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The Northern Front

The Afghan insurgency spreading beyond the Pashtuns

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing conflict in Afghanistan has been characterized until recently as largely a southern Afghan and Pashtun phenomenon. Such a characterization has had important implications both in strategic and political terms. As long as the insurgency was understood as contained in a limited portion of the country, its ability to cause the existing government to implode was seen to be inevitably limited. Moreover, at least half or more of the country could still be presented as broadly supportive of international intervention and of the policies determined in Kabul. But if the north is also perceived as being destabilised, the implications are enormous.

This paper examines the situation in the north as of spring 2010 and tries to determine the potential for increasing deterioration in the face of growing signs of Taliban activity throughout the region. This paper is a preliminary version of a larger paper on the same issue, which will be released by AAN later this year. For the purposes of this report, the term 'Greater North' is used to indicate the nine northern provinces of the north-east and north. The 'north' includes Faryab, Jowzjan, Sar-e Pol, Balkh and Samangan, while the 'north-east' includes Kunduz, Baghlan, Takhar and Badakhshan. The term 'north-west' refers only to Faryab, Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Greater North is best known for its opposition to the advancing Taliban during the 1990s. This opposition was led by three main groups: Junbesh-e Milli (led by General Abdul Rashid Dostum), Jamiat-e Islami (led by Ustad Burhanuddin Rabbani and commander Ahmad Shah Massud) and Hezb-e Wahdat (led by Mohammed Mohaqeeq). What is less well known, however, is that both Junbesh and Jamiat initially flirted with the Taliban in their early phases of expansion, and that from the time the Taliban took the north in 1998 until the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001, collaboration with the Taliban was actually relatively widespread. Resistance was limited to Badakhshan, parts of Baghlan and Takhar and a few pockets in the more remote areas of the north. The Taliban not only found a foothold among the Pashtun pockets of Faryab, Balkh, Kunduz and Baghlan (to mention just the largest ones), but several important figures in Junbesh and Jamiat made deals with the Taliban and began cooperating with them after having surrendered the majority of their weapons. In the Pakistani madrassas, the Taliban also recruited significant numbers of Uzbeks and particularly Tajiks from Badakhshan, who took on a local policing role and helped the Taliban to forestall attempts to rebel against their domination. On top of this, there appear to have been widespread sympathies for the Taliban among the clergy, cutting across ethnic lines. This is not surprising given the way in which the Taliban empowered the clergy and

granted privileges to the mullahs, often using them as their local representatives in lieu of village elders.

It must also be emphasised that not all portions of the Greater North shared the same experience of Taleban rule. Some areas, such as the Hazara and Uzbek communities in Mazar-e Sharif and some Uzbek communities in Qaysar, suffered greatly but other areas were hardly affected, either due to their remoteness or because their elders managed to strike a deal with the Taleban. The latter situation was particularly common among Turkmen communities, who were often not closely allied with any of the anti-Taleban factions and were mostly indifferent to who controlled the region. Even among Uzbek communities, the rejection of Taleban control was not unanimous. Apart from a minority whose sympathies reflected the strong influence of local mullahs, there were also many communities weary of the war, who preferred to have peace under the Taleban than continued fighting under Junbesh: the burden of the war in terms of the loss of lives of young men was increasingly being felt in the north.¹

A SNAPSHOT: KUNDUZ AND FARYAB

The first signs of a systematic effort by the post-2001 Taleban, and perhaps also by other insurgent groups, to penetrate northern Afghanistan date back to 2006.² As always in the early stages of an insurgency, the evidence was fragmentary and mostly rumour-based. It is not surprising therefore that it was largely ignored by both the Afghan government and ISAF, even though the scant information available clearly pointed towards the repetition of patterns already characterising other parts of Afghanistan.

