

The Taliban, Near Victory: Winning Against Empire as Covid -19 Looms*

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“I am considering two promises. One is the promise of God. The other is that of Bush. The promise of God is that my land is vast. If you start a journey on God's path, you can reside anywhere on this earth and will be protected. . . .The promise of Bush is that there is no place on earth where you can hide that I cannot find you. We will see which one of these two promises is fulfilled.” - Mullah Omar

The Afghan Taliban, in their eighteenth year of an insurgency (2002-2020) against the United States, Britain, NATO, and the Afghan Governments of Hamid Karzai (2002-2014) and Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai (2014-2020), have achieved a historic victory with their recent signing of the US-Taliban Peace Deal. After being driven from power in late 2001, the Taliban orchestrated a stubbornly effective insurgency, wresting control of substantial territory (12-70% of the country, according to various estimates) and are now in a position to at least contest control of Kunduz and other major urban centers in Afghanistan. They signed an agreement with the U.S. and NATO on the withdrawal of the remaining 12,000+ U.S. troops and 8700+ NATO forces over the next several months on February 29, just as the deadly coronavirus makes its way into Herat (and beyond) from over 115,000 returning visitors and refugees from western Iran (15,000 a day).

The Taliban launched three hundred attacks in the week of March 15-22 and stormed several districts in the northern provinces of Kunduz, Faryab, and Badakhshan on March 28, while reportedly responding quickly and resolutely to the medical threat in areas under its control, separating recent arrivals from the population, while its medical personnel performed medical examinations. Dozens of Afghan forces were killed in successful Taliban attacks in recent days, amidst the news that 88 coronavirus infections were reported in six different provinces by March 26. The 90,000-man Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) appear to be among those most likely to spread the virus to the general population. Just as these multiple crises overlap, the U.S. announced a \$1 billion cut in financial assistance to Ghani's Administration (from a \$4.5 billion annual aid package) this week, partly in response to the contested election results which produced claims of victory by both President Ghani and Dr. 'Abdullah 'Abdullah, formerly an aide of Ahmad Shah Massoud and a representative of the Northern Alliance. These cuts will certainly endanger further efforts to control the outbreak and defend the regime from ongoing Taliban

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offensives. Challenged on the danger of the aid cuts to the government's survival, U.S. President Donald Trump remarked, "Countries have to take care of themselves".¹

Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, diplomatic leader in the Taliban's Doha office, former muhajid commander, and deputy of the deceased Taliban Supreme Leader Mullah Muhammad Omar (d. 2013), signed the historic agreement on February 29, 2020, with U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (State Department), Zalmay Khalilzad. Sayyed Muhammad Tayyeb Agha and Mullah Baradar, Mullah Muhammad Omar's closest deputies, had been proposing a negotiated settlement of the Afghan insurgency since before 2010, when Baradar was arrested by Pakistani officials and detained (mostly under house arrest) until 2018, after Pakistan shifted to a pro-negotiations position on the war in 2016. Qatar mediated talks between Agha and Karzai's administration as early as 2011. Included in those talks in Doha were the five Taliban prisoners released in 2014 in the Sgt. Bowie Bergdahl prisoner exchange (during Obama's second term), after thirteen years in captivity, a paradox with few parallels in the US War on Terror. The current *Emir al Momineen* (Commander of the Faithful), and leader of the Taliban, Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada (2016-2020; b. 1961), scholar, former director of a Kandahar madrasa, and the equivalent of a 'Chief Justice' of the Taliban Court System, has approved these negotiations and agreements, continuing the trend toward a negotiated settlement of the war, established by Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur before him, and supported by Pakistan.²

The momentum for a negotiated settlement was advanced further after Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Islamist leader of the Hezb-e Islami Party and organizer of both the 1980s jihad against the USSR, the 1990s intra-mujahidin war in Kabul, and the 2002-2016 insurgency, made a separate agreement to end hostilities with the Afghan Government in 2016. Pakistan supported Hekmatyar's decision and released Baradar, two years later, in order that he could participate in high level talks with US diplomats and Afghan Government representatives in preparation for what became the agreement in February of 2020. Pakistan acted to prevent comprehensive agreements from being reached without the careful consideration by the Taliban political leadership of their policy priorities and imprimatur. The Taliban demanded that all U.S. and foreign troops be withdrawn from the country as a condition for a final agreement, which they intend to conduct separately with Afghan Government officials as foreign troops are withdrawn. The U.S. reportedly agreed to facilitate the release of 5000 Taliban prisoners and to withdraw 8600 troops over the next four months, with NATO agreeing to withdraw troops simultaneously. The Taliban reportedly agreed to release 1000 of its prisoners and not to host foreign forces as a "safe haven" for attacks on the U.S. from

1 *ibid*; Mujib Mashal, *For Afghanistan Already on Brink, U.S. Aid Cut Is a Big Shove*, *NYTimes*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/world/asia/afghanistan-us-aid-cut.html>, accessed 3/30/2020; 2:30 pm, PDT.

2 *ibid.*, Mujib Mashal, *Once Jailed in Guantanamo, 5 Taliban Now face U.S. at Peace Talks*, *NYTimes*, Mar. 26, 2019; <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/26/world/asia/taliban-guantanamo-afghanistan-peace-talks.html>, accessed 03/31/2020; Mujib Mashal and Taimoor Shah, *NYTimes*; *Taliban's New Leader, More Scholar Than Fighter, Is Slow to Impose Himself*; 07/11/2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/12/world/asia/taliban-afghanistan-pakistan-mawlawi-haibatullah-akhundzada.html>, accessed 02/31/2022, 12:30 pm, PDT.

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Afghan soil. The Taliban did not agree to suspend armed actions against the Afghan Government, which has announced its intention to begin prisoner releases on March 31. The Afghan Government's negotiating team was established under Intelligence Chief Massom Stankezkai, but the constitution of that team was rejected by the Taliban on March 30, as unrepresentative of the nation's political forces. It is unclear if the coronavirus crisis will affect these scheduled withdrawals or the release of prisoners. No significant release has yet occurred almost a month after the signing.³

The withdrawal of foreign forces, in excess of 130,000 at its height in 2014, if completed, would make the Taliban the most potent and formidable political and military force in Afghanistan; leaving it in the position to determine the political future of the nation, along with their primary sponsors, Pakistan and the Gulf Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as Iran, which also, surprisingly, contributed significantly to Taliban military efforts in the west and northwest, coordinated by the Pasdaran/IRGC/Quds Force from 2010-2016. The Taliban insurgency has thus become one of the longest and most successful insurgencies in modern world history, as well as in the five centuries of Muslim resistance to western imperialism.⁴

3 Aljazeera.com, *Afghanistan: Ghani, Hekmatyar Sign Peace Deal*,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/09/afghanistan-ghani-hekmatyar-sign-peace-deal-160929092524754.html>, Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War, 2001-2018*; Hurst Publishers, NY, 2019, p. 28,

p. 71; *Taliban Refuses to Talk to Government's Negotiating Team*, The Guardian/Reuters, March 28, 2020,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/28/taliban-refuses-to-talk-to-afghan-governments-negotiating-team>; accessed 03/30/2020; 4 pm, PDT.

