# An Assessment of the Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan (2001-2018)

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## Abstract

Since 2009, Afghan security forces and their international allies have been faced with a powerful insurgency which poses a serious threat to the security and stability of Afghanistan. One of the challenges of this insurgency is the fact that the image of who the insurgents are seems to be blurred. This is to some extent justified by the fact that due to Afghanistan's geography and demography, the nature of the insurgency can vary greatly from one region to the next, or even from one village to the other. On the other hand, few would describe the insurgency in Afghanistan as merely a collection of small, locally based militias with no overall leadership or direction. However, when reading insurgents' own statements and publications, we see that the militants have definite ideas of who they are and how they relate to other actors on the scene. Therefore, the Taliban's definition of themselves may at times differ considerably from the mass media's often ambiguous use of the label "Taliban." This paper seeks to investigate the current situation of Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. As the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) presence decreases, the onus will shift to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to secure the country and continue the fight against the insurgents still battling the Afghan government. Moreover, because it is a key regional actor, the actions of Pakistan and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) will be critical to the end game of the conflict and future direction of Afghanistan. The paper therefore seeks to ascertain how these two outfits can carry out their tasks and ensure security for the people of Afghanistan.

**Keywords**: **Afghanistan, Insurgency, Taliban and Terrorism,**

## Introduction

The foundation for modern-day Afghanistan was laid by the Pashtun emperor, Ahmed Shah Durrani, in 1747. The country's borders, as we know them today, were finalized by the British and Russian empires at the end of the 19th century, when Afghanistan functioned as a buffer state between the two great powers. Afghanistan gained full independence from the British Empire in 1919 and remained a kingdom until 1973, when it was transformed into a republic after a bloodless coup by king Zahir Shah's brother-in-

law, Muhammad Daoud. A coup in 1978 ensured that the Afghan communist party, PDPA, came to power.

Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan in 1979 in order to support the faltering communist regime, and occupied the country until they were forced to withdraw in 1989.

The withdrawal was partly a result of fierce popular resistance among the Afghans, primarily by rebels known as the *mujahidin*, who were trained and supported by a number of external factors including Pakistan, the United States and Saudi Arabia. In 1992, a coalition of *mujahidin* parties led by Burhanuddin Rabbani came to power in Kabul, but was unable to stabilize the country due to severe infighting and civil war. In 1996, a conservative Islamist movement known as the Taliban took control over Kabul and remained in power until they were ousted by the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Many of the Taliban's leaders had fought with the *mujahidin* in the 1980s, but the Taliban did not emerge as a separate political force until about 1994.

In some ways, the Taliban's rise to power from 1994 to 1996 represented something new, since it was the first time an Islamist movement had been able to control a substantial portion of Afghanistan's territory. On the other hand, the movement was not without precedents. Islamist-inspired anti-government opposition has a long history in Afghanistan. At times, the opposition was initiated by conservative tribal leaders, and at other times, by charismatic religious figures known as pirs or mullahs. These religious figures were normally not bound by the tribal structures, and were therefore able to rally large amounts of tribesmen to *jihad* against whoever they perceived as enemies of Islam. In the Pashtun border areas between Afghanistan and Pakistan; such uprisings were dubbed "mad mullah movements" by the British colonial administration (Thomas and Chris, 2007).

The Taliban's leader, Mullah Omar, has frequently been compared to the charismatic mullahs of the 19th and early 20th centuries, such as Mullah Hadda (who started the Great Pashtun Revolt of 1897) and the Fakir of Ipi (who led a guerrilla war against British India in the 1930s and 1940s). However, while it may be tempting to label the eccentric Taliban leader a "mad mullah," it is important to point out that the Taliban phenomenon was more than simply another village uprising that gathered momentum due to Pakistani support. The rise of the Taliban as a political organization in the 1990s must be seen as a result of the great changes that Afghanistan and the rest of the region underwent during the latter part of the 20th century.

Islamist political movements did not become a major force in Afghanistan until the Soviet-Afghan war in the 1980s where large groups of *mujahidin* were equipped and trained by foreign powers, in order to counter the threat of Soviet communism. In 1992, a coalition of these *mujahidin* parties came to power in Kabul and declared Afghanistan an Islamic state, but never managed to implement it in a systematic manner due to civil war and in-fighting. It was in this context that the Taliban movement rose to prominence in 1994–96.

