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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 Eslami (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' (andiwai, 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.

Organisationally distinct, there are two other armed insurgent organisations, Hezb-e Eslami Afghanistan (popularly called HIG) led by Gulbuddin

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 'jihād') 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.

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 a political 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.

1. INTRODUCTION

Attempts to defeat the insurgency in Afghanistan primarily by military means have not been successful. They have only driven more Afghans to take up arms. Despite Western claims that its military has severely interrupted the insurgents' chain of command-and-control, violence has increased, not diminished both geographically and in intensity. Far smaller scale political efforts at 'reconciliation' through various channels and methods have also met with little success. The insurgency is still there, and indeed stronger and more active in more areas of Afghanistan than at any time since 2001. Equally, their reliance on terrorist attacks and other means of asymmetrical warfare seems to be more a sign of an ability to adapt to their opponents than of weakness as often claimed.

With its outline for a new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, the US administration in principle has opened the door for a new, coordinated approach towards tackling the insurgency. The major relevant documents² refer to measures like exploiting differences between the insurgents, integrating reconcilable ones and breaking the link between the insurgents and the drug economy. At the same time, it rejects making deals that include 'Mulla Omar and the Taleban's hard core that have aligned themselves with al-Qaeda'.³ Counter-terrorism measures are still prioritised over a broader approach. 'Disrupting terrorist networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan to degrade any ability they have to plan and launch international terrorist attacks' is set as the first of five main US objectives to achieve its 'core goals' in both countries.

It seems, however, that in practice the insurgency is continued to be tackled by military means primarily. In a television interview in late May, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates concluded that 'until the momentum of the battle turns against the Taliban [...] the likelihood of any kind of reconciliation on the part of the leadership of the Taliban is very small'.⁴ The scene to create this

momentum is already set with the deployment of additional US troops to Afghanistan and by the appointment of a new commander for them who is credited with having considerably weakened the Iraqi insurgents in his former capacity as the Joint Special Operations Commander.⁵ The additional soldiers are supposed to 'take the fight to the Taleban',⁶ i.e. to degrade their military capacity so that they can be pushed to the negotiating table. The assumption seems to be that weakened Taleban might become more ready for an accommodation sweetened by the integration of some individuals or groups into the political process.

On the other side, the Taleban have already taken counter-measures. They consider the US surge as a 'declaration of war',⁷ started their asymmetrical spring offensive (some authors see a 'counter-counter-insurgency') and reshuffled parts of their central and provincial leadership. That brought less reconciliatory elements more to forefront again.

As a result, the level of violence had risen considerably in the spring of 2009. General incident rates in the first five months of 2009 were already more than 50 per cent higher than in the same period the previous year. In early June, the highest weekly number of attacks since 2001 was recorded. Assassinations of Afghan officials and pro-government figures as well as the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) increased sharply, resulting in growing NATO casualty figures. Insurgents launched a number of synchronised multiple suicide or 'complex' attacks in Kabul, Kandahar, Khost and Laghman and only the number of individual suicide attacks seems to be down. Not a single province was free of incident anymore – a sign that the insurgency has spread further geographically. This trend was

www.smallgovtimes.com/2009/05/gates-decries-fear-mongering-in-guantanamo-debate/.

⁵ Elisabeth Bumiller and Thom Shanker, 'Commander's Ouster Is Tied to Shift in Afghan War', New York Times 12 May 2009. In Iraq, General McChrystal 'oversaw secret commando operations for five years' against insurgents and reportedly 'pushed his ranks aggressively to kill as many of them as possible'. See: Elisabeth Bumiller and Mark Mazzetti, 'A General Steps From the Shadows', New York Times, 13 May 2009.

⁶ 'Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, 27 March 2009', http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-a-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan/.

⁷ Author's interview with former high-ranking Taleb, Kabul 12 Feb 2009.

² See: White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group's Report on US Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan, http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/Afghanistan-Pakistan_White_Paper.pdf.

³ White Paper [see footnote/FN 2].

⁴ Quoted from: 'Gates Decries "Fear-Mongering" in Guantanamo Debate',

accompanied by the insurgents' notably better training, tactics and understanding of international forces' operational patterns.

Under these circumstances, it is far from sure that the new US strategy will work. Sooner or later there will be a return to a 'reconciliation' strategy. In anticipation of this, a better understanding of what the insurgency is, who its actors are and what their reasons for taking up arms is needed. It is also necessary to clarify what is meant by saying that there is a need for talks or 'reconciliation' with '(the) Taliban' or (the) insurgents.

This paper, in its two first parts, discusses the causes, composition, structures and some aspects of the ideology and modus operandi of the insurgency and its organised core, the Taliban. In its third part, it tries to clarify what the range of meanings can be when one refers to 'reconciliation' in the current Afghan context. In the conclusions, it suggests a to differentiate between 'reconciliation' – as a broader aim – and 'talks' with (the) insurgents as one step toward it and proposes a more useful language. Furthermore it draws conclusions and gives recommendations for a sharpened and more realistic strategy for stabilization of Afghanistan that prioritises political means.

2. ROOTS AND CAUSES OF THE INSURGENCY

A discussion of the Afghan insurgency⁸ should start from its causes, not from who its actors are. Causes define actors. A glance back on some pre- and post-2001 development will be of help. This will also throw some additional light on the – too limited – debate about whether there are 'moderate' Taliban or not.

The Taliban movement emerged in the mid-1990s⁹ as a reaction to the misrule of the mujahedin

government established in 1992, officially known as the Islamic State of Afghanistan (ISA). This had resulted in another round of inter-factional fighting, the destruction of further parts of the country, a collapse of order and widespread atrocities that alienated the hitherto supportive population. Afghans became receptive to an alternative that pledged to establish security and the rule of strict 'Islamic' law.

Initially a local initiative in the region of Kandahar the Taliban were welcomed by the population, even outside their area of origin. That gave them momentum and turned them into a force that developed nation-wide aspirations. Its first fighters were recruited from amongst the students in madrassas and mosques in Afghanistan, in the 1980s, in 1994 and after 2001, with a later influx from madrassas in Pakistan. These students are called *taleban*¹⁰ what gave the movement its name: Islamic Movement of the Taliban (Pashto: De Talebano Eslami Ghurdzang or Tehrik). By 1998, the movement controlled the country except the Panjshir valley, Badakhshan and parts of Takhar. Already in late 1997, it had proclaimed the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) with Mulla Muhammad Omar¹¹ at its head as the *amir ul-mu'menin* ('leader of the faithful') in Kandahar, after seizing control of Kabul in 1996.

The core Taliban leadership – represented by the movement's Leadership Council (*rahbari shura*) -, was composed of former mujahedin commanders who had quit fighting after the fall of the Soviet-backed government in 1992 and returned to their Islamic studies. In that sense, the Taliban were – and

fought in the framework of other mujahedin 'parties'. Only in 1994, they merged into the Taliban movement.

¹⁰ In this paper, the distinction is made between *taleban* (or *taleban ul-elm*; 'students of [Islamic] science'), with a small 't', i.e. the madrassa students in general, and the Taliban with a capital 'T' as the members of the Taliban movement.

¹¹ In the 1980s, Mulla Omar was a small commander in the outskirts of Kandahar. Already then he was known for his radical anti-Western views and for dispensing justice locally. First, he fought with Hezb (Khaless) and later joined *Harakat-e Enqelab-e Eslami* (Movement for an Islamic Revolution), an ulema and madrassa network-based mujahedin 'party' that, together with Hezb (Khaless), provided the most manpower for the emerging Taliban movement. Toward the end of 1994, its leader, late Maulawi Muhammad Nabi Muhammadi, publicly stated his organisation's support for the Taliban and declared that it would dissolve into them.

⁸ I use Kilcullen's definition: 'an organized movement that aims at overthrowing the political order within a given territory, using a combination of subversion, terrorism, guerilla warfare and propaganda'. See: David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, Oxford University Press 2009, p. 12.

⁹ The movement had predecessors in the various 'Taliban fronts' of the 1980s reported from Zabul, Kandahar, Uruzgan and Badghis provinces by international and Afghan eyewitnesses. These fronts, however, did not constitute a movement or organization of their own. They

are – not entirely distinct from the mujahedin but are a sort of ‘neo-mujahedin’. They rather represent a puritanical offspring claiming the mujahedin’s legacy and original Islamic values. Consequently, they continue to call their fighters ‘mujahedin’.

Most of the leadership council’s members were personal friends and former brothers-in-arms of Mulla Omar, originating from Uruzgan, Kandahar and Helmand in Southern Afghanistan. This is an example of the *andiwal* networks that are characteristic for political alliance-building amongst Pashtuns. Based on long-term personal relations, they provide coherence, often across tribal and even ethnic lines. This still is the case in the Taleban’s inner circle and in local level groups today.

When the Taleban’s Emirate collapsed in late 2001, their movement was not decisively defeated. Facing the overwhelming power of the US military, its fighters dispersed and its leaders were forced to give up power. Most of the grass-root fighters returned to their home villages. Their leaders went to Pakistan or underground, knowing that they would face prosecution for their alliance with al-Qaeda which had permitted the 9/11 attacks. All of them waited to see how things would take shape. Some groups of fighters stuck together in remote areas like Shahikot (Paktia) and Baghran/Pasaband (at the Helmand/Ghor border). Although a number of leading Taleban signalled readiness to integrate peacefully into the post-2001 set-up, they neither surrendered nor were they finally included in any political deal. Only a small number of prominent Taleban officials joined the new institutions as individuals. Some of them were elected to the Emergency Loya Jirga in 2002, others to parliament in 2005. With its leadership surviving, the Taleban never ceased to exist as a movement.

2.1. INDUCED AND INTERNAL FACTORS

In the first years to follow, the strategic choice of the US not to deploy foreign ground troops outside Kabul, the so-called ‘light (military) footprint, and the lack of political will by major allies to disagree with this left a power vacuum in the rural areas. That became one major contributing factor to the re-emergence of the Taleban and their metamorphosis into an armed insurgency. It created the operational space for the Taleban remnants while the moral space was created when the US-led coalition allowed the very warlords and commanders whose atrocities

had made the Taleban a viable alternative in the eyes of many Afghans in the mid-1990s to take over the rural areas and return to power in Kabul. As a result, the Taleban, and the insurgency as a whole, grew in strength every year from 2002 onwards. In February 2003, Mulla Omar issued his first communiqué since losing power in December 2001. He already set the themes that would dominate the coming years. He called the build-up for the U.S. invasion of Iraq a ‘continuation of the crusades’, appealed to the ‘Muslim and mujahed nation’ of Afghanistan to raise another jihad against the US-led coalition forces, called the Karzai administration a ‘puppet and infidel regime’ and Afghanistan a ‘divided country with different centers of power’ that made a ‘comeback’ for the narcotics production possible.¹²

The second factor for the Taleban’s comeback was the increasingly bad governance of the new Karzai administration in which so many Afghans had put their hope and votes and the silence of its international allies who watched but kept still. In some areas, many if not most insurgents are motivated by their rejection of and exclusion by corrupt local government – some analysts call those ‘anti-corruption Taleban’. This is particularly true in most provinces of the South. Here, initially broad tribal coalitions had supported the new administration led by Hamed Karzai (himself a Southern Pashtun from the Popalzai tribe). These coalitions were later broken by local strongmen that increasingly monopolised power in the name of certain tribes while others were pushed out. A number of those strongmen are either members of the Karzai family, linked to it tribally or through other personal relationship¹³, a fact that helped them to legitimise their actions. They also often relied on Western military support (whose mandate was to strengthen the central government and its local representatives) when suppressing protests and resistance - in particular when they were able to label their opponents as ‘Taleban’. Being targeted, the latter felt forced to join the insurgency.

As a result, in Kandahar, Helmand and Farah the Durrani tribal confederation disintegrated into polarised factions. In Uruzgan it initially created rifts

¹² Rahimullah Yusufzai, ‘Taleban call for holy war’, BBC 8 Feb 2003.

¹³ The best known examples are Karzai’s brother Ahmad Wali, the head of the Kandahar Provincial Council, and former Helmand and Uruzgan governors Sher Muhammad Akhundzada and Jan Muhammad Khan who still exert enormous influence in their respective provinces.

between the Durrani and Ghilzai and only later spread within the Durrani camp itself. In Zabul, exceptionally, the alienation seems to have been caused by networks of a mujahedin tanzim - Hezb-e Eslami - establishing itself in the province's centre but unable to reach out to local tribes. Those in political power increasingly managed to translate this into economic might, sometimes by linking up with the drug trade, using drug money to expand into licit businesses (trade monopolies, real estate, security companies etc.) or by monopolising reconstruction contracts. That, in turn, further limited access to resources for the ones pushed out. Some communities joined the insurgency because of the harassment, arrest and mistreatment in Guantanamo, Bagram or other prisons of former Taliban members who were respected by them, had returned and shown readiness to integrate peacefully by international or Afghan forces. Others did so because they suffered high numbers of civilian casualties during air strikes of international forces. The local population calls these insurgents majburi (forced) Taliban¹⁴ – in contrast to the maktabi ('school' or ideological) ones.

Thirdly, in the political sphere, a distinct sense of occupation slowly grew amongst Afghans because of the anything but 'light' political footprint of the international actors, led by the US. External interference at critical junctions of the political process took the institution-building process out of Afghan hands, created a group of 'most favoured' Afghans, dissolved ordinary citizens' hopes in a self-determined development and in general discredited democracy as a political option in the eyes of the Afghan public. This included the remote-control induction of Karzai in Bonn, the ousting of the late King and others as Karzai challengers during the 2002 Loya Jirga, arm-twisting in favour of a presidential system during the Constitutional Loya Jirga as well as during the 2004 elections (while ignoring manipulations), the 'justice is a luxury' position that prevented a meaningful process of transitional justice from being started, the unconditioned political integration of all jehadi leaders and warlords (except Hekmatyar) who were allowed to keep most of their arms, to infiltrate and subsequently dominate the new institutions, the sidelining and neglect of liberal, democratic and civil society forces

and political parties in general, all still in favour of Karzai and allowing him to manipulate the fragmented legislative. The resulting disenchantment developed into widespread anti-Westernism - not in the sense of the Western 'graveyard of empires' narrative but in a much more political sense, as a hardening of anti-domination and -manipulation feelings.

While the international engagement, both military and civilian, was clearly welcome amongst most Afghans in the first years after 2001 more recently they have added their own 'conditionality'. Demands that the Western forces refrain from using harsh and culturally insensitive tactics have become widespread and public. Some provincial councils and even groups of lower house members have boycotted sessions in protest against airstrikes that caused civilian casualties. Parliament has demanded legislation to regulate the status of foreign forces and for an end to all operations in which no Afghan troops are present.

This anti-Westernism is reflected increasing as manifestations of international Muslim solidarity amongst Afghans. While issues like Palestine, Lebanon or Iraq have never before generated widespread popular reactions, they now lead to an increasing number of demonstrations and parliamentary protests.¹⁵ In parallel, elements of Muslim supremacist ideology are spreading amongst some Afghans, originating from radical readings of Islam that are also widespread amongst some former mujahedin. For example, the term kafer – 'nonbeliever' – is increasingly used in the general public for non-Muslims without any reflection of its derogatory connotation.

The anti-Western feelings are exploited by some of the former mujahedin leaders who increasingly feel entitled to rule the country as a result of their role during the anti-Soviet and anti-Taliban wars but sidelined by Karzai as the political process moves forward. They object in particular to genuine

¹⁴ Kilcullen calls them 'accidental guerillas'. See: Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla* [see FN 8], pp. 28-38. However, they seem to be 'accidental' only in the sense that they were not 'natural allies' of al-Qaeda.

¹⁵ In May 2005, Afghans in various cities demonstrated for three days against an alleged desecration of a Quran by US personnel in Guantanamo prison. In January and March 2008 and again in January 2009 the Wolesi Jirga (lower house) voted to condemn Israeli operations in the Palestinian territories, in March 2008 it condemned the republication of the controversial Muhammad caricatures in Denmark and the perceived anti-Islamic film of a Dutch Member of Parliament (MP) and in May 2008 another alleged Quran desecration by US soldiers. In December 2008, anti-Israeli protests in Kunduz turned violent.

disarmament, reforms of the administration, police and army as well as to transitional justice, and try to discredit these issues as Western impositions.

