacement of district governor <i>Mawlawi Jawadullah</i> is not known yet. Jawadullah (about 55 years old, Pashtun from the Omar Khel tribe, mullah and madrassa-teacher who studied in Pakistan) was killed on 7 October 2010 by SOF. <i>Muhammad Isa Khan</i> , a.k.a. Muhammad Khalid, military commander, about 32 years old, Pashtun from Omar Khel tribe, studied in Pakistan <i>Nazik Mir</i> , Pashtun; <i>Qadratullah</i> , Pashtun; <i>Qari Islamuddin</i> , sub-commanders About 70 Taleban are in the district and control more than half of it
KHWAJA GHAR	<i>Qari Muhammad Amin</i> , district governor, Uzbek <i>Mullah Hussein</i> , military commander, Uzbek, son of a former jihadi commander, killed by Russians in the 1980s <i>Mullah Abdul Qari</i> , commander of a small unit as well as head of the justice commission, Uzbek, about 35 years old, studied at the law faculty of Balkh University in Mazar-e Sharif <i>Mawlawi Yussuf</i> , attorney of the justice commission, Uzbek, elected as a member of the provincial council, but left

a few Taliban cadres.²⁰⁷ Argo, an old Hezb-e Islami stronghold, has been one of the main centres of insurgent activity. The exposed district of Warduj, which can be infiltrated from Nuristan, has been another. What the exact source of violence is in most cases is not clear; factional conflict goes on within Jamiat and between Jamiat and Hezb-e Islami, which causes violence that is sometimes attributed to the Taliban. Local sources further suggest that small-scale Taliban infiltration from Takhar and Nuristan continues.²⁰⁸ Taliban coming over from Takhar might be more inclined to help establish a Taliban presence in the adjacent districts while Taliban coming over from the east, that is, Tajikistan or Pakistan, mainly use Badakhshan as a transit corridor to reach other destinations.

The new military commission of the Taliban, appointed to overlook the northeastern region in spring 2010, reportedly concluded that the insurgency in Badakhshan was developing too slowly and that new leaders should be appointed to accelerate the pace. The two long-standing leaders of the Badakhshan Taliban, Mawlawi Saif-ur-Rahman (temporarily detained, current status unclear) and Pahlawan Shamsuddin, could not get along, the latter being a Tajik and the former an Uzbek with links to IMU and al-Qaeda. Saif-ur-Rahman's group has recently become more active and one of his cadres has reached Badakhshan from Pakistan, organising a couple of small insurgent groups in Argo and Keshm districts and trying to mobilise more.²⁰⁹

The arrest of one of the main Taliban figures in Badakhshan in 2009, Mullah Abdul Razzaq, by German Special Forces might have convinced the commission of the need for

new blood. New, proactive commanders were sent to Badakhshan to motivate or shame into action the less active local sympathisers of the Taliban. Some of the new arrivals may already have sprung into action, attacking Keshm district centre on 11 May 2010 and ambushing the Warduj chief of police as well as a pro-government mullah in early May.²¹⁰ Until this fresh activism, Taliban sympathisers were mostly active in the conservative and Deobandi-influenced Warduj district. Fundamentalist mullahs operate in the northern part of the district, which is largely Sunni – as opposed to the south, which has a large Ismaili population. One of the leading figures in the north is Mullah Sayed Amir, a former commander of Hezb-e Islami. Some minor local commanders, including disaffected Jamiatis and some other Hezbis, have taken part in violent activities in Warduj.²¹¹ German forces in Warduj came under attack in early 2010. But after most troops from the PRT in Faizabad were redeployed to Kunduz to reinforce the newly formed ASB mentoring battalion, the patrols' range was reduced to the provincial capital. The killing of ten international and national staff members of the International Assistance Mission (IAM) on 5 August 2010 (who were treating patients in remote villages of Nuristan) seems to have been an isolated attack, perpetrated by fighters from outside the Taliban command structure, following orders from Pakistani insurgents.²¹²

According to a western analyst, 'the Taliban couldn't operate here without the blessing of Hezb-e Islami who itself remains quiet here.'²¹³ Technically, the Taliban fighters are improving: while until 2009 the material used to produce IEDs was mainly ammonium nitrate fertilizer, today military explosives are

²⁰⁷ '2 Taliban Commanders Detained in NE Afghan province,' *Xinhua*, 5 July 2010. Two other Taliban commanders, Qari Amin and Qari Ghulam, were arrested by NDS one week later, according to NDS in Faizabad.

²⁰⁸ Interview with security officer, Mazar-e Sharif, 18 April 10. Communication with Fabrizio Foschini, June 2010.

