

Lessons Learnt

“Islamic, Independent, Perfect and Strong”:
Parsing the Taliban’s Strategic Intentions, 2001-2011



Alex Strick van Linschoten
Felix Kuehn

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Background

The 'Lessons Learnt' project was originally funded by a grant from King's College London. In May and June 2010 Robert Dover and Michael Goodman, with AHRC funding, ran a series of 5 policy seminars on *Lessons Learnt from the History of British Intelligence and Security*. These were held in partnership with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the Cabinet Office, King's College London and The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). Just under 180 people attended the seminar series in total, from both academia and government. The output from these has subsequently been published in a book called *Learning from the Secret Past: Cases in British Intelligence History* (Georgetown University Press, 2011). The rationale for this initiative and the current one have come from the 2004 Butler Report into the Iraq war (and the intelligence situation that contributed to it), which concluded that the historical lessons had been forgotten, and that a regular review process should be instigated.

The Current Project

This current project aims to build upon the 2010 seminars, improving and developing the relationship between researchers and government via the production of research and briefing papers, and seminars held in Whitehall. The primary impact is on improving national security, achieved via academics contributing to the development of the government's analytical capability.

The project is split into two halves:

- Highlighting historical examples of good analysis.
- Improving understanding of regions of current interest.

Leading academics have been specially commissioned to produce research and briefing papers for a Whitehall audience. This publication series reproduces the reports.

Commissioned Research on the History of British Intelligence and Security

Project Reports

1. 'Post-Mubarak Developments Within the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood' (October 2011) – Dr Lorenzo Vidino, Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich.

2. *“Islamic, Independent, Perfect and Strong”: Parsing the Taliban’s Strategic Intentions, 2001-2011*
(November 2011) – Alex Strick van Linschoten & Felix Kuehn

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Executive Summary

This paper aims to answer the question of what the Taliban wants. In doing so it illuminates some important points about the Taliban as an organisation – it is neither a unified nor a static organisation. The fluidity of people of influence within the Taliban, the shifts in views that can be seen to be core to it, and the mystery surrounding its figure-head, Mullah Omar, are all aspects that can only usefully be brought out by experiences gleaned within Afghanistan. This paper provides an historical context to the current position, and then goes on to explore some of the Taliban's strategic goals, offering some valuable context in which future negotiations with the Taliban might occur.

Series Editors' Notes

The war in Afghanistan is into its tenth year. This was a war that was almost universally supported in its early days, but which has become the subject of direct and indirect controversies – from the number of casualties being taken by the international coalition, to the failure to speedily capture the Taliban and Al-Qaeda hierarchy, to the accusations that the military campaign was not attached to an adequate strategy or that it was well equipped and funded. Such controversies almost inevitably focussed media and commentary attention onto the military covenant and the duty of care owed to the military, and onto the fate of Pakistan, an important country by dint of its nuclear capabilities and its links to the UK. As we move towards the 2015-16 horizon, and the anticipated withdrawal of international militaries from Afghanistan, the attention of the policy sphere has refocused on this transitional phase to try and assess the intentions of the anticipated key players in the post-conflict era, and the prospects for whether key allied objectives for Afghanistan can be met, for example, in terms of counterterrorism, counter-narcotics and democratic governance.

Whilst plenty has been written about the conflict in, and the reconstruction of, Afghanistan, there is relatively little in the way of first-hand accounts of life within and amongst Afghan communities, that do not come from the security sector, or a security perspective. We sought out Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, as two academics who have spent a great deal of time living within 'ordinary' Afghan communities, and for whom the conflict of Afghanistan is merely the unfortunate backdrop to their interest in the nation. We commissioned Alex and Felix to tell us what, in their view, the Taliban want. The resultant paper, which follows here, is an illuminating and interesting first hand contribution to our understanding of this troubled country as it hopefully moves towards a post-conflict peace.

Robert Dover & Michael S. Goodman

“Islamic, Independent, Perfect and Strong”: Parsing the Taliban’s Strategic Intentions, 2001-2011

The murder of Burhanuddin Rabbani – the head of Afghanistan’s High Peace Council appointed by President Karzai to explore and eventually lead talks with the Afghan Taliban – was regarded by many as signalling the “death” of the peace process, a clear sign that the Taliban in Quetta were “not serious” about peace.¹ President Karzai announced that direct talks with the Taliban were suspended and that Afghanistan would instead seek to engage with Pakistan which, he said, is the “other party” in the ongoing conflict.² Even before Rabbani’s death, rumours had been circling for several years about various negotiation tracks that were supposedly ongoing. Discussion of negotiations has often lacked clarity and poses several questions.