Significantly, feelings of anti-Westernism and oppressed muslimhood are evolving into an ideological bridge that links the Taleban with those parts of the current Kabul setup – former mujahedin, parts of the Islamic clergy and broader sections of the Afghan population, influenced by them. This is particularly true for the university students (and other young people) amongst whom there is intensive political mobilisation by mujahedin ‘parties’. At the same time, the insurgents also mobilise successfully for protests in the name of ‘defending Islam’.¹⁶

In a next step, these factors and the shared mujahedin past provide common denominators for political contacts between the Taleban and the former Northern Alliance (NA) that has evolved into the National Front (NF) now as well as for reported weapons sales to insurgents from stocks kept in the north. As early as on 12 May 2007, Mulla Omar appealed to the jihadi leaders to ‘jointly liberate Afghanistan from the hands of the unbelieving Americans’ within a broad front of the former mujahedin. Later in the same year, the Taleban leader urged ‘all Afghans, particularly those brothers who have taken part in the resistance against the Russians, to come forward and let us fuse into one’. In early 2008, the NF spokesman responded by saying that ‘[w]e are both Muslims, we are both Afghans, and we are both not satisfied with the government’s performance’.¹⁷ Later that year, former president and head of Jamiat-e Eslami Burhanuddin Rabbani, announced that his party had received ‘encouraging signs’ from contacts with the Taleban. The latter responded by declaring that while their fight would continue until victory, ‘the door for talks, understanding and negotiations will always be open’ to ‘mujahedin’.¹⁸ Further secret contacts abroad between both sides were reported, brokered by a Pashtun former Jamiat commander

and head of the South-Western zone in the Rabbani government who now is affiliated with the Taleban.

The trends towards a possible rapprochement reflect patterns of shifting alliances in earlier periods of the civil war which have transcended ideological cleavages. Although the mujahedin Northern Alliance and the Taleban have fought each other mercilessly and the latter even denounced their adversaries as ‘anti-Islamic’, what divided them mainly is that they had ended up on different sides in the mid-1990s power struggle and that, post-2001, the mujahedin were included in the Bonn process while the Taleban were excluded.¹⁹

The latest factor that feeds the insurgency is spreading popular anger about the counter-insurgency approach of US and other troops, mainly of some special forces.²⁰ It is linked to what is perceived as ‘culturally insensitive’ house searches, long-term incommunicado arrests of elders and air raids with high numbers of civilian casualties.²¹ This anger is rapidly spreading onto groups that have traditionally supported the central government as well as the international military and civilian engagement and previously rejected any

¹⁹ Former leading protagonists like then UN special envoy to Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi now regret the Taleban exclusion: ‘One of my own biggest mistakes was not to speak to the Taliban in 2002 and 2003’. Haroon Siddiqui, ‘Expert advice on Afghanistan’, Toronto Star 14 Sep 2006. However, the option to bring in their leadership was not acceptable for major actors at the time, including the US, Iran and the Northern Alliance. A plan reportedly pushed by some Western intelligence agencies, on Pakistani advice, to bring in Jalaluddin Haqqani failed. It also ignored the fact that he was the one within the Taleban most closely linked with al-Qaeda and Arab financiers. See: Daniel Eisenberg, ‘Are There Any Moderates Here?’, Time 21 Oct 2001.

²⁰ According to some reports, special forces were responsible for three damaging incidents causing many civilian casualties, in Batikot district (Nangrahar province) on 4 March 2007, in Azizabad (Shindand district, Herat province) on 22 August 2008 and in Granai village (Bala Boluk district, Farah province) on 4 May 2009.

²¹ This does not mean that there are no reasons for searches, arrests etc. In numerous cases weapons are hidden in women’s quarters, explosives found in madrassas, insurgents supplied by locals. At the same time, not every phone contact, in particular within the context of kin, constitutes an act of active support of the insurgency. Food and shelter often are provided under coercion – or because hospitality cannot be denied to relatives. See: Thomas Ruttig, ‘Sie machen, was sie wollen: Eine Reportage aus dem afghanischen Südosten’, Die Wochenzeitung (Zurich) 26 Feb 2009, p. 13.

¹⁶ For example the three-day closure of schools and bazaars in three districts of Khost province preceded by Taleban ‘nightletters’ calling for that kind of action after a misguided US airstrike in January 2009.

¹⁷ Anand Gopal, ‘Afghan opposition courts Taliban’, Christian Science Monitor 3 Apr 2008; ‘Taleban leader urges Afghans to boycott “deceptive elections”’, Afghan Islamic Press (Peshawar) 7 Dec 2008.

¹⁸ Jason Burke, ‘Why the West thinks it is time to talk to the Taliban’, The Observer (London) 28 Sep 2008.

compromise with the insurgents, like Pashtun tribes in the South-Eastern region as well as some pro-democratic forces.²²

2.2. THE PAKISTAN FACTOR

Finally, there is the Pakistan factor. Most insurgent groups currently active or their predecessors – in particular the Taliban, their associated networks and Hezb-e Islami – have been using this region as a training, supply, rest and staging area since the early 1970s, first during their low-profile guerrilla campaign against President Daud (1973-78) and afterwards against the Soviet-backed regime. Today, they can rely on a system of extensive links with the local tribal population, parts of the Pakistani authorities, first of all in the army, its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), including former high-ranking ISI officers now officially retired, and the Frontier Corps as well as with various Islamist political parties that has developed over decades. These links have been reactivated after 2001. Curbs of the ISI wing handling the Taliban after 2001, initiated by the US, as well as after the take-over of civilian President Asif Ali Zardari in 2008 have not changed the situation sufficiently.

Some support mechanisms developed in the 1980 and 90s are still in place. In particular the Haqqani network and Hezb-e Islami, the latter in the area of Chitral which is fully under government control, continue to use safe houses in urban areas, have the privilege of unchecked passage over the Afghan border (using special number plates handed out by the ISI in the 1990s)²³ and control some

Afghan refugee camps without being seriously challenged. Jalaluddin Haqqani seems to enjoy a 'most-favoured' status amongst some Pakistani and Saudi authorities who repeatedly have suggested including him as a 'moderate' in attempts to start negotiations with insurgents.²⁴

In Pakistan, this behaviour is grounded in the political thinking of parts of the military-intelligence community and some elements in the political establishment who have seen Afghanistan as Pakistan's 'strategic depth' in its conflict with the 'hereditary' foe, India, over decades. Pakistan's role as major handler of Western and Arab supplies to the mujahedin in the 1980s indirectly gave Islamabad the green light to try to establish a client government in Kabul. For that purpose, it has been manipulating a succession of armed insurgencies, among them the current Taliban-led one. Although the 'strategic depth' theory has officially been given up, some in Islamabad still consider the Taliban a strategic asset.²⁵ The unresolved border issue and the resulting potential for Afghan irredentist claims to Pashtun and Baluch areas of Pakistan contribute to preserving this mindset.

3. WHO ARE THE INSURGENTS?

From the analysis of its multiple causes it can be concluded that it is not sufficient to consider the insurgency exclusively – and even primarily – as a problem of terrorism. The actors involved are far more diverse than the al-Qaeda/Taliban symbiosis. The Taliban themselves are not simply a terrorist movement. Interestingly, the US, the EU, the UK and the UN have not listed them as a terrorist organisation.²⁶

²² This does not mean that there are no reasons for searches, arrests etc. In numerous cases weapons are hidden in women's quarters, explosives found in madrassas, insurgents supplied by locals. At the same time, not every phone contact, in particular within the context of kin, constitutes an act of active support of the insurgency. Food and shelter often are provided under coercion – or because hospitality cannot be denied to relatives. See: Thomas Ruttig, 'Sie machen, was sie wollen: Eine Reportage aus dem afghanischen Südosten', Die Wochenzeitung (Zurich) 26 Feb 2009, p. 13.

²³ Author's interviews in Kabul, Gardez and Khost; conversations with Pakistani journalists May 2008, Mar 2009. Details of how this cooperation works see: Ron Moreau and Mark Hosenball, 'Pakistan's Dangerous Double Game', Newsweek 22 Sep 2008; Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt, 'C.I.A. outlines Pakistan links with militants', New York Times 30 July 2008; Ron Moreau and Michael

Hirsh, 'Where the Jihad Lives Now', Newsweek 29 Oct 2007.

²⁴ E.g. see: Jon Ward, 'Saudi prince says Taliban leader could be U.S. ally', Washington Times 27 Apr 2009.

²⁵ See recent reports on continuing ISI support for the Taliban that, according to US officials, includes 'money, military supplies and strategic planning guidance'. Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt, 'Afghan Strikes by Taliban Get Pakistan Help, US Aides Say', New York Times 26 March 2009.

²⁶ The sanctions list based on the UN Security Council resolution 1267 only includes individuals, entities, groups and other undertakings 'belonging to or associated with' the Taliban or al-Qaeda but not the Taliban as an organisation. HIG is listed as an organization only in the UK; in the US, it just appears on an annex to the Offi

3.1. The segmented insurgency

The insurgency and the Taleban - as its core – are heterogeneous and homogenous, unified and segmented at the same time. This has caused a debate about whether there are 'one or many' insurgencies or even Taleban organisations.²⁷

Organisationally, the insurgency is segmented and consists of seven armed structures: the Islamic Movement of the Taleban, the networks of the Haqqani and Mansur families in the South-East, the Tora Bora Jihad Front (De Tora Bora Jehadi Mahaz) led by Anwar-ul-Haq Mujahed in Nangrahar (Eastern region), HIG, small Salafi groups in Kunar and Nuristan provinces (Eastern region)²⁸ and, as a new phenomenon, a number of not inter-related local ex-mujahedin groups that (or whose historical leaders) had been pushed out of power, are taking up arms and starting to adopt Taleban-like language and behaviour.

The Mansur and Haqqani networks as well as the Tora Bora front, as remnants of former mujahedin tanzim, historically precede the Taleban movement. The Mansur network stands in the tradition of the Khuddam ul-Furqan²⁹ and its later incarnation, the Mansur faction of the Movement for an Islamic Revolution (Harakat-e Enqelab-e Eslami), while the Haqqani network and the Tora Bora front are successors to local branches of Hezb (Khales).

While the Taleban and HIG pursue a countrywide agenda, the other groups operate locally only. The

mainstream Kandahari Taleban constitute the strongest fighting force, both within the Taleban movement as well as amongst the insurgency as a whole. They can 'operate for extended periods deep inside Afghanistan, drawing on local support' based on 'local guerilla cells cooperating with mobile insurgent columns'. (Similar structures exist in parts of eastern Afghanistan.)³⁰ The Kandahari Taleban – as most of the other insurgent groups – are controlling a series of districts, some fully, some partially,³¹ and a number of them already for several years. They were the only ones who, in 2007, tried to challenge Western troops in an open field battle when they unsuccessfully tried to take over Kandahar city.

All seven structures relate to each other but on different levels of integration and cooperation. Three of them constitute the core of the insurgency, the 'Taleban universe': the 'Kandahari'-led³² Taleban movement and the Haqqani and Mansur networks. Perhaps, also the Tora Bora front. The current leaders of the networks, Jalaluddin Haqqani and Abdullatif Mansur, are reported to be members of the Taleban's leadership council but not so Mujahed, the leader of the Tora Bora front. These groups accept Mulla Omar as their spiritual leader – which gives this part of the insurgency an element of ideological homogeneity and cohesion. It is mainly around those groups that the alienated tribal fighters cluster who do not have an organisation of their own. Possibly, however, they are the largest group numerically.

Counterterrorism's Terrorist Designation List, under 'other selected terrorist organizations'. Hekmatyar is listed as an al-Qaeda associate by the UN. See:

<http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/consolist.shtml>;
<http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>.

²⁷ On this discussion see: Antonio Giustozzi, One or many? The issue of the Taliban's unity and disunity, Pakistan Security Research Unit, Brief no. 48, 23 Apr 2009.

²⁸ Official name: Jama'at al-Dawa ala-l-Quran wa-l-Sunna (Society for the Invitation to Quran and Sunna). This group already established an Islamic mini-state in Nuristan in the 1980s. Its current leader Haji Rohullah joined the post-2001 process but was later arrested and detained in Guantanamo. It is registered as a political party in Kabul.

²⁹ 'Servants of Providence'. This is an Islamist group of the 1950/60s that joined the Taleban movement in the mid-1990s but maintained features of a distinct existence during the Emirate. In late 2001, it became the only group that organisationally broke ranks with the Taleban when it re-established itself in Pakistan, attempted to join the political process but was rejected. One of its leaders, Maulawi Arsala Rahmani, however, was appointed a senator by President Karzai in 2005.

³⁰ Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla* [see FN 8], p. 53.

³¹ The Afghan government officially recognized in June 2009 that 11 districts are under full insurgent control. However, according to the Ministry of Interior there are between 70 and 80 others with government authority covering only the district centre or parts of it. Less conservative estimates put this figure at 100 to 120. Information received from analysts in Kabul, May 2009.

³² 'Kandahari' often is used for people from the South-Western region in general, with the centre Kandahar and Helmand, Uruzgan and Zabul provinces. Many of the 'Kandahari' Taleban leaders – like Mulla Mulla Beradar and Mulla Obaidullah, currently the Taleban's deputy head and No. 3, respectively, Guantanamo inmate Mulla Fazl and late Mulla Meshar and Dadullah – originate from Uruzgan. Mulla Omar's lineage, however, is somewhat more complicated. A Ghilzai Pashtun of the Hotak tribe, his forefathers seem to have migrated from Zabul to Kandahar where he was born. When his father died early, Omar was raised by an uncle who took the family to Uruzgan where he received his private religious education. Two of Mulla Omar's wives are Babozai from Uruzgan.

The other three groups – HIG, the Salafis and the ex-mujahedin – are organisationally distinct. HIG is a former mujahedin organisation that initially, during the mid-1990s, confronted the Taliban and lost many fighters to it. Its leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar might still harbour a grudge toward the Taliban but has put it aside in the current situation. Militarily, it is less strong on the ground, not least because it is deeply discredited in the population for its ruthlessness and its political opportunism. Politically, however, it pursues a more sophisticated strategy than the Taliban. While the latter wholly concentrate on military confrontation and have not established a political wing, HIG follows a two-pronged approach: military pressure on one hand and an infiltration strategy of central and provincial political institutions on the other one.

A group of former HIG officials has been able to register a political party in October 2005, after it had reluctantly and under heavy political pressure distanced itself from Hekmatyar.³³ It insisted on using the mother organisation's original name (Hezbe Eslami Afghanistan (HIA), as HIG officially still does) and party emblem. Some observers consider HIA as the largest unofficial faction in parliament, with around 40 members. A large number of former known HIG members with positions in the presidential palace, the parliament or as provincial and district governors remain outside the 'new' party. However, they constitute a network of their own that can be activated under certain political circumstances.

The Salafis and the alienated mujahedin groups are mainly concerned with local interests. While the Salafis are isolated because of their distinct religious practices – they consider those who do not follow them nonbelievers – the potential reach of mujahedin category is much wider. One example from this category that already has taken up arms is the group of commander Ghulam Yahya Akbari Siawushan in Herat province, an ally of former Western Afghanistan strongman Ismail Khan, now a minister in the Karzai cabinet. Akbari told reporters: 'I agree with a lot of what the Taliban do, and I have even helped them out financially. I am in contact with one group of Taliban, but I am operating an

independent front.'³⁴ Similar groups probably contribute to insurgent activity in the Northern and Western regions as its latest intensification in Faryab, Baghlan, Kunduz, Badakhshan and Ghor cannot be explained solely by local Pashtun pockets playing the role of staging areas. Although still limited in numbers, these groups could provide a bridge for the Taliban into the wider mujahedin camp.