²⁰⁹ Interview with Afghan informer connected to the Taliban, June 2010; *Xinhua*, '2 Taliban Commanders Detained' (FN 210).

²¹⁰ Interview by Afghan informer connected with the Taliban, May 2010. Communication with Fabrizio Foschini, June 2010.

²¹¹ Communication with Fabrizio Foschini, June 2010.

²¹² This at least was the preliminary result of research and interviews with investigators from Afghan, US and German police, August 2010.

²¹³ Interview with Western analyst, Faizabad, August 2010.

used.²¹⁴ For the Taliban in general, Badakhshan seems to be very relevant for smuggling and a safe passage to and from Pakistan.

In Badakhshan, dual loyalties that cross current frontlines can be frequently observed. The reason for this phenomenon lies, according to local sources, in the ongoing competition between commanders and police chiefs over control of the main smuggling routes. Taliban are not seen as allies or foes but as an additional source of income. One example is Qari Waddud, the police chief in Baharak district, a former Hezb-e Islami-follower who is now, according to Western intelligence sources in Faizabad, providing the Taliban with information.²¹⁵ A second example is Nazir Muhammad, one of the most notorious militia leaders in Badakhshan, who guards the outer ring of the German PRT with his illegal militiamen (and guarded the inner ring until 2009 when Mongolian troops took over this duty). He is also reportedly one of the patrons of weapon smuggling in the province.²¹⁶ According to Afghan intelligence sources, MP Zalmay Mujaddedi – a minor commander until Hamed Karzai appointed him as head of the NDS 10th Directorate in charge of protecting the president – has been involved in granting safe passage to insurgents for cash. On 15 January 2008, he supposedly met a high ranking insurgent commander in Jurm to negotiate the fee for Taliban crossing from Pakistan through Badakhshan: according to the source, a fee of US\$200 for each Afghan and US\$500 for each foreign fighter was agreed upon, provided that he just cross and not stay in the province.²¹⁷ Badakhshan's role as a transit corridor is corroborated by information that three groups of IMU fighters stayed in Badakhshan for several weeks in summer 2010 on their way from Pakistan to Kunduz and Takhar. Reportedly, they were led by two commanders, Aka Sharif (who arrived

in Chahar Dara in August) and Sharif Tatar (who already fought in the Swat valley in Pakistan and later in Nuristan and who is believed to have been in Khwaja Bahauddin in Takhar since August 2010).²¹⁸

In the markets of Sheghnan and Ishkashim, weapons – mainly AK-47s and AK-74s – are traded for poppy or heroin, indicating that the main Taliban interest seems to be acquiring weapons, not smuggling for cash. According to smugglers and local sources,²¹⁹ several middlemen are involved in the transactions: big smugglers who control the market places bring the weapons into Afghanistan from where they are transported by members of the border police. Then, for example, from Chah Ab district, a Hezb-e Islami commander named Tisha takes over and delivers them to Kunduz and Takhar. In Argo, the known Taliban commander Abdul Waddud is said to be in charge of transporting them to Chahar Dara. Between July and August 2010 alone, he reportedly transported 300 AK-47s from Argo to Kunduz. The opium is said to mainly come from Nangarhar and is processed locally to heroin in several laboratories that belong to various commanders who mostly have positions within the Afghan government.²²⁰

While Jamiat and Shura-ye Nazar still dominate the political setting in Badakhshan,²²¹ the province's clergy traditionally follow a very conservative approach. Activities of *Deobandi* madrassas in Pakistan have heavily influenced the religious environment in Warduj. This created a fundamentalist attitude cutting across local allegiances to the majority Jamiat in the 1980s and 1990s. While the district remained politically under the control of Rabbani's Islamic State of Afghanistan, sympathies for the Taliban ideology among the district clergy and rank-and-file mujahedin was quite high. In

²¹⁴ Interview with ISAF source in Faizabad, July 2010.

²¹⁵ Interview with NDS officer in Faizabad, July 2010.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Interview with police officer in Faizabad, July 2010.

²¹⁹ Interviews with smugglers in Ishkashim, June 2009.

²²⁰ Interview with ex-UNAMA official, June 2010.