Due to variations between the various *mujahidin* factions, as well as within the Taliban, it is hard to make any generalizations about their differences. For the sake of simplification, we can say that *mujahidin* leaders such as Burhanuddin Rabbani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar were Islamist intellectuals with secular university degrees, who had gotten their inspiration from urban Islamist movements in the Middle East. The Taliban's leaders, on the other hand, were more often of rural background and had a traditional Islamic education, often from madrasas in Afghanistan or Pakistan. But the distinction between *mujahidin* and Taliban is by no means clear: In the 1980s, before "Taliban" existed as a separate political movement, many religious students fought with the various *mujahidin* parties against the Soviet occupation. Mullah Omar himself, and about half of those who were to become the Taliban leadership, fought under the Islamic Revolution Movement of Afghanistan (*harakat-e enqelab-e islami-ye afghanistan*) led by Mullah Muhammad Nabi Muhammadi (Robert and Amin, 2008).

The Taliban's approach is a mixture of rural-urban insurgency, depending on which regional command of the country is being analyzed. Overall, the insurgency is rural, protracted, and funded through rents acquired from illicit economies. Its approach, or fighting strategy, has alternatively been described as asymmetric, 'Fourth Generation', Maoist, and that of the 'war of the flea'. While there are certainly elements of each of these fighting styles apparent in the Taliban's approach, the most accurate characterization is probably closest to Maoism. In the opening stages of the conflict, insurgents infiltrated the population and gained control over key areas before moving on to consolidate base areas, organize guerilla war, and create rudimentary political structures (Gutierrez and Giustozzi, 2010).

This study is an attempt to investigate the current situation of Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan by ascertaining how the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and Pakistan and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) have ensured security for the people of Afghanistan.

## Conceptual Clarification

### The Taliban

The Taliban, who refer to themselves as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), are a Sunni Islamic fundamentalist political movement and military organization in Afghanistan currently waging war (an insurgency, or jihad) within that country. Since 2016, the Taliban's leader is Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada. The leadership is based in Quetta, Pakistan. From 1996 to 2001, the Taliban held power over roughly three quarters of Afghanistan, and enforced there a strict interpretation of Sharia, or Islamic law. The Taliban emerged in 1994 as one of the prominent factions in the Afghan Civil War and largely consisted of students (*talib*) from the Pashtun areas of eastern and southern Afghanistan who had been educated in traditional Islamic schools, and fought

during the Soviet–Afghan War. Under the leadership of Mohammed Omar, the movement spread throughout most of Afghanistan, sequestering power from the Mujahideen warlords.

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was established in 1996 and the Afghan capital was transferred to Kandahar. It held control of most of the country until being overthrown after the American-led invasion of Afghanistan in December 2001 following the September 11 attacks. At its peak, formal diplomatic recognition of the Taliban's government was acknowledged by only three nations: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The group later regrouped as an insurgency movement to fight the American-backed Karzai administration and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in the War in Afghanistan.

The Taliban have been condemned internationally for the harsh enforcement of their interpretation of Islamic Sharia law, which has resulted in the brutal treatment of many Afghans, especially women. During their rule from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban and their allies committed massacres against Afghan civilians, denied UN food supplies to 160,000 starving civilians and conducted a policy of scorched earth, burning vast areas of fertile land and destroying tens of thousands of homes (Skain, 2002).

## Concept of Insurgency

An insurgency is a rebellion against authority (for example, an authority recognized as such by the United Nations) when those taking part in the rebellion are not recognized as belligerents (lawful combatants). An insurgency can be fought via counter-insurgency warfare, and may also be opposed by measures to protect the population, and by political and economic actions of various kinds and propaganda aimed at undermining the insurgents' claims against the incumbent regime. As a concept, insurgency's nature is ambiguous.

Insurgency is a protracted political military struggle directed toward subverting or displacing the legitimacy of a constituted government or occupying power and completely or partially controlling the resources of a territory through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations. The common denominator for most insurgent groups is their objective of gaining control of a population or a particular territory including its resources. This objective differentiates insurgent groups from purely terrorist organizations. It is worth nothing that identifying a movement as an insurgency does not convey a normative judgment on the legitimacy of the movement or its cause, the term insurgency is simply a description of the nature of the conflict.

