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The Insurgents of the Afghan North

The rise of the Taleban, the self-abandonment of the Afghan government and the effects of ISAF's 'capture-and-kill campaign'

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Until recently, the belief was widespread that the Greater North was immune from Taleban infiltration, due mainly to two reasons:

- a) The Taleban were perceived as a purely Pashtun movement by local Western analysts and the Afghan government. This would limit their potential for recruitment to predominantly Pashtun areas, of which few exist in the Greater North of Afghanistan;
- b) In practice, the level of Taleban infiltration from southern Afghanistan and activity of other insurgent groups remained very low until 2008, compared to the south and east of Afghanistan. Attempts by the Taleban to gain support and build cells in the so-called Pashtun pockets from 2005 onwards did not translate into military actions quickly and were rated by NATO/ISAF forces and the Afghan government as a failure.

The picture changed drastically in 2008 with attacks and roadside bombs and even large-scale ambushes involving dozens of fighters in 2009. The argument that the Taleban could only attract Pashtuns became controversial. Obviously, what had looked like failing Taleban attempts to build up local structures was in fact a patient effort of systematic infiltration, reflecting a strategy to extend their control beyond their traditional strongholds in the south. The Taleban repeated patterns of infiltration that had been utilised elsewhere in Afghanistan: They initially allocated material resources and manpower to the Greater North, sent political agents to recruit sympathetic mullahs and appeal to disgruntled Pashtuns, and installed sympathetic mullahs in local madrassas and mosques – with visible results from 2008 onwards. By early 2010, the Taleban had brought the northern half of Baghlan, several districts in the south and north of Kunduz, most of northern Takhar and parts of Faryab and Jowzjan under their military control or influence. They attacked German troops in Kunduz province and even aggressively pursued them in retreat. During the Taleban's build-up phase, ISAF contingents in the Greater North had followed a reluctant approach: avoid direct conflict, military escalation and casualties. When the situation deteriorated, they had no answer to the growing insurgency – mainly because they lacked political backing to pursue a more aggressive counter-approach in the Western European capitals.

In the grand debate concerning Taleban strategy, including whether it exists in the first place, the Greater North bears witness that it is indeed real.

At the same time, the Taleban opened their ranks for non-Pashtuns and managed to form cells in Uzbek and Tajik areas. From 2009 onwards, the evidence that the Taleban were recruiting significant numbers of Uzbeks and Turkmen and smaller numbers of Tajiks was overwhelming. As of spring 2010, ethnically mixed groups of insurgents were reported, but as exceptions rather than the rule, in the Greater North. The Taleban leadership in Pakistan has started to appoint non-Pashtuns as local commanders in an effort to systematically install deputy district governors and district-level military chiefs all over the north. This helped them gain strength beyond the 'Pashtun pockets'. While Taleban recruitment among Pashtuns in the north often attracts elders and non-clerical elements, the clerical presence seems to be much stronger among Uzbeks and Turkmen. Tajiks (apart from Aimaqs) have so far been less involved in the insurgency, at least in terms of grassroots recruitment, perhaps because Tajik strongmen enjoy a greater Islamic legitimacy than Uzbek strongmen (linked to the secular Jombesh). In some areas, the Taleban also have used social fault lines – for example, among the Pashtuns of Baghlan, they drew the lower strata of society towards the insurgency.

A new trend in the Taleban recruitment strategy could be observed particularly in provinces dominated by non-Pashtuns, such as Aryab, Jowzjan, Sar-e Pol and Takhar, where the Taleban emphasised a religious and ideological approach rather than an ethnic one in their recruitment drives.

Perhaps the most important source of support and recruitment for the Taleban, however, is the clergy – which, as an institution, transcends ethnic divisions. Sectors of the clergy were already openly preaching against the government and foreign presence well before the Taleban surfaced in the north. Their appearance seems to have inspired many conservative mullahs to come into the open and take positions against the government and foreign presence, which incidentally coincided with their interest to maintain their positions of unquestioned power in their communities. Where the Taleban do not have extensive community support, madrassas seem to be the main source for grassroots recruitment. According to northern notables and clerics, 70 per cent of the mullahs in the north (of all ethnic backgrounds) have been trained in Pakistan. In at least one predominantly Uzbek district in Takhar province, itinerant *tablighi* preachers from Pakistan became the main drivers of Taleban recruitment in 2009.