The case of Kunduz is exemplary in this regard. In early 2007, a constant influx of recruiters from Pakistan, mostly clerics from various madrasas, was noticed by Afghan security agencies. These men came with money and “malign words”, as one observer stated, trying to recruit people for the Taleban. But their success was initially limited – as

it had been in previous years. Attacks on German soldiers and Afghan police mostly failed due to hasty preparations, with IEDs often found half-dug next to the road. In addition, a network of sympathizers was lacking, forcing the few insurgents to hit and run. The German military, in charge of Kunduz, tried to avoid conflict, escalation and casualties. However, following the first successful suicide attack in May 2007, which left three soldiers dead, the number of patrols in the city and province of Kunduz dropped to a bare minimum for weeks and even longer-term, failed to return to the original degree. The consequence was that the build-up of Taleban strongholds, albeit limited, went largely unopposed. Mutual avoidance was the *de facto* strategy of the German Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Kunduz.³

By late 2008 or at the latest by spring 2009, the Taleban had brought the largely Pashtun district of Chahrdara, in Kunduz province, under their control. Elders had been threatened or even killed if they resisted the newly grown force of immigrant and locally recruited Taleban, who were establishing their domination. The police came frequently under attack, leading them to retreat into their heavily fortified headquarters. In spring 2009, for the first time, the Taleban initiated multiple attacks on German forces in Chahrdara, using IEDs, small arms and suicide bombers on motorcycles. Ambushes lasted for hours, and in at least one case, the Taleban followed the Germans as they tried to retreat to the PRT.

Chahrdara, a district with a history of government neglect, is mostly inhabited by Pashtuns who had migrated to Kunduz in the early 20th century and remained socially isolated in the Uzbek/Tajik-dominated province. After 2001, it came under pressure from anti-Taleban factions because of the widespread support of local Pashtuns for the Taleban regime. Yet in 2009, Chahrdara became a Taleban stronghold and remains so to this day, despite several operations by US forces together with the Afghan National Army (ANA). The Afghan government has lost its tenuous grip on the region and locals now seem either reluctant or too fearful to change sides. The Taleban have since established their own governmental structures in the district to the extent that they collect tax payments, issue receipts and via their mobile

¹ On the relationship between the Taleban and non-Pashtun communities see A. Giustozzi, *The Taleban beyond the Pashtuns*, *The Afghanistan papers* no. 5, Waterloo (Ontario): CIGI, forthcoming 2010.

² Some incidents occurred even earlier than that, dating from 2004, but even if perhaps attributable to the Taleban, they do not seem to have been part of a systematic effort to infiltrate the region.

³ Confirmed in numerous interviews conducted by Christoph Reuter with German military personal in Kunduz, Mazar and Germany in the years 2008-2010.

courts, control the most important judicial institution.⁴

Faryab in north-western Afghanistan is another noteworthy example. In early 2010, this province arguably was reaching the situation of Kunduz two years earlier. The first signs of Taliban infiltration into Faryab from neighbouring Badghis province date back to 2007, with the apparent involvement of two separate groups, one of Pashtuns and one of non-Pashtuns, mostly Uzbeks and Turkmen. Initially, the response of the local population was mixed: penetrating Pashtun communities in Almar district seems to have been easier, while resistance to tax collection was reported in the mostly Uzbek district of Qaysar. In any case, the authorities and local anti-Taliban political factions dismissed the threat as not serious. A group of fighters that had infiltrated the centre of the province was dismantled and the Afghan security forces established a base in Ghormach, from where the infiltrators originated, and inflicted some casualties on the local Taliban. While this did not prevent the Taliban from continuing their infiltration, it led to a degree of complacency among authorities, distracting them from the task of confronting the ongoing threat.⁵

By spring 2010, while the situation was still not like that of Kunduz, where violence was occurring on a large scale, it was certainly much worse than the rosy outlook presented by Afghan police officers and Faryab members of parliament to one of the authors the previous year. Apart from Maimana and some of the northernmost districts, all other administrative sub-units of Faryab are now being affected by the insurgency to at least some degree. There is not yet a major Taliban stronghold as in Chahrdara, although this may partly be due to the unwillingness of authorities and the Norwegian PRT to intervene heavily in the Pashtun populated areas of Almar, Shirin Tagab and Dawlatabad, where allegedly the insurgents are receiving hospitality and logistical support. In fact, it would seem that in this case, the lack of an aggressive attitude on the part of provincial authorities may have removed one key factor driving Faryab's Pashtuns to actively join the Taliban.⁶

⁴ Research conducted by local journalist Sami Ayoubi, Kunduz, March 2010.