Not all rebellions are insurgencies. There have been many cases of non-violent rebellions, using civil resistance, as in the People Power Revolution in the Philippines in the 1980s that ousted President Marcos and the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. Where a revolt takes the form of armed rebellion, it may not be viewed as an insurgency if a state of

belligerency exists between one or more sovereign states and rebel forces. For example, during the American Civil War, the Confederate States of America was not recognized as a sovereign state, but it was recognized as a belligerent power, and thus Confederate warships were given the same rights as United States warships in foreign ports (Roberts, Adam and Timothy Garton Ash, 2009)

When insurgency is used to describe a movement's unlawfulness by virtue of not being authorized by or in accordance with the law of the land, its use is neutral. However, when it is used by a state or another authority under threat, "insurgency" often also carries an implication that the rebels' cause is illegitimate, whereas those rising up will see the authority of the state as being illegitimate. Criticisms of widely held ideas and actions about insurgency started to occur in works of the 1960s; they are still common in recent studies (Douglas, 1977).

## Analysis of the Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan

### The Rise of the Taliban

Popular stories tell us that the Taliban movement came into being in 1994, after a warlord in Kandahar province had kidnapped and molested two local girls. Mullah Omar, then a local village mullah, gathered a group of religious students, went to the commander and freed the girls. The story has several variations: Some versions tell that it was a young boy that was kidnapped; others add that the Taliban killed the warlord and hung his corpse on the cannon of a Soviet tank. Whatever the details, it is commonly acknowledged that the Taliban movement started as a local reaction to the widespread anarchy and lawlessness in the country.

In 1994, Afghanistan had already gone through a ten-year long struggle against Soviet occupation, followed by five years of devastating civil war. Due to the large amounts of arms and other support given to the *mujahidin* in the 1980s, the country's population was armed to the teeth by the time of the Soviet withdrawal. While society previously had been based on tribal laws and customs, the long struggle against Soviet occupation and the subsequent civil war had led to a fragmented society, where power was no longer based on tribal heritage, but on military muscle. Thus, the 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of a new phenomenon in Afghanistan, namely, that of warlordism. It resulted in a period of brutal suppression of the population, corruption, anarchy and lawlessness. It was this society that the Taliban movement set out to reform, by calling for a return to a "pure" Islamic society governed by a strict interpretation of *Sharia*, or Islamic law.

The Taliban movement quickly increased in strength, and came to control 90 per cent of the country in less than five years. The research literature usually points to two main explanations for the Taliban's rapid rise to power: The fragmented nature of Afghan society, and the external support it received from Pakistan and other foreign actors. Thus,

the literature tends to downplay or ignore the role played by the Taliban themselves. However, other researchers have argued that the Taliban's rise to power cannot be explained by external factors alone. In a recent article, Sinno argues that the Taliban's rapid rise to power was due to the Taliban's own skills and efforts at assimilating or sidelining rival Pashtun leaders. This would explain why the Taliban managed to take control over large portions of Afghanistan so quickly while Hekmatyar, a Pashtun warlord who received far more foreign support than the Taliban, never managed to extend his power outside a small area of eastern Afghanistan. On the other hand, it is unlikely that the Taliban would have achieved what it did, had it not been for the specific historical circumstances and the support from outside actors, in particular the Pakistani intelligence agency ISI (Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence). There is probably more research to be done in the field of understanding the internal dynamics of the Taliban movement of the 1990s (Abdulkader, 2008).

## Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan 2013-2018

### Taliban Cancels Talks; U.S.-Afghan Tensions Flare

In January, the Taliban strikes a deal to open an office in Qatar, a move toward peace talks that the United States sees as a crucial part of a political settlement to ensure a stable Afghanistan. But two months later, the Taliban suspends preliminary talks, accusing Washington of reneging on promises to take meaningful steps toward a prisoner swap. In February, U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta announces the Pentagon's plan to conclude combat missions by as early as mid-2013 and shift to a primarily security assistance role in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, several incidents serve asblows to the international mission, including an accidental burning of Qurans by U.S. troops and allegations that a U.S. soldier murdered at least sixteen Afghan villagers. President Hamid Karzai demands that foreign troops be withdrawn from village outposts and confined to military bases, which analysts say would greatly accelerate the pace of transition from NATO to Afghan control.