4 Comparable Muslim insurgencies would include the Moroccan (Saadian) War vs. Portuguese colonialism, 1527-1578; the North African/Algerian/Ottoman war vs. Spanish colonialism 1509-1574; the Malabar Mappila War vs. Portuguese colonialism 1499-1550s; Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi's war and Adal Sultanate vs. Abyssinia 1529-1543; the Mindanaoan and Sulu Moros' struggle for independence 1565-2019; Morisco Alpujarras Rebellion vs. Spanish Christians 1568-1571; the Indonesian (Maduran Prince) Trunajaya revolt vs. the Dutch VOC (East India Company) 1675-1679; the Chinese War and Third War of Indonesian Succession vs. the Dutch VOC, 1740-1757; Tipu Sultan vs. British colonial armies 1782-1799; Shaykh Mansur's revolt in Chechnya vs. the Russian Empire, 1785-1794; Sumatran Padri jihad vs. Minangkabau royalty and the Dutch VOC, 1803/1821-1837; Prince Dipanegara's War vs. the Dutch VOC, 1820-1825; Abd al-Qadir's Algerian jihad vs. the French, 1832-1844; Dagestani Imam Shamil and the North Caucasus revolt vs. the Russians, 1834-1859/62; Afghan uprisings vs. British colonialism, 1842, 1879-82, 1919-21 and the Mirzali Khan's (the Faqir of Ipi) rebellion, 1936-50+; al-Hajj 'Umar Tall, Tijanniyya Tariqa and his son Amadu Tall's jihads vs. French colonialism in Senegal and Mali, 1852-1864, 1880-1892; Indian Uprising vs. British Raj, 1857-58; Yaq'ub Beg's East Turkestan Muslim State in Xinjiang vs. Qing China 1864-77; Almamy Samori Ture's resistance to French colonialism in Burkina Faso, West Africa 1882-1898; the Aceh War and Free Aceh Movement in Indonesia 1873-1904; 1945-1949; 1977-2004; the Mahdian State of Muhammad Ahmed ibn 'Abd Allah (the Sudanese Mahdi) and the Khalifa, 'Abdallahi ibn Muhammad's wars vs. Egyptian/British forces 1883-1898; the Somalian War of Muhammad 'Abdullah Hassan and the Salihyya Tariqa vs British colonialism 1899-1920; the Rif War in northern Morocco of Abd al-Krim vs. Spain and France 1911-1927; the Libyan/ Sanussiyya anti-colonial war (w/ Umar Mukhtar) vs. Italy 1911-1934; the 'Urabi Revolt in Egypt 1879-1882 and the Egyptian Revolution of 1919; the Basmachi Revolt in Central Asia vs. the USSR, 1917-1926; the Palestinian Resistance to Israel, 1917-1929; 1936-39; 1965-2020; the Indonesian Revolution vs The Netherlands, 1945-1947; the Mappila Uprising vs. British colonialism in Kerala, 1921; the Dar ul-Islam Revolt vs. the Netherlands and the Indonesian State 1942-1947; 1947-196; Warsaw Ghetto Uprising vs. Nazis 1943; the Malayan Revolt vs. British colonialism 1948-1960; the Tunisian Neo-Dastur Campaign vs. French colonialism 1952-54; the Algerian revolution 1954-1962,

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According to scholar Antonio Giustozzi, 20% of Taliban mujahidin were killed every year from 2002 until 2014 (when ISAF forces were withdrawn) as well as nearly all of its original commanders, an incredible attrition rate for any military force (approximately 80-90,000 have been killed, as of 2020), thus demonstrating an incredible level of individual and collective motivation and resilience in its confrontation with a greatly superior enemy, both in numbers, financing, training, and technological sophistication. By 2010, the Taliban were utilizing the asymmetric strategy and tactics that proved so effective in the Iraqi Resistance, which replaced the more conventional warfare of the 2005-2009 era, driving the war into a far less predictable trajectory. In 2020, perhaps 45,000 Taliban will continue fighting the

the Polisario Revolt in the Western Sahara vs. Morocco 1975-1991, The Iranian Revolution and the founding of the Islamic Republic 1978-81; Amal and Hezb'ullah's resistance to Israel, 1981-2007/2020; the Kashmiri Insurgency vs. India, 1987-2020; the Chechen Independence Movement and jihad vs. the USSR, including Umarov's Islamic Emirate, 1991-2013; the Algerian Civil War 1994-2001/3; al-Qa'ida attacks vs. the US, 1996-2001+; Boko Haram/Islamic State in West Africa uprising vs. Nigeria 2002-2020; the Iraqi resistance (including the Islamic State of Iraq) to the US 2003-2012, 2006-2020 Somalia Uprising by Islamic Courts Union and al-Shabab vs. Somalia Govt., U.S., Ethiopia, Kenya and African Union forces; the Libyan Revolution 2011-2012/20, the Houthis vs. Yemen; and al-Qa'ida vs. Houthis, in the Yemen War 2011-2020, the Syrian Revolution 2011-2020; Ansar Dine and the Movement for Tawhid and Jihad in West Africa vs. Mali, Algeria, Niger, and French forces, 2013-2020; the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant vs. Iraq, Syria, Syrian Revolutionary forces Boko Haram/Islamic State in West Africa uprising vs. Nigeria 2002-2020, the U.S. and NATO, 2014-2020.

Non-Muslim insurgencies would include innumerable Indigenous Peoples' wars against and sometimes allied with Spain, Portugal, Britain, France and the United States in the Americas, 1492-1890 (Tupac Amaru II, in Peru, 1780, the Cherokee War 1758-1761, Shawnee/Creek War 1812-1814, the Seminole Wars 1816-1819 and 1835-1842, the Comanche State and Resistance to Texas settlers 1836-1875, Chihuahua and Mescalero Apache Wars 1848-1886, Niimiipuu/Nez Perce war 1877, et al), German Peasants/ Anabaptists War vs. German Lords 1524-25; the Schmalkaldic League Rebellion vs. Holy Roman Empire 1546-47 (Reformation); The Netherlands War of Independence vs. Spanish Habsburgs 1578-1648; the English Civil War/Revolution 1642-1651; the Maratha Revolt vs. and conquest of the Mughal Empire 1680-1707; 1757-1758; Circassian War vs. Russian Empire, 1763-1864/ 1829-1859; Maratha Wars vs. British EIC in India: 1803-1805 and Pindari War 1818-1819; Greek Independence Movement vs. Ottoman Empire 1821-1832; Italian Nationalist Uprising (w/Garibaldi) 1848-1859; Taiping Rebellion vs. Qing Dynasty, China 1850-1864; the Southern Confederacy vs. U.S. (Civil War) 1861-1865; Korean Independence Movement vs. Japan, 1905-1910; 1919 March 1st Movement in Korea; Balkans War vs. Ottoman Empire 1912-1914+; the Italian and Balkans' Partisans Resistance to fascism 1943-1945; the Chinese Communist Revolution 1946-49, the Vietnamese struggle against Japanese, French and US colonialism 1945-1975, the South African struggle against Apartheid (1961-1989), the Mau-Mau Revolt in Kenya 1952-1960, the Cuban Revolution 1953-1959, the Angolan War of Independence vs. Portugal, South Africa and the US, 1961-1975/1990s, Mozambique's War of Independence 1964-75/1990s vs. Portugal and South Africa; Malayan Communist Insurgency 1967-1989; the Khmer Rouge vs. Cambodia and the U.S. 1968-1975/1979; the Zimbabwean Revolution 1970-80, the Irish struggle for Independence against Britain and the struggle in Northern Ireland 1916-1921; 1968-98, Bolivar's campaigns in Venezuela, Colombia, and other regions of South America against the Spanish Empire 1813-1830, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia 1917-1923, the Haitian Revolution 1791-1804, the French Revolution 1789-1799, the South American insurgencies 1968-1976 (Araguaia War in Brazil 1967-1974, The People's Revolutionary Army/ ERP in vs. Argentina 1968-1976, and the Tupamaros vs. Uruguay 1968-1972), the Central American insurgencies (Guatemala 1960-1996, Nicaragua 1970-1979/'89, El Salvador 1979-1992), the Zionist uprising vs. British Mandate in Palestine 1946-48, and the Sendero Luminoso insurgency vs. Peru 1980-1992/2017.

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Afghan Forces (ANDSF), which have been reduced by 66% from their highest levels several years ago (90,000, presently, down from 300,000 men) and have been deeply compromised by high desertion rates, ineffective performance in combat, and attacks on foreign forces from within its own ranks. By 2016, both the U.S. and the Taliban had concluded that a military resolution of the conflict was impossible, as neither side could hope to defeat the other. Negotiations began and may have reached a turning point this year, perhaps signaling a final phase of the war, either by a power sharing agreement, or conversely by an eventual Taliban military victory.⁵

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the Taliban position in its current phase is the quality of its leadership as it faces a military and political confrontation with the Kabul Government, after the withdrawal of foreign forces. Certainly, a consensus now exists (and has since 2015) among its major leaders--Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, Sirajuddin Haqqani, and Mullah Baradar, Mullah Omar's son, Mullah Ya'qub, et al--to attempt to negotiate an end to the war; but the profound lack of unity in Kabul and its ineffectual electoral process makes it highly questionable that a power sharing arrangement can be reached with President Ashraf Ghani, Dr. 'Abdullah 'Abdullah and other relevant political actors. This makes a military confrontation around Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, Kunduz, Mazar-e Sharif, and other cities likely in the coming years. Can the Taliban's current leadership face such a prospect and prevail in such a confrontation, if negotiations fail to achieve a political consensus in 2020 or 2021? In addition, if Donald Trump is defeated in the 2020 U.S. elections, will a Democratic administration be willing to allow the Taliban to take power in Kabul by force, without rescuing its notoriously corrupt and inept partner in this two decade debacle of intervention and half-hearted nation-building.