The Haqqani and Mansur networks, the Tora Bora front practically operate under their own command and strategy. They are also not subjected to the Taliban practice of rotating 'provincial governors' and commanders. Internally, this makes them much more static than the mainstream 'Kandahari' Taliban. At the same time, their pre-Taliban background gives them organisational autonomy, making them 'Taliban-associated networks' and their leaders a sort of semi-independent warlords. Their symbiotic relationship with the 'Kandahari' Taliban holds because it is mutually beneficial. It gives the associated networks access to the label of the Taliban, as the most popular insurgent organisation, while the Taliban are enabled to project presence in regions that have never been their strongholds and to present themselves as more than a purely Kandahari movement. These 'tactical alliances', however, do not need to last forever.

The Haqqani network stands out for its operational reach and impact. Long-established independent links to Arab financial sources, to al-Qaeda and Pakistan's ISI give it command of sufficient resources to operate autonomous of the Taliban supreme leadership. It is ethnically more diverse than other Taliban networks integrating Pashtun, Pakistani, Uzbek, Chechen and Arabs fighters. From its traditional area of operation in the South-Eastern provinces it has moved into the strategically important region immediately south of Kabul, in Wardak and Logar provinces, over the last few years. It operates in Kabul and also is expanding in Ghazni province and in the Eastern region by co-opting local commanders.

Significantly, although, the Haqqani network has not been able to set up permanent fronts on Afghan territory and, apart from some insular bases inside Afghanistan, almost exclusively relies on fallback positions inside Pakistan. This seems to be due to local tribal leaders who want to avoid a military

³³ Eyewitnesses report that during the party's congress in Kabul in early 2009 plenty of 'Long live Gulbuddin!'s were shouted.

³⁴ Shapoor Saber, 'Rebel Chief Defies Coalition Forces', Institute for War and Peace Reporting (Kabul), Afghan Recovery Report No. 313, 18 Feb 2009.

backlash and probably maintain bargaining positions vis-à-vis Kabul.

Amongst the various insurgent groups, there is both competition and cooperation. HIG and Taliban fighters cooperate locally in many places. In the Eastern (Kunar, Laghman, Nuristan) and North-Eastern regions (Kunduz), the picture is even more blurred; often it is difficult to find out whether operations have been conducted by the Taliban or HIG. It seems that a new generation of mullas and fighters is not concerned with old rivalries anymore. According to some reports, the Taliban leadership has decreed – possibly as early as 2001 – that their fighters should not actively confront HIG groups. This seems to have been reciprocated by the latter. There also seems to be an – at least tacit – agreement that allows HIG to use the Islamic Emirate's signature for 'nightletters'.

On the other hand, some groups compete with each other in some areas, mainly over territorial control and access to resources. For example, the Taliban have appointed a regional commander-in-chief ('head of the zone') for Eastern Afghanistan, an area claimed by the Tora Bora front. For some months, at least, there were overlapping 'Kandahari' Taliban and Haqqani network structures in Wardak and Logar (with different 'governors' appointed by both sides – a problem that seems to have been overcome in spring 2009 by agreeing that Haqqani's man is in charge) as there are still in the South-East. In the latter area, the Haqqani and Mansur networks also overlap at some places.

Insurgent groups and organised crime also overlap, mainly in regard to the drug and abduction industries. Criminal networks and local bandits adopt the 'Taliban' label to instil a higher degree of terror in their victims. At the same time, Taliban groups are involved in assassinations, abductions or robberies or sometimes commission them from criminal gangs. In areas like Ghazni or, recently, Baghlan armed bandit gangs are proliferating. A portion of reported insurgent activities can be attributed to them.

3.2. The core of the insurgency: The Taliban

The Taliban movement is the strongest force amongst the insurgents. It is contradictory in character: tribal and supra-tribal, heterogeneous and coherent at the same time.

3.2.1. Tribal and social factors

Ideologically, the Taliban do not recognise tribal and ethnic distinctions. Mulla Omar stated in 2008: 'Our religion enjoins on us to avoid from indulging in any kind of activity involving prejudices based on ethnicity. The only bond, which binds us, is the bond of Islam'.³⁵ In the early, pre-Emirate phase the Taliban rebuffed attempts by tribal leaders and political groups to put themselves at the helm of the new movement in the name of Pashtun nationalism. This included the Karzai family, the some famous Pashtun nationalist intellectuals, the Afghan Mellat party and monarchist elements. During the Emirate period, many leading Taliban declined to discuss (their) tribal affiliations. Insofar, it would be incorrect to call them a 'tribal movement'.

However, most Taliban cannot escape their tribal roots. Every Pashtun knows which tribe, subtribe, 'clan' he or she belongs to. That cannot be destroyed even by social uprooting, displacement and urbanisation. Refugee camps and neighbourhoods in Afghan cities are ethnically or tribally organised as well. Also, there are a lot of aspects in the structure of their movement and in the behaviour of its individual members and constituent networks – mainly with regard to recruitment, operations and succession patterns – that show how deeply rooted the Taliban remain in the Pashtun tribal society. Most of their groups operate in or not far from their areas of origin; although there are also 'roving' units and a degree of mobility – often 'Kandahari' Taliban are moved in when local groups behave too 'softly' with the population. Local fighters tend to avoid violence that creates long-lasting blood feuds. When commanders are killed, they are often replaced by (younger) brothers or other close relatives. This was the case when Mulla Dadullah was killed in May 2007 and succeeded by his younger brother Mulla Mansur who then symbolically added 'Dadullah' to his name. This can be read as a reflection of the tribal institution of the *khankhel*, i.e. that the leaders of Pashtun tribes usually come from one particular 'clan'.³⁶

³⁵ 'Taliban leader urges Afghans to boycott "deceptive elections"' [see FN 17].

³⁶ See the Babrakzai amongst the D Zadran or the family of Muhammad Afzal Khan (killed 1978) among the Popalzai. These cases also show how political events can change which family is dominant. The D Zadran are now widely dominated by the Haqqanis and the Popalzai by the Qaranagh to which the Karzai family belongs.

Most of the Taliban are indeed Pashtuns. This reflects patterns of ethnicisation that emerged during the civil wars between the late 1970s and 2001. As a result, it is justified to call the Taliban a '(predominantly) Pashtun movement'. But they are not 'the movement of the Pashtuns' representing as they do only a minority of Afghanistan's largest ethnic group. Terming it a Pashtun movement overlooks the segmentary character of the Pashtun society with its layers of hierarchy and the existing political diversity amongst Pashtuns and often appears as politically motivated.³⁷ There are significant numbers of Pashtuns that support non-Taliban political groups across the spectrum some of whom have shown impressive coherence over decades. This reaches from mujahedin groups (HIG, Harakat) to the nationalist Afghan Mellat party and successors of the leftist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA).³⁸ The biggest group, however, might be those who just try to survive by manoeuvring between the ever-shifting Afghan political frontlines.

There were always small but significant non-Pashtun groups among the Taliban. During the IEA period, a substantial Badakhshan element, Tajik as well as Uzbek, was active. Reportedly, many of those have continued to fight alongside the Taliban after 2001, mainly outside their area of origin. In the meantime they might have moved back home and contributed to the latest upsurge of insurgent activity in North-Eastern Afghanistan. In Laghman, a strong network amongst the local Pashai minority is linked to the Taliban. Apart from them, there were regional non-Pashtun allies and 'satellites' of the Taliban like the Tajiks of Bamian province or the faction of the Shia/Hazara Hezb-e Wahdat³⁹ led by Ustad Muhammad Akbari during the Taliban

Emirate's era. These examples reflect how often local politics shape coalitions: both the Bamian Tajiks and the Akbari faction tried to overturn the dominance of another Wahdat faction by linking up with their enemy's enemy. Today, some local Shia commanders in Daykundi have re-established links with the Taliban.

Equally, the description of the Taliban as a Ghilzai movement is an over-simplification.⁴⁰ Indeed, the Ghilzai Pashtuns are excluded from political power in many parts of Southern Afghanistan and feel persecuted by 'the Durrani' from which the Pashtun tribal aristocracy emanated that upheld the Afghan kingdom between 1747 and 1973. There definitely is a high number of Ghilzai and other non-Durrani present in the Taliban leadership. But at the same time, there are many Durrani. The most prominent example is Mulla Omar's brother-in-law, deputy and confidant Mulla Beradar, a Popalzai (Durrani) Pashtun with the real name Abdul Ghani. In some southern provinces, at least, the Taliban are much more successful in tribal inclusiveness than the Kabul government and its local strongmen.

Social factors also contributed to the emergence of the Taliban but have not received much attention. Other Pashtuns often say about individual Taliban that they 'have no name' or that 'we do not know their families', i.e. that they belonged to the lower strata of society. As early as 1996 an analyst wrote: 'The majority of the Taliban comes from amongst the most disadvantaged in Pashtun society [...] and did not enjoy the prestige and the power that derives from the possession of land. [...] The very austere way of life in the madrassas radicalised the Taliban and mobilised them to seek their revenge. In this sense, the movement subscribed to a continuation of the social restructuring that occurred in Afghanistan during the war. It is a reaction of the disadvantaged social strata and the young against the khans and the traditional notables, a reaction of the periphery against the centre and of the rural areas against the cities which are considered as places of vice in which the traditional Pashtun values are in danger.'⁴¹ Interestingly enough, this aspect recently came up again in Swat where the Pakistani Taliban at least in one area – Matta tehsil (district) –

³⁷ This is often an attempt to persuade the West that the Taliban's political inclusion is the only way to accommodate the Pashtuns. E.g. see: Amina Khan, US and Growing Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan, Islamabad: Institute of Strategic Studies, Reflections No. 2/2009 : 'Afghanistan cannot be stabilized unless the issue of Pashtun alienation is addressed. [...] The Taliban who are Pashtun, need to be brought into the political process'.

³⁸ PDPA ruled 1978-92. On the segmentary society amongst Pashtuns, see: Christian Sigrist: *Regulierte Anarchie*, Oltén 1967; on political parties: Thomas Ruttig, *Islamists, Leftists – and a Void in the Center: Afghanistan's Political Parties and where they come from (1902-2006)*, Kabul: Konrad Adenauer Foundation [2006].

³⁹ Officially Hezb-e Wahdat-e Islami (Islamic Unity Party), now split into four parties.

⁴⁰ See e.g., Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, 'Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan', *Orbis* (winter 2007), p. 4.

⁴¹ Mariam Abou Zahab, 'L'origine sociale des Tālebān', *Les Nouvelles d'Afghanistan* No. 74-75, Paris 1996, pp. 24-6.

organized the landless against landlords that resisted their advance.⁴² These aspects should cast some doubt on the recent proliferation of 'tribal' approaches to tackling the insurgency both in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Such schemes often take Pashtun tribes - wrongly - as something homogenous and static.

3.2.2. A concentric model

Structurally, the Taleban can be described as a model of concentric circles. There at least three circles around a core that mainly consists of a small number of commanders around Mulla Omar that joined the movement early on and are mainly from the South, most of them ideologically motivated former mujahedin commanders with a basic religious education: (1) an inner ring of fighters that follow those 'Kandahari' and other commanders and are mainly recruited from their own tribes; (2) around that, a ring of indoctrinated madrassa students (the 'original' taleban) and foreign jihadis who are the rank-and-file fighters; (3) an outer ring of marginalized Pashtun tribesmen with local grievances, loyalties and interests (the majburi and 'anti-corruption Taleban') as well as hired fighters who join because of unemployment and poverty.

The core and the two inner rings have developed historically and represent the element of continuity between the Taleban movement and regime of 1996-2001 and what today sometimes is called the neo-Taleban. The outer ring is largely new and a result of the divisive and predatory policies of Kabul and its local strongmen. There is low vertical mobility between the rings and the core although some madrassa students have risen to become local commanders after the death of their 'historical' predecessors.

Neither the madrassa students nor the tribal elements have influence on the decision-making of the core, and the ideological commitment of the individual fighter tends to diminish the further away he is located from it (both in terms of the model and physically/geographically). However, the widespread respect for Mulla Omar as the amir ul-mu'menin, combined with an anti-Western ideology which constructs a dichotomy (the fight between 'Muslims and unbelievers') as well as the use of terror against

dissidents⁴³ and real or perceived spies, creates a strong coherence between the core and the rings.

A number of Taleban groups operate outside of the control of zonal and provincial commanders. These are either mobile forces under the direct control of the leadership council or groups of foreign fighters. The foreigners have kept themselves – or are kept – separately from the Afghan Taleban structures altogether for most of the past years.⁴⁴ Many of them seem to have the responsibility to execute suicide and truck bomb attacks. Recently, however, there are more reports about Afghan and foreign fighters operating jointly. This hints at an increasing integration of the latter at least with some Taleban structures beyond the South-East where the Haqqani network traditionally incorporated Arabs.

3.2.3. Organisational hierarchy

When it comes to the concrete composition of their structures on the different levels, as described below, it is difficult to obtain a sharp picture. The Taleban do not regularly announce reshuffles on positions in their system. Available information comes from often uncorroborated media reports, the Afghan rumour mill, unauthorised local Taleban commanders or spokesmen.⁴⁵ The Taleban's own media increasingly contribute facts, in particular its magazine al-Samud that regularly prints interviews with members of the central Taleban leadership, governors and commanders. As in the case of most of their leaders' refusal to be photographed even while in office before 2001 or the practice of using noms de guerre, this still restrictive information policy is part of the Taleban strategy to complicate identification and capture. Parts of the structure exist on paper only. This is driven by the Taleban's wish to project a picture of themselves as a state-like structure, a parallel Emirate, to the outside world, including to their donors.⁴⁶ Therefore, what is

⁴² Jane Perlez and Pir Zubair Shah, 'Taliban Exploit Class Rifts in Pakistan', New York Times 17 Apr 2009.

⁴³ See the killing of the former IEA deputy interior minister, Mulla Khaksar, in January 2006.

⁴⁴ Reportedly, around 20 non-Afghan groups operate in the south-eastern region only which, as the East, seems to have a higher concentration of foreign fighters than the South-West.

⁴⁵ The Taleban have appointed two official spokesmen, Zabihullah Mujahed for the South-West and West and Qari Yusuf Ahmadi for the Southeast, East and North who are directed by the head of their information committee Abdulhai Mutma'in, a former Taleban minister. 'Taliban "appoint new spokesman"', BBC News Online 14 Oct 2005.

⁴⁶ Al-Samud 'seeks to highlight the Taleban's hierarchy, organizational coherence and depth'. International Crisis

described in the following paragraphs shows how the Taliban would like to be perceived.

Mulla Omar as the amir ul-mu'menin continues to stand at the top of the movement after 2001. He is advised by the rahbari shura (leadership council, sometimes called Quetta council) composed of 10 to 12 members⁴⁷, the Taliban's main decision-making body. Mulla Omar seems to be isolated from it for security reasons; according to some sources, Mulla Beradar heads the council. Reportedly, even the rahbari shura's members have no direct access to Omar and have to go through Mulla Obaidullah⁴⁸ or Beradar. This apparently has enhanced the position of both within the movement significantly, making them its actual, at least day-to-day leaders. Meanwhile, Mulla Omar concentrates on input on strategic and moral issues, channelled through the leadership council. For example, in late 2006 he issued a layha (code of conduct) for Taliban fighters.⁴⁹ It emphasises avoiding un-Islamic behaviour and the need to treat the civilian population well and has been repeated and updated by Mulla Omar's messages on the occasion of Islamic festivals.⁵⁰ This seems to be an attempt by the

Taliban leadership to indirectly distance itself from practices used by Haqqani and late Mulla Dadullah and remedy growing concerns about them in their own ranks.

In early 2006, an alternative draft constitution (De Afghanistan Eslami Emarat Dastur) appeared in Pashto, Dari and English on a Taliban website.⁵¹ Most likely it was designed in 2004 as an answer to the 2003 Constitutional Loya Jirga but did not gain the approval of the leadership – which would explain its subsequent disappearance.

