

Thomas Ruttig

# How Tribal Are the Taleban?

*Afghanistan's largest insurgent movement between its tribal roots and Islamist ideology*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recent developments in Afghanistan have underscored that there is still an immense lack of understanding – and even of interest – with regard to the nature of the Taleban movement.<sup>1</sup> Discussions about whether ‘moderate’ Taleban exist have overshadowed deeper questions about the character of the Afghan Taleban movement. As a result, there is considerable confusion as to whether the largest and most influential insurgent movement is mainly driven by ethnic, religious or political motives. This paper aims to clarify the often complex forces that shape the Afghan Taleban movement. It explores several central questions, including the following: Are the Taleban a Pashtun tribal or even nationalist force or are they, as they claim to be, supra-ethnic Islamists who do not acknowledge tribal, ethnic and linguistic differences but ‘only know Muslims’? In addition, this paper discusses the place of tribes and their institutions within Afghan society. A distinction is made between what is real and what is myth, as constructed by Afghans and also by foreign observers.

The paper then discusses the origins of the Taleban movement, the (limited) role of Islamist ideology and the extent to which it can be considered a Pashtun nationalist movement. Furthermore, this paper looks at the beginning debate about whether the Taleban have morphed into a ‘Neo-Taleban’ movement.

Today’s Taleban movement is dualistic in nature, both structurally and ideologically. The aspects are interdependent: A vertical organisational structure, in the form of a centralised ‘shadow state’, reflects its supra-tribal and supra-ethnic Islamist ideology, which appears to be ‘nationalistic’ – i.e., it refers to Afghanistan as a nation<sup>2</sup> – at times. At the same time, the movement is characterised by horizontal, network-like structures that reflect its strong roots in the segmented Pashtun tribal society. The movement is a ‘network of networks’.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper further develops thoughts laid out in Thomas Ruttig, *The Other Side: Dimensions of the Afghan Insurgency: Causes, Actors – and Approaches to Talks*, Kabul/Berlin: Afghanistan Analysts Network, Thematic Report 01/2009, July 2009. It builds on two presentations given at a workshop organised by the Abbassi Program in Islamic Studies, at Stanford University on 3 December 2009, and at the Jamestown Foundation’s 2009 Terrorism Conference ‘The Changing Strategic Gravity of Al Qaeda’ in Washington on 9 December 2009.

<sup>2</sup> This term is not specific enough. In Europe, it even has a chauvinistic undertone. ‘National’ would fit better, and many Afghans therefore often refer to ‘national’ (*melli*) almost synonymous with ‘patriotic’, another word disliked by many in Europe.

Religious, tribal and regional components overlap even when it comes to the organisational principles of the Taleban.

Individually, the Taleban are deeply rooted in their tribal societies. But, in their self-identification, the balance between being Pashtun and being Muslim has changed, as is the case with many Afghans.

In thirty years of conflict and gradual state collapse, Pashtun tribal society has undergone drastic changes. Traditional social and political relations have increasingly been weakened and dissolved. The younger generations questioned the authority of the 'elders' who they held responsible for these conflicts. This had negative impacts on intra-tribal cohesion. As a result, the *jirga* as the major conflict-resolving mechanism of the Pashtuns has lost much of its authority. Powerful newcomers are able to ignore *jirga* decisions with impunity. Might often trumps *pashtunwali* and even Islamic law. Rising levels of education have changed the character of tribal representation. Diaspora communities of certain tribes have emerged in the big cities. Their members absorbed modern skills but maintained links to their original tribes. This way, influences of modernism penetrated even the rural communities. This diaspora-tribe relationship intensifies in times of crisis.

In many Pashtun tribes, the more-permanent tribal *shura* has replaced the *jirga*. Some of them still represent a form of 'traditional' self-organisation, but many others are convened by the new strongmen. This makes them hierarchical in structure, in contrast to the egalitarian *jirga* where ideally all male members of a certain tribe find a consensus about a certain conflict. Meanwhile, a *shura* deliberates and gives advice to the leader who then decides whether he makes use of it or not. Many Pashtuns use both terms, *jirga* and *shura*, interchangeably now.

Today, some tribes cover such a large area that they are simply too big to have a single leader – although it is doubtful whether there was always *one* undisputed leader at any given time on any given level of the tribal pyramid. In ongoing competition, various aspirants for leadership would fought each other for prestige and influence. Leadership and power within any tribal segment resembled an ever-changing equilibrium. The lack of a 'dynastic principle' amongst Pashtuns stands in the way of a coherent and continuous tribal leadership.

Furthermore, the 'tribal code' of Pashtuns, *pashtunwali*, needs to be understood as an idealised concept. As the Pashtuns' genealogical chart, it can change in time and space. Categories used by outsiders as if set in stone (like the much-discussed Durrani-Ghilzai divide) are fluent. Different local versions of *pashtunwali* (called *nirkh*) are used. In cases of conflict between groups, a decision would be made in advance whose *nirkh* to use.

The Taleban movement emerged from religious networks from the 1978–89 resistance, i.e., it is a broader movement that saw itself as religiously motivated. Only when the *mujahedin*, in the eyes of the later Taleban, violated their own religious principles, did the Taleban establish their own, now ultra-orthodox movement. Only after their initial moves, were the Taleban 'adopted', supported and instrumentalised by the Pakistani military establishment. Today, many Taleban activities in Afghanistan's southeast and south<sup>3</sup> still centre around networks of *ulama*-led *madrassas* and mosques.

Politically, the Taleban movement aspires to aims that are larger than its individual tribal realms: political power on the 'national' Afghan level and the re-establishment of its emirate. They are nationalists, but cannot be called Pashtun irredentists, i.e., they do not strive for a 'reunification' of all Pashtun areas in a 'Pashtunistan'.