Also on April 13, 2017 U.S Attacks Islamic State Redoubt, the United States drops its most powerful non-nuclear bomb on suspected Islamic State militants at a cave complex in eastern Nangarhar Province. The weapon, known colloquially as "the mother of all bombs," comes as newly elected President Donald J. Trump delegates decision-making authorities to commanders, including the possibility of adding several thousand U.S. troops to the nearly nine thousand already deployed there. (There are about as many U.S. contractors as well.) The bombing casts a spotlight on the emergence of the Islamic State in Afghanistan. At the same time, the Taliban appears to be as strong as ever, and the U.S. military describes the war as a stalemate. Kabul experiences suicide bombings on a scale never before seen, while the Taliban control or contest more than a third of the country. U.S. Marines are once again dispatched to Helmand Province.

Furthermore, January 2018 the Taliban Launches Major Attacks amid U.S Escalation, The Taliban carry out a series of bold terror attacks in Kabul that kills more than 115 people amid a broader upsurge in violence. The attacks come as the Trump administration implements its Afghanistan plan, deploying troops across rural Afghanistan to advise Afghan brigades and launching air strikes against opium labs to try to decimate the Taliban's finances. The administration also cuts off security assistance worth billions of dollars to Pakistan for what President Trump called its "lies and deceit" in harboring Taliban militants. Critics of the National Unity Government say domestic politics-notably a showdown with a provincial governor-have distracted President Ghani from security.

## Who are the Insurgents?

In order to describe the nature of the Afghan insurgency, it is essential to say something about how it is comprised. Most of the research literature agrees that the insurgent movement can be divided into several distinguishable groups: The Taliban movement/Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan led by Mullah Omar; the Haqqani network led by Jalaluddin Haqqani and his sons; the Hizb-e-Islami led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, foreign fighters connected to the al-Qaida network, and so forth.[23] This would also correspond to how the insurgents often describe themselves. In reality, however, and especially on a local level, it is often hard to distinguish between the various insurgent groups, especially when they all seem to be fighting for the same cause.

Dividing insurgents into groups may in some cases seem artificial, and does not describe the dynamics of the insurgent movement very well. Another approach, which is especially useful for counter-insurgency purposes, is to divide the insurgent movement into "layers" based on the individual insurgents' motivation for fighting. Using this approach, the literature talks about "hard-core" vs. "non-core" insurgents, "first-tier" vs. "second-tier" and "third-tier" Taliban, and the like. In one end of the scale are those motivated by ideology and religion alone, and on the other end are those fighting for money or other pragmatic reasons. In the following, we will outline both these approaches (Gutierrez and Giustozzi, 2010).

## Development of the Military Campaign in Afghanistan

There are different versions of how the Afghan insurgency started, but it is generally agreed that the initiative came from a narrow group of Taliban leaders who had managed to survive the U.S. invasion in 2001.Initiatives probably came from local commanders and militants inside Afghanistan as well, who may have started fighting the coalition forces and the new Afghan authorities on their own, and for a variety of purposes. Nevertheless, it appears that remnants from the Taliban government were involved in organizing and coordinating an insurgency from early on. Some have argued that had former Taliban officials been offered a role in the post-war negotiations, they would

perhaps not have started the insurgency. This depends, of course, what part of the "Taliban" one is referring to. Giustozzi has argued that while so-called "moderate Taliban" might have been involved in such a process,the "hard-core" led by Mullah Omar started the insurgency not because they were refused a seat at the negotiation table, but because they, for ideological reasons, "never accepted defeat and thought it was their duty to fight on."The IEA's ability to recruit and gather followers, on the other hand, could perhaps have been reduced had "moderate Taliban," or former Taliban officials willing to cooperate with the new government, been given political influence in the new Afghan state from the very beginning.

From January to September 2002, there were occasional incidents of violence, mostly concentrated in the southern and south-eastern border areas of Afghanistan, and in particular the provinces of Paktia, Paktika and Khost in the southeast, and Kunar in the East. The largest battle in this period was the battle of Shah-i-Kot (Operation Anaconda) in the first half of March 2002, which involved both local Taliban militia (fighters associated with the commander Safiur Rahman Mansoor) and foreign fighters associated with al-Qaida and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. It was not looked upon as a sign of a new insurgency, but rather as a "last stance" for foreign and local fighters who had not yet withdrawn to Pakistan. In this period, there were also occasional attacks elsewhere in Afghanistan (Rahimullah, 2002).