In short, are the Afghan Taliban interested in negotiations with the Afghan government and/or international military forces? What do they seek out of such a process, domestically and/or internationally? And to what extent do their political goals as a movement transcend their more short-term military goals?

Partial answers to these question can be gleaned from the history of the past thirty years, the Taliban’s official statements, as well as from individuals associated with their leadership. Similar themes can be found in both the Taliban’s pre-2001 history, when they were in charge of much of the country, as well as the years since, when they have sought political engagement on multiple occasions.³

One ongoing dynamic, however, should be placed in the foreground of any discussion in terms of how the Taliban movement are both perceived and how they act: fragmentation.

The international military campaign has had a significant impact on the Taliban as a group, particularly over the past two years. While the Taliban structures are best

¹ Marvin Weinbaum, “The Death of Reconciliation in Afghanistan,” *The National Interest*, September 22, 2011. <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/death-reconciliation-afghanistan-5921> (accessed October 27, 2011). Max Boot, “Rabbani’s Murder Shows Taliban Not Serious About Negotiations,” *Commentary*, September 20, 2011. <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/2011/09/20/rabbani-murder-taliban-peace/> (accessed October 27, 2011).

² Associated Press, “Karzai: Peace Talks with the Taliban Useless,” October 1, 2011. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/10/01/501364/main20114286.shtml?tag=contentMain;contentBody> (accessed October 27, 2011).

³ We will not be covering the pre-2001 history in this paper, although it is instructive on the issue of talks and political engagement. For more, read Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn (2011), *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban-Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970-2010* (London: Hurst).

described as a horizontal movement, the central command and the Taliban's leadership has been trying to vertically integrate and enforce command structures. The high turnover that the lower- and medium-level command posts have seen – in part a result of the capture-or-kill targeting campaign – has created a growing entropy. This does not translate into a decline of the insurgency's ability to conduct operations at large, nor do its operational capabilities seem to have shrunk significantly as a result of this leadership targeting. This trend has accelerated the problems with regards to the cohesion of the insurgency. This internal conflict is more pronounced in how it affects ground operations rather than on the ideological level, where any splits have been far more muted.⁴

The internal dynamics of fragmentation should be of central concern to those trying to engage the Taliban. Not only has fragmentation produced a leadership that may or may not be able to control or direct all the violent actors that claim the name 'Taliban', but growing divisions between the Taliban's military and political wing – a significant gap by now – has seen the military wing assume a wider decision-making role within the movement, such that might preclude future serious engagement.

The final consequences of these processes are difficult to predict; they are continuing and the changes that they introduce are complex. This paper will outline the history of the Taliban's strategic position⁵ since the fall of their government in December 2001, and then will attempt an assessment of their current position in the light of these ongoing dynamics.⁶

Political Engagement and Strategy, 2001-2010

The first two years following the fall of the Taliban government were a time of shock and recuperation for the movement's leadership. They had neither an organisational structure, nor a unified vision of how to engage with the new reality. The senior Taliban were mostly in Pakistan by early 2002; some had been captured or killed during the initial stages of Operation Enduring Freedom, but the vast majority had survived. Individuals and small groups lacked lines of communication to each other and weighed their options.⁷

⁴ The ban on Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadem's book, for instance, has been quietly but effectively implemented. The book reportedly is concerned with Wahabi doctrine.

⁵ Given the Taliban's increasing fragmentation, the number of possible perspectives that could be brought into the discussion of who 'the Taliban are' is quite large. We will limit ourselves to discussing the senior Quetta leadership's position for the sake of coherence; note that there will not be a detailed discussion of where the Haqqanis stand, except insofar as it feeds into the senior Quetta leadership's position.

⁶ The authors would like to thank the commissioners of the study for giving us space to outline some of our thoughts on this issues, as well as several Afghan interviewees in Kandahar and Kabul who must remain anonymous for their own security.

⁷ Interview, Kandahar, June 2010; Interview, Kabul, July 2010.