The Taleban movement's supra-tribal ideology, i.e., Islamism, keeps the door open for non-Pashtun elements. This has allowed it to systematically expand into non-Pashtun areas of the North and West. 'Islam' provides an umbrella that creates cohesion in an otherwise – ethnically as well as politically – heterogeneous movement.

The system of reference individual Taleban or their leaders allude to – tribal, nationalist and Islamist – depends on the circumstances under which a particular decision is taken and on the particular tactical or strategic aim at stake.

The combination of vertical (religious/ideological) and horizontal (tribal) structures gives the Taleban movement a high degree of cohesion while maintaining organisational elasticity. This elasticity in its horizontal dimension – based on Pashtun individualism – allows discussion and even dissent. It allows a sufficient degree of autonomy of local commanders and prevents them from feeling over-controlled. Subsequently, the movement has experienced no splits, or at least none that have seriously weakened its organisation.

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, 'Southeastern region' is used for the three provinces of Loya Paktia and 'Southern region' for Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan and Zabul. The latter region is referred to as 'Southwestern region' by some.

The movement has shown more continuity than discontinuity between the pre- and post-2001 phases in the major aspects that characterise such armed insurgent movements: the organisational structure including the composition of its leadership, ideology, political aims and programme. Most importantly, the movement still adheres to its undisputed and single most important leader, Mulla Muhammad Omar, the *amir ul-mo'menin*. The Taliban Leadership Council stems from the pre-2001 phase and is still mainly Kandahari. The presence of non-Kandahari Taliban leaders in this council is more symbolic than significant. The influence of newly recruited, younger-generation Taliban foot-soldiers on strategic decision-making is still minimal although the presence of Mulla Omar's two new deputies (after the arrest of Mulla Baradar) indicates that now both the old and the new generations are represented on this level. The major change in the Taliban is that up to late 2001 it was a quasi-government with a state-like structure, while after 2001 it was forced to reorganise as an insurgent or guerrilla movement that runs a parallel administration. Based on this, the movement claims the continuity of its emirate, which in its eyes a foreign intervention unlawfully removed and replaced with a 'puppet administration'.

There is no organised or recognisable 'moderate' (or any other 'political') 'faction' in the Taliban to counterbalance the 'religious' hardliners. It is more useful to differentiate between different currents: pragmatic, politically thinking, pro-talks Taliban who understand that a political solution is desirable but who still are conservative Islamists, compared with those who favour a purely military approach, often combined with a hypertrophic recourse to terrorist means. Both groups compete for the allegiance of the non- or less-political *majburi* and *na-raz* foot-soldiers.

The fact that a large majority of the Taliban are Pashtuns does not make them *the* 'representative' of *all* Pashtuns. Since the late 1940s, a pluralist political choice has always existed in Pashtun society. The armed conflicts of the past 30 years, however, have narrowed the political space. The marginalisation of political parties has further aggravated the problem. In today's violent atmosphere, between the anvil of the Karzai government and the hammer of the Taliban, there are no viable political alternatives for Pashtuns.

Tribes cannot assume the roles of independent actors. Rather, they provide an arena in which political competition takes place. Attempts to make 'tribes' into instruments for stabilisation, as has been done in the formation of 'local defence initiatives', is misdirected. Rather, alternative Pashtun political and social organisations should be given more scope and resources. At the same time, it is not too late to strengthen the internal cohesion of certain tribes and their particular institutions by supporting their abilities to re-establish functioning, legitimate decision-making bodies (*jirgas*, *shuras*). External actors, however, should only provide a level playing field, a framework of security and possibly – where requested – take on the role of neutral arbiter. They should refrain from being seen as taking decisions on Afghans' behalf and be aware that interference often deepens, instead of remedies, existing rifts.

The Afghan government's draft Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program – as well as the West-dominated approach that creates an artificial division between 'reconciliation' and 'reintegration' – still treats the Taliban problem mainly as a technical one. It supposes that many Taliban can be won over by economic and social incentives – and the insurgency, in effect, split. This underestimates the political motives that drive the Taliban insurgency. Furthermore, there still is an – although not publicly expressed – incongruence between the US approach (using the 'surge' to weaken the Taliban before any talks) and President Karzai's approach that still seems to favour immediate direct contacts.

The June 2010 peace *jirga* in Kabul has not brought the necessary clarification process forward. It was not preceded by a broad consultation and lacked genuine representativeness. Only an approach to reconciliation based on genuine broad participation and buy-in by Afghans can lead to an outcome in which the Taliban can be absorbed into the political mainstream and Afghan society. An approach imposed from the top down, even if covered with rituals of surrogate participation, will always be vulnerable from spoilers.

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Thomas Ruttig has a diploma in Afghanistics from Humboldt University, Berlin (Germany). He speaks Pashto and Dari and has been working on Afghanistan for some 25 years, almost ten of them living in the country and in Pakistan. Thomas has worked for the GDR Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1985-90, as a journalist from 1990-2000, for the UN as respectively UNSMA head of office in Kabul, adviser to the Afghan Independent Emergency Loya Jirga Commission, and UNAMA head of office in Islamabad and Gardez 2000-03, as the Deputy to the EU Special Representative for Afghanistan 2003-04 and as Political Adviser to the German Embassy in Kabul 2004-06. In 2006-08 he was a Visiting Fellow at the German think-tank Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik/German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP). Since 2008 he is an independent political analyst, author and consultant, including for the Netherlands Embassy in Kabul with frequent visits to Uruzgan. His long list of publications on Afghanistan includes academic articles, policy papers and newspaper articles.

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