Some of twelve original members of the leadership council have left or were killed but it is not clear whether and on the basis of which mechanism they have been replaced. As a result, the council's exact current composition is unknown. Until very recently, most of its members still were Mulla Omar's 'Kandahari' companions – they simply do not trust 'outsiders'. Non-'Kandahari' elements from the associated networks in the South-East and East were only symbolically represented in it.⁵² Apart from the remaining founders of the movement, most likely the Taliban zonal commanders, each of them responsible for a number of provinces, are members of the rahbari shura.

The zones correspond with the four regional military councils all located in Pakistan.⁵³ The one in Quetta directs operations for Southern and apparently also Western Afghanistan. It is led by Hafez Majid, a Taliban founder-member. Perhaps it is largely identical with the rahbari shura, based in the same area. The council in Peshawar covers eastern and possibly north-eastern Afghanistan⁵⁴,

Group (ICG), Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words? Asia Report No. 158, 24 July 2008, p. 13. It is characteristic that there are no matching publications in Afghan languages.

⁴⁷ There is some confusion because there are two Taliban councils in (or around) Quetta, the leadership council and one regional military council for the Afghan South. On the former, one report gives 33 as the number of its members, based on an interview with a Taliban provincial governor. Sami Yousafzai and Urs Gehriger, 'Der Kodex der Taliban', Weltwoche (Zurich) No. 46/06 (15 Nov 2006).

⁴⁸ There are conflicting reports about his arrest and possible release in Pakistan in 2008.

⁴⁹ Yousafzai and Gehriger, 'Der Kodex der Taliban' [see FN 47].

⁵⁰ 'I once again give you the same guidelines, to stand in front of the enemy like steel. But be very careful when you face the general people and your innocent countrymen. Do not go for an attack which has a possibility of harming general people. All your operations must be in the light of the sayings of Allah and the way of Muhammad (Sallaho Alaihe wa Sallam). Always leave your personal and emotional feelings behind. Every act which is not in harmony with the teachings of Islam or is not according to the Islamic civilization or does not look good with the Muslim Ummah [...] like blasts in [mosques] and where there are a gathering of the general people, looting of the properties on the highways, cutting noses and ears in the name of [sectarian] differences which Islam forbids [...] the burning of Islamic books must be strongly countered.' Ameer Al-Mu'meneen Mullah Mohammad Omar Mujahid

about the pleasure of Eid al-Fitr, <http://www.afghanvoice.com/index.php/news/news-in-english/237-ameer-al-mumeneen-mullah-mohammad-omar-mujahid-about-the-pleasure-of-eid-al-fitr>.

⁵¹ The original internet link was inactive in 2009.

⁵² Of late, that might have changed. Haqqani became more influential in the movement and Abdullatif Mansur was reportedly appointed the new head of the Taliban political commission in 2009 (more on this below).

⁵³ The names of these councils indicate a more stable geographical location than there might be in reality. The council members might hide separately in the wider area and are highly mobile. After discussions in the US to extend drone attacks to Pakistani Baluchistan, movements from Quetta to Waziristan and Karachi are reported.

⁵⁴ There are conflicting reports about who leads the Peshawar council and whether its area of coverage includes the North-East. According to one version, it is the leader of the Tora Bora front, Mujahed, in another

the one in Miramshah in North Waziristan, led by Serajuddin Haqqani who is advised by his father Jalaluddin, covers South-Eastern Afghanistan (Greater Paktia). The fourth council, in Gerdi Jangal (a refugee camp in Pakistani Baluchistan) is possibly just a sub-council, responsible for Helmand. It is reportedly headed by Akhtar Muhammad Mansur⁵⁵ who is also called the Taliban's overall head of military operations by some sources. The Miranshah shura, in particular, appears to integrate Afghan and Pakistani Taliban and, possibly, foreign fighters. Most likely, the rahbari shura and most other councils are no standing, institutionalised bodies that meet regularly but rather virtual groups that convene in changing compositions and focus around the responsible individual – again reflecting the Taliban's leadership principle.

At least four committees at the central level deal with the most important issues: military, political and financial affairs as well as 'culture and information'. The political committee deals with foreign relations, the committee for culture and information with the Taliban media and supervises the 'Media Centre of the Taliban Islamic Movement'.⁵⁶ But there are likely more committees, amongst them for interior affairs, prisoners and refugees, education and training as well as recruitment.⁵⁷ Each committee consists of two to three members and 'reports' to the rahbari shura but the committee heads are not necessarily members of it.

At the same time, the Taliban have not established a political wing like other armed groups abroad (e.g. the PLO, PKK, LTTE etc.) or in the country, including Hezb-e Islami (Gulbuddin).⁵⁸

Maulawi Muhammad Kabir, a member of the rahbari shura who was IEA governor of Nangrahar. The second version seems to be more likely, otherwise Mujahed would be in charge over an area which is clearly larger than his role in the insurgency. Probably, there are still competing structures. Some other recent reports say that the rahbari shura also directly instructs commanders in Kunduz.

⁵⁵ Former IEA minister for aviation and air defence; not related to the Mansur network.

⁵⁶ On the diversity of Taliban media see: ICG, Taliban Propaganda [see FN 46], pp. 13-4.

⁵⁷ Shamim Shahid, 'Quetta-based Taliban move to Karachi', The Nation (Lahore) 30 Apr 2009; ICG, Taliban Propaganda [see FN 46], p. 11.

⁵⁸ There were attempts from 2003 onwards to encourage former IEA leaders in Kabul, in particular former Foreign Minister Mutawakkel, to set up a 'Taliban political party' inside Afghanistan. This had failed. Outgoing U.S. Ambassador William Woods has repeated this proposal in

3.2.4. Parallel structures

Significantly, the Taliban central institutions, including the name of their committees, resemble those of regular Afghan governments, although in a rump form; the committees being the Taliban 'ministries'. The same was the case during the Emirate period when the vice and virtue ministry was the only significant addendum.⁵⁹ Not recognising the Karzai government's legitimacy on grounds of its 'puppet' character, the Taliban claim continuing legitimacy as a (parallel or alternative) state and use the title 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' on all their documents and publications.

This pattern is reproduced at the subnational levels. In most areas they are operating in, with the exception of a few provinces north of Kabul, the Taliban have set up parallel provincial, district and even village structures. On the provincial level, there usually is a governor with two deputies (one responsible for military operations, one the police chief), a chief judge and a head of the vice and virtue department. The deputies for operational affairs are, theoretically, in charge of the Taliban fronts (called jabha or mahaz in Dari/Pashto) in one province which, in turn, are subdivided into operational groups (delgai, Pashto: 'grouplet'; or utaq, Dari/Pashto: 'cell') of a handful up to 20 people each.⁶⁰ Of particular importance are the Taliban courts which are often preferred by the population to the corrupt and slow government courts. In 2008, however, functioning Taliban courts were reported only in about two dozen districts (out of 400) while elsewhere the Taliban relied on local ulema.⁶¹

March 2009. 'Taliban political party being considered', UPI, 22 March 2009. Currently, a revived Harakat offers itself for this role again. After years of political dormancy, the party has appointed MP Musa Hotak as head of office and nominated Maulawi Muhammad Said Hashemi as its presidential candidate. Hashemi, an alem, claims some influence over the Taliban saying 'they were our pupils'. Author's interview, Kabul 27 Apr 2009.

⁵⁹ Officially: Ministry for the Promotion of Vice and the Prevention of Vice (amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa nahw al-munkir), popularly known as the 'morality police'. It was upgra during the Taliban Emirate from a commission that has been established before they took over.

⁶⁰ According to some reports, front commanders can apply for recognition by the Taliban leadership when they have 20 men at the minimum. Antonio Giustozzi, personal e-mail, June 2009.

⁶¹ Antonio Giustozzi, The neo-Taliban: a year on, 12 Nov 2008, www.opendemocracy.net/article/the-neo-taliban-a-year-on.

It is only in the Pashtun South, however, that the parallel provincial governors assert relatively strong control over local commanders. Outside those areas they are often only symbolically appointed, being temporary or permanent 'absentees'.

The zonal commanders seem to have the last word in appointing the provincial officials. At the same time, neither their position nor that of the provincial Taleban governors remains unchallenged. Mulla Mansur Dadullah is a rival for the 'official' new chief of the South-Western zone, Maulawi Abdulqayyum Zakeri⁶², another Taleban hero who in a move highly publicised by the Taleban joined their ranks again after having been released from Guantanamo in 2008.⁶³ In Uruzgan, there is a long-standing competition between major Durrani and Ghilzai commanders about which side should name the 'provincial governor'. The Taleban leadership tried to solve this by the appointment of a Ruhani, a quasi-ethnic minority group similar to the Seyyed and Sadat that claim to go back to different parts of the Prophet's family and therefore command religious respect. But even that did not immediately help: the appointee had to return to Quetta for further backing after the new 'district governors' proposed by him faced opposition from local group commanders.

The shuras, committees and commissions, the provincial structures and local fronts represent the Taleban movement's relatively strong hierarchic element, with a functioning command-and-control chain that is stronger in some parts of the country and weaker in others. The chain is stronger closer to the Pakistani border where the leadership has easier access and influence. In southern Afghanistan, there are strong indications that local commanders would not dare to ignore instructions from the leadership for fear of punitive action. But there seems to be no permanent communication between Quetta and every single field commander. The Taleban leadership seems to concentrate only on situations or issues it considers important in what Kilcullen calls a 'strong but elastic discipline'.⁶⁴ Instructions are communicated mainly via mobile phones and through messengers. This includes operations for which several Taleban groups need to be clustered

and the execution of harassment and assassinations of influential local pro-government leaders; from Zabul and Uruzgan 'expulsion or death lists' have been reported that were issued by Taleban leaders. The sporadic character of it leaves them day-to-day autonomy with regard to small-scale operations, including mine and IED planting.

The local structures and the networks of individual commanders represent the horizontal layers of loyalties that can contravene the theoretically strongly centralised hierarchy – another similarity with the government the insurgents are fighting. The relative strength of each local commander depends on the number of fighters and supporters he can mobilise. This is defined by the degree to which he is rooted in local tribal communities.

There are also mechanisms that allow individuals to – at least temporarily – circumvent the Taleban hierarchy. Many commanders have developed special client-patron relationship with certain Taleban leaders in Quetta or elsewhere, often defined by their tribal relationship or by a past as brothers-in-arms during the anti-Soviet jihad. This allows them to diversify access to resources, particularly financial support from abroad, and replicates a pattern of the mujahedin movement. Large networks of this kind, on the other hand, allow some commanders to operate more autonomously from the Quetta leadership. The most visible case was late Mulla Dadullah who assumed the role of an official Taleban spokesman and projected himself as the Taleban supreme military commander – two positions he officially never had. His younger brother Mulla Mansur Dadullah still commands large parts of this network of groups throughout the country, thanks to resources channelled directly to him through Arab donors honouring his brother's 'hero status'.

In 2008, a new commission under the Taleban central leadership reportedly carried out a long-term administrative review in some southern provinces. Apparently, this was preceded by popular complaints about misconduct of certain Taleban commanders but also by commanders' complaints about inactive 'governors'.⁶⁵ In Zabul province, pairs of auditors were seen questioning the local population in Taleban-controlled areas about the behaviour of local commanders based on Mulla Omar's *layha*.

⁶² He is the son of Abdullah Zakeri, a.k.a. Saheb Jan Sahebzada, one of the most influential Taleban ulema.

⁶³ Pamela Hess, 'Afghanistan Taliban leader was at Gitmo', Associated Press 11 March 2009.

⁶⁴ Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla* [see FN 8], p. 54.

⁶⁵ Afghan eyewitnesses' reports; author's private conversation with international analyst, Kabul April 2009.

They took notes and reported back to Quetta. It is possible that this was an ad-hoc body although, according to some reports, it continues to exist and to deal with judicial matters. Divergent reports name either Mulla Muhammad Yunus or Mulla Nazir, both from Zabul, as its head.⁶⁶ As a result, non-local commanders and fighters were withdrawn from some areas, like Helmand and Wardak, and were replaced by local ones who are supposed to be more tolerant vis-à-vis the local population. In late 2008, an internally announced reshuffle of some 'governors' of southern provinces followed. By mid-2009, the changes had been implemented in Ghazni, Uruzgan and Zabul and possibly in Helmand and Farah but not yet in Kandahar.⁶⁷

To date, the Taliban have been surprisingly unaffected by killings and arrests of leaders at their central or sub-national levels. Gaps have been filled relatively quickly while it can be assumed that the new commanders in many cases have less fighting and leadership experience. Due to their education in madrassas abroad and lack of contact with real Afghan society they are possibly also more ideologically radical, brutal vis-à-vis the local population and less prone to reconciliation than their predecessors – not least because the deaths of the original commanders create the 'necessity' for revenge. There have been reports for some years that even veteran Taliban commanders are concerned about the newcomers and that it was driving them to look for a political solution.⁶⁸

Under the described circumstances, it is difficult to estimate the number of Taliban fighters. Most observers give figures of between 10,000 and 20,000. But there are also higher ones: Kilcullen gauges between 32,000 and 40,000 for mid-2008, with 8,000 to 10,000 'full-time fighters'. Giustozzi more cautiously speaks of 'tens of thousands', with

rising figures since 2008.⁶⁹ Indeed, these figures need to be qualified since there are different kinds of fighters: full-time mobile ones, probably one in ten, the rest part-timers who live in their communities, behave as civilians most of the time and sometimes join voluntarily, sometimes are hired for small money. This includes some of those who help to install IEDs. Amongst them, the jobless 'occasional Taleb'⁷⁰ might dominate. (Commanders – or 'IED facilitators' – are rewarded higher premiums after incidents in their operational area – which creates competition and over-reporting). Additionally, probably a few dozen specialists produce bombs and explosive devices – with small cells in most provinces. Last but not least, sympathisers influence the atmosphere on the ground by projecting that the Taliban's eyes and ears are there all the time.

3.2.5. Ideology and programme

One long-term observer describes the Taliban mindset as an 'eclectic ad hoc' mixture full of 'contradictions, breakouts, gaps, alterations and highly idiosyncratic interpretations'.⁷¹ Elements of literalist (kalami) Sunni subgroups – Salafists, Wahhabists and the Deobandi school⁷² –, 'modern' radical Islamist ('jehadist') interpretations and the Pashtun tribal code, i.e. pashtunwali, are stirred into this mixture. Any modern or individual interpretation of the canonical scriptures of Islam (ijtihad) is rejected; the 'ancients of Medina' (the salaf) are meticulously imitated; there is a fixation on outwardly aspects of religious behaviour (certain types of beards, haircuts and clothing; public prayers and punishments for 'sin'; the strict segregation of women); a dualist worldview with a strict division between 'good' and 'bad' and believers and

⁶⁶ Toward the end of 2008, there were reports about Mulla Nazir's arrest in Pakistan and his replacement by Mulla Assadullah (or Sa'dullah).

⁶⁷ The only media reports available on this mentions a few names: Mu'tassem as head of the finance committee, Amir Khan Mutaqi as head of the culture and information committee, Mulla Jalil as responsible for interior affairs and Mulla Beradar as special aide to Mulla Omar. The reference to Maulawi Kabir as the new head of the political committee, however, seems to be incorrect. Shahid, 'Quetta-based Taliban' [see FN 57].

⁶⁸ The author encountered various of such reports while travelling in Afghanistan, the first one in 2006 in Wardak.

⁶⁹ Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla* [see FN 8], pp. 48-9; Giustozzi, *The neo-Taliban: a year on* [see FN 61].

⁷⁰ Fetrat Zerak, 'The Occasional Taliban', Institute for War and Peace Reporting (Kabul), *Afghan Recovery Report* No. 319, 23 Apr 2009.

⁷¹ See: Bernt Glatzer, 'Zum politischen Islam der afghanischen Taliban', in: Dietrich Reetz (Ed.), *Sendungsbewusstsein oder Eigennutz: Zu Motivation und Selbstverständnis islamischer Mobilisierung*, Berlin: Zentrum Moderner Orient, Studien 15, 2001, pp. 173-82.

⁷² Traditional Salafists attempt to renew Islamic society peacefully by reviving Muslim traditions stressing the personal conduct of life while their 21st century successors try to do this from the top by seizing power and establishing an Islamic state. Wahhabism and Deobandism developed from that source in the 18-19th centuries as puritan reform movements in distinct regions, on the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian subcontinent.