The broad majority of the Afghan population welcomed the ousting of the Taliban and the promises made by world leaders.⁸ The new political paradigm excluded the Taliban. There were individual attempts of Taliban to reconcile with the new administration – dominated by former members of the Northern Alliance⁹ – and its leader, Hamid Karzai. The absence of a coherent attitude among the foreign powers and their local allies, however, saw some Taliban being accepted while others were sent to Guantánamo or other detention facilities.¹⁰

The Taliban were inactive, for the most, besides the occasional statement.¹¹ While the lack of coordination and organisation translated into a weak political leadership, a number of initiatives were taken by senior Taliban in the first few years after their ousting. In November 2002, senior Taliban figures gathered in Pakistan and considered reaching out to the Afghan government in an attempt to participate in the national political arena through legitimate means.¹² There was, however no interest from the Afghan interim government and also some internal opposition.¹³

Ali Jalali, the former Afghan Interior Minister, engaged with this group at the time and has since stated that this was a significant moment for the Taliban leadership; if they had been given some assurance that they would not be arrested upon returning to Afghanistan, he said, they would have come, but neither the Afghan government nor their international sponsors saw any reason to engage with the Taliban at that point in time – they were a spent force.¹⁴

This early period following the fall of the Taliban movement does not reveal an evolving political and military strategy, but rather offers examples of its leadership reacting to circumstances. It was the developments within Afghanistan – in particular the failure of the new administration and interim authorities to capitalise on the political will and support of the people, and the strategic mistake of allowing former strongmen and warlords to play key roles in the government – that have contributed to and continue to fuel the conflict.

⁸ Interviews, Afghanistan, 2005-10; Ahmed Rashid (2008), *Descent into Chaos*. (New York: Allen Lane), 130.

⁹ Rashid (2008), chapter 10.

¹⁰ Mullah Zaeef, for example, was handed over to the United States in January 2002, subjected to interrogation in a variety of facilities inside and outside Afghanistan before being transferred to Guantánamo Bay. Mullah Mutawakil, another political Taliban, chose to hand himself over voluntarily to US troops in February 2002. This, he argued, was in order to remain within the political process.

¹¹ Nadia Abou el-Magd, "Alleged Mullah Omar Statement Aired," *Associated Press*, September 12, 2002.

¹² Interview, Kabul, July 2010 (with senior Taliban political figure who attended the meeting).

¹³ Note, too, the failed opportunity of the December 2001 Shah Wali Kot meeting. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/oct/06/afghanistan-time-running-out-peaceful-resolve> (accessed October 27, 2011).

¹⁴ Conversation, Ali Jalali, June 2010. There does seem to have been another meeting in late 2003/early 2004 with a similar purpose (and seeking "protection and space for political activities") which resulted in a Taliban representative being dispatched to Kabul to meet with government authorities.

Mullah Mohammad Omar had rhetorically committed to a fight against the “imperialist invader” already in 2001, stating clearly in an interview with the BBC that, “we will not accept a government of wrong-doers. We prefer death than to be a part of an evil government.”¹⁵

By 2003, the Taliban had made plans for a series of military operations to take place in the summer. Mullah Dadullah took Dai Chopan district of Zabul and much of Paktika province was captured.¹⁶ 2004 saw Taliban activity in Uruzgan and Kandahar provinces, and 2005-6 saw Helmand come into focus for the Taliban along with Ghazni, Paktya, Khost, Lowgar and Farah.¹⁷ Suicide operations had become a prominent tactic in mid-late 2005 in the south and south-east. The high point of this initial strategy (enacted from 2004 onwards) was the Taliban’s battle for Pashmol in September 2006; this standoff saw hundreds of Taliban killed and their force defeated in what amounted to a frontal battle with ISAF forces.¹⁸

2005-8 saw the insurgency consolidate and achieve significant territorial and propaganda successes against the Afghan government and foreign forces. Mullah Dadullah was in part responsible for this and the arrival of NATO’s expansion troops¹⁹ in southern Afghanistan in 2006 appears to have helped motivate parts of the local population to side with the insurgency at the time. In many parts of the country – nowhere more than in Helmand which was officially under the lead of British forces – individuals joined up as a reaction to what was perceived by many as a ‘settling of scores’ dating back to the Anglo-Afghan wars, and the Taliban capitalised on a feeling of disappointment and disenfranchisement of the general population over the lack of development and improvement in their daily lives.²⁰

By the summer of 2006, the Taliban had solidified their military and political strategy. They had a very ambitious idea of what could be achieved in the summer of 2006 and how much of Afghanistan could be brought under their control: this extended to the belief

¹⁵ “Interview with Mullah Omar - Transcript,” *BBC News* (Online), November 15, 2001. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/1657368.stm (accessed October 10, 2010).