²²¹ Shura-ye Nazar is officially the military wing of Jamiat that was led by late Ahmad Shah Massud, but in fact is a rather independent organisation.

the 1990s, a local cleric declared an Islamic Emirate on the district level. Without breaking with the Rabbani government politically, its leader sought to implement the same socio-religious decrees locally the Taleban had enforced in the rest of the country.²²²

Since 2009, wandering preachers of the tablighi movement, close to the *Deobandi* school in Pakistan, roam the province. Staying for days or weeks in one place, they are preaching in mosques as well as in private houses against the 'infidel occupation'. Mostly, they are Badakhshanis who had studied for years at madrassas in Pakistan and now return to spread their acquired belief of jihad.²²³ In mid-June 2010, a group of 15 young local tablighi preachers, most of them from Argo district, who had studied in Pakistan for several years and led by a 20-year-old named Mullah Hassan, managed to turn a rumour about two women receiving male visitors at home in Jurm into a local uprising against immorality. The women were subsequently killed as alleged prostitutes, Jurm's girls' school burned down and, a week later, a fatwa was issued that women were only permitted to go to the bazaar if accompanied by their husband or another male *mahram*. Within days, the same fatwa was issued in Keshm and some other places as well; altogether three girls' schools were burned down in Badakhshan.

Back then it seemed that, under the strong influence of conservative mullahs, a peaceful district could tip over within weeks and trigger the same effect in neighbouring areas. But two weeks after the unfriendly takeover of Jurm, the majority of the local population and their elders were fed up with the new 'Islamic rule' and called a former commander in for

help. Subsequently, Mullah Hassan was killed; his companions were arrested by the NDS and handed over to US forces under the accusation of being al-Qaeda members.²²⁴

Although this kind of recruitment attempt was less successful here than in other provinces, the inclination towards a very conservative interpretation of Islam seemed to represent an entry point for Taleban infiltration. However, even that apparently does not always work, as in the case of the most radical madrassa of the province, Dasht-e Farakh in Baharak district – security forces shut it down in early July 2010 and no further activities have been observed since.

At the same time, Badkshshan local security officers – as elsewhere – are deeply irritated by the general shift in Kabul's policy welcoming the Taleban 'as brothers'. 'The word "Taleban" is no longer a curse, the red line now is drawn before al-Qaeda. Hence people are doubtful whether we should fight the Taleban – or not any longer? All these talks about reconciliation and Karzai's constant appraisal of Mullah Omar have in the last three months dramatically changed the perception of people.'²²⁵

Apparently, at the provincial level the local population as well as the authorities try to prevent Taleban from gaining ground in Badakhshan (except for the areas mentioned above). At the same time smugglers, local powerbrokers, police commanders (the three categories often overlap) and politicians have no problem in facilitating Taleban activities in other provinces by providing them with weapons or safe passage as long as their own province remains relatively calm.

²²² According information provided by Fabrizio Foschini, June 2010.

²²³ Interview with ex-UNAMA official, June 2010.

²²⁴ Interview with an NDS officer, Faizabad, July 2010.

²²⁵ Interview with UNAMA security expert, Faizabad, July 2010.

incidents were rare but, as Graph 2 shows, they were becoming more significant during 2009–10. The arrest of the Taliban governor for Aqcha in 2009 only stemmed the insurgents' expansion momentarily.

The remote cluster of three districts of Darzab, Sayyad and Qush Tepa emerged as the most important Taliban pocket in northwestern Afghanistan in 2009, due to the number of Taliban operating from there and its strategic location. The region is accessed by the local Swedish PRT only a few times each year and is completely inaccessible during most months due to weather conditions.

The main Taliban commander in this area, Mullah Nadir, appears to be Tajik, probably Aimaq, and has been associated with the Taliban since before Operation Enduring Freedom started in late 2001. Initially, he returned to his village to lie low but the police harassed him for extortion and he finally took to the mountains in 2006. At that time, the reach of the Taliban to northern Afghanistan was limited and not until 2008 did Mullah Nadir reportedly link up with the Taliban leadership and travel to Pakistan. From there, he returned to his hideout near al-Malik village with weapons and fighters. Since then his front has been steadily expanding and is believed to number at least 180 men as of April 2010.²²⁷ Mullah Nadir has been recruiting in Darzab and Qush Tepa, most of Sar-e Pol district, as well as in other provinces.

A mixed population of Tajiks, Uzbek and Arabs inhabit Sayyad, with Tajiks accounting for perhaps half. Darzab is largely Uzbek, with small Tajik, Arab and Aimaq minorities. Qush Tepa has a significant Pashtun minority. But the most important characteristic of the three districts is their remoteness from the Afghan state which resulted, among other things, in a modest number of state schools, limited to the district centre and a few large villages, and in the predominance of religious madrassas. The influence of the clergy in these districts is

strong. Initially the local Taliban had opposed secular schools, but under pressure from the communities, they eventually accepted to reopen the schools but collect a 20 per cent tax on the teachers' salaries. Many local mullahs were educated in Pakistan; not surprisingly, Taliban sympathisers emerged in this area quite early, in 2003, preaching against the foreign occupation.²²⁸