A Brief History of the Taliban

The Taliban established an Islamic Emirate in 1994, after its founders fought the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in Kandahar and Helmand provinces in the 1980s. That resistance to the USSR, led by factions of mujahidin under the command of Ahmed Shah Massoud and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar devolved into a violent contest for control of Kabul. Nearly half of the city was destroyed by shelling in that internecine struggle. President Najibullah Ahmadzai (1987-92) was captured in a UN

5 Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War, 2001-2018*; Hurst Publishers, London, 2019, p. 2.; Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: Inside the Helmand Insurgency, 2004-2012*, International Affairs, 89:4 (2013), p, 845-871; p. 869; <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/89/4/845/2417159>; accessed 03/10/2020; 12:15 pm. So-called "green on blue" or "insider attacks" by Taliban infiltrators or disaffected soldiers in the ANDSF were a serious problem in the 2012-13 period and in 2019, General Austin S. Miller was nearly killed by an Afghan soldier in the murder of the well-known Afghan ANDSF General Abdul Raziq in Kandahar. Attacks continued at a reduced in 2020; Mujib Mashal, *Two American Soldiers Killed in Shootout with Afghan Forces*, NYTimes, 02/08/2020 (see Mashal, endnote 3), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/08/world/asia/afghan-us-soldiers-shooting-deaths.html>; Howard Kopliwicz, *What Is a 'Green-on-Blue Attack'? Killing of U.S. Major General Harold Greene is Just Third Insider Attack in 2014*, International Business Times/08/05/2014;

<https://www.ibtimes.com/what-green-blue-attack-killing-us-major-general-harold-greene-just-third-insider-attack-1649920>; accessed 03/29/ 2020; 3 pm, PDT.

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compound in Kabul by the Taliban in 1994 and hanged in public view. Ahmed Shah Massoud was assassinated by al-Qa'ida operatives acting as a video crew on September 9, 2001, two days before the 9/11 attacks and Hekmatyar fled to Peshawar and worked with the Taliban until his surrender to Afghan government in 2016. The Taliban fought and defeated their mujahidin rivals, taking Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, and other major cities by 1996 and were fighting to secure the northern provinces against Uzbek, Tajik (including those led by Massoud), Hazara and other forces opposed to their regime, when their al-Qa'ida allies launched the attacks against the US on September 11, 2001.

Sixteen years of violent social transformation from the 1978 coup by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDMA; Khalq faction) and the Soviet invasion the following year, to the jihad and its aftermath had left Afghanistan in ruins. Its major cities were destroyed by years of shelling; trade had been reduced to criminalized smuggling operations, and the agricultural life in the countryside had been profoundly disrupted by the Soviet air war, the proliferation of mines, and the destruction of the indigenous *karez* irrigation system (underground channels). By 1986, one million Afghans had been killed (including tens of thousands of tribal elders, maleks, and 'ulema) and over three million had fled into Pakistani and Iranian refugee camps and other settlements, where only the most meager employment could be found. The Afghan state, economy, and social order of the twentieth century had been utterly eviscerated and only military gangs (including many former mujahidin) ruled the roadways, towns, and villages. The Taliban's policies of forcibly suppressing warlords (both mujahidin and otherwise) to end a nationwide breakdown in tribal, religious, and civil authority from urban centers to remote villages was very popular in the early months of its rule in 1994-1995.⁶

The Pashtun population centers in Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan and Zabul provinces, from which the Taliban fighters had hailed, enthusiastically welcomed them to stop the frightening erosion of cultural norms and practices that led to widespread kidnapping, robbery, rape, murder, and social chaos that followed the withdrawal of Soviet occupation forces.⁷ The piety of the Taliban leaders was impressive to local people, while their leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar (d. 2103), was a reclusive young man now battle-hardened from the 1980s jihad, whose religious training had not yet qualified him as a *mullah* (permitted only to deliver a Friday sermon in village mosques) from his limited *hujra* (small madrasas attached to village mosques) education. The Taliban fealty to local and Deoband conceptions of the Shari'a and their rigorous enforcement of the moral and behavioral norms and personal attire of village Pashtuns of southern Afghanistan were at first very popular in the south, if not elsewhere. Sociologist and journalist Anand Gopal's groundbreaking research has shown that Taliban leaders were truly **sons of the soil**, with at least 24 of their future leaders having

⁶ Tamim Ansary, *Games Without Rules; The Often Interrupted History of Afghanistan*, Public Affairs, Perseus, 2012, Philadelphia, p. 179-224.

⁷ Anand Gopal and Alex Strick van Linschoten, *The Ideology of the Afghan Taliban*, Afghanistan Analysts Network, June, 2017, <https://ecoi.net/en/file/local/1403761/1226-1499755260-20175-agopal-asvlinschoten-tb-ideology.pdf>, p. 1, 17; 27; accessed 03/28/2020; 3 pm, PDT.

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fought in six southern fronts in the jihad of the late 1980s, unlike the caricatures of them as “alien fundamentalists” trained by “fanatic Wahhabi mullahs in Pakistani madrasas” in the work of Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid in 2000/2010.⁸

With its strong base among Ghilzai Pashtuns and the Noorzai, Ishaqzai, and Alizai clans and many other local tribes, among the Durrani Pashtuns, the Taliban attracted thousands of young students from a few Afghan and many more Pakistani Deobandi madrasas in the refugee camps. Taliban forces were well-known for their close-knit personal ties, prayers and piety, respectful relations with each other and tribal and village elders, an emphasis on religious education while on combat missions, and expectant and even enthusiastic willingness to die as martyrs.⁹ The Taliban established several highly respected Islamic courts across Kandahar to resolve disputes while they fought in the 1980s, including the one under Mawlawi Pasanai Saheb that was renowned for its unbiased verdicts, even sentencing abusive commanders to criminal sanctions and even execution. The Taliban gathered thousands of recruits as they fought their way to the conquest of Herat, Kabul, Ghazni, Jalalabad, and the northern cities (Kunduz and Mazar-e Sharif) and provinces, and as they moved away from the southern provinces their rule became more repressive, as Afghan society appeared to them to require far more corporal discipline to become truly Islamic.¹⁰

The Taliban’s controversial policies of forcibly re-establishing a rural, village-centric Pashtun Islamic regime and society, of a highly localized Kandahari Deobandi (Hanafi) orientation, sometimes colored by Naqshbandiyya Sufi elements, featured the enforcement of daily prayers and a rigid conformity to local religious and bodily practice and comportment. These strictures were assumed to be necessary in order to inculcate the Islamic consciousness of virtuous, pious and learned Muslims, which by its enactment would end the chaos, criminality and lack of authority plaguing most communities.¹¹ These measures met

8 Ahmed Rashid, *The Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 2000, 2010.

9 *ibid.* Gopal, 2017, p. 8; Abdul Salam Zaef, *My Life with the Taliban*, transl.: Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, Hurst Publisher, London, 2010, p. 21-30. These madrasas were organized by Pakistani Deobandi ‘ulema, a scholarly sect of Sunni Islam in India and Pakistan that emphasizes the importance of orthodox Muslim practice, personal piety and comportment, based on the Hadiths and the fiqh of the Hanafi madhhab. The Deoband tradition was founded in the aftermath of the 1857-’58 Indian Rebellion against the British Raj, in 1867, and many of its original faculty participated in it. Afterwards, the Deoband avoided politicization in order to preserve Islam after Muslims were blamed for fomenting the uprising. The Pakistani Deobandi ‘ulema have supported the anti-western and anti-imperialist militancy of Muslim radicalism since the Sunni Sawha (Awakening) of the 1970s, the Afghan jihad of the 1980s and during the War on Terror. (see Barbara Metcalf, ‘Traditionalist’ Islamic Activism: Deobandis, Tablighis and Talibs: <http://essays.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/metcalf.htm>, accessed 03/31/2020; 6 pm, PDT.