¹⁶ Antonio Giustozzi (2007), *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*. (London: Hurst), 5.

¹⁷ It was during 2004 that Mullah Dadullah was appointed commander of the Taliban’s military forces, and Mullah Akhtar Osmani as head of liaison between the Taliban and the tribes.

¹⁸ Rashid (2008), 363-4.

¹⁹ The approval for ‘phase three’ was granted on December 8, 2005 in Brussels, and by September 28, 2006, approval was granted for a NATO expansion into fourteen additional provinces.

²⁰ Interviews, Kandahar, 2006-2011.

that they could take the south of the country.²¹ The south saw the main thrust of the Taliban's push as well as an aggressive public relations strategy.²²

Politically, there was some “talk about talk” in terms of a dialogue between Karzai and the Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahed, but no serious efforts were made nor did the idea receive genuine support.²³ An examination of Mullah Mohammad Omar's eid statements (issued twice a year during the period with a few exceptions) shows that 2006 was when a more coherent political strategy emerged.²⁴ Statements were longer, offered more substance and spoke of specific wishes and plans rather than simply in negative terms rejecting government and international proposals.

The Taliban have engaged in a campaign to win over rural Afghans since 2005-6, but it was only in 2008-9 that the provision of services and accountability became more widespread. While being a clear display of their hold over an area it gave the Taliban more credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the local population. An ad hoc system of courts had been operational since the movement fell, albeit in a highly reduced form, but from 2007 onwards these court sessions spread to different locations, were systematised and met more regularly.²⁵ This happened parallel to the rolling out of a more responsive complaints system whereby inhabitants of rural areas could request investigations into corrupt Taliban commanders or members or other actions where they felt they had been wronged. Many of these complaints seem to have been addressed in a systematic manner – with high-level investigations and figures coming from Pakistan – and, most importantly, to the satisfaction of many Afghans.²⁶ The layeha or rule book first released in 2006 was a public expression of this seemingly newfound devotion to public accountability. 2008-9 was a period when the Taliban's leadership felt they were close to gaining serious and wider political control over the southern regions of the country.

For most political figures across Afghanistan – not just for the Taliban – this period was characterised by a long wait to see how the new US President, President Obama, would decide to steer US policy in Afghanistan. Until that moment came, however, – on December 1, 2009, with the dispatch of 30,000 extra troops on the advice of his senior

²¹ Interviews, Kandahar, summer 2006; interviews, Kandahar, summer 2007.

²² It was also around this time that the Taliban had started to increase the output on their website, translating articles into Arabic, Urdu and English as well as Dari and Pashtu. See Giustozzi (2007), chapter 4.

²³ See, for instance, Shahzad (2007) and the Taliban statement made on February 4, 2007 (<http://www.afghanwire.com/article.php?id=4039> (accessed March 12, 2011)).

²⁴ Statements referenced here were made on December 29, 2006, December 18, 2007, December 2, 2008 and December 8, 2008. (Author email copies).

²⁵ Interviews, Kandahar, 2008-10.

²⁶ Ibid.

military commanders – political groupings within Afghanistan played a waiting game. This was apparent from both the Taliban as well as from the Afghan government. The Taliban issued statements voicing their doubts about Obama’s intentions and plans, and Karzai avoided the issue of his government being criticised by the US administration.²⁷

Nevertheless, the decision to send extra troops came as a disappointment for some senior Taliban political figures who had hoped that Obama might offer a different tangent to US policy in Afghanistan.²⁸

The news of extra American troops was met with messages promising a military escalation by the Taliban. Two statements were released in the week that followed, one simply entitled “On Obama’s New Strategy,” and the next entitled “Obama, Following Bush’s Steps.”²⁹ There was a sense among the Taliban leadership that this was a moment in which to reinforce their efforts.³⁰ There were around 400 attacks throughout the country on the day of the presidential elections in 2009; the Taliban were implementing a national strategy.³¹