'nonbelievers'; the interpretation of the jihad concept as the sixth individual religious duty (besides the Islamic credo, the five daily prayers etc.) and the principle of takfir that makes possible the excommunication of fellow Muslims who do not follow these exact same practices. The latter applies to Shia Muslims in particular. The consequence is an 'absolute theocentrism'; everything that is seen as at fault with God's revelations 'merits annihilation'.⁷³

This theology does not, as William Maley points out, reflect 'the values of the [Pashtun] village, but the values of the village as interpreted by the refugee camp dwellers or madrassa students most of whom have never known ordinary village life that the Taleban seek to impose'.⁷⁴ This puritanical and rigorist ideological mix was already taught to the mujahedin during the anti-Soviet jihad by the ISI and the Deobandi mullas that had been integrated into the Pakistani army during Zia-ul-Haq's military regime. They mainly came through Pakistani Islamist parties like Jamiat-i-Islami and Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Islami, the early mentors of the Afghan Taleban.

It is unclear however how much of a theological debate is really going on amongst the Taleban or their ulema. In any case, the door is open to pragmatic adaptations if politically opportune. One example: while the Taleban committed a number of massacres against Shia Hazara during their rule, in his October 2006 'Id message Mulla Omar for the first time appealed to his fighters 'not to go for sectarian hatred[; a]ll Muslims of different schools of thought are brothers and there is no difference among them'.⁷⁵ This might be an attempt to reach out also to former Shia mujahedin.

'Islam' being their programme and ideology, the Taleban never published a political manifesto. In practice, their one-point agenda needed no printing and during their ascent in the 1990s was sufficient to appeal to the Afghans who had tired of the political chaos: to establish a 'truly Islamic order' by disarming all other groups that had 'betrayed' Islam. (The Taleban considered themselves 'neutral' in the inter-factional fighting.)

Their understanding of politics and society only became manifest after their takeover of power, through the rejection of any pluralism - religious and political - and the exclusion of women from the public sphere. Details were to be decided after the end of the civil war by Islamic scholars (ulema). While those scholars theoretically played an important role during the Taleban Emirate, they have not been particularly pro-active in influencing the decision-making. In consequence, there only was a small circle of really influential advisors (amongst whom there might have been a small number of ulema from Pakistan, as well as ISI advisors). The Islamic Emirate's ulema shura only had the role of a rubberstamp.

Statements of Taleban leaders about their political aims have not become much more detailed since. In a recent interview, deputy leader Mulla Beradar expressed the following aims: regaining 'freedom, authority [of the Emirate] and [...] Islamic Sovereignty' for 'our Muslim nation' [i.e. Afghanistan] through 'complete and un conditional withdrawal' of the US forces; the establishment of a 'truly representative Islamic Afghan administration based on the consent of our people' and 'a policy of mutual respect and non-interference with all countries of the world'. 'Special attention' would be given to education 'as our financial resources permit us'.⁷⁶ Mu'tassem, the former head of their political committee earlier rejected any political power sharing: 'The Islamic Emirate demands to rule the country so as to establish an ... Islamic system in it'. Somewhat contradictorily, he said however that 'an Afghan strategy' for the future system of the country should be determined 'in consultation with all the Afghan groups'.⁷⁷

The Taleban leadership's political aim is to re-establish their Islamic Emirate. In order to achieve this, they attempt to force the international forces to withdraw and the Kabul government to collapse by curbing their opponents' access to an increasing area of the country. Additionally, they try to build up political pressure on the governments of the troop-providing countries through their voters. Currently,

⁷³ Abdelwahab Meddeb, *Islam and Its Discontents*, London: William Heinemann 2003, pp. 104-5.

⁷⁴ William Maley, 'Interpreting the Taliban', in: Maley (Ed.), *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban*, New York University Press, 1998, p. 20.

⁷⁵ 'Mullah Omar Eid message', Afghan Islamic Press (Peshawar) 21 Oct 2006.

⁷⁶ 'Text of interview of the esteemed Mullah Beradar Akhund, Deputy Ameerul Mo'mineen of The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan With the "SARK" magazine', 23 June 2009, <http://alemarah1.org/english/marki-23-06-2009.html>; the magazine's name is misspelled and should read 'Srak' (Pashto: 'beam of light').

⁷⁷ Sayed Salahuddin, 'Taliban say want peace with Afghans, NATO troops out', Reuters 26 Feb 2009.

the Taliban do not strive for permanent territorial control. In rural areas, they force the weak government representatives to strike deals in order to survive and to hand over weapons and money. District centres are only taken over temporarily, to show presence and maintain uncertainty amongst locals. In areas still not under their influence, they rely on a step-by-step strategy: first spread propaganda in mosques and bazaars through unarmed activists, then create small groups of unarmed sympathisers who report about government collaborators and finally create groups of armed fighters. By these means, they effectively block the physical and institutional reconstruction process and create permanent instability.

3.2.6. Modus operandi

The main modus operandi of the Taliban and the associated networks is asymmetrical warfare. This includes terrorist tactics like the use of IEDs, mines and suicide attacks as well as intimidation, regularly followed by abductions and assassinations. The targets include Afghan and international security forces, their contractors and translators, government employees, community leaders and clerics sympathetic with the government or meeting internationals, aid workers who are accused of spying for the Western military, the UN and diplomats of some countries. Mulla Beradar described the Taliban approach as follows: 'Our first priority target will be the foreign invaders and secondly the high rankings of the Karzai administration[:] we are working on a strategy to keep foreign invaders under siege in Kabul'.⁷⁸

From some southern provinces, the existence of 'death lists', communicated by phone, has been reported. This is targeted violence against soft targets in order to dissuade interaction between the population and the government and the international community. The Haqqani network has possibly cultivated this to a higher degree than the others, emphasizing spectacular operations that show its ability to hit at any time and place of its choosing, with special attention to the capital Kabul. Its use of terrorist means (with an emphasis on suicide bombings and commando-style operations) as a copy of Islamist militant tactics elsewhere puts the Haqqani network closer to al-Qaeda than even most of the 'Kandahari' Taliban leadership. The

Mansur network is known for its close links with Kashmiri jihadis and militant Punjabi groups.

Meanwhile, open military combat operations against international forces remain sporadic and an exception. As of 2009, however, combat encounters seem to last longer than before and show increased resilience of the Taliban. Open attacks still concentrate on Afghan police posts and patrols. The police suffer the highest casualty rate. At the same time, the Taliban and other groups increasingly try to infiltrate the security forces, in particular the police and newly established 'tribal' militias.⁷⁹ It can also be supposed that they have informers in many government and international institutions.

The cost of Taliban operations are estimated at some USD 70 million per annum currently.⁸⁰ The sums to cover this are raised from diverse sources. In the areas under Taliban influence, 'taxes' are raised on property, business and trade profits in a rather systematic way from NGOs⁸¹, private companies - including the big telecom companies - and individuals as well as from humanitarian goods delivered by UN agencies. From Zabul, written demands for payment based on detailed knowledge of land property are reported. In Kandahar and Uruzgan, even in the provincial capitals held by the government, its employees tacitly pay 'income tax'. Mostly, these 'taxes' are religiously justified, as *ushr* and *zakat*. The degree of coverage varies from province to province. Local commanders might levy their own 'taxes' - and sometimes are called to account for this by the *rahbari shura*.

Until recently most analysts believed that the Taliban's 'tax' collection was mainly designed to project the presence of their 'government' while the amount collected was less important. There are strong indications, however, that this has to be revised. The income from protection money possibly matches that from taxing on drugs. A foreign advisor based in Kandahar since four years confirmed that 20 to 30 per cent of the contract value is regularly paid to the Taliban. A German newspaper reports that '[i]n the cases of major projects, contractors have to

⁷⁸ 'Interview with Mulla Beradar, great mujahed and responsible of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan', www.alemarah1.org, Oct 2008.

⁷⁹ Author's conversations with Afghan and external observers, Kabul and Uruzgan 2008/09, also relating to other provinces like Wardak.

⁸⁰ Author's conversations with analysts, Kabul and Europe 2009.

⁸¹ NGOs are urged to 'register' with the Taliban if they want to work in areas under their control or are threatened with 'arrest'. See: 'Interview with Mulla Beradar' [see FN 78].

have the construction plans and bidding documents scrutinised by Taleban engineers after which the amount of the charge is fixed.⁸² The substantial increase of aid money expected to flow in with the US 'civilian surge' might further contribute to the Taleban income.

A second significant part of the Taleban finances flows in from Gulf and other countries with Muslim populations. The role of Islamic charities apparently is often overrated. Most of this money is collected privately and in mosques. Reportedly, there are also officially appointed Taleban fundraisers.⁸³ This area is targeted by an array of Arab-language Taleban media like the magazine *al-Samud* (both online and in print)⁸⁴ – with accounts from the battlefield, casualty lists, tributes to 'martyrs' and glossy photographs -, websites, videos and DVDs in which a lot of effort is put into.

Thirdly, money from illicit businesses plays a major role. This includes the much-discussed drug money raised by levies on poppy cultivation, opiate production and trafficking, of which, according to the UN, USD 200 to 300 million per year flow to the Taleban. (The Afghan drug exports were valued at USD 3.4 billion for 2008.)⁸⁵ Not all Taleban drug profits will be used to finance operations as much of it is privately appropriated. The drug cartels and those in the Afghan institutions who are involved either directly in the drug industry or provide political protection possibly pocket larger shares than the Taleban.

Additionally, there seems to be an increasing amount of money obtained through abductions which have obtained the character of an 'industry', with 'on-demand' and commissioned kidnappings carried out by criminal gangs who, then, sell their victims on to their 'customers' amongst the insurgents. Some of these gangs are part of the drug business at the same time and enjoy political protection from within Kabul institutions.

There also is an – under-researched – involvement of al-Qaeda and possibly some Taleban

in the international finance business. Money is reportedly laundered and channelled through the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (and possibly other) banks, foreign stock exchanges as well as the traditional hawala system. Apart from Karachi, the UAE has the largest Pashtun diaspora with its extensive regional trade networks.⁸⁶

Despite the Pakistani influence and major foreign funding, the Taleban are an Afghan and Afghan-led movement. Afghan (anti-Pakistani) nationalism and even xenophobia vis-à-vis their Arab 'guests' creates fault-lines within the movement. During the Taleban Emirate time, there was a lot of mutual mistrust between Arab and Afghan fighters and infighting (sometimes physical) between Afghan and Pakistani Taleban. Although there are no recent reports of that kind, it can be assumed that the general mindset has not fundamentally changed. The relationship between Afghans and foreign elements is ambivalent and pragmatic: External money and advice is happily received but does not automatically create feelings of brotherhood.

The Taleban movement came back because it was not defeated when de-legitimised and, when it reappeared, was re-legitimized because more and more Afghans see its competitive advantages in security, justice and 'Islamic' credentials when they compare it with its successor regime. The growing popular disaffection and the sidelining of important tribal groups, combined with the increased anti-Westernism, fed the impression amongst the Taleban that history was repeating itself and that they could get a second chance to establish their Emirate. This provided the fertile ground for its metamorphosis into a much broader insurgency. The growing civilian casualty figures caused by Western military operations added popular anger that turned into support at some places while the Pakistani hinterland support provides the logistical lifeline for an insurgency in a land-locked country that otherwise would face attrition from supplies. The broad spectrum of causes of the insurgency is the reason for the insurgency's growing appeal beyond the Pashtun ethnic group. In contrast, the Taleban ideology and their narrow-minded and exclusive reading of Sharia or al-Qaeda's internationalist jihadism are of less importance in pulling Afghans into the insurgency. This ideology is far from being attractive for most of them - for the traditional

⁸² Willi Germund, 'Steuergeld für Taliban', *Frankfurter Rundschau* 1 July 2009.

⁸³ Shahid, 'Quetta-based Taliban' [see FN 57].

⁸⁴ Its editors use the following spellings: 'Al Somood' and 'www.alsomood.com'.

⁸⁵ 'Taliban Earns USD 300mn From Opium Trade: U.N.', *Nasdaq - Global Markets* 20 Feb 2009; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008*, Nov 2008, p. 128.

⁸⁶ ICG, *Afghanistan: The Problem of Pashtun Alienation*, Asia Report No. 62, 5 Aug 2003, pp. 15-6.

Hanafi majority amongst Pashtuns, not to speak about non-Pashtuns, Shia Muslims, women and – on the political side – the pro-democratic forces and even non-Islamist tribal conservatives.

3.3. The FATA triangle: al-Qaeda, Afghan and Pakistani Taleban

In order to judge the Taleban's potential for independent decision-making, its relationship with al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda's own current shape needs to be briefly examined as well as the relations between the Afghan Taleban and the growing Pakistani Taleban movement.

Long-term terrorism observers diagnose that since 2006/07 al-Qaeda's financial and recruitment situation as well as its ability to replace killed and arrested functionaries have improved.⁸⁷ This has significantly shaped the situation in the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan. According to the coordinator of the UN Security Council's Al-Qaeda/Taleban Monitoring Team, it is '[t]he one geographic area [worldwide] where al-Qaeda has retained influence, or even consolidated and increased its standing over the last three years'.⁸⁸ This was in 2008, before this year's attempts of the Pakistani Taleban to expand their area of influence in the Malakand region (which includes Swat) and the Pakistani army's counter-attack.

3.3.1. The al-Qaeda/Taleban symbiosis

Al-Qaeda's infrastructure in the area is 'robust' and includes 'two operational structures' in FATA, one in Waziristan and one in Bajaur agency, on the territory of the Wazir and Dawar tribes and the Mamond tribe, respectively.⁸⁹ This is on the Pakistani side of the border, explaining US (and Afghan government) claims that al-Qaeda was not 'based per se' in Afghanistan anymore and only indirectly active there

through 'elements and [...] affiliates'.⁹⁰ Other top level US officials confirm that al-Qaeda's infrastructure in the Afghan-Pakistani border areas is 'the single most important factor' for its 'ability to threaten the West'.⁹¹

Both in Afghanistan and Pakistan, al-Qaeda exploits local conditions by co-opting militant groups with local battle experience. Relying on long-established links with individuals and groups from within the Taleban movement and expanding them, it manages to 'ride on the back of the resurgent Taleban movement'.⁹² It is its support role for these groups that renders al-Qaeda effective in the first place: the transfer of technical knowhow, devices and training for IED use, truck and suicide bombings as well as the channelling of what some observer call 'strategic level funding'. This raises the level of sophistication of Taleban and associated networks' operations.

Increasingly, al-Qaeda approaches the Afghan and the Pakistani wings of the Taleban in different ways. Barrett calls its alliance with the Afghan Taleban surviving yet 'fragile' while the one with the Pakistani Taleban is deepening.

In the case of the Afghan Taleban, the reason is that both organisations follow divergent strategic approaches. The Taleban do not share al-Qaeda's internationalist agenda and concentrate on Afghanistan mainly. This was reflected in a recent interview by Taleban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahed who said that the Taleban are 'one thing and al-Qaeda is another. They are global[,] we are just in the region'.⁹³ In jihadist ideological terms, al-Qaeda concentrates directly on the 'far enemy' – the US – while the Taleban fight against the 'near enemy', i.e. the Afghan government, and only targets the 'far enemy' as long as it occupies 'Muslim territory'.⁹⁴

This already had led to an occasionally problematic relationship between them and their

⁸⁷ Guido Steinberg, *Die Wiederkehr von al-Qaida: Aktuelle Entwicklungen im internationalen Terrorismus und ihre Folgen für Europa*, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP-Aktuell 62) Nov. 2007, pp. 2-3.

⁸⁸ Richard Barrett, *Seven Years After 9/11: Al-Qaida's Strengths and Vulnerabilities*, London: International Center for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, The Future Action Series, Sept. 2008, p. 2.

⁸⁹ Rohan Gunaratna and Syed Adnan Ali Shah Bukhari, 'Militant Organisations and Their Driving Forces', in: Kristina Zetterlund (ed.), *Pakistan – Consequences of Deteriorating Security in Afghanistan*, Stockholm: FOI (Swedish Defence Research Agency) 2009, pp. 36-8.