10 *ibid.*, p. 4, p.17-19. Afghan cities and populations: #1 Kabul: 3 million, #2 Kandahar: 391,000; <https://www.geonames.org/AF/largest-cities-in-afghanistan.html>, accessed 03/30/2020; 2:30 pm, PDT.

11 Gopal and van Linschoten describe the Naqshbandiyya Sufi influences on Mullah Muhammad Omar, including his teacher, Haji Baba, his advisor, Mawlawi ‘Abdul Ali Deobandi, who approved of the intercession of deceased Sufi pirs, O’ Bab Sahib, Paw Mikh, and Padshahi Agha to solve personal problems, and Mullah

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considerable resistance and hostility outside the southern provinces and Taliban officials charged with the Propagation of Virtue and Prohibition of Vice (*bisba: amr bil mar'uf wa nahy an al munkar*), led by Minister of Justice Mullah Nooruddin Turabi (surrendered 2001; later retired in Pakistan) initiated widespread whipping of men and women in public by religious police, *hudud* punishments including stoning, the cutting off of hands, public executions, the strict segregation of women (*purdah*), banning of women's employment outside the home, the closing of girls' schools, mandatory beards for men, and the banning of modern technologies. It was the implementation of these measures in Kabul and northern provinces, where southern Afghan culture was not normative, that led to widespread public dissent and resistance to the Taliban from 1996-2001.

These repressive measures (most of which are now routinely renounced by the same Taliban officials who authorized them) and their suppression (and burning of books) of moderately reformist and Salafi literature (e.g. the writings of the Muslim Brothers, Sayyed Qutb, Abul A'la Maududi, Yusuf Qaradawi, etc.), as well as the banning of music, television, cassette tapes, and newspapers led to serious criticism of the Emirate and the Taliban by other Afghans, Bareilvi, Ahl-I Hadith, and other South Asian Muslims, Arab and South Asian 'ulema (even the Deobandi organization, Jam'iat Ulema-I Islam), various governments in the Muslim world, western governments, human rights advocates, liberals, leftists, and feminist organizations. Opposition to the Taliban was so widespread inside Afghanistan that by the time of the US invasion in 2001, very few Afghans fought in their defense and the regime quickly collapsed. Mullah Muhammad Omar barely escaped death when both his compound and a convoy of his family's vehicles were destroyed by air strikes or drones, killing his young son. The overwhelming victory by the U.S. and the United Front/Northern Alliance in securing control over former Taliban strongholds in Kandahar, Helmand and eastern provinces such as Ghazni and Paktika, forced the leaders of the Taliban to withdraw from politics altogether in 2002. The stage was set for a complete reconstruction of Afghan society under the control of the U.S., its international partners, with a new liberal, modernist elite assuming the reins of power under Hamid Karzai, a son of a Pashtun chief from Kandahar and liberal Afghans trained and educated in the West.

The Taliban Insurgency 2002-2009:

According to the groundbreaking research of social and political scientists Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi, linguist and author Alex Strick van Linschoten, and sociologist and

Omar's approval of the use of amulets, and his visitation to Sufi shrines after the 2001 attacks. Gopal mentions that Barbara Metcalf (*Islamic Revivalism in India: Deoband, 1860-1900*; Princeton, 1983) mentions in her work on the Deoband madrasa, Dar ul-Ulum, that Sufi pirs were involved in the inception of the madrasa and its early curriculum; 2017, p. 1-12, 16-17. Gopal and van Linschoten also discuss the epistemology underlying the Taliban emphasis on bodily comportment as the "embodied practices" upon which Talal Asad has theorized, as well as the Deobandi emphasis on Hadith studies, virtues, piety, internal states; p. 1-18.

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journalist Anand Gopal and the narratives and interviews of nearly two hundred Taliban leaders, officials and former and contemporary mujahidin on the ground, we have persuasive accounts of how the Taliban leadership forged a second jihad, and an almost unthinkable second rise to power over the last two decades.¹² In the process, the organization and religio-political orientation of the Taliban appeared to have shifted significantly over these past two decades. After the U.S. invasion, most Taliban leaders found refuge in Pakistan (or in the Gulf), despite President Pervez Musharraf's cooperation with the U.S. in the War on Terror, and contented themselves with resuming their religious education, having harbored no intention to again seek political power. Many openly sought and were refused official surrender, amnesty and reconciliation with the Karzai regime in order to return to Afghanistan, including Mullah Omar, Mullah Baradar, and the Ministers of Defense and the Interior. As van Linschoten, Gopal, Farrell, and Giustozzi observed in their interviews, it was the violent repression and relentless harassment of Taliban commanders, fighters, supporters, and their families by the militias loyal to the Karzai Regime and the U.S. that drove these men to once again organize a rebellion, this time to free the nation's people from a U.S. occupation and Western cultural invasion, and in the process the Taliban embraced the worldview of the mainstream modern Islamist theologians, strategists and activists (including those from Iraq, Egypt, and Palestine) of which they knew little in 2001.¹³

Once Taliban officials, commanders, mujahidin and sympathetic tribal elders known to have supported the Taliban could no longer live in Kandahar or Helmand provinces without facing continuous humiliation, violence, and impoverishment for over a year, the impetus for a renewed insurrection against the U.S. occupation and the Karzai Regime gained momentum. Representatives of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) approached Mullah Muhammad Omar and his colleagues and encouraged them to revitalize their social

12 Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001-2018*; Theo Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001-2014*; Vintage Press, London, 2019; Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: Inside the Helmand Insurgency 2004-2014*; *International Affairs* 89:4, 2013; p. 845-871; Alex Strick van Linschoten, *An Enemy We Created; the Myth of the Taliban Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan*, Oxford, 2012; Anand Gopal, *The Taliban in Kandahar*, in Peter Bergen and Katehrine Tiedeman (eds.) *Talibanistan; Negotiating the Borders of Politics, Terror and Religion*, Oxford, 2013.

13 Gopal, 2013, p. 11-17; Gopal and van Linschoten, 2017; Anand Gopal, *Missed Opportunities in Kandahar*, *Foreign Policy*, November 10, 2010; Tayeb Agha, Sayyed Muhammad Haqqani (d. 2016), Mullah Obaidullah Akhund (d. 2010), Mullah Abdul Razzaq Akhund, all prominent figures in the subsequent 21st century insurgency were among those who sought surrender; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/11/10/missed-opportunities-in-kandahar/>; accessed 03/29/2020; 4:20pm, PDT. Some prominent Taliban officials were able to surrender, such as Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil, Mullah Nooruddin Turabi, Minister of Justice, and Abdul Haq, Governor of Herat; Mark Landler, *A Nation Challenged: Amnesty; 7 Taliban Officials Surrender to a Governor and Go Free*, *NYTimes*, January 10, 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/10/world/nation-challenged-amnesty-7-taliban-officials-surrender-governor-go-free.html>; accessed 03/29/2020; 4:15 pm, PDT. Three of the Taliban Guantanamo prisoners released in the Sgt. Bowie Bergdahl case and involve in the talks with the US in Doha had surrendered to the Government or to General Dostom: Mullah Khairullah Khairkhwa, a provincial governor and acting Minister of the Interior, Abdul Haq Wasiq, a Deputy Minister of Intelligence, and Commander Mullah Fazel Mazloom, renowned for his reported indiscriminate violence (see endnote 3).