While often in direct violation of international human rights, the Afghan Taliban leadership, in particular its founding and early members, represent a movement with values based on their interpretation of Islam and socio-economic heritage. They still represent a mixture of local customs and religious norms that resonate in a number of Afghan communities, particularly among the rural Pashtun south and east. They³² offer a broad-brush political vision, albeit one lacking specifics of how their goals are to be implemented or even how they would alter the precedents set when they ruled Afghanistan in the 1990s. An eid letter written by Mullah Mohammad Omar (issued on September 8, 2010) comes as close to an outline of their domestic policies as we have:

²⁷ For example, <http://theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Dec09/Obama,%20following%20Bush%20Steps.htm> (accessed March 12, 2011).

²⁸ This sense of disappointment come across from reading the statements written in reaction to various early announcements by Obama on Afghanistan-related policy as well as from interviews made with Taliban figures.

²⁹ See <http://theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Dec09/Statement%20of%20the%20Islamic%20Emirate%20of%20Afghanistan%20Regarding%20Obama%E2%80%99s%20New%20Strategy.htm> (accessed October 17, 2010) and <http://theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Dec09/Obama,%20following%20Bush%20Steps.htm> (accessed October 17, 2010).

³⁰ Interviews, Kabul and Kandahar, 2009-10; Taliban statements 2008-10.

³¹ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *What’s Really Happening in Afghanistan: a Report From the Front*. (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009), 9. <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/0911carnegie-afghanistan2.pdf> (accessed October 17, 2010).

³² Part of the problem with the characterisation of the Taliban as “they” is their fragmented nature, and questions posed to low-ranking fighters or commanders will not necessarily represent the senior political figures within the movement.

The victory of our Islamic nation over the invading infidels is now imminent and the driving force behind this is the belief in the help of Allah (SwT) and unity among ourselves. In the time to come, we will try to establish an Islamic, independent, perfect and strong system on the basis of these principles – a system with economic, security, legal, educational and judicial aspects being based on the injunctions of Islam and conducted through a consultative body joined by persons with experience, knowledge and expertise. All God-fearing, experienced and professional cadres of the Afghan society will be part and parcel of this system without any political, racial and lingual [sic] discriminations.

Administrative responsibilities will be devolved on them according to their talent and honesty. We will respect the Islamic rights of all people of the country including women; will implement Sharia rules in the light of the injunctions of the sacred religion of Islam in order to efficiently maintain internal security and eradicate immorality, injustice, indecency and other vices; will strictly observe the law of punishment and reward and auditing in order to bring about administrative transparency in all government departments. The violators will be dealt with according to the Sharia rules.³³

Another eid letter written in August expands on this:

Our manifesto is that Afghanistan should have a real Islamic regime which is acceptable to all people of the country. All ethnicities will have participation in the regime and portfolios will be dispensed on the basis of merits; will maintain good relations with regional and world countries on the basis of mutual respect, Islamic and national interests. Such dispensation will entirely focus on conduits to recover the spiritual and material losses that have been caused by the three decades-long war. [...] Contrary to the propaganda launched by the enemies, the policy of the Islamic Emirate is not aimed at monopolizing power. Since Afghanistan is the joint homeland of all Afghans, so all Afghans have right to perform their responsibility in the field of protection and running of the country. [...] Professional cadres and national business men will be further encouraged, without any discrimination, to serve their religion and country.³⁴

Taliban messaging often focuses on security and justice; this sometimes jibes with actions taken by field commanders on the ground. Much of this can be explained by the internal structure of the Taliban insurgency; the governance structures aspired to

³³ <http://theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Sep10/Message%20of%20Felicitation%20of%20the%20Esteemed%20Amir-ul-Momineen,%20on%20the%20Eve%20of%20Eid-ul-Fitr.htm> (accessed September 9, 2010).

³⁴ <http://theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Aug11/Message%20of%20Felicitation%20of%20the%20Esteemed%20Amir-ul-Momineen%20on%20the%20Occasion%20of%20Eid-ul-fitre.htm> (accessed October 27, 2011).

by the Taliban leadership itself grants significant autonomy to district- and province-level Taliban shuras and commanders.³⁵ There are also strategic considerations that affect regional policy; for example, an encouragement of franchise groups operating in the north – groups that bear the Taliban’s name but may never have had significant interactions with the Taliban’s leadership in Pakistan or any past associations with the movement.³⁶ These internal developments have a profound impact on the group overall and its struggle to maintain coherence.