From September 2002, the insurgency gradually developed into a more organized campaign. Attacks slowly increased in number and in geographical distribution. New tactics were also introduced, and the attacks became slightly more sophisticated. In the beginning, attacks involved mostly small numbers of fighters and tactics were limited to rocket attacks and ambushes on U.S. targets, in addition to attacks on Afghan police and military. Towards the end of 2002 and in 2003, insurgents started to operate in larger units (up to 150), the use of roadside bombs increased, and operations became more frequent. A Taliban stronghold was reportedly established in the province of Zabul, which some said housed up to 1,000 fighters

During 2004 to 2006, more strongholds were established across southern and south-eastern Afghanistan, and in 2006, reports started to emerge of insurgent activity in northern parts of the country. In 2006, insurgents also stepped up their efforts in the southern provinces of Afghanistan, in particular Kandahar, Uruzgan and Helmand, as a reaction to the deployment of ISAF troops in the area. In Kandahar province, insurgents gathered in the Arghandab district in a possible attempt to take the city of Kandahar, the second largest city of Afghanistan and a traditional Taliban stronghold. However, they suffered a setback during a massive ISAF operation known as "Operation Medusa," carried out in September that year. The IEA's leadership also suffered another setback in May 2006, when the notorious commander for Southern Afghanistan, Mullah Dadullah, was killed. In spite of this, the insurgency seemed to resume with full strength the

following spring (Asia *Strategic Survey*, 2007). In 2007, the insurgency continued its spread to western and northern parts of the country, and the fighting also came closer to Kabul. From late 2007, a series of high-profile attacks have been mounted inside Kabul city, including:

i. 14 January 2008: An attack on the five-star Serena hotel in Kabul was carried out by four militants with small arms and suicide bombs, killing six people.
ii. 24 April 2008: An attempt on President Karzai's life was made during a military parade in Kabul, carried out by six militants with small arms and suicide bombs. Three people were killed.
iii. 7 July 2008: A suicide car bomb attack against the Indian Embassy in Kabul killed 41 people. This was the largest attack in Kabul city since 2001.
iv. 11 February 2009: A coordinated attack on three government buildings (the Justice Ministry, the Education Ministry and the directorate for prisons) in Kabul was carried out by eight militants with small arms and suicide bombs. Around 20 people were killed.
v. 15 August 2009: A suicide car bomb attack against the NATO headquarters in central Kabul killed eight people.
vi. 17 September 2009: A suicide car bomb attack against an ISAF convoy in Kabul killed six Italian soldiers and at least 10 civilians.
vii. 8 October 2009: A suicide car bomb attack against the Indian embassy in Kabul killed at least 17 people.
viii. 29 October 2009: An attack on a UN guesthouse in Kabul was carried out by three gunmen. Five UN staff and three Afghans were killed.

Over the past few years, there have been some new trends in the insurgency that deserve mention. First of all, the capital of Kabul appears to be more often targeted with gunmen and/or suicide bombers than before. It is a disturbing development, as it indicates that militant networks have the ability to smuggle fighters and weapons even into the seemingly secure capital. Most attacks in Kabul have been directed against coalition forces, the Afghan government and certain foreign embassies. The attack on the Serena hotel in 2008 and the UN Guesthouse in 2009 were exceptions to this pattern. Up until 2009, UN offices in the Afghan capital had largely been spared for direct attacks, which made the Afghan insurgency different from that in Iraq.

In an article published in May 2007, Williams noted that the UN appeared to be respected by the main insurgent groups in Afghanistan as a neutral partner in the conflict. The attack on the UN Guesthouse in Kabul in 2009 broke with this trend, but it is still too early to say whether it was a separate incident connected to the UN's involvement in the 2009 elections, or the beginning of a new strategy to step up attacks on UN personnel and installations. The IEA has repeatedly condemned the UN in their public statements (more on this in Chapter 8), but does not appear to have a specific strategy to target the UN on a massive scale. According to an IEA spokesman, the attack on the Guesthouse in October

2009 came because of the UN's involvement in the Afghan elections that autumn, which the IEA sought to derail (Brian, 2007).

