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The Other Side

Dimensions of the Afghan Insurgency: Causes, Actors and Approaches to 'Talks'

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY¹

The insurgency in Afghanistan is a very complex phenomenon. Organisationally, it cannot be reduced to 'the Taliban'. Its causes and motives make it much broader than what simply could be described as a terrorist structure. Concurrently, steps to deal with it are also required to be more multifaceted, with an emphasis on political approaches.

Organisationally, the insurgency consists of seven armed structures of different provenance. The core of the insurgency is the Taliban movement, with its 'Kandahari' mainstream and associated, semi-autonomous networks, those based on the Haqqani and Mansur families and the Tora Bora front in eastern Afghanistan based on remnants of Hezb-e Islami (Khaless). Those four segmented components form the Islamic Movement of the Taliban. Every single one of those elements is based on layers of different kinds of relationships, tribal, political-ideological and 'non-kinship' (andiwal, Pashto: 'buddy'). Amongst the Taliban, cohesion and identity are provided by the movement's leader Mulla Muhammad Omar (the amir ul-mu'menin or 'leader of the faithful'), a common ideology and, even more, a common enemy. This is bolstered by a top-down hierarchical structure with the leader and the leadership council on the highest level and structures on province, district and village levels which command means to enforce decisions. That establishes a chain of command-and-control that operates on a case-by-case basis but very effectively. At the same time, this kind of structure leaves a relatively high degree of autonomy for the lower levels, in particular the local commanders – which, somewhat paradoxically, does not diminish but strengthens cohesion.

¹ This paper exclusively reflects the author's personal perceptions. It is based on relevant published material and some restricted sources as well as on key informant interviews and personal observations of the author over the past 10 years, both in Kabul, Afghan provinces and abroad. See a biographical note at the end of text.

On the spelling: This paper consistently uses 'Taliban' (not 'Taliban'), 'hezb' (not 'hizb'), 'al-Qaeda' (not 'al-Qaida'), 'jihad' (not 'jihad') etc. and 'mulla' (not 'mullah'), including in citations where in the originals other spellings are used, but not in references (in order to facilitate web searches). The aim is to be closer to the correct pronunciation. Taliban is plural, the singular is Taleb.

Organisationally distinct, there are two other armed insurgent organisations, Hezb-e Eslami Afghanistan (popularly called HIG) led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar which is active country-wide and small Salafi groups (who have distinct and strict religious practices) of local importance in eastern Afghanistan. The seventh category is a recent phenomenon, also still local in character. It clusters former mujahedin groups that have been (or feel) alienated from the post-2001 political process, have taken up arms and adopted a Taleban-like modus operandi and language but act independently of each other. These organisations and groups do not consider Mulla Omar as their leader. In the field, however, they occasionally cooperate and coordinate with local Taleban. This includes joint operations, the use of the Taleban 'label' by other groups (e.g. on shabname, 'nightletters', used to threaten the population or individuals) and unwritten mutual non-aggression agreements.

A broad range of motivations drives individuals or groups into the insurgency. Without doubt, the Taleban core is motivated by ideology - an eclectic mix of elements borrowed from different forms of political Islam. They have a basic and simple political programme, i.e. to drive the foreign troops out and re-establish the Islamic Emirate. For the Taleban leadership, the Emirate continues to exist; it is embodied in the parallel governmental structures across Afghanistan. HIG is aiming at gaining political power at the centre while the other groups are locally oriented, although all are generally religious-conservative in outlook.

Arguably most insurgent foot-soldiers are motivated less by ideological reasons but by alienation from the post-2001 political process. This alienation resulted from exclusion from the access to power and resources and the resulting rejection of abusive, predatory local strong men who represent central government, intra-tribal and ethnic polarisation, government corruption on all levels, the re-insertion of the warlords and commanders in positions of power and their subsequently acquired domination over most of the political institutions. Underlying factors were the light military footprint, including inadequate international troop deployment, and direct political interference of the US-dominated international community in the early post-2001 period on one hand and the lack of effective governance by the Karzai administration, supported uncritically by its external allies on the other. While the light military footprint created the operational space, bad governance provided the moral space for the comeback of the Taleban and its transformation into a broader insurgency. In this respect, the 'Pakistan factor' – the cross-border insurgency support infrastructure – only plays a secondary role.