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networks in preparation for a return to jihad, while other sectors of the Pakistani military were arresting officials and commanders such as Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef (Taliban Ambassador to Pakistan and author of *My Life in the Taliban*) and turning them over to the U.S. for imprisonment at Guantanamo. The Haqqani Network of Miran Shah in South Waziristan, a key ally and facilitator of al Qaeda's retreat into Pakistan from Tora Bora, the remnants of Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami party, and its Shasatoo Shura (a mujahidin military brigade organized in a Peshawar refugee camp) based in Peshawar (since the Taliban victory of 1994) and the Taliban leadership, based in Quetta were to become the three nodes of a polycentric form of Afghan command and control that would oscillate in its leadership, military operations, financing (via Pakistan ISI and Gulf Arab states and private donors), community relations and services, and logistical organization.¹⁴

In the early incursions, in 2002-2003, individuals and small groups of Taliban would appear in villages to make contact with family members and supporters at night. Later as support grew, small, supportive tribal *jirgas* were organized to prepare local communities, and activists organized their own communities and recruited from their families, subtribes and friends. Those tribal and kinship networks in Helmand and Kandahar that were excluded from government posts and resources (e.g. Ishaqzais [Durrani] Pashtuns) and facing harassment were amenable to the return of Taliban armed groups. The Taliban had never been a clandestine organization and it would take many more years before they mastered the tactics of guerilla warfare. Those that joined reported that they were motivated by the Afghan militias' and US and British violence and sought to end foreign occupation. Recruits also intended to exact revenge for the deaths of family members and their own beatings and humiliating episodes. By 2004, Afghans working in official capacities for the Karzai Government and local loyal militias were being killed and by June of 2006 five entire districts of Helmand Province were under Taliban control, with 500- strong units sometimes operating together in coordinated operations.¹⁵

In the midst of this early organizing in 2002-2003, the Taliban made a strategic shift toward large-scale opium cultivation. The Taliban had banned opium cultivation and use in the Islamic Emirate from 1994-2001, but under the pressure of the early U.S. and British opium eradication policies (those were soon shelved due to the Afghan Government and its militia commanders' own ties to opium smuggling) and the economic crises of that era, they decided to forge an alliance with major opium producers, small share-croppers dependent on their 20-30% share of the crop, and the vast smuggling operations that carried the drugs out of the country to Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asia. The Taliban became heavily dependent on their "taxed" income from this production and trade (as did their opponents) and were thus able to finance their jihad through a system that eventually produced 80% of the heroin available on global markets. This shift has had a major impact on Taliban leaders, who have

14 Farrell and Giustozzi, 2014, p. 845-850; Giustozzi, 2019, p. 1-20.

15 Giustozzi, 2019; p. 15; On one occasion in June of 2006, at the battle of Palmush in Kandahar, 1200 Taliban fought together in a coordinated offensive, led by renowned commander Mullah Dadullah Lang, but were soundly defeated, leading to a general reassessment of conventional battle tactics.

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altered the nature of their Deobandi ethical commitment to adapt to the pragmatic necessities of guerilla war against the world's military superpowers. As late as 2012, 40% of the Rahbari Shura was funded by opium production and distribution. Despite vastly increased funding from Pakistan, Gulf Arabs, and Iran that presently constitutes 80% of their greatly expanded financial flows, the cooperation with opium producers and smugglers continues in 2020. It became a major component of their local popular appeal to a nation that produces little else of interest to the outside world (minerals have yet to be mined effectively due to political instability). The Taliban has also forged alliances with Pakistani smuggling operations of a wide array of consumer goods into Afghanistan.¹⁶

The Taliban quickly organized the Rahbari (or Quetta) Shura in March of 2003, a council of former officials, commanders, and their deputies, who organized the insurgency from Quetta, Pakistan, 150 miles southeast of Kandahar. It included major leaders and commanders Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Mullah Dadullah Lang, Mullah Faruq, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur, and Mullah Gul Agha Ishaqzai, among whom only Baradar and Ishaqzai have survived. Mullah Muhammad Omar remained Supreme Leader. This group established commissions (*komisiuns*), for the supervision of military, logistics, finance, and eventually for health, education, and every other aspect of their activities; offices (*daftars*), the *mabaz* (small battle groups in limited zones) and *loy mabazes* (large fronts of thousands of mujahidin). Special teams (*dilghays*) were organized years later for specialized operations, that later acted as special forces for targeted assassinations, the planting of mines and IEDS, and martyrdom operations (by other *shuras*).

The Rahbari Shura was later augmented and challenged by experienced and competitive groups such as the Haqqani Shabaka (Network), based in Miran Shah, South Waziristan, which deployed its forces into the eastern provinces of Paktika, Khost, Paktya, and Ghazni, and had the experience necessary to utilize IEDS and explosive belts in martyrdom operations, and the Peshawar Shura, with closer access to the key cities of Jalalabad and Kabul, and the northwest provinces of Nangarhar, Kunar, Kapisa, Parwan, Laghman, Panjshir, Nurestan, and Baghlan. The Rahbari Shura organized the 2005-2009 offensives in the south and participated in those in the east. The Peshawar and Miran Shah Shuras profoundly influenced the next phase of conflict, in a more centralized professional guerilla war (often led by Military Commission Leader Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir) from 2009-2014. The Raahbari Shura resumed its primary leadership role from 2015-2020.¹⁷

Mullah Dadullah Lang (d. 2007), one of the very few Taliban commanders who refused to surrender to the Karzai Government, became the dominant and charismatic commander on the ground in Helmand and Kandahar in the early years, and organized the most effective *loy mabaz* (expansive fronts with thousands of combatants that extend across several districts or

16 Ibid., p. 207-209; According to Giustozzi, the Quetta Shura had a "drug office" and Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur was accused of profiting from drug trade and his *mabaz* was considered to be the most dependent (50%) on opium financing.

17. Farrell and Giustozzi, 2014, fn. 58, p. 853; 848-851.

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provinces, a under single commander). He was notorious both within the Taliban and beyond it for his courage, strategic and tactical military genius, brutality, unbridled violence, and was cautioned about his excesses by the Quetta Shura. The other major *loy mabazes* in the “golden age” of the original Taliban insurgency in the south were organized by other charismatic commanders, such as Mullah Baradar, Mullah Faruq, and Mullah Ibrahim, Dr. Wasi, and Mullah Obaidullah Akhund (d. 2010). All were killed except Baradar, who was plagued by rumors that he had betrayed Dadullah to US forces, leading to Dadullah’s death. The remarkable cohesion of Taliban commanders and their men in the first five years of the second insurgency (2002-2007) allowed them to weather the immense firepower brought to bear upon them, especially from 2009-2013. The mujahidin and commanders routinely referred to each other affectionately as *andival* (friend). A code of conduct (*layeha*) for Taliban mujahidin was written in 2006 by Baradar, stipulating the adherence to the Shari’a, the avoidance of unnecessary violence and abuse to civilians and summary executions, and the necessity of their own Islamic courts to hold them accountable. These were revised and reissued in 2009 and 2010 by the Peshawar Shura, under the direction of Mullah Zakir, another charismatic and highly effective commander and head of the Military Commission of the Rahbari and Peshawar Shuras.¹⁸

Forged in the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s, The Haqqani Shabaka (Network) was led by Jalaluddin Haqqani for decades, it maintained close ties to the Pakistani ISI during its mobilizations in and around Kashmir, as well as al-Qa’ida, in their Waziristan training camps in the 1980-90s. The elder Haqqani handed over leadership of the network to his son Sirajuddin Haqqani, who led the Miran Shah Shura and worked closely, if intermittently, with the Rahbari Shura of Quetta, depending on the vagaries of ISI funding, power struggles, and differences in organization and structure, until the present day. As Deputy Leader, he remains at the very apex of Taliban military and political leadership in 2020.¹⁹ The Haqqanis were uniquely experienced and skillful in conducting special military operations, especially in Kabul, where they have launched many effective and deadly martyrdom operations and targeted assassinations of Afghan Government officials. They began organizing resistance to the U.S. invasion and occupation immediately after the defeat and retreat of Taliban leaders in late 2001, along with hundreds of Arab and Pakistani mujahidin who remained in Waziristan. Nek Muhammad, a future leader of the Tehrik-e Taliban of Pakistan (TTP) launched some of the first attacks across the border and attacked a U.S. base. The Haqqani mujahidin would identify sometimes as Taliban to wary villagers and sometimes as the

18 Giustozzi, 2019, p. 37-38, 63, 71; Antonio Giustozzi, *The Military Cohesion of the Taliban*; Center for Research and Policy Analysis, July 17, 2017, <https://www.crpaweb.org/single-post/2017/07/10/The-Military-Cohesion-of-the-Taliban>, accessed 03/30/2020; 3:15 pm PDT.