⁵ Giustozzi, op. cit.; interviews with police officers, UN officials, Afghan NGO Safety Office (ANSO) officials and members of parliament in Maimana, Mazar and Kabul, April 2009 and April 2010.

⁶ See footnote 1.

DO THE TALEBAN HAVE A STRATEGY?

The Taliban appear to have a clear strategy aimed at also destabilising northern Afghanistan. Moving north strengthens their claim to be the legitimate government of Afghanistan and to be fighting for the whole country, not just for a particular region or ethnic group. Furthermore, there is no doubt that the psychological impact of the north's destabilisation upon Western Europe and the US would be considerable, overstressing resources as well as reducing the recruitment pool of Afghan army and police, by enabling the Taliban to intimidate the families of the volunteers.

Steadily, over years, and withstanding their initial failures, the Taliban leadership has established areas of local dominance by sending cadres to different parts of the north. Their attempt to reach out to areas without a Pashtun majority can be observed by their appointment of 'shadow governors' even for those areas like the Panjshir valley or Badakhshan which they did not govern under the Islamic Emirate.⁷ Another factor highlighting how keen the Taliban are on the Greater North is the despatch of trained cadres from areas such as Helmand where fighting is much more intense. In October 2009, a German military intelligence officer verified their presence in Chahrdara, while confirmation of the north-bound despatch of Helmandis was provided by sources in the province itself.⁸

In the north-west, evidence of external input in terms of training, advice and leadership is scant. The low level of military activity in the area also makes it difficult to detect trends in the military skills and capabilities of insurgents. However, the mere fact that much of the Taliban presence in the north-west is attributable to infiltration from Faryab indicates that alongside the 'spontaneous' generation of groups of insurgents in remote areas of the region, there is also a 'grand design' to destabilise the north, which is being managed by a relatively complex organisation. Even these locally-based groups seem to have been formed with the encouragement and provision of incentives from the Taliban's central leadership in Quetta; there is indeed no other way to explain the more or less

⁷ The shadow governors represent the main feature of the Taliban's shadow administration; their main role is to take political decisions at the provincial level, settle disputes among the population and lobby in favour of the Taliban.

⁸ Personal communication with Martine van Bijlert, May 2010.

contemporary appearance of pockets of insurgency in various areas of the north-west. During 2009, these emerged in several districts of Faryab, three districts of Jowzjan and two of Sar-e Pul.⁹ Moreover, some of the leaders of the insurgency in the Greater North are clearly based in Pakistan or move back and forth, as highlighted by the arrest in Pakistan of the shadow governor of Kunduz in early 2010.¹⁰ There is also evidence of communication between Taleban commanders in the north and structures based in Pakistan¹¹ and sources within the ANA suggest that the insurgency in the north-west is being directed from the Quetta *shura*, while the insurgency in the north-east is directed from the Peshawar *shura*.¹²

The Taleban seem to have perfected their insurgency 'template', which consists of a number of phases of recruitment as well as the selection of appropriate strongholds from which to operate in relative safety. These phases of recruitment can be observed all over the north: the infiltration of political agents to re-establish contact with old supporters or to identify new ones; the arrival of preachers who invite locals to join *jihād*; the establishment of small groups of armed men (a mix of returning locals and outsiders) to conduct armed propaganda and the intimidation of hostile elements; and finally, extensive local recruitment and military escalation.