The new generation of insurgents, a younger group with no recollection of an Afghanistan that was not at war, are less inclined to reach a political settlement. While accurate information on this young generation is relatively scarce, individual voices suggest that they seek to recapture the entire state, installing an ‘Emirate’ that potentially is considerably different from that experienced during the 1990s. There is a noticeable qualitative difference between the old generation and new generation Taliban when they discuss the official statements put out by the leadership. Whereas the older generation is careful in discussing individual goals and demands, the younger generation appears to seek the strictest and most rigid application of the official line.

The Taliban’s declared intentions and goals for Afghanistan have been relatively consistent, both in public statements of the leadership based in Quetta and the political Taliban based in Kabul.³⁷ While there can be speculation about the Taliban’s long-term goals the movement as such was subject to continuous change and strongly influenced by policy decisions by the international community and neighbouring states, which makes predictions about its trajectory highly speculative.

As a movement, the Afghan Taliban remain concerned primarily with Afghanistan. Individual voices as well as official statements have repeatedly stated that they seek good relations with the world and do not intend to interfere in other countries’ affairs or attack them.³⁸ Statements calling for a “global *jihad*” or in support of such actions taken by other groups are not to be found in recent years from the Afghan Taliban and there are implicit indications that they are systematically trying to emphasise this point.³⁹

³⁵ Layeha (2010 edition), author copy; interviews, Kandahar and Kabul, 2010. Kate Clark, *The Layha: Calling the Taliban to Account*. (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network). <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=1894> (accessed October 27, 2011).

³⁶ Interviews, Kunduz, Balkh and Baghlan, November 2009.

³⁷ These do not speak officially for the movement but may be seen as unofficial advocates of a political solution.

³⁸ Taliban statements, 2008-2011.

³⁹ Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *Separating the Taliban from al-Qaeda: The Core of Success in Afghanistan*. (New York: Center on International Cooperation). http://www.cic.nyu.edu/afghanistan/docs/gregg_sep_tal_alqaeda.pdf (accessed October 27, 2011).

The Afghan Taliban are changing as a group; if current trends are not fundamentally altered the movement will be increasingly less subject to the old hierarchies and restraints that its senior leadership attempt to impose. One of the most significant challenges to the leadership of Mullah Mohammad Omar currently can be found in the younger generation of commanders who are increasingly independent, both financially and ideologically from the old-school Kandahari Taliban leadership based in Quetta; this de facto limits the senior leadership's options. For the moment, internal threats to the credibility of the senior leadership are not however threatening their integrity and ability to implement decisions. Loyalty among the senior structures seems to be relatively robust.

Mullah Mohammad Omar, moreover, has managed to keep his moral authority relatively intact in the eyes of many in the movement. That said, learning the lessons of the September 11 attacks must have required a rethink of the role and suitability of Mullah Mohammad Omar as the leadership figure within the movement. It is entirely possible – although this is speculative – that the penultimate tier of Taliban leaders (those visible on the ground and taking decisions as to the future direction of the movement on a daily basis) are not entirely dissatisfied with Mullah Mohammad Omar's currently limited presence and influence.⁴⁰

Current Strategic Goals

There is no single Taliban strategy or set of goals. The movement is heterogenous by nature and continues to undergo considerable changes that see a deepening fragmentation within. There appear to be considerable differences as to the political and military future of the Taliban internally. It is also worth mentioning that not all parts of the insurgency fall under the umbrella of the Afghan Taliban, such as Hekmatyar's Hizb-e Islami or the interests represented by the Haqqani family.

An examination of the Taliban communiqués issued since 2001 shows that the leadership regularly fails to explicitly address questions such as whether they desire power in the same form as the mid-late 1990s. Their official communications and interviews with figures from the political wing suggests that lessons from the 1990s have been learnt. Their statements and interviews conducted show a growing understanding regarding key concerns of the international community, particularly in as much as they effect the

⁴⁰ Loyalty, at least nominally, is such that Taliban figures are loath to speak out against Mullah Mohammad Omar, even in private.

external perception of the Taliban movement.⁴¹ This paradoxical combination (violence and brutality versus understanding the shortcomings of such tactics) should be regarded as part of the natural divide between the fighting vanguard of the movement and its political base.

