



The Non-Pashtun Taleban of the North: A case study from Badakhshan

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Published: 3 January 2017

Downloaded: 2 January 2017

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The Taleban movement is winning ground in the northern province of Badakhshan, a province that was never conquered when the Taleban were in power in the 1990s. Over the past two years, a new generation of largely Tajik Taleban has come to pose a serious challenge for the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) : a number of districts have changed hands between the ANSF and insurgents, and two strategic districts are now insurgent strongholds. Its success seems partly due to a recruitment policy that – in contrast to the 1990s – favours local non-Pashtuns for key provincial positions and as fighters. In this provincial case study, AAN’s Obaid Ali analyses the Taleban’s new recruitment policy and how it has strengthened the movement (with input from Borhan Osman and Thomas Ruttig).

In 2004, as the insurgency began to gather pace, setting up a shadow administration was one of the Taleban’s major political strategies for controlling both territory and population. Over the years, in the Tajik and Uzbek-dominated provinces in the north, the movement increasingly appointed local non-Pashtuns, from shadow governors – both at the provincial and district level – to judges and heads of provincial committees. In Badakhshan, a Tajik-dominated province, most Taleban posts are now occupied by Tajiks.

The shift in the movement’s recruitment strategy seems to have had a visible impact on its



battlefield gains in Badakhshan. To put this into historical perspective, a comparison of the Taleban's recruitment in Badakhshan during the current insurgency period and the movement's years of rule, is useful.

Badakhshan's contribution to the Taleban regime during the 1990s

During the Taleban regime in the 1990s, there were no more than a handful of high-ranking Taleb figures from Badakhshan. They were:

- Mawlawi Sayed Ghiasuddin, a Tajik from Badakhshan who served among the Taleban leadership soon after the formation of the [movement](#) in the mid-1990s;
- Qari Din Muhammad Hanif, a Tajik originally from Yaftal district in Badakhshan. During the Taleban regime he served as the Taleban minister for Planning and Higher Education. Now, Qari Din Muhammad is a member of the Taleban office in Qatar (read more background [here](#)) and was one of the first official Taleban representatives to publicly explain his movement's position with regards to peace talks, which he did during an academic conference in Kyoto in 2012 (see AAN analysis [here](#));
- And, less well known, Mullah Zaher, Shaber Ahmad and Mullah Nur-ul-Huda, who operated as military commanders, although not in their home province.

While the Badakhshanis' representation within the Taleban leadership was limited, the province did produce hundreds of Taleban fighters. A sizeable number of religious Badakhshani students who had been studying in madrassas in Peshawar and Karachi joined the movement's ranks and constituted one of its largest non-Pashtun groups. These Badakhshani fighters suffered hundreds of casualties during the Taleban's Emirate.

The first significant incident involving the Badakhshani Taleban was a clash between the Taleban and Northern Alliance fighters in Topkhana, an area in Zebak district near Badakhshan's border with Pakistan, in 1998. Hundreds of Taleban fighters led by Mullah Sharif, a commander originally from Warduj district, stormed check points controlled by Northern Alliance commanders in a cross-border attack from Pakistan. After overcoming minor resistance, the Taleban took control of the area. This first appearance of the Badakhshani Taleban was a warning to the Northern Alliance. Its local commanders, particularly the most famous Jamiat-e Islami commander of the province, Sayed Najmuddin Waseq, took steps to repel Mullah Sharif's fighters and prevent further Taleban infiltration in the province. He gathered hundreds of fighters to retake control of the Topkhana area, and inflicted heavy casualties: according to locals, hundreds of Taleban fighters, mainly Badakhshanis, as well as their commander, were mercilessly killed.

This incident affected many families in the province, who lost their pro-Taleban young sons. It also created a rift among Badakhshani clerics from both warring sides. The clash in Topkhana amounted to a failure of early Taleban attempts to infiltrate Badakhshan, demonstrating that the province was a Northern Alliance stronghold, impossible for the Taleban to take. Indeed, Badakhshan was one of few places the Taleban never controlled during their regime. Recent



events illustrate how much this dynamic has changed, with the Taliban now successfully implementing a strategy not only to infiltrate but also to seize and to hold ground in Badakhshan.