In Kunduz, the Taleban have already established strongholds which resist both ISAF attacks and attempts by government-backed Afghan militias to expel or defeat them. At the opposite end is Badakhshan where Taleban efforts still primarily consist of travelling recruiters trying to influence local mullahs and perhaps a few small pockets in the process of formation, but without yet much of an impact. Takhar is somewhere in between: military activities were already underway last year, but recently, a relatively large group of insurgents established themselves in a remote area between the districts of Yangi Qala and Derqad. Kunduz and Baghlan have already gone through the process of initial infiltration by Taleban agents and preachers, the formation of small armed bands (up to five men) mainly bent on recruitment and armed

propaganda, and the coalescence of these small groups into larger ones.¹³

THE ETHNIC DIMENSION

Despite direct experience of the negative consequences of neglecting early warning signs in Kunduz (and Baghlan, as will be discussed in the forthcoming longer report), the reluctance of ISAF and the Afghan government to acknowledge the growth of the Taleban in the Greater North may have something to do with their disbelief concerning the latter's ability to recruit non-Pashtuns. Certainly, until recently, vulnerability to Taleban-recruitment in the Greater North seemed to have been confined to Pashtun areas. But with an overall deteriorating security situation, existing conflicts within non-Pashtun groups as well as between such groups and the government or ISAF have become more open to exploitation. The increasing number of non-Pashtun fighters seems to confirm this trend. Evidence is mounting that Uzbeks, Turkmen, Aimaqs and to a lesser extent, Tajiks are being drawn into the Taleban's ranks in significant numbers.

In Chahrdara, in particular, there are numerous accounts of non-Pashtuns among the ranks of the Taleban, even if, in this case, the majority do not seem to be from Afghanistan. As early as 2009, the presence of at least one group of Uzbeks (from Uzbekistan) as well as Afghan Turkmen and a few Afghan Tajik fighters was reported. Some Chechens have even been reported to be in the area (although their influence has often been exaggerated), supposedly assisting mainly with the technical improvement of IEDs. An Uzbek commander interviewed by one of the authors of this report stated that they had come to Kunduz to fight "infidel soldiers" because it was simply less dangerous than in Uzbekistan, where the repression of opposition is very ruthless. Indications that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) may have played a role in the recruitment of non-Pashtuns by providing Uzbek cadres for the task could also explain why the Taleban have been less effective in recruiting Tajiks. Although evidence of IMU activities in the Greater North is limited, in early 2009, a group of Uzbek Taleban, related to the IMU and led by their own commander with the *nom de guerre* Mufti Selim, was residing in Chahrdara. The cross-border Uzbeks have the reputation of being more experienced and better trained fighters, possibly

⁹ See footnote 5.

¹⁰ Bill Roggio, 'Pakistan detains Taliban shadow governor of Kunduz,' *The Long War Journal*, 17 February 2010.

¹¹ Personal communication with ISAF and diplomatic sources, Kabul, October 2009.

¹² Personal communication with a Colonel from ANA military intelligence, April 2010.

¹³ Interview with NGO workers and UN officials, April 2010.

one reason for the fierce battles between the Taliban and German forces in this area in 2009 and spring 2010, including this year's Good Friday attack in which three German soldiers were killed. In the north-west, at least one group of IMU fighters has been spotted in the Sayyad-Derzab-Qush Tepa mountainous pocket, although they do not appear to have collaborated very closely with the local Taliban.¹⁴

Local conflicts, grievances or simply offers of money have helped to recruit non-Pashtuns and the weaker the appearance of the central government, the easier recruitment has become. The establishment in Kunduz province of local militias, has challenged the Taliban militarily and possibly reduced their ability to recruit among minority groups. In Dasht-e Archi, a district in the north of Kunduz with a mixed population, local militias clashed with the Taliban in late 2009 and successfully limited their influence. In the district Qala-ye Zal, a newly founded homogeneously Uzbek militia achieved the same. In Chahrdara, by comparison, a Pashtun militia had no success in fighting the Taliban. It would seem, therefore, that the 'Pashtun card' and ethnic identity are emerging as factors of resilience for the Taliban against competing powerbrokers.¹⁵

Even so, in the north-west, there is clear evidence of Taliban recruitment among Uzbeks and Turkmen in all three provinces, with a small number of Aimaqs being recruited as well. Although beginning in the remote areas of Faryab, Sar-e Pul and Jowzjan, the Taliban are now also visiting villages close to Shiberghan and not too far from Maimana. Local militias are also starting to spring up in the north-west, but it is too early to predict their impact. Although in 2008/9, there were reports of old Junbesh and Jamiat commanders communicating with the Taliban and in some cases cooperating with them, since 2009, grassroots recruitment in the madrasas seems to have been the more dominant trend.¹⁶

¹⁴ Interview with Mufti Selim, conducted by Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, (partly unpublished, see footnote 13 for printed part), April 2009; interview with notable from Sar-e Pul, April 2010.