⁹⁰ Petraeus, 'Main al Qaeda organization not based in Afghanistan', CNN Political Ticker 10 May 2009.

⁹¹ 'State of al Qaeda Today', Transcript of a speech held by [then] CIA director Michael Hayden, Washington D.C.: The Atlantic Council 13 Nov 2008.

⁹² Gunaratna and Bukhari, 'Militant Organisations and Their Driving Forces' [see FN 89], pp. 36, 39.

⁹³ 'Transcript: Afghan Taliban spokesman discusses war', CNN (online), 5 May 2009.

⁹⁴ On these concepts, see: Guido Steinberg, *Der nahe und der ferne Feind: Die Netzwerke des islamischen Terrorismus*, Munich: C.H. Beck 2005, p. 46ff.

leaders earlier,⁹⁵ a fact that was only overshadowed by the dramatic events of 9/11 and the perceived Taliban entanglement in them. In fact, the Taliban were likely not aware of al-Qaeda's plans in advance, at least not in its concrete form.

Before 9/11, the Afghan Taliban movement painstakingly kept itself organisationally distant from al-Qaeda. It did not join the 'World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders' set up by Osama bin Laden in February 1998 with groups from Bangladesh, Egypt and Pakistan. At that time, Mulla Omar even demanded from the al-Qaeda leader to refrain from political activities abroad while being a 'guest' of the Taliban. For their 'hospitality', Usama had to give bayat, an oath of allegiance, to Mulla Omar.⁹⁶ In the post-2001 period, as well, al-Qaeda is respecting the Taliban leadership: '[W]e are under the command of the Islamic Emirate and under the field leaders in the Islamic Emirate'.⁹⁷ By this, al-Qaeda, at least nominally, recognized Mulla Omar as its supreme leader but was forced to indirectly also endorse the precedence of 'national' movements over its own 'internationalist' agenda. Possibly, this also reflects the Wahhabi thought that jihad can only be waged from a country in which the Sharia prevails, a dar ul-islam led by an amir as the spiritual leader.⁹⁸ There were also reports of inter-marriage between Omar's and Osama's families.

Nevertheless, mutual interest took precedence over rifts. The Taliban's hospitality provided al-Qaeda with safety and an operational basis. It reciprocated with financial support and weapons purchases. Furthermore, the Arabs provided a welcome and important fighting force. Indeed many of the Afghan commanders were happy about foreigners seeking martyrdom – it helped them conserve their own forces. Subsequently, most of the Arab fighters were used as cannon-fodder on the bloodiest battlefields, as in the Shomali plains north of Kabul. Furthermore, the Taliban appear to have allowed these units to carry lighter weaponry only.⁹⁹ Another group of experienced Arab and other

foreign fighters, however, the so-called brigade 055, was more of an al-Qaeda elite unit. As integrated part of the IEA army, it served as a shock force. Not all Arabs were fighters, though. Engineers supported infrastructure and road building. Charities were active in the humanitarian field.

The fall of the Emirate created two contradictory developments in this symbiosis. On one hand, the Taliban's financial and logistical dependence on al-Qaeda arguably became much more critical since they lost their internal 'tax' base raised by their government. On the other hand, the Afghan Taliban paid a heavy price: the loss of power after al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks which directed the rage of the international community against them.¹⁰⁰ This must have strained the mutual relations and might explain the mixed messages the Taliban are continuing to send out. Messages that suggest a much closer relationship seem to have emanated from certain Taliban commanders who were vying for media – and possibly separate donor – attention such as the late Mulla Dadullah. In May 2007, he said that 'we and al-Qaeda are as one'.¹⁰¹ This reflected divergent opinions that exist within the Taliban but also tactical and communication considerations that might change from time to time.

Al-Qaeda already had set up own structures in Afghanistan beginning in 1989 before the Taliban emerged although they had only a 'loose organizational cohesion'.¹⁰² Some authors mention a setup named Tanzim Qaeday al-Jihad fi Khorassan (Al-Qaeda Jihad Organisation in Khorassan) and call it a sub-organisation specifically dedicated to Afghanistan.¹⁰³ This, however, seems to be incorrect. It rather is a name used in online publications for the

⁹⁵ See: Jason Burke, *Al-Qaida: Wurzeln, Geschichte, Organisation*, Dusseldorf/Zurich: Patmos 2004, pp. 232-4.

⁹⁶ Burke, *Al-Qaida* [see FN 95], pp. 233-4.

⁹⁷ 'Mustafa Abu al-Yazid's Interview on al-Jazeera, 22 June 2009', transcript, New York: NEFA Foundation, p. 2.

⁹⁸ See: Charles Allen, *God's Terrorists: The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad*, London: Abacus 2006, p. 39.

⁹⁹ Jane's Intelligence Report, June 2001, quoted in: Imtiaz Gul, 'Security Dynamics in Pakistan's Border Areas', in:

Kristina Zetterlund (ed.), *Pakistan – Consequences of Deteriorating Security in Afghanistan*, Stockholm: FOI (Swedish Defence Research Agency) 2009, p. 81.

¹⁰⁰ Even amongst Arabs fighting in Afghanistan, there is some rejection of the 9/11 attacks for this reason.

¹⁰¹ Quoted from: Ronald Sandee, *Core Al-Qaida in 2008: A review*, New York: NEFA Foundation 8 April 2009, p. 2.

¹⁰² Guido Steinberg, *Der nahe und der ferne Feind* [see FN 94], p. 59. He adds that al-Qaeda had a 'structured organization with hierarchical leadership' between 1997/98 and 2001 only.

¹⁰³ Gunaratna and Bukhari, 'Militant Organisations and Their Driving Forces' [see FN 89], p. 38. If this name is correct, it is unlikely to resonate well amongst Pashtuns because it is often applied by non-Pashtun ethno-centrists who want emphasise Afghanistan's non-Pashtun heritage.

al-Qaeda organisation in general.¹⁰⁴ In any case, in the post 2001 time, al-Qaeda appoints 'heads of operations', both for the country as a whole – since May 2007, this is Sheikh Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, an Egyptian¹⁰⁵ – and for certain Afghan provinces; there are such reports about Kunar and Zabul. For Helmand, a distinct structure, called Jaish al-Mahdi, is sometimes mentioned that also is said to include Afghan fighters.

These structures seem to be used mainly to carry out sporadic but high-profile attacks, in order to create media attention and footage for its own propaganda. For example, al-Qaeda has claimed responsibility for attacks on US installations in Afghanistan, like the one on Bagram airbase in February 2007 or in Sabarai (Khost) in March 2008, the latter in cooperation with its Turco-Uzbek affiliate Islamic Jihad Union.¹⁰⁶ Some of al-Qaeda's leading 'Afghan' cadres (Arabs, mainly) have been reported killed in locations close to the border with Afghanistan.¹⁰⁷

3.3.2. Pakistan's Taleban: On their own way?

The cooperation with the Pakistani Taleban groups certainly is a proof of al-Qaeda's much-debated new character as a brand name or an ideological 'franchise'¹⁰⁸ to which autonomous local groups look for inspiration (and sometimes for financial and logistical support) and in which they 'buy in', thus becoming part of an imagined worldwide al-Qaeda 'web'. In the case of the Pakistani Taleban, the so-called Punjabi Taleban play the role of the transmission belt. These are 'a loose conglomeration' of militant non-Pashtun Pakistan-mainland groups,

often with a sectarian character, that operate fully or partly from bases in the FATA and 'have developed strong connections with' the Pakistani Taleban umbrella groups Tehrik Taliban-i-Pakistan (TTP). They include Lashkar-e Jhangvi, Jaish-e Muhammad, Sipah-e Sahaba Pakistan as the most important ones. Some authors also include Kashmiri groups like Harkat-ul-Mujahedin in this category.¹⁰⁹ During the 1990s up to 2001, many of them 'directly benefited from state patronage' through close links with the ISI.¹¹⁰ In Afghanistan, they 'constituted a significant part of the Taleban forces in Afghanistan' as parts of the Haqqani and Mansur networks.¹¹¹ Today, Kashmiri and Punjabi fighters reportedly continue to participate in the insurgency in Afghanistan's Eastern region, particularly in the provinces of Kunar and Nuristan.

Those groups' influence was particularly important for the non-FATA Taleban. They either have been fringe groups for many years or created just recently; many of their leaders have a history in crime. This makes them much less rooted in tribal structures than their counterparts in Waziristan and more dependent on outside resources and guidance.

In general, the Pakistani Taleban are a secondary phenomenon when compared with their Afghan brethren. Except Tehrik-e Nafaz-e Shariat-e Muhammadi (Movement for the Enforcement of Muhammadan Sharia Law - TNSM), founded in 1992 in Malakand,¹¹² they did not set up organisations of their own. They provided a support base for the Afghan mujahedin in the 1980s and for al-Qaeda and the Taleban after 2001 in the tribal areas. Further south, in the FATA, many Pashtuns from tribes that straddle (and do not recognise) the Afghan-Pakistani border joined mujahedin commanders from their

¹⁰⁴ E-mail by Guido Steinberg, terrorism expert at Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin, June 2009.

¹⁰⁵ Evan F. Kohlmann, Dossier: Shaykh Mustafa Abu al-Yazid (a.k.a. 'Shaykh Saeed'), New York: NEFA Foundation June 2008.

¹⁰⁶ The IJU split-off from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in 2002, supports an internationalisation of the jihad under the lead of the Taleban, mainly cooperates with al-Qaeda and the Haqqani network and has recruited volunteers from Central Asia, Pakistan and Europe. It is accused of being behind a group of Germany-based Turks and Germans that had planned terrorist attacks in Germany in 2007.

¹⁰⁷ See: Sandee, Core Al-Qaida in 2008 [see FN 101], p. 6.

¹⁰⁸ The first who seems to have used this expression is Olivier Roy. See: Sebastian Rotella and Richard C. Paddock, 'Experts See Major Shift in Al Qaeda's Strategy', Los Angeles Times 19 Nov. 2003.

¹⁰⁹ See e.g., Gunaratna and Bukhari, 'Militant Organisations and Their Driving Forces' [see FN 89], pp. 35, 39; Hassan Abbas, 'Defining the Punjabi Taliban Network', CTC Sentinel, West Point: Combating Terrorism Center April 2009, pp. 1-2. Lashkar-e Taiba, of Mumbai attack fame, is said to maintain a separate command structure.

¹¹⁰ Abbas, 'Defining the Punjabi Taliban Network' [see FN 109], p. 4.

¹¹¹ Zahid Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam*, New York: Columbia University Press 2007, p. 73; see also: Muhammad Amir Rana, *A to Z of Jehadi Organizations in Pakistan*, Lahore: Mashal Books 2004, pp. 251, 263-4, 271-2.

¹¹² In November 1994 - about the time Mulla Omar's Taleban appeared around Kandahar - TNSM staged an armed uprising with the aim of imposing Sharia rule in Malakand and controlled the area for some ten days.

respective tribes, the most prominent example being Jalaluddin Haqqani and his Dzdaran tribe.

After 2001, the Pakistani Taleban – and first those in Waziristan – increasingly obtained a life of their own. Inspired by the Afghan Taleban's Emirate and recognising Mulla Omar as their spiritual leader, mobilised by its downfall caused by 'Western invaders' and angered by the perceived U-turn of the Musharraf regime in cooperating with the US 'war on terror', they increasingly turned against their own government. The Pakistani army's Lal Masjid operation in Islamabad in mid-2007 gave a second and decisive impetus. This led to the formation of TTP set up by the Waziristan groups in late 2007 and, in February 2009, of the Shura Ittehad-al-Mujahedin (United Mujahedin Council) as well as to a drastic intensification of their military activity. However, the different groups in Waziristan, other parts of FATA and Malakand – divided by inter-tribal animosities¹¹³ – practically remain autonomous, making the new council more of a kind of federation.

Meanwhile, the Afghan Taleban face a dilemma. Deeply dependent on their Pakistan connections and mainly interested in obtaining the Pakistani Taleban's support against the Western troops in their own country they are not willing to bite the hand that still feeds them – by joining their Pakistani brethren's fight against the Pakistani army. In March 2009, Mulla Omar conveyed a message to them that the real jihad is to be fought in Afghanistan. Earlier, some of the Afghan Taleban had intervened to end fighting between some Pakistani Taleban and Uzbek jihadis as well as between Pakistani Taleban and Pakistani troops and had helped to broker some of the FATA ceasefire and peace agreements between 2006 and 2008.¹¹⁴ These initiatives were possibly inspired by their Pakistani case officers.

As one author observes, all the mentioned groups are 'largely networked with one another' and a 'water-tight compartmentalisation of the groups is not possible'.¹¹⁵ They have more in common, namely that they have been widely controlled – or even set up – and utilised by the Pakistani military and its

main intelligence service, the ISI, in the regional power game, in particular vis-à-vis India. Observers differ in their assessment of how far these groups are still under this type of control. It can be assumed, however, that parts of this extremely fragmented spectrum of groups provide a covert connection between al-Qaeda and elements in the Pakistani military. It also can be assumed that the military employs 'rogue' army retirees to maintain this link, in order to provide them the same plausible deniability as in the 1990s when they massively supported the Afghan Taleban.

4. 'TALKS' OR 'RECONCILIATION'?

There seem to be a lot of different ideas about what is meant by 'reconciliation' in the current Afghan context. In the light of the current insurgency, it is often thought of as solely or mainly directed at achieving an understanding with either the leadership of the insurgent organizations (mainly Taleban and HIG) or significant parts of them to stop their armed opposition to the current Kabul government and/or its international allies, at the national or local level.

Most current approaches aim at persuading insurgents to lay down their arms, accept the constitution and integrate into the political process, i.e. to change to the 'good side' and 'join the government' in return for some form of political reward under the headline of 'power sharing'.

Given the multiple causes of the insurgency, this is too much of a black-and-white concept and driven by particular political (currently electoral) interests. The Taleban and HIG leaderships as well as many individual insurgents perceive this as surrender and unacceptable, even more so as they feel that they have the upper hand and can wait out the international military. Others who would indeed consider stopping fighting are deterred by the fact that there is no working mechanism in place that would accommodate their demands and fears.

By many Afghans, particularly in the Pashtun-dominated South, reconciliation is seen in the first place as the need for a process between alienated (tribal or other) groups and the national government and its local representatives. The aim would be to end the monopoly of power wielded by some tribes and re-integrate the alienated groups – e.g. to create tribally broad-based administrations in the provinces again. More broadly amongst many Afghans, both Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns, there is strong -

¹¹³ Amongst the Waziristan Taleban, the Mahsud and the Wazir/Dawar groups are clearly distinct. TNSM is mainly Yusufzai.

¹¹⁴ See e.g.: 'Ahmadzai Wazir Tribesmen Negotiate Return of Taliban Commanders, The Jamestown Foundation: Terrorism Focus, Vol. 5, Issue 14, 9 Apr 2008.

¹¹⁵ Gul, 'Security Dynamics in Pakistan's Border Areas' [see FN 99], p. 70.

however idealised - support for a political deal with the Taliban and HIG at almost any cost, including their integration into a future political setup just to stop the bloodshed. If this approach were implemented without any red lines drawn in advance, however, it might incur high political costs, in particular in terms of the rights and freedoms enshrined in the 2004 constitution.

The Afghan government is strictly – and legitimately – insisting that contacts with its opponents are its own prerogative. This argument would be much stronger, though, if it had taken a lead in developing a consistent and convincing policy of its own in this regard. Instead it has sent mixed signals over the last few years, as the US government did. Repeatedly, Kabul invited the Taliban and HIG leaders for talks and promised them safe conduct. At other times, they were excluded from such offers with reference to the UN sanctions.