The new non-Pashtun Taliban leadership in Badakhshan

After the reemergence of the Taliban in 2004, the movement invested its energy in recruiting a larger number of non-Pashtun Taliban in Pakistani madrassas in order to strengthen its support among the local population in those provinces. This shift in approach reflected (and still reflects) the movement's changed attitude towards Afghans of non-Pashtun ethnic backgrounds, which had evolved from essentially seeking to exclude them from most leadership positions, even in areas where they constituted the majority to a more inclusive approach. This shift may also have been a manoeuvre by the Taliban leadership to portray the movement post-2001 as a national rather than a Pashtun-dominated one. In this strategy, the Taliban created more space for other ethnic groups to join the movement, not only as fighters, but also as local Taliban officials.

These Taliban were mainly from rural areas in northern Afghanistan. After 2001, thousands of students from Badakhshan flocked to madrassas in Peshawar and Karachi to take advantage of the free food and accommodation, as well as the religious teaching – a remarkable increase compared to the time of the Taliban regime. As a result, the movement has gained a particularly significant recruitment base from among the students from conservative Warduj, Argo and Jurm districts. This has translated into influence in these areas. It was from Warduj where the Badakhshani Taliban launched their first serious attack. In October 2006, they ambushed a German PRT patrol in the district; the attack lasted for four hours and only ended after US air support was called in.

From 2008, and in sharp contrast to behaviour exhibited during the Taliban regime (1994-2001), the Taliban leadership council offered most local posts to this new generation of local Taliban, instead of merely using Badakhshani recruits from Pakistani madrassas as foot-soldiers.

While the Taliban's recruitment of the Badakhshani students exploited their radicalisation from Pakistani madrassas, not all those who joined the movement's ranks did so for ideological reasons. The Taliban's success in recruitment also seems to have banked on Badakhshan's fragmented politics. The political dynamics in the province have long been defined by a struggle between local powerbrokers. This provided the Taliban with various opportunities. For instance, Jamiat commanders in Jurm and Kuran wa Munjan districts competed for control of smuggling routes and natural resources and used a small group of armed men, whom they described as Taliban, to threaten each other. On a number of occasions in 2008, powerbrokers granted safe passage to insurgents seeking to reach their battlefields in Takhar and Kunduz. In return the insurgents avoided fighting in those areas of Badakhshan where they received safe passage. In fact, in 2008 the Taliban were not strong enough to pose a threat to the powerbrokers in Badakhshan but the deal helped them to secure safe transit routes. Until 2009, Taliban efforts



in Badakhshan still primarily consisted of “travelling recruiters trying to influence local mullahs and perhaps a few small pockets in the process of formation, but without yet much of an impact,” according to [this](#) earlier AAN report.

While the Taliban’s strategy of recruiting locally in Badakhshan dates back to 2004, it accelerated from 2012 onwards. Since then, a new cadre drawn mostly from a younger generation has been appointed to lead the insurgents’ fronts in the province. One example of this type was Qari Shamsuddin in conservative Warduj district. Shamsuddin received a religious education in Pakistan. At first he led a small group of around 20 fighters in Warduj, but later he expanded his influence into the neighbouring districts of Zebak, Baharak and Yamgan. In 2012, however, he was killed following a US airstrike. As AAN previously reported (see previous AAN paper about power structures in Badakhshan [here](#)), the Taliban received support “from those parts of the population excluded from the provincial patronage networks since the late 2000s” in Badakhshan.

In 2013, the Taliban appointed Qari Fasehuddin from Isterab village in Warduj district as shadow governor and head of the military commission in Badakhshan. Fasehuddin is a young cleric from a well-known religious family. He received his education during the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Fasehuddin’s father, Mawlawi Saifuddin, served as an imam in the 1980s in Warduj. He was not only highly respected and influential there but also in the other conservative districts, such as Yumgan, Jurm and Baharak. Since 2013, Qari Fasehuddin has been known as one of the most prominent commanders in the province.