¹⁵ Confirmed in interviews with several militia-leaders in Kunduz province, including Mir Alam, with police officers in Kunduz, and with Sami Ayoubi, March 2009.

¹⁶ Interviews with notables from Jowzjan and Sar-e Pul and personal communication with UN officials and NGO workers, Kabul, Mazar-e Sharif and London, March-April 2010.

DRIVERS OF TALEBAN INFILTRATION

The possibly inflated reports about the presence of IMU fighters run the risk of distracting from some of the deeper, underlying social, political and economic trends that have fuelled the northern insurgency. The primary target of the Taliban's recruitment drive has clearly been former associates of the movement who were living outside the country or lying low inside it. Paradoxically, the Taliban's recruitment effort was greatly helped by the often clumsy reaction of the Afghan security forces who, in some areas, began to round up suspects at the first sign of Taliban agents in the region, and in some cases, drove them into the hands of the insurgents. This is what is rumoured about Mullah Nadir, the best known Taliban commander in the north-west (on the border between Sar-e Pul and Jowzjan), who was reportedly harassed by the authorities before making it to the mountains. However, this source of recruitment remains relatively limited in the Greater North, given the historical weakness of the Taliban's roots in this region.¹⁷

Perhaps the most important of all sources of support and recruitment, particularly when considering the sustainability of the insurgency, is the clergy. Support or at least sympathy among the clergy for the aims of the Taliban seems to be quite extensive, particularly among village mullahs. There is some evidence that well before an armed presence of the Taliban surfaced in the north, sectors of the clergy were already openly preaching against the government and foreign forces, for example in Faryab in 2003/4 and in Takhar in 2005/6. According to local notables and clerics, 70% of mullahs in the north (of all ethnic backgrounds) have been trained in Pakistan, a fact which is likely to facilitate the spread of pro-Taliban sympathies. The actual appearance of the Taliban can therefore only have stimulated a larger number of conservative mullahs to come out into the open and to take a position against the government and foreign presence. Indeed, the role of the clergy can never be sufficiently highlighted, given its capillary distribution in each village and the high degree of respect accorded to mullahs by more conservative elements of a village's population. Certainly, in those instances where the Taliban do not have extensive community support,

¹⁷ Interview with notables from Jowzjan and Sar-e Pul, April 2010.

it seems to be the madrasas which are functioning as the main source of grassroots recruitment.¹⁸

Another important trend is the collaboration with or at least tolerance of the Taliban demonstrated by sections of the Afghan state administration. This is especially the situation in Baghlan province where the Taliban have enjoyed years of very supportive tolerance about which even local police officers bitterly complain. In late 2009, for example, when police confiscated a truck owned by a Taliban commander, they received an order from the Ministry of Interior in Kabul to release both the vehicle and its driver. During the 2009 elections, the police were ordered to surrender to the Taliban in all instances, even when outnumbering them. Some government officials in the north speculate that the background to this clandestine cooperation lies in the ethnic topography of Baghlan and the wider regional power struggle. They argue that Karzai's regime considers the Pashtuns to be natural allies in the conflict with the Tajik power centre around Ustad Muhammad Atta, the governor of Balkh, and in any possible future conflict after the withdrawal of international forces. This contention seems to be particularly borne out in the case of Hezb-e Islami, which maintains an armed presence in parts of the north-east. For example, Hamid Karzai personally intervened several times to have a former Hezb-e Islami commander released from the US prison in Bagram where he had been held after his arrest and the confiscation of suicide bomber-vests, belts and explosives. Today, this former commander, Amir Jan, is the district governor of Baghlan-e Jadid, the most troublesome district of Baghlan.¹⁹