19 Sirajuddin Haqqani wrote this opinion piece in the *New York Times* during the last phase of the negotiations with the U.S.: *What We, the Taliban Want*, February 20, 2020;

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/opinion/taliban-afghanistan-war-haqqani.html>;

accessed 03/31/2020; 1 pm, PDT.

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Haqqani Shabaka and began their initial activities in Paktya and Khost Provinces, until they formed the Miran Shah Shura of the Taliban in February of 2003, just one month before the Rahbari Shura in Quetta. They began assassinations of police, government officials, suspected spies, and tribal elders who opposed them from their motorbikes in 2005. Sirajuddin Haqqani and another member of the Miran Shah Shura also joined the Rahbari Shura from 2003-2007 and their leadership role in the Taliban as a whole has increased steadily since 2003. They are thought to have a reserve force of up to 50,000 men (based in Pakistan, in Waziristan and the Punjab), only a fraction of which were active at any given time. They have also been highly regarded as military operatives by the Pakistani ISI.²⁰

The Peshawar Shura emerged in the aftermath of the activity of several smaller *shuras* in the eastern provinces, where the Hezb-i Islami organization of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar had once been strong. The Taliban commanders, influenced by its more centralized structure and local roots, could operate more effectively in the eastern provinces and further north.²¹ By 2004, they were active in Paktika, Paktya, and Ghazni Provinces, and later in Baghlan and Faryab in the north and northwest. By 2005, with the encouragement of the Pakistani ISI, Qari Khalid established the Peshawar Shura by merging his Ijraya Shura with the Shamsatoo *mahaz* of Hekmatyar, organized in the Shamsatoo refugee camp in Peshawar and led by commander Qari Habibullah in 1998, but never deployed during the Taliban Emirate. The vast majority of mujahidin in Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami Party constituted 70% of the Peshawar Shura's fighting force as late as 2015. Hekmatyar himself, a legendary if notoriously violent Islamist from Kabul University in the 1970s, and perpetrator (along with Massoud) of the destruction of Kabul (1992-94), was more of an administrator than a military commander.²²

The centralization of Peshawar Shura's command and control attracted the ISI as a remedy for the horizontal, polycentric and overlapping authority structures favored in the Quetta/Rahbari system. They began to receive far more funding in 2007, overtaking Quetta by 2013, and rapidly ascended to a primary position in the insurgency from 2009-2013.

²⁰ Giustozzi, 2019, p. 28-39.

²¹ Ibid., p. 87-97. The Haqqani Shabaka and Shura was virtually a family military enterprise and by far the most patrimonial of all Taliban formations, although the various Rahbari *mahazes* were also quite patrimonial, in practice, until at least 2015. According to Giustozzi, the "professionalization" of Taliban forces was attempted between 2009-2015, and afterward to curb corruption by commanders and provincial and district governors. It included financing directly by shuras, rather than the local collection of "taxes" from client tribes, farmers, traders, and smugglers, and it included the rotation of commanders from one region to another to discourage patronage networks on the ground.

²² Ibid., p. 22-28; Ansary, p. 207-209; These four smaller combat groups were the Spin Ghar Mahaz of 2002-2003 in Nangarhar, led by Qari Hamla, Mullah Agha Ahmadi, and its leader, Mawlawi Bilal Sediq Shari; the Ijraya Shura in 2002, led by Qari Khalid and Ishaq Faryabi. They organized over 2000 fighters in Nangarhar, Kunar, Kapisa, and Laghman provinces early on and eventually moved into the northern provinces of Faryab and Baghlan. The third was the Tora Bora *Mahaz*, operating across the Pakistani border and encouraged Pakistanis to join the battle. A fourth group, the Khalid bin Walid Mahaz was the largest of the northeastern groups and merged into the Peshawar Shura in 2007 after its leader, Mawlawi Rahmatullah Baghlani was killed in action.

Based on the Peshawar organizational model, a centralized system of command, the Nizam-e Massuleen, deployed its military officials in all of Afghanistan's provinces competing with and eventually supplanting the political (rather than military) provincial and district governors and officials that had formed the Quetta leadership structure. This system was intended to initiate a professionalization of Taliban military forces and commanders to limit corruption and local patronage networks (with some significant success) and develop a far more clandestine style of confronting international forces. This was the classic guerilla warfare model that proved far more effective than large scale conventional warfare, as the U.S. dramatically escalated its troop levels to 100,000, major operations, night searches, and special forces raids in the early months of the Obama Administration.²³

2009-2014: The Shift to Asymmetric Warfare Under Rival Shuras

Between 2009-2013, the Taliban were transformed into a far more professional guerilla army with a new centralized decision-making structure, extensive and repeated training, and began utilizing mines, IED roadside bombs, and martyrdom attacks with explosive belts, the tactics of the Iraqi resistance from 2005 onwards. These latter techniques were thus used by the Taliban (actually led by the Miran Shah Haqqanis) and Peshawar Shura for the first time. These attacks killed far more U.S., European, and Afghan soldiers and undoubtedly led to the U.S. decision to de-escalate the war by 2014 (the same year that European forces, including the British in the ISAF were withdrawn). Unfortunately, Afghan civilians were also killed in far larger numbers than with previous tactics and many thousands of villagers and elders became profoundly disillusioned with the Taliban in those years (2009-2011) as a result. Many elders and villagers who had supported the Taliban since 2003 simply wanted the war to end. The Peshawar Shura nevertheless penetrated Kabul and its surrounding territory, posing a serious threat to life in the capital, often deploying up to 1200 Pakistani militants from a wide variety of independent militias. The terrible losses among Taliban forces during the years of U.S. and ISAF/escalation, from 2009-2013, as well as the behavior of Rahbari Military Commission Head, Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir in his operations in regions, provinces, and districts long led by Peshawar Shura commanders led to bitter rivalries, violent confrontations and deaths, and his eventual demise and retirement in 2014.²⁴

The competition, violence and chaos that characterized relations between *shuras* and commanders, particularly as a result of the expansion of Mullah Zakir's influence from 2012-2014, in which Taliban commanders often shifted allegiance to gain access to Zakir's

23 *ibid.*, p. 87-91; 93-107; The leaders of the Peshawar Shura were Shaykh Amanullah Safi (2005-2008, 2015-2016), Abdul Saleh (madrassa teacher, originally of the small Toor-e Pagri mahaz) Qari Kahlid, Qari Baryal, Qari Habibullah (actually 'Abdul Rahman), leader of the Shamsatoo Shura and student in Saleh's madrasa, and his brother, Qari Atiqullah. The Safi tribe was especially important to the Peshawar Shura. The leaders were very young, in their late 20s, and maintained very close personal ties. They were favored and rewarded by the Pakistani ISI from 2007-2013 both for their centralized style and their effective military operations, until 2014, when the ISI shifted its funding and attention back to the Rahbari Shura, who had long objected to the Hezb-e Islami origins and style of the group.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 87-91.

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distribution of funds, weapons, supplies and taxes (from local communities, opium farmers, and smugglers) resulted in the death of four commanders in Zabul Province in 2013 (two Quetta and two Peshawar commanders). These conflicts and crises finally began to force the three major *shuras* into an accommodation and restructuring the following year. The Rahbari Shura assumed more control in 2014, receiving far more funding from Pakistan and Gulf Arabs, under the leadership of Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur. Mansur had long been a charismatic and effective Rahbari Shura commander, despite a reputation for amassing private wealth, and was known to be close to Mullah Omar and his allies and family (including Tayyeb Agha and Mullah Baradar). Mansur's term was deeply tarnished by the decision to conceal the death of Mullah Omar for two years (2013-2015) and asked the Afghan Government to announce his death before announcing himself. Mansur's ascension to power provoked the rebellion of Mullah Omar's son, Mullah Ya'qub and Omar's brother, Mullah Abdul Manan. Nevertheless, Mullah Mansur was able to weather that storm due to Yaq'ub's youth and inexperience, and he led the transition from Mullah Zakir's aggressive warfare to a policy of negotiated settlement of the war, complex negotiations with Iran, as well as significant changes on the battlefield. With the encouragement of Pakistani ISI and Mullah Baradar, he engineered the demise of the powerful and controversial *loy mahaḥ* leader, former Guantanamo prisoner (2002-2007) and leader of the Quetta Shura Military Commission (2010-2014), Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir. Mullah Zakir had joined the Peshawar Shura as Quetta's (Rahbari's) representative there many years earlier. Under Zakir's pressure in the northwest, a breakaway office and eventually an independent Shura was organized under Iranian auspices in Mashhad, Iran in 2013 to control Taliban fronts in the west, under the leadership of Mullah Rasool, in Herat and Farah provinces and the northwest in Faryab and Bagdhis provinces.²⁵