From this pocket, a group of Taliban led by Mawlawi Baqi, an ex-official of the Taliban regime, has been operating in the northern, mountainous part of Belcheragh district. Other groups moved north, affecting virtually the full length of the road to Shiberghan. WFP was forced to stop operations after being threatened in 2009–10.²²⁹ Mullah Nadir himself has been spreading his activities northwards, towards Shiberghan, and eastwards, into Sar-e Pol district. By 2010, the collection of *khums* was reported, even near the provincial centre.²³⁰ IMU was reportedly present in the area at least until 2009. But IMU fighters do not seem to have cooperated closely with Mullah Nadir's men, who largely originate in that particular area.

Although not as remote as Darzab and Qush Tepa, Aqcha shares a similar history of government neglect. The majority of the local youth does not receive any public education and attends madrassas instead, many of which have become Taliban recruitment grounds. About half of the population of Aqcha is Turkmen, with Uzbek, Arab and Tajik minorities. In Aqcha and in most of Jowzjan, the predominance of Turkmens is a major factor that may predispose the region to Taliban influence due to the weak links between Turkmen communities and anti-Taliban factions.

Apart from the ethnic make-up, these districts share the same history of government neglect. Even where state schools are open, attendance rates are low compared with

April 2010. Interview with Olfaty, MJ from Jowzjan, Kabul, 25 April 2010.

²²⁷ Interview with intellectuals from Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol, Mazar-e Sharif, 20 April 2010.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Interview with foreign diplomat, Kabul, 7 April 2010.

²³⁰ Interview with UN official, Mazar-e Sharif, 21 April 2010.

madrassas; many Turkmen families are reluctant to send children to state schools fearing they will lose their faith and, more generally, because they tend to avoid contact with the state. Turkmens usually interact little with other communities and have hostile relations with Uzbeks; they rarely speak much Dari. Government neglect is also reflected in the weakness of the security forces: Aqcha's 31 villages are only covered by 20 policemen and two to four NDS staff.

Influential clerical networks fill this vacuum. One of the few Uzbek intellectuals who maintains close relations with Turkmen described their way of life as 'close to the Pashtun way'; the Turkmens' value code and their nomadic ancestry brings them closer to Pashtuns than to sedentary Uzbeks and Tajiks. Villagers reportedly approach mullahs for authorisation when they want to buy a television, or even just to watch it. The Turkmen intelligentsia is very small, about 60 in 2003; several districts of Jowzjan do not have a single school reaching grade 12.²³¹ Qarqin district, in particular, is renowned for the influence of its clergy and the presence of many mullahs educated in Pakistani madrassas. Only in Kham Ab are clerical networks weak and *Deobandi* influence nonexistent, due to the opposition of an established local power broker, Juma Bey, who prevented the recruitment of Pakistani-trained mullahs in local mosques.

During the 1980s, jihadi parties such as Jamiat-e Islami (Aqcha, Mordyan) and Hezb-e Islami (Derzab, Aqcha) influenced or outright controlled some districts. In Khaniqa, Hezb-e Islami members allegedly currently collaborate with the Taliban. A core mobile team of perhaps 20 insurgents has been visiting villages, preaching, taxing and recruiting.²³²

The Taliban were mobilised under the sponsorship of Mawlawi Ismail, the active shadow governor of Jowzjan. The epicentre

appears to have been Sorkhas Qul village where radicals influenced three madrassas. The Taliban district governor leading the local front was Hafiz Nurullah, from Aqcha itself. A former Taliban Emirate official, he was detained in Guantanamo for a period, joined the insurgency after his release and was arrested again in February 2010 by the NDS. By that time, he gathered an estimated 200 fighters, largely young Turkmens recruited in the madrassas of Aqcha and the neighbouring districts, although he recruited a few farmers as well. This group is rumoured to be setting up a base in the Qaraqawa mountainous region of Khaniqa.²³³

Because most other areas in this part of the province are flat, Aqcha's Taliban have easy access to the neighbouring districts of Khaniqa, Qarqin, Mordyan, Mingajik and Faizabad, which are also populated mostly by Turkmens (Mordyan, Khaniqa) or entirely so (Mingajik, Qarqin). In principle, the lack of cover should make counter-insurgency efforts easier but, as explained above, the government has not been proactive. At the same time, the Aqcha front does not appear to have benefited from external support; no foreign fighters have been reported within its ranks and its occasional military operations have appeared clumsy and ineffective. A team based in the Mimlik village of Faizabad district lost its leader Qari Niamatullah in its first serious military operation, an attack on a police check post in spring 2009.²³⁴

The Jowzjan Taliban had until early 2011 been little affected by reconciliation efforts. Even those who approach the government for reconciliation put forward steep demands. One of them, Muradi, told a government delegation that he wanted several conditions to be met: the sacking of his rivals in the local administration; the release of prisoners; a stop to all military operations and no interference in his tax collection.²³⁵ This can only be read as a sign of self-confidence and a belief in the inability of a weak government to

²³¹ Interview with intellectuals from Jowzjan, Mazar-e Sharif, 21 April 2010.