The use of suicide bombers is another trend that deserves mention. The tactic of suicide bombing was virtually unknown in Afghanistan before 2001. The first known suicide attack to take place on Afghan soil was carried out on 9th September 2001, when the Northern Alliance commander, Ahmed Shah Masoud, was killed by two Arab suicide operatives posing as journalists. As the insurgency gained momentum, the use of suicide bombing also increased, and the tactic started to be employed by local insurgents as well as by foreigners. The number of attacks per year reached a peak in 2007 with 142 attacks, after which it appears to have declined.

Suicide attacks with a large number of casualties, which occurred on a few occasions in 2007 and 2008, do not appear to be a trend in Afghanistan. In fact, suicide attacks in Afghanistan have tended to result in much fewer casualties per attack than similar campaigns in Iraq and elsewhere. A study of attacks carried out in 2006 and the first half of 2007 concluded that in almost half of the cases, only the suicide attacker himself was killed. There may be many reasons for this, including a lack of professionalism and motivation on part of the suicide bombers. However, the avoidance of mass casualty bombings also appears to be a deliberate strategy of Taliban leaders. When suicide attacks result in large numbers of civilian casualties, IEA's spokesmen usually deny responsibility, presumably for fear of losing popular support. In 2009, the IEA issued a new "code of conduct" for its members which stated that the use of suicide bombings should be limited to high-value targets and that "the utmost effort should be made to avoid civilian casualties."Another point is that few suicide attacks in Afghanistan have randomly targeted civilians or other religious sects, as was the case in the Iraqi insurgency.When mass-casualty attacks do happen, they appear to have had a specific target in mind such as Afghan politicians or security chiefs (Brian, 2007).

Taliban insurgents who fight against US and ISAF troops in 2014 are motivated by a different set of factors than the group of young madrassa students that initially comprised the movement in the mid-1990s. Then, the Taliban was primarily motivated by the desire to establish an ideal Islamic state governed by sharia law. After all, the Taliban's ranks were made up of young Afghans who grew up in the refugee camps of Pakistan, displaced from the fighting of the Soviet-Afghan War. Today, the Taliban fight first and foremost to expel foreign troops from Afghan soil. Following a dozen years of fighting against Coalition forces, the Taliban has been seriously degraded. Estimates put the number of insurgents somewhere between 60,000 and 70,000, of which approximately 15,000 insurgents are full-time fighters.

American airpower, ISAF counterinsurgency warfare, and special operations night-raids have damaged the organization and caused it to disperse throughout Afghanistan and across the border in Pakistan. However, this is the same group that claims membership in

the mujahedin that drove the Soviets out of Afghanistan in the late 1980s. Despite suffering major losses, elements of the insurgency remain confident that if its fighters are able to muddle along, the Taliban can survive until US troops are withdrawn from Afghanistan. This could potentially set the stage for a return to violence and yet another Afghan civil war.

The majority of the Taliban's military operations are conducted by insurgents operating within their home provinces (Fotini, 2009). Still, the influence of groups like the Haqqani Network and links to both al-Qaida and the Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP), or Pakistani Taliban, indicate that as the conflict continues, the Afghan Taliban could be influenced by actors with more regional and even global ambitions8. Thomas Ruttig believes that the current U.S. strategy of degrading the Taliban to force it to the negotiating table is having unintended effects. The most serious of these is contributing to the rise of younger, more radical Taliban commanders who are filling the ranks of the 'neo-Taliban', an iteration of the insurgency with a more 'jihadist internationalist' worldview (Ruttig, 2011).

**Funding and Support of the Taliban Insurgency**

How an insurgent group finances itself has a major impact on the motivation of its members, overall group morale, political legitimacy, and the trajectory of the conflict. Unlike groups that are strictly considered 'narco-terrorists', the Taliban does not rely solely upon narcotics as a means of funding its insurgent activities in Afghanistan. Indeed, it maintains diverse sources of financing, coupled with a robust support network that offers both active and passive support. Part of the Taliban's war chest is derived from a multibillion dollar trade in goods smuggled from Dubai to Pakistan (Rubin, 2001). According to Peters, by 2010, the Taliban had become involved in no fewer than 36 cross-border smuggling operations12. Besides taxing narcotics traffickers and smuggling, the Taliban also runs protection rackets, commits extortion, and is engaged in kidnapping for ransom (KFR) throughout Afghanistan. In 2007, Taliban insurgents met with members of the Haqqani Network and the TTP to discuss how to negotiate an agreement on dividing the ransom proceeds raised from the return of hostages (Peters, 2010).