In 2014, the Taliban suffered 173 mujahidin killed in a single encounter in Zhiray district, in Kandahar, a defeat that led to an intense debate about future battle strategy and led to the final demise of Mullah Zakir. It was a reprise of the devastating Oct.-Nov. 2006 defeat at the Battle of Pashmul, in which 1200 Taliban had fought together for the first time (under Mullah Dadullah Lang) that had initiated the shift to guerrilla warfare and the preeminence of the Peshawar Shura. Baradar was released from Pakistani detention to deal with the leadership crisis. He criticized Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur, Mullah Majid, and Mullah Naim for allowing Zakir to concentrate power. Mansur threatened other commanders that challenged his political governors, while Mullah Baradar threatened any of the commanders from his *loy mahaḥ* network if they continued to affiliate with Zakir and both strongly advocated for negotiations with Kabul and eventually with the U.S. Qari Baryal, an important fixture in the Peshawar Shura and their expansion into northern provinces, also aligned with Mansur to restrain Mullah Zakir from mid-2013 into 2014. The Mashhad Shura declared its autonomy that same year and by the summer of 2015, Mansur was forced to deal with the blowback from Mullah Omar's death and the credibility crisis that ensued. Nevertheless, the Peshawar Shura became subordinate to the Quetta leadership again in 2016, ending its independent functioning and funding, after seven years, and contributing further to a unified command structure. Peshawar controlled 60% of the Taliban fighting

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 16, 93-107.

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forces in 2013 but by mid-2014, that number had fallen to 35%. By 2016, it was reduced further. The Peshawar Shura's move to the north (Kunduz, Baghlan, and Badakhshan provinces) in 2012-2013 (through the efforts of Qari Baryal), allowed the Quetta Shura to assume control over the eastern provinces, a major advance in its resumption of control over the insurgency.²⁶

Despite the setbacks of 2014-2015, the Taliban did achieve a dramatic step forward in 2015 when they took the city of Kunduz in the north of their country, near the Tajikistan border. This successful offensive in a major urban area, with Tajik fighters in their ranks, far from their base in the south, presented an ominous portent of things to come. Perhaps it is no accident that the U.S. in 2016 decided that it would confine its Mission Resolute Support to training the Afghan forces, rather than to engage in further combat. This was certainly an indication that the Taliban presented too great a threat to risk more American lives. By far, the most lethal weapon in the Taliban arsenal against foreign forces had been IED attacks, nearly four times the rate of direct fire.²⁸ The Peshawar Shura also became subordinate to the Quetta leadership in 2016, ending its independent functioning and funding, after seven years, and contributing further to a unified command structure. This consolidation of power in the Quetta Shura in 2014-2015, under the leadership of Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur, Mullah Baradar, and Mawlawi Haibatullah, after internalizing the need for centralization and professionalization from Peshawar, and the asymmetric tactics of the Haqqanis, led the Taliban to their strategy of a negotiated settlement in 2016. Whether this will lead to a power sharing situation, after the withdrawal of U.S. and European forces, or simply a prelude to a military showdown in Kabul and other cities, remains to be seen.

2015: Iran and the Mashhad Shura/High Council

Perhaps the most surprising element of Taliban organization was its relationship with Iran, which had supported Shi'i opponents of the Taliban from 1995-2001, especially the Hazara and Tajik communities and militias. The Rahbari Shura initiated talks with Iran by sending emissaries to Mashhad to meet with the IRGC Quds Force from 2005-2008, and southern Pashtuns retained strong ties to Uzbeks and Turkmen in the north. After the Tajik Jundullah *mahaz* developed in the northwest in 2012 under the leadership of Mawlawi Mohsin Hashami, as part of the Peshawar Shura, Iranians began funding him. By 2015, the Jundullah Mahaz had better funding and weapons than any other organization in Afghanistan. Iran had clearly understood the need to influence events there while the U.S. escalated its presence and its negotiations on the JCPA/BARJAM nuclear weapons agreement. That focus intensified with the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and his stated opposition to Iran and the JCPA. By 2013, Jundullah had 6000 men and clashed several times with Mullah Zakir's western *mahaz*, because as some believed "Tajiks are giving orders to Pashtuns". This conflict only worsened as the western mahazes began to coalesce as an independent and highly potent fighting force under Iranian tutelage.²⁷

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 204-205, 218-220.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 67-68; 200, Farrell and Giustozzi, p. 857.

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In July of 2015, the Mashhad Shura, led by Mullah Muhammad Rasoul, based in an office in that northeastern Iranian city, provided by the IRGC/Quds Force declared its autonomy from the leadership of the Quetta Rahbari Shura, purportedly in protest of the ascension of Mullah Mansur to its leadership. Calling itself, the High Council of Afghanistan Islamic Emirate, the Shura assumed moral leadership of the Taliban, and directed its operations in the western and northwestern provinces of Nimruz, Farah, Herat, Faryab, Baghdis, and Ghor, particularly in the population centers in Herat. Mullah Muhammad Rasoul had been the Taliban Governor in Nimruz, a minor province during the years of the Emirate and was known to be particularly close to Mullah Omar. Mansur's controversial handling of Mullah Omar's death was a particular point of contention, but Iranian influence was an equally important factor in the decision to announce its autonomy. Mansur Dadullah (d. 2015), a major *loy mabaz* commander and nephew of the infamous Mullah Dadullah Lang (d.2007), had been previously loyal to Mullah Zakir, also affiliated with the High Council. He was killed in action against Rahbari Shura fighters in November of 2015 and 166 Taliban and 67 High Council mujahidin were killed in clashes that persisted until May of 2016. Mullah Omar's son (Mullah Yaq'ub) and brother had considered joining opponents of Mullah Mansur; but they were quickly persuaded to refrain from such splintering. Mawlawi Haibatullah had long been close to Iran and recognized the Mashhad Shura as a legitimate part of Taliban decision-making, which brought Iranian influence and funding of the Taliban to its highest level ever, but of course he would not sanction its independence of the Taliban. Russians were also brought into strategy discussions, but the Taliban used these contacts to pressure Pakistan and the Saudis into closer cooperation as the Iran-Saudi rivalry escalated.²⁸

Fighting between the Taliban and the High Council continued in December of 2017 in the Zer Koh Valley in Shindand District in southern Herat Province. The High Council has also been accused by some Taliban sources of working on behalf of the Afghan Government, after its claim of responsibility for a series of suicide bombings in a mosque in Kuchlak, Balochistan, and other nearby areas near Quetta, that targeted, but failed to kill, Taliban Supreme Leader Mawlawi Haibatullah in August of 2019. Mawlawi Haibatullah's brother, the local Kuchlak imam and several other Taliban officials were killed and injured in the attacks. It is very likely that these bombings were intended to disrupt the momentum of negotiations with the U.S. and/or the Afghan Government and to cast doubt on the credibility and stability of the Rahbari Shura's leadership, but the ultimate intentions and allegiances of the High Council have yet to be