²³² Interview with intellectuals from Jowzjan, 21 April 2010.

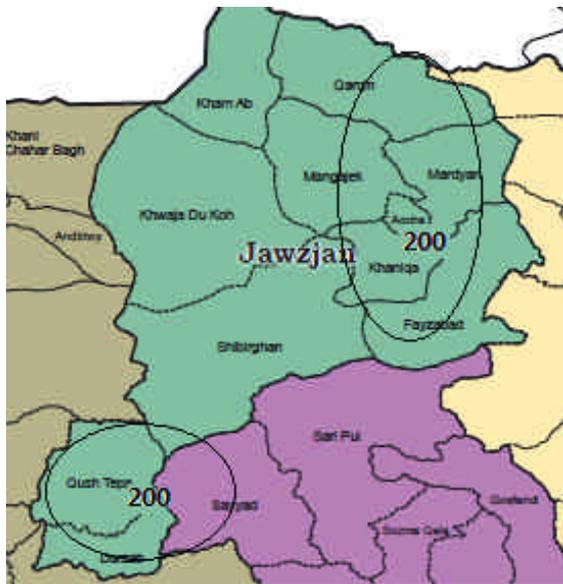
²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Interview with intellectuals from Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol, Mazar-e Sharif, 20 April 2010.

cope with the crisis. But this attitude may change once US forces start their SOF operations in the northwest.

Map 8
Taleban pockets in Jowzjan, 2010



Note: The circles indicate the main areas of Taliban activity and the numbers indicate the number of insurgents.

ANNEX 6 PROVINCIAL CASE STUDY, FARYAB

After Kunduz, Faryab, surprisingly, was an early focus of Taleban efforts in the Greater North. Faryab has long been a stronghold of Uzbek ethnic consciousness and anti-Taleban groups such as General Dostum's Junbesh. During the Taleban regime, pockets of anti-Taleban resistance existed in Qaysar district and in the south, although the Taleban were mostly firmly in control from 1998 to 2001.

Already in 2007, the Norwegian PRT based in Maimana, the provincial capital, counted 17 IED incidents in Faryab and 37 in 2008.²³⁶ During 2007, infiltration from Ghormach district in neighbouring Badghis province was limited in scale and amateurish in execution

²³⁶ ISAF source, March 2009.

but the insurgents' skills increased during 2008. By 2009, the Taleban coming from Badghis had gained a local foothold and started local taxation, which has been expanding since then.²³⁷

Although one of the early spots of Taleban infiltration in Faryab was Almar, a district with a strong Pashtun population, the Pashtun support for the insurgents has been surprisingly muted. A vulnerable minority (fewer than 15 per cent of the population), Pashtun communities appear to have helped the Taleban move men and supplies deeper into Faryab and Jowzjan, in exchange for abstaining from violent actions near their camps and villages. Fears of becoming an easy target were reinforced by common abuses by the ANA and ANP during house searches and by retaliation against people who had collaborated with the Taleban in 1990s. However, the Almar-based border police are clearly collaborating with the Taleban. As of April 2010, they had lost 187 weapons, a suspiciously high number, to the Taleban. The evidence led to the dismantling of two border posts in 2010, to the chagrin of local Pashtun communities to which the border police is a major source of jobs and benefits.²³⁸

In practice, the Taleban in Faryab have recruited mostly non-Pashtuns. Even in Almar some Pashtun elders have actively resisted the Taleban; one of them, Akhtar Muhammad Khan, was assassinated in August 2010.²³⁹ Until early 2009, local observers believed that Turkmens were more vulnerable to Taleban recruitment than either Uzbeks or Tajiks²⁴⁰ but then Uzbeks began flocking to the Taleban in larger numbers.²⁴¹ For example, Qazi Ziauddin, an Uzbek, was appointed Taleban leader in

²³⁷ Interview with UN official, Kabul, 25 April 2010.

²³⁸ Interview with UN official, Maimana, 16 March 2009. Interview with security officer, Mazar-e Sharif, April 2010. Email communication with UN official, August 2010.

²³⁹ Email communication with UN official, August 2010.