The Taliban have issued statements outlining their goals but much about their aspirations remains disputed. The underlying assumption is that they aim to return to power and resurrect the 'Emirate'.⁴² While their communiqués are issued in the name of the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' and they present themselves as a government in absentia, the lack of explicit statements to this end may reveal more flexibility than is often assumed.

The Islamic Emirate has curtains [sic] goals to achieve. They are:

1. *Complete independence of the country.*
2. *Establishment of an Islamic system representing the wants and aspiration of the Afghan people.*
3. *Progress and prosperity of the country and people.*

*Our first priority is to achieve these goals through talks and negotiation. But if the invading powers in Afghanistan are not ready to give the Afghans their natural rights which is the right of independence and establishment of a government based on their aspirations and wants, then the Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate are determined to carry on the fight until the realization of the said goals.*⁴³

In a statement issued in March 2011, the Taliban state the following on the possibility of peace:

*We think, if the Contact Group, the Islamic Conference and other circles really want to bring the current war in Afghanistan to an end, then the solution is very clear and feasible – they should withdraw 150,000 foreign forces from Afghanistan unconditionally and pave the way for establishment of an Islamic System on the basis of the Islamic and national aspirations of the Afghans.*⁴⁴

⁴¹ The authors do not mean to imply that any of the Taliban interviewed for this book have fundamentally changed their stance on issues regarding *shari'a* law and human rights, or women's rights. Rather, there appears to be a growing understanding and awareness among political Taliban that the handling of these issues have a significant impact on foreign relations and are important to the international community with regards to Afghanistan.

⁴² See, for instance, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/07/anti-war-taliban-afghanistan> (accessed October 27, 2011).

⁴³ Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, "Can we call this reconciliation?" February 6, 2010. <http://theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Feb10/Can%20We%20Call%20This%20Reconciliation.htm> (accessed July 12, 2010).

⁴⁴ <http://theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Ma11/West%20Admits,%20Afghanistan%20has%20no%20Military%20Solution.htm> (accessed March 20, 2011).

Much of their messages incorporates legitimate complaints of the population against the foreign forces and the Afghan government.

The core goals of the Taliban are for justice and a role in the political future of the country. International commentators often voice concern about the revisionist nature of analyses of the Taliban, pointing towards the countless human rights abuses the movement committed while in power and since their ousting in 2001.⁴⁵ These correctly point out that the Taliban are far from being “modern Robin Hoods” who simply defend their own rights or those of the people; it is nevertheless informative to examine the underlying developments. Local shifts in perception reflect at least a partial reality: corruption and the poor performance of the Afghan government in conjunction with oft-voiced promises and pledges have eroded the credibility of the government in Kabul and the internationals. There is an obvious disconnect between the message and the deed. The Taliban, on the other hand, while employing terror tactics, appear to be consistent, and if not in reality then at least in the perceptions of many.⁴⁶ The considerations seem pragmatic for the most part rather than an explicit subscription to the Taliban’s goals and narrative.

Informed to a large degree by a deep-seated lack of trust on all sides, the Afghan Taliban find themselves in an environment with limited options for action from their perspective. Current US strategy is perceived as being driven by the military; any change that will come, they believe, will only be in the realm of incremental tactical adjustments. The present situation offers few incentives for the Taliban to publicly position themselves against any militant Islamic group, be it al-Qaeda or any other. With state supporters coming under increased pressure, the number of potential or current allies for the Taliban is limited; it is important to understand this limitation. The Taliban operate within an environment of various religious and militant groups. A public position could have significant consequences for the Taliban leadership, and those based in Pakistan would likely face a backlash following such a declaration.

Excepting a tectonic shift in the political environment – among the Afghan government, or in the international stance on talks – there is no room for the Afghan Taliban publicly to delineate itself from other militant Islamic groups in the region, including al-Qaeda.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch (2010), *The ‘Ten-Dollar Talib’ and Women’s Rights*. 13 July. <http://www.hrw.org/node/91466> (accessed August 1, 2010); <http://www.weeklystandard.com/print/articles/diplo-terrorist> (accessed October 27, 2011).