In the areas they controlled and influenced, the Taleban established their shadow administration, starting in the fields of justice and taxation, followed (in some cases) by education and health, with a significant impact on the lives of sections of the population. First and most importantly, their justice system delivered quick and rather non-partisan justice through their mobile courts, normally consisting of a mullah and two assistants travelling on motorbikes. All parties vigilantly respected their verdicts. Wherever Taleban had power and the human resources, they installed these courts, which have been highly praised by local interviewees in various provinces. Once the Taleban commanded influence in a certain area and had set up their court, even people from adjacent areas would turn to them. Taleban justice lacks sophistication, but offers institutional coherence: Cases are decided quickly and without demands for bribes; verdicts are respected; an integrated chain of security and justice is maintained. The Taleban followed up these justice mechanisms with 'commissions' for taxation, education and health that regulated how government-established institutions in these fields would continue working under Taleban control. While in general, the Taleban do not tolerate any employment within the Afghan government, health and education staff was explicitly exempted from this rule, at least in Kunduz province. In Kunduz, the Taleban's attitude concerning education became clear: while girls' schools were closed to the greatest extent possible and girls were banned from participating in schooling despite occasional protests by village elders, boys' schools remained open.

The Taleban also do not seem to have a coherent anti-NGO agenda. NGOs were asked to register with Taleban authorities in various northern provinces. Whether attacks on NGOs occur seems to be

related to their source of funding: USAID-funded projects were strongly opposed by the Taliban. Their more permissive attitude towards NGOs in general is directly linked to pressure from communities that are interested in NGO services.

All of the above indicates that the Taliban not only want to fight the Afghan government but to replace it. Moving north and establishing their shadow structures strengthened the Taliban's claims to be the legitimate government of Afghanistan, a nation-wide movement, and that they are fighting for more than just a region or a particular ethnic group (the Pashtuns).

Apart from the Taliban, several other insurgent groups operate in Afghanistan's Greater North. All are linked to the Taliban in one way or another. Most noteworthy is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which uses northeastern Afghanistan as a staging area to infiltrate Central Asia. The relationship between the Taliban and the IMU seems close. In contrast, Hezb-e Islami led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (often referred to as HIG) is not very active militarily in the Greater North, but often at odds with the Taliban. (An exception is Badakhshan where a comparatively stronger Hezb tolerates and supports the few Taliban active there.) In Baghlan, the Taliban defeated Hezb in March 2010. The relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda is more difficult to define because al-Qaeda has a low-profile presence in northern Afghanistan and, more generally, it is not a distinct entity here.

The arrival of US Special Operations Forces (SOF) in the Greater North had a major military impact in pushing back the insurgents. But their initial approach, to reconcile with as many insurgents as possible, has given way to an emphasis on capturing and killing as many Taliban as possible. The long-term results of this remain unclear, as assessing its effect on the population is very difficult. In general, experienced, locally rooted commanders have either been killed or fled to Pakistan. Their replacements – from southern Afghanistan or directly from Pakistan – have no roots in the area of their deployment; are in their mid-twenties on average (compared to their predecessors who were in their mid-thirties on average); lack the skills, experience, knowledge and respect from the community; are more radical and refuse any tactical agreements with NGOs, instead killing alleged spies and blowing up infrastructural projects. This may deepen their isolation from society, but to negotiate with them one day will be more difficult than with their predecessors.

At the same time, the Afghan government was neither providing even the basic services the Taliban was nor filling the vacuum created by the ISAF campaign (carried out by SOF) that managed to push the Taliban out of areas they had recently controlled. Political calculations and manoeuvres of President Hamed Karzai and his government even strengthened the Taliban, at least in Baghlan province. There, considering Pashtuns in general as natural allies, government personalities supported (Pashtun) Hezb-e Islami cadres in conflict with the Tajik-dominated political factions, which were however already planning beyond the expected ISAF withdrawal. The government's actions backfired when the Taliban in Baghlan suspected Hezb-e Islami of clandestinely cooperating with Karzai's government and defeated them militarily in March 2010.

This contributes to a very unstable status quo, turning ISAF's presence (or absence) into the factor that decides the balance of strength between the insurgents and the government. The inherent dilemma of ISAF's present successes against the Taliban is that its presence is not sustainable indefinitely. A withdrawal of ISAF combat forces in 2014 – or at any other time – might facilitate a return of the insurgents. Furthermore, judged from its performance in 2010, doubts are justified that the Afghan government will be able to contain the insurgency on its own.

The report was produced in the course of 2010 and reflects the situation in the Greater North as of the end of autumn 2010.

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