²⁴⁰ Interview with international organisation official, Kabul, 6 April 2010.

²⁴¹ Interview with UN official, Maimana, 16 March 2009.

Faryab, after his predecessor Hashim Kaikar, a Tajik, was killed.²⁴²

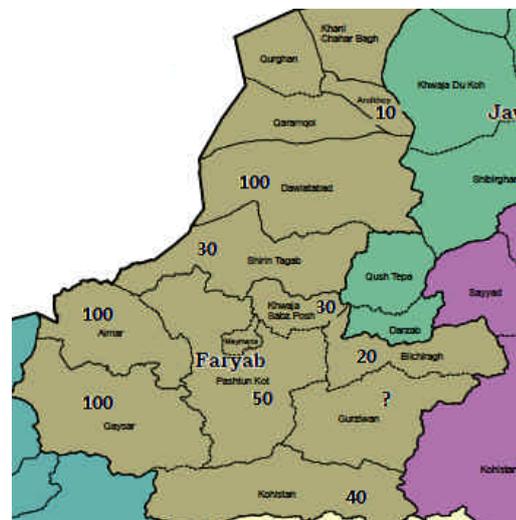
By early 2010, the insurgency affected most of Faryab. Pockets of relatively strong Taliban emerged in Dawlatabad, Qaysar, Almar and the Miandara valley in Pashtun Kot district where local recruitment is going on. In summer 2010, the Taliban felt sufficiently strong to occupy the centre of Shakh, an unofficial district formally part of Almar, and pushed out the local police contingent. Their presence is also reported from Gurziwan (Tajiks), Bilchiragh (in part linked to the group of Mullah Nadir in Sayyad, Darzab and Qush Tepa) and Shirin Tagab. In summer 2010, the Taliban started operating east of the ring road crossing Faryab, reaching Pashtun Kot, eastern Shirin Tagab and Khwaja Sabz Posh. The ring road is now unsafe, as Taliban operate check posts along it. Their apparent purpose is to remind Afghans to support the jihad against the occupiers (by paying tax) and to refuse to collaborate with them.

Certainly the impact on the population's perceptions of the government's strength has been significant; the passivity of the police in recent months contrasted with their proactive opposition to the Taliban in 2009. Taliban have seemingly unhindered access to villages close to the ring road. They seem to be growing quickly stronger. A group of fewer than 20 insurgents, mostly with criminal backgrounds, reportedly entered Miandara valley in Pashtun Kot in early March 2010 and started recruiting locally; by August their number had grown to 50. Some other districts, such as Andkhoy, registered a small-scale Taliban presence, too.²⁴³ In Kohistan, small groups have been reported, and night letters have started appearing.²⁴⁴ A front of 30 or 40 Taliban is allegedly operating in

Lawlash, near the border with Ghor province, around a village called Chahrqolug.²⁴⁵

In the southern and western districts of Faryab, the initial wave of violence was clearly linked to the Taliban's co-optation of criminal gangs.²⁴⁶ As grassroots recruitment started, however, the gangs lost importance and were replaced by genuine Taliban fighters. Several madrassas in Faryab with students of mixed ethnicity are linked to the Taliban, as are others in Jabal-e Wali and Shirin Tagab. One local observer comments: 'Every village has four or five madrassa students with links to the Taliban.'²⁴⁷

Map 9
Taliban presence in Faryab, as of October 2010



Note: The numbers indicate the number of insurgents; the question marks indicate groups of unknown size.

ANNEX 7 PROVINCIAL CASE STUDY, SAMANGAN

In Samangan, at the end of 2010, the impact of the insurgency was more limited than in the

²⁴² Interview with UN official, Kabul, 25 April 2010.

²⁴³ *The ANSO Report*, 15 March 2010. Email communication with security official in northern Afghanistan, August 2010. Email communication with UN official, August 2010.

²⁴⁴ Interview with UN official, Kabul, 25 April 2010.

²⁴⁵ Interview with Afghan intellectuals, Mazar-e Sharif, 20 April 2010.

²⁴⁶ Interview with UN official, Kabul, 25 April 2010.