28 Giustozzi, 2019, p 209-212, 253, Matthew Dupee, *Red-on-Red: Analysing Afghanistan's Intra-Insurgency Violence*, CCT Sentinel, Center for Combatting Terrorism, January, 2018, Vol. 11, Issue 1; (accessed 03/31/2020; 5 pm, PDT);

determined.²⁹

The Threat of the Islamic State-Khorasan

The Taliban were also threatened by the emergence of the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) group, to which several Taliban mid-level commanders defected, in late 2014 and 2015 in Nangarhar Province. This development coincided with the Islamic State's rise to power in Mosul and Syria at about the same time. Strong ties to villagers there allowed the group to launch combat operations as a direct challenge to the Taliban's Rahbari Shura and its negotiating strategy in 2016-2017. The Haqqani Network had close ties to the Islamic State leadership in Iraq before the ascension to leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (d. 2019), sent fighters to join them in Syria and Iraq, before their conflict with al-Qa'ida, and never directly challenged them in Nangarhar, or Kunar Provinces, zones of significant influence for the Peshawar Shura. The Rahbari Shura did take concerted action to combat their presence in Nangarhar and the dozen or so other provinces across the country, with considerable success. IS-K's severe repression of Nangarhar villagers, including their murder of many elders there forced most of their fighters to flee into Kunar Province. The U.S. and Afghan ANDSF also attacked IS-K with special forces and major attacks against them in Jowzjan Province in the northwest of Afghanistan, ending their threat there, and attacking their Nangarhar headquarters in April of 2017 with the largest conventional bomb ever used in combat, the GBU-43. The last three IS-K emirs have all been killed by U.S. attacks. In 2019, their troop strength was estimated to be between 5-8000 in Afghanistan and 2-3000 in Pakistan. They also appear to have hundreds of operatives inside major Afghan and Pakistani cities and have launched several very deadly suicide attacks in Kabul, which have killed hundreds of civilians. Their numbers and influence appear to be declining in 2020, but they hope to remain relevant by attacking a Sikh religious center and killed 25 people there in Kabul on March 24, 2020. The IS-K's penchant for extreme violence far exceeds that of the Taliban and the Afghan public's exhaustion with the war does not bode well for their prospects.³⁰

Conclusion

According to the research and writing of Anand Gopal, Alex Strick van Linschoten, and Antonio Giustozzi, the Taliban leadership has transformed itself in the eighteen years of its struggle against the U.S., NATO, and its hapless Afghan client government in Kabul. It has witnessed hundreds of its founders, officials, and commanders and tens of thousands of mujahidin and civilians killed in this dreadful war, while greatly improving its military

29 Abdul Ghani Kakar, *Militants Target Afghan Taliban in Series of Attacks in Balochistan Province*, *Pakistan Forward*, August 19, 2019; https://pakistan.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_pf/features/2019/08/19/feature-02; accessed 03/30/ 2020; 4:30 pm PDT.

30 Theo Farrell, *Introduction: IS-K*, Paul Lushenko, IS-K; Defeating the New Central and South Asia Jihad, *CCT Sentinel*, Center for Combatting Terrorism, Jan., 2018, Vol. 11: 1 <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-a-look-into-the-islamic-state-khorasan/>; accessed 03/31/2020; 2:45 pm, PDT;

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capabilities and its governing capacity and skills. It has modernized and professionalized its military, political, judicial, and medical organizations, utilizing a wide range of contemporary technologies it formerly rejected (e.g. utilizing youtube videos of operations as propaganda) or of which they were unaware. The Taliban leaders have effectively challenged the world's greatest superpowers militarily, politically, and ideologically and have demonstrated their willingness to negotiate directly with U.S. diplomats for their own political independence. Many have continued their religious and secular education abroad and in the process have moderated their Islamic ideology considerably from an idiosyncratic and narrow vision and practice, rooted in southern rural Pashtun villages, to a far more contemporary reformist Islamism, shared with the Muslim Brothers, and scholars such as Shaykh Yusuf Qaradawi, that now tie the Taliban far more closely to modernist Islamist networks across the Muslim world, including the 'ulama of neighboring societies and the more secular leadership of the Pakistani, Saudi, Qatari, and Iranian military elites and intelligence networks. Many have become informed about the Arab jihads, revolutionary, and reformist movements that erupted in 2011 and again in 2019, from Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen to more recent processes of change in Lebanon, Palestine, Sudan, Algeria, Iran, and Iraq. Some of the Taliban leaders have evolved into religious nationalists committed to Afghan cultural integrity against the western cultural invasion of their homeland since 2001 (or since the 1970s, or the British invasion in 1839), yet they perceive themselves increasingly not merely as Afghans, but also as part of a global Muslim ummah. Many in the political leadership, at least, appear to accept the reality that they cannot transform Afghanistan into an Islamic Emirate such as that they attempted to impose upon non-Pashtun communities from 1996-2001.

The Taliban political leadership, if not their major commanders, appear to be (or represent themselves as being) prepared to rule or share power, in a far more pluralistic fashion, with elements of their society unwilling to tolerate the strictures characteristic of their Deobandi madrasa education. Much of the Taliban political leadership has now lived in Pakistan, Doha, and traveled across the Muslim world and have adjusted their worldviews considerably in the process. They have stopped their attacks on girls' and boys' schools, on government-sponsored development projects, on NGOs, and appear to be cognizant of the need for greatly enhanced literacy, technocratic skills and development projects for the future independent Afghan state they hope to construct together with non-Taliban political forces. Many are educating their daughters in schools in Pakistan and Doha and have publicly committed themselves to ensuring the rights of women in the context of an Islamic society, as did Deputy Leader Sirajuddin Haqqani in the pages of the New York Times in February of 2020.³¹

The overwhelming violence of this insurgency and the U.S., European, and Afghan Government's response to it cannot be overlooked. The Taliban continue to target village and tribal elders and 'ulema who oppose them, and local and national officials and functionaries for assassination. The U.S. continues to conduct drone strikes, airstrikes, and

³¹ see endnote 20, above.

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train Afghan forces in aggressive counterinsurgency warfare in the early months of 2020.³² There is no escaping the realization that mujahidin and many contemporary radical Islamist movements are waging war, opposed by Western, Russian, Saudi, UAE, and Iranian war machines that profoundly and negatively impact millions of Muslims in Central Asia, the Arab World, and East and West Africa. The Afghan wars of the last 42 years have left the country among the very poorest and most dangerous in the world.

The Taliban have achieved much in the past eighteen years and they have lost perhaps even more³⁴, as so much of Afghanistan has been destroyed and disfigured by two of the most hideously violent imperialist invasions of recent world history. Millions of Afghans have died and thousands more may do so in the years ahead as Afghans try to recover from the deranged ambitions of the USSR and the U.S. in Central Asia. Both invasions intended to exert control over an Islamic society that did not accept secular, foreign, or violent domination, and had long resisted similar designs by the leaders of the British Raj. The Taliban first emerged as a local expression of Islamic piety and a response to the oppression and trauma that arose as a reaction to it. Through its own efforts and errors in trying to re-establish an Islamic culture and society, the Taliban became an icon of centuries of western propaganda about Islamic pathology and backward irredentist patriarchal domination. As wary but hospitable hosts of Osama bin Laden and al-Qa'ida, and as the attacks of September 11 unfolded, the Taliban lost its power and were driven out of their own country, seemingly to be relegated to the footnotes of history, along with al-Qa'ida (and soon enough, the Islamic State). Yet now in 2020, the coronavirus threatens Afghan society with more suffering and death, while the Taliban may have created the opportunity to transform their country again. The future of Afghanistan and the Islamic heritage of that remarkable land may soon depend upon the Taliban once more.

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* As intense fighting continued across northern provinces, celebrations of Nowruz and the approach of Ramadan on April 23rd brought thousands of returning Afghans together in wary gatherings, disregarding President Ashraf Ghani's ban on large gatherings in Herat and Kabul in late March [due to the Covid-19 global pandemic](#). Some Afghans cited their fear of widespread infection in Iran as the cause of their decision to return, despite the war, while many of Afghanistan's urban Islamic leaders planned to conduct *salat al-jumu'ah*, as usual, to

³² The scale of the Afghan War debacle for U.S. military and political elites was laid bare in the publication of an analysis of 'The Afghanistan Papers', obtained by the Washington Post and published in December of 2019: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>; accessed 04/05/2020, 11pm, PDT.

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welcome the newcomers. The Afghan Health Ministry ominously predicted that half of the 34 million population would become infected, with a possible death toll exceeding 100,000, possibly more than the fatalities of the past ten years of war. See Mujib Mashal and Najim Rahim, [Taliban Attack Afghanistan Amid Growing Coronavirus Threat, NYTimes, March 28, 2020](#); Fatima Fauzi and David Zucchini, [Fresh From Iran's Coronavirus Zone, Now Moving Across Afghanistan, NYTimes, March 26,2020](#); Ali M.Latifi and Roya Heydari, [Coronavirus: Herat emerges as Afghanistan's Epicenter, Aljazeera.com, March 25, 2020](#); accessed 03/27/2020, 1:45 pm, PDT.