While the Taleban are still a predominantly Pashtun movement, their appeal amongst non-Pashtun groups is increasing. The deepening sense of occupation, undercurrents of anti-Westernism based on perceptions of an 'anti-Muslim' Western world and Islamic moral superiority, a surge of international Muslim solidarity (linked to development in the Middle East) and the joint mujahedin history establish common ideological denominators between the Taleban and a wider range of former mujahedin that have currently joined the post-Taleban setup in Kabul. Enormous growing anger about the behaviour of foreign forces has already brought groups closer to the insurgency that earlier had supported the international engagement in Afghanistan. If this trend continues and ideologically different elements feel compelled to join, the insurgency has the potential to develop beyond ethnic boundaries and religious differences into an even broader Afghan nationalist movement.

While the United States (US) military surge on one hand and the reactive internal streamlining as well as the intensification of asymmetrical warfare by the Taleban block any short-term political solution, the insurgency's demographic depth, flexible structures and political appeal make it unlikely that a predominantly military strategy will succeed in overcoming it, ending the violence and stabilising the country sustainably. The insurgency's heterogeneity makes it necessary to develop differentiated political approaches to achieve these aims, at least in a mid-term perspective. Pure counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency techniques do not meet these requirements.

Therefore, this paper advocates developing multilayered contacts ('talks') with different elements of the insurgency in order to differentiate between the motivations, aims and demands of its different components. A build-up of better mutual understanding and possibly some trust with reconcilable elements might be an early side-effect. But a 'talks' approach must be embedded in a broader 'reconciliation' strategy. A first step would be to differentiate between short term 'talks' and long-term reconciliation.

The kind of 'reconciliation' pursued up to date has failed because of wrong assumptions. Individual or groups of insurgents were urged to join the existing government. This ignores the fact that the character of the regime itself is one reason for many insurgents to take up arms. It cannot therefore be considered neutral and an arbiter itself. Reconciliation also cannot be approached in an ahistorical way, i.e. with some of those who either had been

involved in past crimes (and contributed to the emergence of the Taliban as a 'purification' movement) or have later caused the alienation of many of those who have joined the insurgency setting the terms of reconciliation. The same goes for the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and even the United Nations (UN) mission in Afghanistan.

This requires a new, broader strategy on reconciliation and apolitical consensus about such a strategy, both internally amongst Afghan, amongst – at least – major international actors and, finally, between Afghan and external actors. Reconciliation cannot be limited to the immediate antagonists of the current conflict but needs to be a broader process within the deeply divided Afghan society. First of all, there needs to be reconciliation between the central government and many of its local representatives on one hand and the many alienated groups in the local populations on the other. This broad process needs to combine elements of enhanced political inclusiveness as well as of transitional justice, including a public discourse and, finally, the 'healing' of wounds. This requires a more open political atmosphere than exists currently. It will be a gradual, long-term and at times painful process that goes far beyond electoral timelines and considerations as well as, most likely, the termination of the external military engagement.

The term 'reconciliation', therefore, should be used for these long-term processes. 'Talks', i.e. contacts or even negotiations with the insurgents with the aim of some political accommodation or to stop the violence are merely steps on this way. Use of more precise language would, not least, help to end the confusion amongst Afghans and parts of the foreign audience about this issue.

Though the often-repeated position of the international community is that such a process must be Afghan-led, in reality the Afghan leadership has been unable to develop such a broad strategy. In order to overcome this blockade, the international community must take up the role of initiator. The best facilitator of 'talks' would be the UN in close cooperation with either a group of its Islamic member-states or in the shape of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC). This umbrella could initiate, first, an inclusive Afghan pre-'talks' mechanism that both ensures a buy-in of all relevant social and political actors and establishes 'red lines' and criteria that should be upheld in both 'talks' and reconciliation and secondly help to create neutral Afghan and international bodies as arbitrators.

At the same time, the international community should focus much more emphatically on supporting pro-reform and pro-democracy forces. They are needed as stabilisers within the Afghan society vis-à-vis the likely inclusion of additional Islamist forces into the political setup as the result of a possible political accommodation.