²⁴⁷ Interview with international official, Kabul, 1 October 2009.

rest of the Greater North; the 110 per cent increase in violence recorded in 2010 was due to a modest number of 21 insurgent-initiated attacks.²⁴⁸ Violent incidents were reported only very occasionally. Taleban groups from Baghlan or Kunduz cross into Hazrat Sultan district for rest and recreation; they do not seem to be recruiting in Samangan.²⁴⁹ More significantly, reports have been emerging in 2010, but are not very coherent, of groups based in the province. A large group of 40–50 fighters was observed in lower Dara-ye Suf but whether it is linked to the Taleban or a criminal gang remains unclear. Some sources speak of four to five ‘core Taleban’ who have recruited both locals and criminal elements. They may also be attempting to build an insurgent base in Robatak, a mountainous area 20 kilometres east of the provincial capital Aibak. Pro-Taleban agitation was reported in the remote Ru-ye Duab district where the old network of Mawlawi Islam (a former Taleban notable turned MP and assassinated in Kabul in 2005), now led by two of his sons, seemed engaged in propaganda activity against the government and foreign presence. However, these activities might be linked to one of the son’s run for parliament in 2010. Similar activities had been reported in 2002 but then petered out, perhaps because of Mawlawi Islam’s successful candidature.²⁵⁰

A new development in late 2010 was the emergence of a nearly exclusively Uzbek *arbakai* militia to fight insurgents. According to intelligence analysts in Mazar-e Sharif, it quickly used its power to try to dominate local Hazara communities. By the end of 2010, Hazara, despite their traditional opposition to the Pashtun-dominated Taleban, formed small

Taleban groups as a response – not for ideological reasons but because they desperately sought to counter the military empowerment of the Uzbeks and because the Taleban were the only ones to offer assistance. The newly formed Hazara Taleban are said to have no intentions of fighting ISAF or Afghan government forces and only wish to maintain their military status after reconciliation as an act of self-defence.²⁵¹

ANNEX 8 PROVINCIAL CASE STUDY, SAR-E POL

A major pocket of the insurgency has been incubating in Sar-e Pol since 2006; from 2007–08 onwards, local NGOs were aware of the presence of insurgents not only in the Sayyad area but also in Sar-e Pol (centre) district. In 2007, an Islamic scholar was accused of leading a ring of insurgents involved in planting IEDs, carrying out assassinations and training a new generation of radical mullahs, and was arrested.²⁵²

By 2009, the Darzab–Qush Tapa–Sayyad pocket had developed into a Taleban stronghold in Jowzjan province to the north and was spreading the insurgency to neighbouring Belcheragh, Kohistanat, Sar-e Pol, Sozma Qala, Sangcharak, Gosfandi and Shiberghan districts. Although most of the insurgents operating in the area are locals, they are supported by infiltration from Baghdis and Faryab.²⁵³ Taxation now occurs also in areas close to the provincial capital.²⁵⁴ Taleban attacks against ANP and ANA posts increased in 2010. According to the provincial governor, ‘500 to 600 Taleban fighters’ [are] active in the province, mostly operating from the districts of Kohistanat and Sayyad.²⁵⁵

²⁴⁸ ANSO Quarterly Data Report, Q.4 2010.

²⁴⁹ Conversation with independent analyst Krystóf Gosztonyi, London, 17 February 2010.

²⁵⁰ Interview with foreign diplomat, Kabul, 7 April 2010. Personal communication with Kate Clark, March 2010. Interview with international official, Kabul, 6 April 2010. Interview with private security company analyst, Kabul, 17 April 2010. Interview with international official, Kabul October 2009. Personal communication with Thomas Ruttig, October 2010. Email communication with security officer, August 2010.

²⁵¹ Interview with western intelligence official, Mazar-e Sharif, January 2011.

²⁵² Interview with UN official, Kabul, 25 April 2010.

²⁵³ Interview with foreign diplomat, Kabul, 7 April 2010.

²⁵⁴ Interview with UN official, Mazar-e Sharif, 21 April 2010.

²⁵⁵ *The Peninsula Gateway*, 4 November 2010.

ANNEX 9 PROVINCIAL CASE STUDY, BALKH

Balkh province received a lot of attention in 2009 when the security situation worsened rapidly in districts like Chimtal, Charbolak and Balkh. Such interest is due to its strategic, economic and political importance: It is the hub of ISAF's RC North (with a major SOF base under construction) as well as of Governor Ustad Atta Muhammad Nur, a former Jamiat commander who established himself as the paramount leader of the Jamiat networks in the Greater North and at times projects himself as a major antagonist of President Karzai.

In 2009, the situation in the three mentioned districts rapidly increased the overall levels of violence in Balkh. Coinciding with the presidential election campaign, competition between supporters of different candidates likely exacerbated the already-precarious situation. As of June 2010, the three districts seemed much quieter than a year earlier, apparently confirming the role of factional manipulation in the insecurity, although violence along the main road started picking up again in July and August 2010.