4.1. Many actors, no strategy

As a result, there is no institutional framework in place with regard to reconciliation. Instead, there are a number of parallel, uncoordinated and poorly resourced strands of ‘reconciliation’ activities. Moreover, many of these activities have been – and may still be – overshadowed and often limited mainly by US considerations linked to the ‘war against terror’. The US position has oscillated between ‘no talks with terrorists’ and tacit consent for high-level contacts with the two major insurgent groups, i.e. the Taliban and HIG. Despite the more sceptical US position on ‘reconciliation’ after the announcement of the new strategy, Washington seems to continue contacts on lower levels, in particular with Hezb-e Islami (Gulbuddin).¹¹⁶

The Programme for Strengthening Peace – known under its Dari name Program-e Tahkim-e Solh (PTS) – was supposed to be the major channel through which government-led reconciliation is conducted. However, it had made no real breakthrough and had been judged as ‘financially and morally bankrupt’ by

its international donors by late 2007 already.¹¹⁷

Except for a few middle-ranking individuals, no senior Taleb or HIG member has joined the reconciliation process through this channel. Consequently, it was all but officially dissolved.

The major channel for contacts with leading Taliban, HIG and Haqqani network figures is through the Afghan National Security Council. Other institutions involved in reconciliation efforts are the National Directorate for Security and some provincial governors. In the latter case, these initiatives are often driven by the wish to enhance their own political standing vis-à-vis the centre (or to channel resources to allies). Furthermore, the Independent Directorate for Local Governance (IDLG) seeks funding for so-called governor-led reconciliation but has not become active on the ground yet. IDLG has already a broad portfolio and might end up in a turf battle with other government institutions. A number of MPs report to be in contact with individual Taliban, including even with Mulla Omar. Some claim to have received reconciliatory messages stating that the Taliban also have realised that there will be no military victory for them and the continuation of the war will result in more futile bloodshed. Amongst them is Qayyum Karzai, a brother of the president who was part of the Saudi-sponsored Mecca talks between an Afghan government delegation which included some former Taliban and, according to some reports later denied by all sides involved - representatives of the Taliban leadership in late September 2008. After these talks, he resigned from parliament in order to be able to concentrate on these contacts. But this lead also seems to have turned cold.

Some civil society organisations support and promote inter- and intra-tribal conflict management and self-organisation, mainly in the South-Eastern and Eastern regions.¹¹⁸ Some of these initiatives take up calls by tribal and jihadi leaders of these regions for reconciliation with insurgent groups. In some cases in Eastern Afghanistan jihadi commanders try to use such initiatives to expand their own influence – not least with a view to the 2009 presidential and provincial council elections. Some might have even

¹¹⁶ Various media reported meetings between Hezb emissaries and US and British diplomats, apparently including members of US special envoy Richard Holbrooke's team. See: Syed Saleem Shahzad, ‘Holbrooke reaches out to Hekmatyar’, Asia Times Online 10 Apr 2009; ‘Afghan rebel party envoy says talks in USA “very fruitful”’, Pajhwok Afghan News (Kabul, 13 Apr 2009; Shamim Shahid, ‘HIA (Hekmatyar) contacts US for troops pullout’, The Nation (Lahore) online 18 Apr 2009.

¹¹⁷ Paper of the Policy Action Group seen by the author.

¹¹⁸ This includes initiatives supported by The Liaison Office (formerly Tribal Liaison Office), De Afghanistan de Sole Melli Jirga (Afghanistan National Peace Jirga) launched by Senators Bakhtar Aminzai and Muhammad Omar Sherzad on 8 May 2008 in Kabul and others.

longer-term aims, like creating a 'pan-mujahedin' political camp including at least some Taleban.

Apart from this, there is a broad variety of individual links and contacts with insurgent groups or individuals. This includes local tribal leaders and mujahedin commanders, often being local PTS officials or members of mujahedin or ulema councils. In various areas, an ongoing exchange of substantial or just polite letters and more or less regular phone contacts exists.¹¹⁹ This reflects the fact that the Taleban are a part of the Afghan society with which they continue to be linked through close family, tribal, political and other relations. There are also contacts through individuals usually not active in the political sphere but seen as possible interlocutors by insurgents. Some provincial PTS structures survive representing a significant potential (in terms of human resources with knowledge and contacts) which could and should be utilised.

Much of all this activity is sporadic, driven by individuals rather than institutionalised, marred by institutional rivalry (much of it over funding) and lacks coordination, including with the presidential office. Consequently, it has not yielded substantial results nor contributed to an overall political strategy on 'reconciliation'. Although a few former leading Taleban 'reconciled' with the Kabul government due to individual contacts, even this trickle has stopped by now. The last prominent Taleb choosing this path was Mulla Muhammad Eshaq Nezami, former head of the IEA radio De Sharia Ghag (Voice of Sharia) and spokesman of the post-2001 Taleban, in June 2007.

4.2. 'Moderate' Taleban?

Even in a tightly controlled Taleban movement, there clearly are – and there have been – Taleban that are more moderate (or preferably: more pragmatic) than others. It has to be defined what 'more pragmatic' means. For example, during the IEA period some Taleban leaders refused to see and talk to 'nonbelievers' at all. These clearly were 'hard-liners'. On the other side there were those who discussed with, listened and sometimes even reacted to arguments of the international community (or their own population, for that matter). Others, in some areas of the country, tolerated and even protected

girls' schools against their superiors breaching the 'party line'. (For example, they warned teachers and pupils of unofficial schools to stay home when inspections were announced.) There also were those who, in personal conversations, openly disagreed with elements of the official Taleban policy, ranging from its exclusion of women from professional life to the Taleban alliance with al-Qaeda. Today, there are the ones who continue to reject the use of indiscriminate violence against the civilian population and are exploring ways toward a political solution in Afghanistan. 'Moderate' does not mean that these Taleban follow a liberal political agenda. While for example former Taleban residing in Kabul have performed a turn-about towards accepting political pluralism in general, there is no consent about parliamentary democracy. However, if they are ready to put their (strictly conservative) policy to the vote of the Afghan population within the bounds of internationally accepted norms they must be accepted as a legitimate part of the political spectrum. Examples from other Muslim countries like the case of Jamaat al-Islamiya in Egypt show that even militant jihadists can give up violence.

The problem is that these more pragmatic elements still do not form an organised or at least clearly recognisable group or faction within or outside of the Taleban movement. As a result, these 'more pragmatic' ones today do not constitute an institutionalised partner for dialogue, simply because there are no identifiable representatives that can be openly addressed.

Since about 2005, a group of around 30 former high- and midlevel Taleban that had returned to Afghanistan through various channels, 'reconciled' with the government and gathered in Kabul. Ready to play a role inside the new institutions, the group also offered to play the role of a 'moderate Taleban party' and intermediary with the Taleban leadership. Its initially core was a group that had re-established the Khuddam ul-Forqan party at the very end of 2001 in Pakistan. In the following years, it tried to move to Afghanistan, get registered and participate in the 2005 parliamentary elections but was rejected under the influence of the US government that, at that time, rejected any 'talks with terrorists'. The group settled in Kabul anyway and congregated around Senator Maulawi Arsala Rahmani and the former

¹¹⁹ The author witnesses phone conversations and was shown letters sent by Taleban 'fronts' to government officials or elders on various occasions in 2008/09. The same is narrated by other international observers.

'ambassador' to the UN Abdul Hakim Mujahed.¹²⁰ Former Foreign Minister Mulla Wakil Ahmad Mutawakkel, ambassador to Pakistan Abdulsalam Zaef and ex-radio chief Nezami initially held themselves in some distance from this group. But by 2008 they were also regularly involved in the group's consultations and initiatives.

By mid-2008, the group had launched a 7-point step-by-step plan towards peace through negotiations and a political accommodation. This plan includes: (1) that the Afghan government convinces the international military forces that the war cannot be won militarily; (2) starting initial contacts between all involved parties on confidence building measures which would include that the 'armed opposition' stop destroying civilian infrastructure, Kabul release 'some' Taleban prisoners and the international forces stop all operations not approved by the Afghan government (including house searches, arrests) and are concentrated at some 'centres'; (3) a jirga of mutually acceptable Afghans contacts the parties who work out a peace plan; (4) the jirga informs all relevant Afghan forces about the procedure of the peace process, secures U.N. and Islamic Conference support for round table talks including security guarantees for the Taleban participants; (5) the Taleban leaders are de-blacklisted, bounties on their heads lifted and a ceasefire is called; (6) a commission is established to organise a Loya Jirga; (7) this Loya Jirga votes on the decisions taken in the round-table discussions and proceeds to end the war.¹²¹

The group itself claims that this proposal had been discussed with or even approved by the Taleban leadership. Some observers doubted that the group's links to the Taleban leadership were genuine. Indeed, it cannot be excluded that the initiative was just an attempt to improve the group's political weight. However, the content of the proposal concurs with what Taleban leaders have stated. More importantly, it shows a practical way out of the mutual blockade erected by both sides' preconditions. The ambiguity involved also presents an opportunity to try out whether this – or similar – channels can prove to be useful.

¹²⁰ Apart from this circle, there is a scattering of former mid-level Taleban officials in the Supreme Court and other institutions.

¹²¹ Based on author's interviews with members of the group, Kabul April 2009. The proposal itself is titled 'Sola gam pe gam' (Peace Step by Step).

4.3. Inner-Taleban disputes

The group's initiative coincided with some other significant developments in the Taleban. As early as 2006, there were reports that older-generation Taleban were concerned about the rise of a generation of young, Pakistani madrassa-educated, post-jihad commanders who were extremely radicalized and politically less sophisticated and who, when moving further up the command positions, would block any chance for a political settlement.

In 2007, a significant but possibly regionally based 'faction' within the Taleban (mainly from the South-East) sent signals that it was ready to break ranks with the Taleban movement openly and enter the political process, provided it was given sufficient political guarantees and substantive material support.¹²²

In the spring of 2008, some leading Taleban who were former political IEA officials had reached the conclusion that there would also be no military victory for their side, that a prolonged war would only lead to further destruction of their country and cause more Afghans to be killed and that political contacts should be established with their opponents. Later that year, concern among older generation – so-called 'pious' – Taleban rose further about the increase of terrorist attacks that lead to mass Afghan civilian casualties and have the potential to alienate large parts of the tribal population. These elements rejected this violence as well as the technique of suicide attacks as 'un-Islamic'. They also objected to the growing role of paid fighters and criminals which they deem 'unprincipled' as well as to the dependence on al-Qaeda and the ISI.

This development was accompanied by a tendency of 're-tribalisation' within the Taleban. In some instances, local Taleban retook control in their particular original areas from 'out-of-area Taleban'. Such reports came from Helmand, Zabul and Uruzgan and were possibly a response to Mulla Omar's layha. Some of these groups tried to reach out to the Afghan government or international actors.

Finally, the appointment of Mulla Agha Jan Mu'tassem, a 'pro-talks' former IEA finance minister as head of the Taleban's political committee in 2008 was read by some observers as a cautiously positive

¹²² This and the following is based on conversations with Afghans who claimed to be in contact with this group, 2007/08.

move. As a non-Kandahari from the South-East and, at the same time, allegedly, a confidant of Mulla Omar, he could be considered a 'centrist' within the Taliban movement who could have had some political leverage. For the first time, Mu'tassem publicly and comprehensively formulated Taliban preconditions for a political solution in an interview with a Taliban media outlet: 'if they [the Americans] really wish to solve these problems, they must, as a first step, unconditionally withdraw their forces from Afghanistan, in a second step they must immediately close all those jails inside and outside Afghanistan which they built to prosecute the mujahedin and in a third phase they must respect the name of the mujahedin and stop calling them with inappropriate names [i.e. 'terrorists' – the author] and they must abolish all those lists completely which they have [...] compiled to prosecute them'. He also announced that after the withdrawal of the foreign troops the Taliban would table a plan 'to hold talks with regard to Afghanistan's future political order'.¹²³ Possibly his appointment was designed to make up for the lack of a political wing of the Taliban by giving the political committee a higher profile. If so, the move could indeed have represented the blessing of Mulla Omar for talks.

Although all these moves remained ambiguous, there were also no sufficient attempts by the Afghan government and its international allies to evaluate and possibly act on them. In the case of the ex-Taliban group in Kabul, this was mainly prevented by the fact that its members are still subject to the UN sanction regime based on resolution 1267.¹²⁴ The Afghan government has proposed 21 former Taliban for de-listing to the UN Security Council¹²⁵ but this move is blocked by Russia for political reasons that lie beyond Afghan affairs. At the same time, the Afghan government's efforts to achieve the delisting are reportedly rather weak and not comprehensively argued. Also the fact that members of the group were made part of the official Kabul government delegation for the 'Mecca talks' has further undermined what potential they had as neutral go-betweens. An even more complicated problem are – unpublished and dynamic – target lists that are used

by Special Forces of some NATO countries to disrupt the insurgent chain of command and control by arresting or killing the listed individuals. The possibly 150 names on it might include Taliban commanders who in fact are reconcilable and might even have sent out according signals.¹²⁶ If commanders that have signalled readiness to talk are subsequently killed, others will clearly be discouraged to follow their steps.

All of this has inhibited the potential political impact of the Kabul ex-Taliban group. Since in Afghan society, political influence emanates from access to power and resources and the prestige linked with it, this group could have developed into a centre of gravitation for further Taliban elements to come into the political fray. Instead, cynicism is increasing in the group about its further participation in the process – in a situation where there are few meaningful potential channels to the insurgents. This negative experience might dissuade active insurgent leaders who closely watch how their former colleagues are treated in Kabul from joining any political process.

Except for the Kabul group's plan, which is still on the table, all voices from inside the Taliban that pointed at a possible willingness to talk have fallen silent currently. This is the result of four developments. First, the US troop surge has been taken as a declaration of war and is being exploited by the hardcore Taliban to close ranks again. The non-reconciliatory elements were able to end the 'talks about talks' in the movement's ranks for the time being and bring more pragmatic elements back on the 'party line'. The focus now is on strengthening fighting capacities. Measures like the appointment of new Taliban provincial governors in the South and the dispatch of non-local and foreign fighters to the North-Eastern region also aim at activating the military campaign. What the Taliban currently pursue is a counter-counterinsurgency campaign. Secondly, those willing to talk on the Taliban side have realised during 2008 that there is no mechanism in place that could handle their cases. The Policy Action Group (PAG) – a high-level body

¹²³ Interview with Mulla Agha Jan Mu'tassem (Pashto version), www.toorabora.com, 7 March 2009.

¹²⁴ This list includes Senator Rahmani and former governor Abdulhakim Munib.

¹²⁵ See e.g., 'Afghan President Wants Non-Al-Qaeda Taliban Taken Off UN Blacklist', AFP, 29 March 2009.

¹²⁶ As a result, such signals might remain unknown to countries involved. The systemic unwillingness to exchange intelligence even amongst NATO members is a major hurdle that prevents a unified approach towards 'reconciliation'. In other circumstances, this has led to tragic consequences, as the accidental killing of the Chora district governor (Uruzgan province) by Australian Special Forces in 2008 showed.

including representatives of the Afghan government, the UN and of major Western countries – both civilian and military – that was designed in 2006 to advise the President and the NSC on a counter-insurgency strategy and oversee the implementation – has been diverted to other issues. An initiative of a group of countries with troops in the South that had drafted a joint ‘statement of principles’ in 2008 has petered out by now. The established criteria and ‘red lines’ for contacts with insurgents during 2008 that were discussed with the NSC could still be useful. Altogether, the international efforts to contribute to ‘reconciliation’ that were equally unfocussed and split up in various parallel and mutually unconnected channels have stalled. Thirdly, the Taliban apparently were also dissatisfied with the outcome of the much-trumpeted Mekka talks. As a result, they replaced Mu’tassem as head of the political committee in early 2009 by Abdullatif Mansur.¹²⁷ While Taliban deputy leader Mulla Beradar, in interviews given in 2008, reiterated that ‘resolving issues through negotiations is a key element of our policy’ he did not repeat this in his most recent statement but talked about a ‘position of strength’.¹²⁸ Finally, also the expulsion of two officials from the E.U. and U.N. over Christmas 2007 by the Karzai government on allegations of unauthorised talks with Taliban contributed. However, there are indications that disputes within the Taliban about the need for a political solution and negotiations have not fully died down.