⁴⁶ Interviews and conversations (Kandahar, Helmand, Kabul, Khost, Baghlan, Kunduz, Ghazni, Paktya, Nangarhar, Wardak, Mazar-e Sharif, Herat, Badghis, Faryab and Badakhshan, 2005-10.

⁴⁷ Al-Qaeda’s leadership also senses that any deal with the Taliban would threaten their sanctuary. For this reason they are significant possible spoilers to any negotiating process, possibly with assassinations. Some version of this dynamic may have played a role in the murder of Burhanuddin Rabbani.

The old-generation Taliban's leverage over the chain-of-command is increasingly limited to a degree that significantly hampers their influence over all parts of the movement currently fighting, rendering the chance of forging a lasting peace more and more unlikely.⁴⁸ A central motivation for the senior leadership to engage in a political solution, besides their growing marginalisation, is the awareness of the possibility of another civil war that looms if no political solution is found.⁴⁹

While there might be incentives to find a political solution, there are also factions within the insurgency and the Afghan government that are opposed to a settlement – or a substantial inclusion of the insurgency into the current political paradigm.⁵⁰ President Karzai has stressed that he seeks reconciliation,⁵¹ but there are significant voices within and outside the current administration that are not interested in any such process.

Spoilers to a political process, moreover, will continue to take action as long as any such process is active. The death of Rabbani is a testimony to this.

⁴⁸ There is, of course, always the possibility of using Pakistan as a partner for a negotiated settlement, a party with real leverage over regional insurgent groups, as suggested by one prominent expert. See Dorronsoro (2010). Attempts to do exactly this in recent months, however, would seem to belie this possibility.

⁴⁹ In a workshop held in Washington in the summer of 2010, over 90% of the participants (experts, practitioners, researchers and journalists concerned with Afghanistan) agreed that Afghanistan was heading towards civil war, or a situation comparable to the early 1990s.

⁵⁰ The dissatisfaction of former Northern Alliance figureheads is well-known, but the leaking of the Tayyeb Agha negotiation track earlier this year suggests that this may extend even further inside the Afghan government.

⁵¹ Despite comments about the need to engage with Pakistan at the expense of the Taliban itself, Karzai still seems committed to the idea of reconciliation.

Conclusion

To ask the question “what do the Taliban want” is already to apply a certain analysis as to who the Taliban are and how to think about them. There are groups within the umbrella term that make up ‘the Taliban’ – from the field commanders and common fighters, to the high level commanders, from the eastern fighters that increasingly operate and interact with non-Afghan entities, to the old senior leadership in Quetta and in other places. A political process needs to be understood as engaging certain elements within this broad grouping and needs to take into account what this engagement means for each particular group in relation to the other parts and interests.

Given that there is no ‘strong leadership’ currently, engagement will certainly encourage doubt of those individuals and groups that do participate. This, however, is not a divide-and-conquer strategy in which the goal is to play sections off against each other. There are no sections; sections are shifting and formed and reformed, and alliances easily switched. If the goal is to divide the Taliban – rather than to pull as many as possible over onto the side that is negotiating – this will directly translate into a marginalisation of the people we talk to a degree that makes the whole process irrelevant.

The starting positions that all parties bring to political negotiations will often transform – through compromises or otherwise – into something else by the time they are ready for a final agreement. It should not be forgotten, though, that this process can often be generative of new ideas. In this way, part of the answer to the question ‘what do the Taliban want’ will be revealed and discovered through the very process of negotiation. Not only will the process reveal what they want, but will also solidify (and to a certain extent, create) who ‘they’ are.

There are various other external factors – including the reactions and interactions of the internationals in Afghanistan – that have shaped and will continue to shape the strategic outlook of the Taliban movement.

Above all, though, it is the credible threat of civil war that looms over the issue of ‘talks’ and the international forces move towards ‘transition’. The timeline is ambitious and it seems events often overtake the intentions of individuals; at this point, a focused appreciation of the ways in which international actors in Afghanistan can produce

unintended consequences would seem to be a useful effort. The Taliban are changing in character, but our shifts in understanding are much further behind. Even though the statements of the political cadre among the older generation have been more consistent in recent years, the realities of internal group dynamics are spinning out of their control as each day passes.



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