To distinguish between factional and insurgency-related violence is not easy, but pro-Atta Pashtun notables have clearly been losing influence to the advantage of people linked to Juma Khan Hamdard (the only important Pashtun among the former Hezb-e Islami commanders in the north, now provincial governor in Paktia) and former Taleb notable Ibrahimkhel. While Hezb does not seem to have an organised presence here, sources reported insurgents and sympathisers in many Pashtun villages, but who had priorities in spring 2010 other than carrying out violence. They seemed to be concerned with consolidating their support within communities; attacks on NGOs have stopped and frequent meetings with elders are taking place. On the other hand, in 2010 signs indicated that insurgent activity was shifting discretely to other districts such as Shulgara and Kishinde and parts of Dawlatabad. In the former, three separate groups supposedly

existed in early 2010, one of former Jamiatis, one of Pashtuns and one of Uzbeks linked to IMU. In the latter, a former Taleb reportedly returned from a trip to Pakistan with ten armed men, all Uzbeks. Although night letters were one of the favourite activities of the Taleban in Balkh province in 2010, attacks on police posts also occurred.²⁵⁶

Repeated explicit appeals from Mullah Omar and Mullah Baradar to former jihadis in Balkh to join hands with the insurgency suggest that the Taleban are still struggling to expand their influence in this province.²⁵⁷ Proving why something does not exist is difficult, but Governor Atta's attempts to establish a comparatively well-functioning administration have seemingly contributed to the relative calm. He discretely distributed money among many powerbrokers in the province to keep them in line – this has probably helped quell the process of radicalisation.²⁵⁸

But in November 2010, Governor Atta stated that security concerns had now spread across the province, from only 'a few villages'. He perhaps understated the level of violence in 2009 when 88 insurgent-initiated attacks were recorded, but the number of attacks more-than doubled in 2010, to 182. Insurgent activity even spread to the outskirts of Mazar-e-Sharif. Atta complained that his earlier warnings had fallen on deaf ears; that no coordinated plan existed to root out the insurgents and that the local police was undermanned, badly equipped and did not receive the back up they needed from the ANA. According to Atta, there is 'just one policeman for every one or two villages,

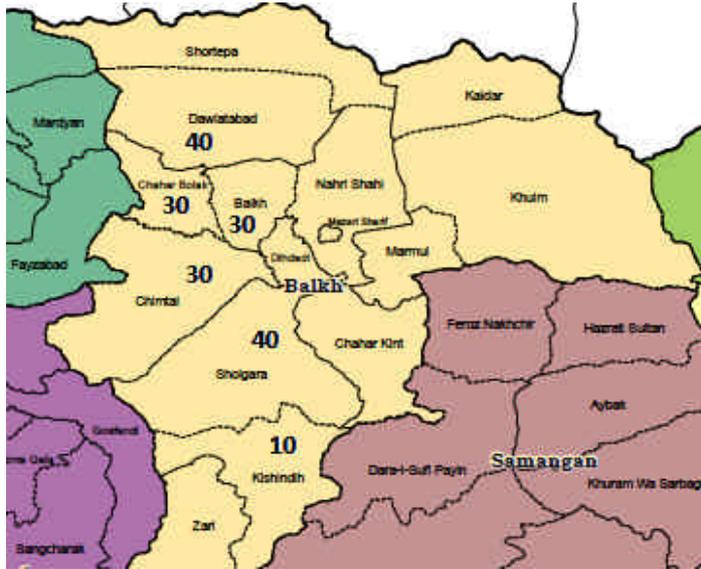
²⁵⁶ Interview with security official, Mazar-e Sharif, April 2010. Conversation with Krystóf Gosztonyi, 18 December 2009. Interview with international official, Kabul 1 October 2009. Interview with foreign diplomat, Kabul, 23 September 2009.

²⁵⁷ Interview with international official, Kabul 1, October 2009. Interview with UN official, April 2010.

²⁵⁸ According to an Afghan researcher in Mazar-e Sharif interviewed in July 2010, Governor Atta is said to control, in addition to other businesses, the legal import as well as the smuggling of various kinds of fuel from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan via the border crossing at Hairatan.

whereas it's likely there are dozens of Taliban in some of these villages.²⁵⁹ Here we see once again how Taliban infiltration has been favoured by rivalries between local and national authorities, in turn contributing to deepen the distrust already existing between different components of the coalition government in Kabul.

Map 10
Strength of Taliban groups in Balkh, as of October 2010



Note: The numbers indicate the number of insurgents.

²⁵⁹ Abdul Latif Sahak, 'Violence Takes a Turn to the North,' Afghanistan Reconstruction Report, 8 November 2010; *ANSO Quarterly Data Report*, Q.4 2010.

ABOUT THE AFGHANISTAN ANALYSTS NETWORK (AAN)

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