As elsewhere in Afghanistan, rivalries among communities and competition for influence among local notables may have played an important role in paving the way for Taliban infiltration. The Taliban seem to be well informed about village politics and manoeuvre accordingly to manipulate local conflicts and to drive a wedge into existing fissures. The most obvious case is the 2009 ethnic conflict between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns in Kunduz province, which particularly affected those

Pashtun communities that held grievances against local strongmen who had been associated with the anti-Taliban alliance in 2001. But this dynamic also seems to apply within each ethnic group. Social and tribal fault lines have, for instance, been exploited by the Taliban among the Pashtuns of Baghlan, drawing the lower strata of society towards the insurgency. There is also evidence that former military commanders of Junbesh and Jamiat are joining the Taliban to express their disaffection at being marginalised by their factional leaders and the government. This move is more common among those who failed to be appointed to positions of influence and power or who were unable to integrate into government-linked networks which control illicit trafficking. A few such cases are known in Faryab, Baghlan and Takhar. These former commanders of anti-Taliban factions join the Taliban with their retinue of armed men and are therefore ready to begin violent activities without delay. Typically, however, they are the least reliable Taliban recruits. In Baghlan, for example, quite a few of these persons have been 'reconciled' with the government, thanks to the intervention of the National Directorate of Security (NDS).²⁰

While the factors highlighted in this paper have clearly been influential, a crucial question to be answered is why the Taliban's strategy of destabilisation only really began to work in 2009. In part, this is perhaps due to the rather long lead time of insurgency operations. Preparatory work can easily exceed two years, even when the effort is not seriously disrupted by the counter-insurgency effort as in the case of northern Afghanistan. However, there is also a sense that the relative success of the Taliban in the north has been amplified by the changing mood across the country: the perception of government weakness and lack of direction as well as the loss of credibility of ISAF and of the general international effort in Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

It seems clear that the attempts of the Taliban leadership in Quetta to destabilise the Greater North is beginning to have an impact. 'Cadres' from the south are being sent northwards to help train and organise and the IMU seems to also be playing a role in this effort. In many parts of the Greater North, the insurgency has advanced well beyond the original phase of infiltration by political agents and in quite a few areas the insurgency is

¹⁸ Faryab case study in the Tufts University paper, 'Winning Hearts and Minds: Examining the Relationship Between Aid and Security in Afghanistan,' forthcoming; personal communication with UN official in Kunduz, October 2006; interviews with a mawlawi in Maimana, April 2009; interview with notables from Jowzjan and Sar-e Pul, April 2010.

¹⁹ Interview with Sanjar Sohail, editor in chief, Hasht-e Sob; interview with UNAMA official, April 2010; personal communications with government officials, Baghlan, 2010.

²⁰ See footnote 1.

even entering the phase of violent military operations. This does not mean that the destabilisation cannot be stopped, but it does mean that time is running out in order to prevent it from spreading. While the potential for the insurgency to take hold in the north will never be on par with the south, it would take much less to destabilise the region. Provinces like Wardak and Logar have not seen the same kind of community mobilisation behind the Taleban as in the south, but a relatively limited number of small Taleban groups has been sufficient to undermine the government's influence and ability to successfully operate there. Something on a similar scale could develop in much of northern Afghanistan, even outside the Pashtun pockets of the north-east which have already been deeply affected by the insurgency. The support of the clergy, together with financial and advisory support from Quetta, could be enough to spread the insurgency, particularly in the absence of any effective counter-mobilisation of those sectors of the population most opposed to the Taleban.

Much of the Taleban's success in the north is due not so much to their own strength, but to the weaknesses of the Afghan government. While this is bad news, it also means that something can be done to at least slow the advance of the Taleban – for example by strengthening the police and improving its effectiveness or by reassuring local elites that there is no intention to marginalise them from the national government. However, while it is easy to point out what should be done in the abstract, it is not so easy to say how this can be realised in practice, given, for instance, the record of failures in turning the Afghan police into a more effective and respected force and to reform the administration. The old government policy of divide and rule, by co-opting some local strongmen to prevent the northerners from acting in a cohesive way, may have its merit but it is certainly not leading to a strengthening of the Afghan state, nor of its legitimacy.

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