4.4. An obstacle: Broken tribal structures

There are also significant social factors that create internal structural obstacles for reconciliation with alienated tribal groups in the first place. Primarily, from the disempowerment of the traditional leaders and structures during the past 30 years of conflict a lack of intra-tribal cohesion has resulted. Major tribal leaders have been eliminated by the PDPA regime; others lost their status to the social upwards climbers of the jihad period, the nouveau riche and powerful amongst the commanders and drug barons. Others simply died while their sons were not able to

maintain the same amount of authority their fathers had. The Taliban (and others) are killing remaining elders and other influential community leaders. As a consequence, armed commanders dominate on the side of the government as well as on the Taliban side. The jirga as the major conflict-resolving mechanism has lost much of its authority. Many powerful newcomers – on the national as well as on the local level – are able to ignore jirga decisions with impunity.¹²⁹ Commanders’ firepower and wealth put them effectively above the law (or they even ‘are’ the law). In many tribes, there is no single undisputed leader (or even a small group of leaders) whose word would be accepted by everyone. Neither are there tribal shuras in most of the cases that can truly claim to represent the whole tribes’ will. Meanwhile, the Taliban leadership tries its best to use this cacophony to play different actors against each other.

This climate can negatively influence the upcoming presidential and provincial council (PC) elections. The Taliban, although, apparently have not decided whether to disrupt the process yet. Mulla Omar has urged the Afghans not to involve themselves in the ‘deceptive election’ but stopped short of an open call to violence. A Taliban commander in Helmand was quoted as saying that ‘[t]he Taliban will not allow people to participate in the upcoming election [...]. [I]n the districts, where the majority of the people live, it’s impossible to find a single person who will dare to participate in the election.’ Similar announcements came from Kandahar.¹³⁰ From some areas of the South and Badghis it has been reported that Taliban have encouraged voters to register. In Kunar province HIG groups are even said to have supported electoral logistics by escorting election commission staff. While in the first case this might be motivated by local tribal power games, HIG possibly supports candidates of HIA, another indication that this ‘split-off’ might not be genuine. At the same time, two PC candidates have already been killed in Taliban-affected areas, in Khost and Ghazni, by end of June 2009. The Taliban might also attempt to recruit disappointed PC election losers.

¹²⁷ One media report mentioned Maulawi Muhammad Kabir as Mu’tassem’s successor but this seems to be incorrect. Shahid, ‘Quetta-based Taliban’ [see FN 57]. Mansur was recently mentioned as holding the position by the Taliban website alemarah. Kabul-based sources confirmed his appointment.

¹²⁸ ‘Text of interview of the esteemed Mullah Beradar ...’ [see FN 76].

¹²⁹ In an intact Pashtun tribal environment this would have been heavily punished by exclusion from the tribe which equals a total loss of status and social support.

¹³⁰ ‘Taliban leader urges Afghans to boycott “deceptive elections”’ [see FN 17]; Adam B. Ellick, ‘US and Taliban to Redouble Afghan Efforts’, New York Times 1 June 2009.

In the longer term, however, it cannot be discarded that the Taliban leadership's might be willing and able to come to a political accommodation in the end. 'Hardline' positions like their public insistence on a complete withdrawal of all foreign military forces from Afghanistan as a precondition for any talks might just be positioning and may be negotiable after 'pre-talk' contacts are established. The support of the Taliban leadership for a ceasefire agreement during the regular country-wide polio vaccination campaign since 2007 proved that they have significant control over their fighters on the ground, even when some groups did not obey the instruction from Quetta. Without any contacts, however, one will never find out.

The Taliban might simply try to 'sit out' the current US military surge. If they succeed and the surge does not weaken them significantly, as intended, they might even become triumphalist.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The current Afghan insurgency cannot be stopped or overcome by military means, counter-terrorism or counter-insurgency techniques alone or primarily. The insurgency's demographic depth and the set of causes and motives that drives it necessitate a comprehensive, long-term strategy that prioritises political means in order to stabilise the country sustainably, to reconstruct it and to avoid a slide back into the situation before fall of 2001.

Military violence needs to be a means of last resort, used with sensitivity and in a more defensive mode - with the priority on protecting the Afghan population and institutions and avoiding civilian casualties. In this case, it can contribute to an increasing feeling of security amongst those parts of the population who currently see no alternative in their areas but accommodating the Taliban.

Besides elements of institution-building, developmental and economic measures in order to improve the day-to-day situation of significant parts of the population, such a broad strategy needs to include two elements which can be mutually supportive: political contacts with the insurgents or parts of them ('talks') and reconciliation. Between both, however, there needs to be a clear conceptual distinction.

The term 'reconciliation' should only be used to describe long-term processes that overcome the rifts within Afghan society that had been caused by three

decades of civil war. In contrast, 'talks' are meant to achieve a political accommodation with the insurgents to end the war in a parallel, staggered process of outreach, limited contacts, direct or indirect talks on specific issues, track II instruments and, possibly finally, negotiations with the insurgents or elements of them. These are merely steps on the way toward reconciliation and could feed into the broader process. This clear distinction would, not least, help to end the confusion amongst Afghans and the foreign audience about what these processes mean.

The Afghan leadership has been unable or even unwilling to develop such a broad strategy and is still preoccupied with short-term concerns of conservation of power. Time and opportunities were wasted, chances for future success undermined. In order to overcome this blockade, its international allies need to take the initiative. It should aim at, however, the Afghan government taking over the lead at an early point on the basis of a consensual concept.

Reconciliation, as understood and pursued hitherto, has emanated from the wrong premise of a 'good versus bad' situation. Insurgents were basically asked to surrender to a government the character and behaviour of which was the cause for many of them to take up arms in the first place. As a result, governmental bodies - like the PTS programme - were not accepted as impartial and failed. The NATO countries are party in the conflict as well. Even the UN is no longer seen as fully neutral by many Afghans. Reconciliation also cannot be approached in an ahistorical way, with some of those who had been involved in past crimes and still armed (or still not disarmed) setting the terms for reconciliation.

A new understanding of reconciliation and new mechanisms for its implementation need to be developed. Reconciliation has to be seen as a much broader process than just an accommodation between the antagonists in the current armed conflict. It has to start within Afghan society itself. First of all, there needs to be reconciliation between the government and the governed, first of all at the local level. In the southern half of the country, large alienated groups of the population need to be re-integrated into political decision-making and resource distribution. There, a sharing of power - if combined with prioritising professionalism over patronage - could help alleviate some of the conflicts that feed the insurgency. Reconciliation with armed insurgents might later feed into this process.

Honourably re-integrated local groups would be in a better position to bring along those insurgents which stem from their communities. This would considerably clip the leverage of the insurgency. At the same time, the population in the northern half needs assurances that a return to the violently abusive Taleban regime is not possible and that reconciliation in the South will not happen at their expense.

Elements of transitional justice need to be integrated into this process as well. This includes documentation, an open debate leading to a social consensus about reconciliation and its terms and, finally, the 'healing' of wounds. This requires a more open political atmosphere than currently exists in Afghanistan with its culture of impunity which silences voices that dare to criticise perpetrators of the past. The international community after having worked with some of the perpetrators and traded justice for a stability that did not evolve finally has to accept the responsibility to level the playing field in this debate in favour of the victims, guaranteeing their security and freedom of expression.

The new mechanisms have to be perceived as genuinely neutral by all Afghan sides involved. In a first step, an inclusive Afghan pre-'talks' mechanism must be developed 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. Secondly neutral Afghan and international bodies need to be established as arbitrators that bring together elements traditionally respected in Afghan society: tribal or community elders, religious scholars and educated Afghans, and also include the powerful civil war upstarts (the commanders) as well as civil society and women representatives. External observers and facilitators should ensure the fairness of the proceedings. The best option would be to do this under the umbrella of the United Nations, with close involvement of Islamic member-states, either as a specific group or through the OIC. The neutral bodies would ensure a buy-in of relevant international actors, including regional ones. The process will show whether unified or separate mechanisms for both elements – 'talks' and reconciliation – are necessary.

With regard to the Taleban – as the organised core of the insurgency – there are, basically, two options: first, to talk to the Taleban, i.e. their central leadership, or secondly to different networks, 'factions' – even if publicly invisible yet – within the Taleban or attached groups (alienated tribal groups).

The general aim should be to break the link between al-Qaeda and the Taleban or, at least, to isolate and pressurise the intransigent al-Qaeda-linked elements in the Taleban.

The first option is supported by the analysis that the Taleban leadership has sufficient command and control over the major parts of the insurgency. This has been shown during recent vaccination campaigns where the Taleban leadership was able to ensure access for the involved UN staff to most of the areas controlled by insurgents. Until recently, it felt that it was in a position of strength from which talks might be desirable but it set maximalist preconditions and insists on the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate. This, however, should be understood just as a starting position.

In general, the option of talking to the mainstream 'Kandahari' Taleban through the leadership council should not entirely be discarded. It is more 'nationalist' in outlook than the Haqqani network which has closer links to al-Qaeda and has experienced some discussions in its ranks about the permissibility of indiscriminate violence against the civilian population. It also needs to be understood that the intra-Taleban play of power can be influenced from outside. Recently, this only has happened in the negative way – for example when Taleban elements interested in contacts realised that neither the Afghan government nor international actors were really prepared to respond and ended their attempts to open channels or, secondly, when the Taleban leadership reacted to the US military surge with an internal streamlining and by stopping at least audible internal disputes. The argument that some local groups might not heed eventual decisions taken by Mulla Omar does not carry far: It would already be major progress if only 50 per cent of the violence would cease.

The current circumstances – with the US military surge and the insurgents' counter-reaction –, however, make it unlikely that this option is realistic for the time being. The US surge aims at weakening the Taleban first and to possibly force them to the negotiating table later. Despite its own upsurge of military activity, the Taleban leadership might try to sit out this period in order to reassess its options after 12 to 18 months.

The uneven picture of the overall situation in Afghanistan, however, will leave space for the second option, i.e. addressing insurgent subgroups. There are plenty of 'entry points' for the second option in the shape of the manifold fault-lines

existing both within the Taliban and other insurgent organisations and within the insurgency as a whole: between different tribes, subtribes and 'clans', between Afghan and foreign fighters, between more and less moderate, maktabi and majburi Taliban etc. The multiple existing 'under-the-radar' contacts between individuals and institutions on both sides of the conflict line based on kinship and *andiwali* that are part of Afghan social behaviour as is the prevailing culture of constantly re-arranging political relationships and alliances can be utilised. With the leadership under pressure, the leverage of some of the majburi Taliban might increase locally. They likely pursue lesser aims: an honourable political re-integration on the local level and a just distribution of resources provided they receive viable guarantees against collective and individual persecution. Old grievances have to be remedied by employing traditional conflict resolution mechanisms including compensation in the broader sense. The West has contributed to the past Afghan conflicts but could regain some capital if it takes over some of the compensation to be paid. Local solutions could also be pursued with the Salafi groups in Eastern Afghanistan who had shown readiness for political integration in the early post-2001 years and additionally are involved in an old conflict with HIG.

If successful examples are established, some trust lost over the past years might be re-established. That, in turn, might encourage reconcilable elements within the Taliban mainstream, in particular if the UN sanctions are lifted for some of those former Taliban who reside in Kabul and have proven that they are constructively working for a political solution. For others, this could be provided as a temporary measure – not as a blank cheque. In turn, this might strengthen the position of pro-negotiation elements within the Taliban again. This requires first and quickly a joint position of the international community on such an approach. The 2008 'statement of principles' that was discussed between some Western countries and the Afghan NSC could provide a basis for this approach.

It is not possible, however, to predict a possible success of any of those approaches. This will depend on the political will of all sides to compromise: the Afghan government, other relevant Afghan actors – including the political opposition and the civil society –, US-led Western coalition, major regional players and the insurgents themselves.

When talking to (the) insurgents in whatever form, it has to be taken into account that there are

considerable sections of the Afghan society (which might even represent an all-out majority) that are seriously worried about any chance of a reintegration of or power-sharing with insurgent elements, in particular with the Taliban. They have a series of legitimate concerns that need to be accommodated. Firstly, the democrats and liberals fear that the constitutionally guaranteed civil rights will be in question again under the influence of an accommodation with (the) insurgents. Secondly, women do not want a return to the situation during the Taliban rule when they were deprived of access to education, work, health care and of social contacts in general. Thirdly, former mujahedin fear a further political marginalisation; some reject any reconciliation with their former adversaries. Fourthly, the non-Pashtun ethnic minorities, in particular the Hazara, fear a Taliban comeback because this would put in jeopardy progress made over the past decades toward social and political emancipation and make them vulnerable to further atrocities. As a result any strategy of 'talks' or reconciliation must be transparent to these groups.

If 'talks' are reduced to a speedy, not well planned process of political integration of one, or possibly two, Islamist insurgent factions – i.e. the Taliban and HIG – by a Kabul government that is primarily oriented at power conservation and without applying certain criteria it would reward the use of violence with political influence. Furthermore, it would change the balance of power even more in favour of those Islamist forces that already have a strong influence in the existing institutions and that are partly linked to drug and other criminal networks. This would be a continuation of the ill-designed all-inclusive 'big tent' approach – i.e. the political inclusion of armed warlords and jihadi leaders – imposed on Afghans by the US- and UN-led international community despite the wishes of their majority for justice.¹³¹

At the same time, the international community must focus much more on supporting pro-reform and pro-democracy forces amongst political parties, social and civil society organisations – both from the modern and the traditional sector – as well as the media. Although those forces have been politically sidelined during the post-2001 process and remained weak and divided as a result, they have the potential to become a counterweight within Afghan society

¹³¹ See: Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, A Call for Justice, Kabul 2005.

vis-à-vis the already dominant Islamists. Support should include a regularised, more frequent and visible dialogue with them, encouragement for inner-organisational democratisation and closer coordination as well as working with the executive and legislative powers to implement existing laws that establish the rights for political participation. In the median sector, focussed funding of genuinely independent outlets should be continued in order to ensure their competitiveness against expanding and well-resourced factionally linked media.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Tackle the internal and external causes of the insurgency simultaneously by enhancing good governance at the national and subnational levels in Afghanistan, by pressuring the Pakistani government to act against insurgents' structures and supply lines on its territory, including in Baluchistan and Karachi, and by limiting the insurgents' room to manoeuvre in Afghanistan by using military power much more cautiously and primarily defensively;
- develop a common position towards 'talks' and reconciliation between major Western powers and the UN based on and by further developing the 2008 'statement of principles' and other relevant policy documents;
- from this position, urge and support the Afghan government to take a lead in developing and implementing a coordinated and consistent strategy of 'talks' and reconciliation including options for outreach to all components of the insurgency, the establishment of 'red lines' (or principles of engagement) for negotiations, and viable mechanisms that sustainably can absorb and integrate reconciled individuals and groups socially and politically;
- ensure the support of Islamic countries and buy-in from the various regional powers through intensified dialogue, using bilateral channels and the good offices of the UN and regional organisations;
- establish a common approach of the Afghan government and the international community;
- use the existing channels of contact with insurgents through local government officials, parliamentarians, political groups and civil society organisations that reflect the diverse social and political reality in Afghanistan and surviving provincial PTS structures (with their human resources in terms of knowledge and contacts); at the same time, its proponents should be encouraged to exchange views and experiences in order to contribute to the unified strategy;
- establish mechanisms that ensure transparency, consult and inform political and social groups in Afghanistan through assemblies (jirgas) and round tables throughout the process;
- intensify lobbying for the de-listing of (some) reconciled ex-Taliban;
- encourage and support unarmed democratic and reformist political forces, including political parties and civil society organizations as a measure to ensure political balance for the case that more Islamist groups join the government; help to develop a more level playing field that can enhance their political role vis-à-vis the dominant forces, as early as before the 2010 elections;
- defend and support the freedom and diversity of the media vis-à-vis an increasing depletion of funds and the creeping dominance of factionally linked outlets;
- all policies should be informed by the acknowledgement that Islamic terrorism cannot effectively be fought through alliances with Islamist extremists and corrupt politicians.

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