The Taliban's finances are very often associated with opium production. While this is true to a large extent, it would be wrong to say that the opium industry is the sole financial source of the Taliban. One report from 2008 estimated that opium production "provides up to 40 percent of the Taliban's total financial support," which is serious enough, but which also indicates that 60 per cent or more comes from other sources. Other sources of income probably include taxations of local populations, various forms of criminal activities (either directly through foreign exchange kidnapping and extortion, or indirectly through cooperation with criminal networks), and donations from local and international support networks. The Islamic Emirate usually admits that the insurgents are financed by way of religious taxes, and local and international donors, although they

principally deny having anything to do with opium trade, or other forms of organized crime (Mohammad, 2008).

## Support Networks in Pakistani Tribal Areas

After the fall of the Taliban regime in late 2001, Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) has functioned as a sanctuary for senior Taliban and al-Qaida leaders. These areas have traditionally been outside control of Pakistan's central government, and have been a site for guerrilla and terrorist training camps since at least the 1980s (Tim, 2004). Today, Afghan insurgents and foreign fighters rely on these areas for training, material support, and recruitment. The border with Afghanistan is porous, allowing for fighters and supplies to be transported across it with relative ease. FATA and NWFP have long been home to a number of Pakistani militant Islamist groups. In 2007, several of these groups joined an umbrella organization called the "Pakistani Taliban Movement" (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, or TTP), initially lead by the Waziristan-based militant Baithullah Mehsud. Mehsud was killed in a drone strike in August 2009, and was replaced by one of his close associates, Hakimullah Mehsud. (Tallis, 2008)

The exact contributions of TTP to the Afghan insurgency are unclear. According to the Pakistani journalist Muhammad Amir Rana, the two organizations enjoy close ties: "Every group that wants to join the TTP must take an oath of commitment to Sharia enforcement and loyalty to Mullah Omar." They also have to contribute 50 per cent of their income to a ''jihad fund" to sustain activities in tribal areas and in Afghanistan.According to various reports, the TTP has supported the insurgency in Afghanistan directly by sending fighters across the border. However, there have also been tensions between TTP and the Afghan Taliban over strategy and tactics, as will be discussed later in this report (Muhammad, 2008).

## Attitude Towards Negotiations and Power Sharing

In the West, there is an increasing realization that negotiations with the Taliban, at some level or another, must be an integrated part of the counter-insurgency effort in Afghanistan. The need for a negotiated solution with Taliban insurgents has also been voiced by NATO and U.S. generals, perhaps most clearly by the departing commander of the British forces in Afghanistan, Brig. Mark Carleton-Smith, who said in October 2008 that the Taliban could not be defeated, indicating that the only way forward for Afghanistan was to find a political solution that would include the Taliban. In practice, this usually means attempting to win over local commanders and tribal leaders inside Afghanistan and thereby undermine the authority of central leadership figures (Michael, 2009).

However, others have called for more direct talks with the IEA's leadership council. The UN representative to Afghanistan, Kai Eide, has said that "effective dialogue must reach the insurgent leadership rather than just marginalised moderates." Few believe that it is

feasible to negotiate with the Taliban leaders directly, due to their rigid stance on the topic. Nevertheless, there are various allegations that the Afghan government has attempted to approach Mullah Omar directly.

**Negotiation Attempts with the IEA's Leaders**

Around 2006, the Afghan government started to talk openly about negotiating with Mullah Omar. The IEA promptly denied that any kind of negotiations had taken place, "neither with the occupation forces nor its followers," and said that it is impossible to hold negotiations when the country is under occupation. Another statement specified that holding negotiations with Karzai would be "meaningless," because he is under the control of others. It also stated that the IEA does not want any political power, i.e. compromise or power-sharing is not an alternative, only "an independent Afghanistan and a sovereign state" (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 2006).

In 2007, there was talk of a joint "tribal council" or "joint peace jirga" to be held, with the participation of Pashtun tribes from both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although the press initially reported that the IEA considered participating in this jirga, the statement was promptly denied by the Emirate's spokesman, Muhammad Yusuf, who claimed he had been misquoted by Reuters.Throughout 2007, the Emirate issued several statements condemning the peace jirga and repeating that the only solution to the conflict is that the foreign "occupation forces" leave Afghanistan. The peace jirga took place in Kabul on 9-12 August 2007 and resulted in a declaration that contained, among others, a pledge." that government and people of Afghanistan and Pakistan will not allow sanctuaries/training centres for terrorists in their respective countries, and a pledge to stop opium production (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 2006).