In the same year, the shadow governor appeared for the first time in a Taliban propaganda film, speaking about the security situation in Badakhshan (the link is no longer available). Thereafter, Fasehuddin, a talented speaker, released a series of videos in which he discussed the virtues of jihad and accused the government of being a puppet to the infidels. In 2015, pro-Taliban social media activists released a video clip of Qari Fasehuddin addressing surrendered Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers in Yumgan district (see this media [report](#)), during which he referred to the 2012 Quran burning at the US base in Bagram (read more [here](#)) and asked, rhetorically, whether it was fair “to shot dead those who protest against the burning of the holy book”. He appealed to all ANA soldiers not to trust the US and the promises they had made over the past decade.

It is hard to estimate the Taliban’s precise military strength in Badakhshan. However, a source close to the Taliban told AAN that the shadow governor leads more than a thousand fighters. Gholam Sakhi Ghafari, Badakhshan’s police chief, estimates that there are around 2,000 Taliban fighters and that the number of militants in the province has increased over the past two years. It is not only foot soldiers that Badakhshan has generated: in a remarkable sign of the changes since the time of the Taliban regime, the province has also produced a sizeable number of well-known commanders.

The shadow governor has established administrative and military structures in the province that are run mostly by the new generation of local Taliban. One example is Mawlawi Amanuddin,



the head of their Special Operations Unit (Qeta-ye Khas-e Amalyati) in the province, which, according to a source close to the Taleban, consists of 300 to 400 fighters and is tasked to lead most of the local special operations against the ANSF. Mawlawi Amanuddin, who previously served as an imam in Badakhshan's Baharak district, joined the insurgents in 2013. Locals say he had begun criticising the Afghan government for its servitude to foreigners during his tenure as a government-paid imam, and had expressed his openness towards the Taleban.

The shadow provincial governor also brought in a number of other local commanders capable of challenging the security forces across the province. For instance, Mullah Hafez, a young Tajik commander, serves as the shadow district governor of Baharak. Meanwhile, Matiullah Khalil, the shadow district governor of Yumgan, Mawlawi Mahbub, the head of the Taleban's provincial education committee, and Mawlawi Saber, the head of the judicial committee, all belong to Badakhshan's young, local and religiously-educated new cadres. The new policy of accelerated local recruiting and the shadow provincial governor's comprehensive understanding of local dynamics has helped the insurgency in Badakhshan to become more effective.

The effect of the local Taleban on the battleground

The 'localisation' of appointments has enabled the insurgents to expand their influence. Over the past few years, Badakhshan's Taleban have conducted several large-scale offensives against the ANSF. At the moment, two out of 28 Badakhshani districts (Yamgan and Warduj) are entirely under Taleban control. At least four more districts (Baharak, Raghistan, Argo and Zebak) have changed hands several times, while four others (Jurm, Shohada, Tagab and Kuran wa Munjan) are heavily contested. Taleban activity has also been reported by several Afghan media sources in Khash, Darayem, Teshkan and the district of the provincial capital, [Faizabad](#) where, according to one report, the insurgents have a "strong presence" in the village of Spingul, only two kilometres away, whence they threaten the important Baharak-Faizabad [road](#).

The ANSF have conducted several counteroffensives, but with limited effect. In early September, for example, they [claimed](#) that the Taleban had been pushed out of an important gold mine in Raghistan; it seems, however, that the mine in fact is not fully controlled by either [side](#). Residents of the districts have also [reported](#) that in this case the local Taleban are "Tajik insurgents". And in late November, the ANSF reported that the district of Tagab had been retaken from the [insurgents](#) "after nine months" – the only problem being that the district's fall had never been reported, and it had been '[retaken](#)' from the Taleban once before, in January 2016.

Meanwhile, Taleban insurgents attacked security forces in the Baharak district of Badakhshan in October 2015 and temporarily took control of the district centre (read short report [here](#) and [here](#)). In November 2015, the Taleban took control of the Raghistan district for almost three days (read report [here](#)). The ANSF soon drove the insurgents out of both district centres, but the failure to protect them in the first place reduced the locals' confidence in the ANSF. At the same time it boosted the insurgents' morale, and increased their motivation to continue



targeting district centres. The collapse of the district centres, even for a short period, has become a “lesson learned”, not for the ANSF, but for the insurgents who now seek to maintain permanent control of the district centres they hold.