In the autumn of 2007, two foreign diplomats (Michael and Mervyn) were expelled from Afghanistan, accused of trying to negotiate with Taliban representatives in Musa Qala, Helmand, without the permission of President Karzai. British troops had long fought with the Taliban in Helmand province for control over Musa Qala, with local Taliban forces periodically seizing control. It is unclear whether the diplomats really negotiated with the IEA, and on what level (media stated there were negotiations with "low-level commanders" only – which was most likely the case). The IEA, however, denied that any negotiations had taken place at all, and that the surrender of Musa Qala had been a tactical decision that had nothing to do with negotiations (*Times Online*, 2007).

In the autumn of 2008, new reports surfaced that there had been secret talks between the Taliban and the Karzai regime, sponsored by Saudi Arabia and Great Britain. The talks were held in Saudi Arabia on 24–27 September 2008, and according to the CNN, "... involved 11 Taliban delegates, two Afghan government officials, a representative of former mujahadeen commander and U.S. foe, Gulbadin Hekmatyar, and three others" (Robertson, 2009). King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia was also said to be present. Other

sources, however, said that the so-called "Taliban delegates" were not representatives of Mullah Omar's organization, but rather, constituted former members of the Taliban regime such as Mullah Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil and others (Bill, 2009). In the wake of these press reports, the IEA, again, issued a series of denials that they had been involved in the talks. This time, it included statements by both the deputy leader of the Emirate, Mullah Baradir, as well as of Mullah Omar himself. The double statement by both the leader and the deputy leader of the Emirate stresses the importance the Taliban leadership puts to upholding its image of being completely uncompromising in the issue of negotiations. Mullah Baradir stated, for example, that "the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan will never hold negotiations with America, NATO, and the Kabul agent administration" (Al-Sumud, 2009). He claimed that the Karzai administration only held talks with former members of the Taliban government, whom "it detains and whom it holds under house arrest. The reality is that those do not represent the Islamic Emirate in any manner." He also stated that the IEA's goal is not to obtain political power, and "if the Islamic Emirate conducts negotiations, they will be on the basis of benefiting Islam and the people, and they will be hidden from nobody." In December the same year, Mullah Omar issued a statement denying any role in the Saudi Arabian negotiations at all.

## Conclusion

This study is an attempt to complement already existing studies of the Afghan insurgency. It cannot be stressed often enough that the primary purpose of the IEA's propaganda is not to represent reality on the ground; they merely represent an image the IEA seeks to project of itself, with the purpose of increasing its chances to win the war in the long run. The Emirate's leaders are well aware that they are fighting a "media war" with its adversaries, in addition to the physical struggle on the ground. The information found in its propaganda cannot be compared with the "hard facts" on the ground. At the same time, however, databases of insurgent attacks can hardly explain *why* a particular target was attacked, or what the insurgents think about the future. It is these and similar questions that have been examined in this report.

One of the findings of the study is that the Islamic Emirate sees itself as a nationalist-religious movement fighting to resurrect the Taliban regime of the 1990s and to bring the various ethnic groups of Afghanistan under its rule. The Taliban-led insurgency is primarily a Pashtun movement, and tribal and ethnic factors have direct influence on its recruitment and mobilization patterns. Its political agenda, however, is different than that of Pashtun separatists who advocate a separate Pashtun state. The IEA's agenda also differs from that of its foreign allies (al-Qaida and Pakistani Taliban) because its primary concern is re-taking power in Afghanistan and implementing their interpretation of Islamic law in Afghanistan.

However, the IEA appears to have a closer relationship with its foreign allies than with the other major insurgent leader in Afghanistan, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. In spite of their fighting for the same broad goals, their relationship can be described as pragmatic at best. The main fault line in the IEA's relationship with its various allies appears to be centred on power and authority: Hekmatyar's group, the Hizb-e-Islami, is seen as a challenge to the IEA's power, while al-Qaida's fighters are not, because they have taken on the role as advisors and supporters. Here probably lies some of al-Qaida's key to success in the region, and the reason why they have not suffered the same destiny as al-Qaida in Iraq.

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