Since then, the Taleban have continued to expand their presence in the two strategic districts of Yumgan and Warduj with a series of assaults. Indeed, Warduj was the place where the Taleban first sought to establish a stronghold in Badakhshan (1). From there, the insurgents can threaten the districts of Eshkashem to the northwest, Zebak to the south, Baharak to the northeast and Jurm to the east. Warduj has been known for its militancy since the first phase of the anti-Soviet war in the 1980s, and continued to be a stronghold of Jamiat-e Islami Afghanistan, the party led by the late Burhanuddin Rabbani, both during the remainder of the war against the Soviet occupation and during the resistance against the Taleban regime.

In October 2015, the Taleban stormed Warduj district centre, which fell with minimal resistance into the insurgents’ hands. The Taleban started their attack from Pol-e Ghalchian, an area located ten kilometres to the southeast of the district centre, where, once the security cordon had been breached, the insurgents entered the district centre (see [here](#)). According to district governor Dawlat Muhammad Khawari, local government forces made no effort to retake the district centre. He told AAN that the Taleban have now set up administrative and military structures there. Further, he said, the Taleban have recruited a large number of fighters in Warduj. After a month of controlling Warduj, the Taleban then pushed forward in order to gain further territory in Badakhshan.

In November 2015, the Taleban conducted a large-scale attack against Yamgan district. Again, the ANSF failed to protect the district centre and the Taleban were able to overrun it after only minor [resistance](#). The Taleban’s propaganda website released video footage of Yamgan’s fall. The video contained footage of government officials being detained by the Taleban.

Speaking to AAN, Imran Paiman, Yumgan’s district governor, confirmed that the district was still under insurgent control. Further, he told AAN that the central government has promised to deploy forces in order to retake it; however he denied giving further details about the fate of those government officials, who, according to the Taleban propaganda video, had been detained. He told AAN that his appointment took place after the collapse of the district. Separately, provincial police chief Ghafuri stated that security in Badakhshan has improved - although he conceded that some parts of the province still face insecurity. He confirmed that the two districts of Warduj and Yamgan are entirely out of government control but that the security forces plan to conduct a counteroffensive to recapture these districts.

The Taleban strategy of appointing non-Pashtun cadres in Tajik-dominated areas has not only yielded success on the battleground but also politically. The insurgents’ propaganda website has repeatedly featured footage and speeches by Badakhshani Tajik commanders in order to portray the insurgency as a nation-wide, supra-ethnic movement (see, for instance [here](#)). This portrayal of the insurgency has in turn helped generate new leaders at the local level, and continues to produce fighters among non-Pashtun ethnic groups (2).



With the mobilisation of local fighters and commanders, the Taleban have managed, over several years, to turn once strongly anti-Taleban Badakhshan into what is, at the very least, contested ground – despite the fact that government forces still continue to hold the majority of the district centres.

Editing by Sari Kouvo, Borhan Osman and Thomas Ruttig.

(1) Philipp Münch wrote in a [report for AAN](#) (slightly edited):

In Warduj valley, the most influential local anti-Taleban commander, Ashur Beg, was said to have demobilised most of his fighters after the fall of the Taleban. This may be why this area, especially the area of Tirgaran, became a hotbed of the insurgency in the following years. Other reasons were that the area was ecologically degraded, saw many returning refugees and received few state resources – as visible in the low number of students. According to one study, during the drought of 2001 up to 95 per cent of the farmers had to sell or mortgage parts of their land, making them more dependent on landlords. This was fertile ground for Arab Salafists and politically active mullahs to call for resistance against the government, as they had done in the 1980s and 1990s.

The information about Arab Salafists in the area is attributed to information from German intelligence, but not confirmed by AAN.

(2) *Structure of the Taleban in Warduj and Yumgan districts, as of October 2016*

Warduj's shadow district governor Haidari, a Tajik from Warduj