

# The Taliban Beyond the Pashtuns

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## ABSTRACT

Although the Taliban remain a largely Pashtun movement in terms of their composition, they have started making significant inroads among other ethnic groups. In many cases, the Taliban have co-opted, in addition to bandits, disgruntled militia commanders previously linked to other organizations, and the relationship between them is far from solid. There is also, however, emerging evidence of grassroots recruitment of small groups of ideologically committed Uzbek, Turkmen and Tajik Taliban. While even in northern Afghanistan the bulk of the insurgency is still Pashtun, the emerging trend should not be underestimated.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Taliban are usually seen as a Pashtun movement, both in their 1990s incarnation and in their post-2001 reincarnation as an insurgency. Even today the large majority of the Taliban rank-and-file are Pashtuns, perhaps up to 95 percent of them. Is this a “genetic” characteristic of the Taliban, however, or the result of specific circumstances? For example, because the Taliban use Pakistani sanctuaries to organize and support their insurgency in Afghanistan, it was inevitable that initially they would have operated and recruited among Pashtun communities. In the early years of the insurgency, the prospect of recruiting non-Pashtuns in significant numbers was sufficiently remote to be worth ignoring for the Taliban. It should be noted that even in this early period they did infiltrate and recruit among Pashai-speaking and Nuristani minorities in eastern Afghanistan. It is not clear at what point a switch in the Taliban attitude occurred. One possible interpretation is that their presence inside Afghanistan started approaching the main areas where minorities live. This occurred in 2006–2007, when the Taliban started establishing a strong presence in Farah province, which gave them access to western Afghanistan; however, the Taliban were present for years in Nuristan before trying to infiltrate Badakhshan. One source has claimed that the decision to focus on penetrating northern Afghanistan was made at the end of 2007 (Azerbaijani-Moghaddam, 2009: 257). The timing of Taliban penetration into northern and western Afghanistan is probably due to a confluence of factors. The growth of

the Taliban in terms of available “cadres” and fighters has certainly greatly enabled the infiltration of non-Pashtun areas. In 2002, the cadres could be counted in the hundreds rather than in the thousands, and their hands were more than full trying to establish themselves in areas of the south and east. By 2006 there were already a few thousand cadres and they have been growing steadily since.

Another key question concerning the Taliban’s interest in areas populated by non-Pashtuns is whether it should be considered a mere opportunistic move on the Taliban side. As I have argued elsewhere, the Taliban leadership does not see itself as a Pashtun movement (Giustozzi, 2008: 48). They aim to represent not all of Afghanistan but certainly the country’s different conservative Sunni religious networks, regardless of their ethnic background. Still, given the length of the supply lines and the reservoir of anti-Taliban sentiment among many non-Pashtuns, one cannot but wonder what the Taliban think they can really achieve in the north and west. Another question that immediately arises is what is the potential of the insurgency to attract support among Tajiks, Uzbeks and others?

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the disentangling of these questions, none of which is merely academic, since the nature of the Taliban’s inroads in northern Afghanistan is of great strategic relevance. The paper is based on my travels to Afghanistan over the last few years and on my interaction with Afghans from different provinces, as well as with other foreigners who have visited the affected regions.

## About the Author

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## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the 1990s, as they expanded throughout the country, the Taliban tried to enlist the cooperation of non-Pashtun groups and communities. Fighters were recruited across the country, while local militias, coming from the old “warlord” groups, were drafted to police specific areas, after having surrendered most of their weapons and having signed cooperation agreements with the Taliban regime. These local militias included groups of Hazaras, Uzbeks and Tajiks. Their former political background was varied as well and included former members of parties such as Hizb-i Islami, Jamiat-i Islami, Junbesh-i Milli and (among the Shiites) Hizb-i Wahdat and Harakat-i Islami. The cooperation with the local militias seems to have worked relatively smoothly: the only known example of significant rebellion concerned a former Hizb-i Islami commander from Baghlan named Jadid, a Pashtun. The attempt was pre-empted and the commander jailed.<sup>1</sup>

As a result, significant areas populated by non-Pashtuns were controlled by the Taliban through indirect rule; they would retain a small garrison (a few hundred usually) in the provincial capital and appoint their own “authorities,” while the villages were left for the militias to control. Such areas included the predominantly Uzbek Faryab, under a former commander of Junbesh, parts of Hazara provinces, such as Bamiyan, Daikundi and Ghazni, under former commanders of Wahdat and Harakat and parts of Tajik Parwan and Baghlan under former commanders of Jamiat. In 2000, a number of Tajik and Uzbek commanders of Ittehad-i Islami and Hizb-i Islami also organized a pro-Taliban rising in parts of Badakhshan province (chiefly Ragh and Argo), within what was left of the territorial control exercised by the government led by Prof. Burhanuddin Rabbani and Commander Massud of Jamiat-i Islami. The rebellion was stopped in its early stages through a negotiating effort by Rabbani. The Taliban also recruited significant numbers of non-Pashtun madrasa students in Pakistan, among whom Tajiks from Baharak and Jurm of Badakhshan seem to have been particularly numerous. The Taliban trusted them sufficiently to have them garrison Paktia province in the 1990s (Azerbaijani-Moghaddam, 2009: 251).

Only as Operation Enduring Freedom advanced did several of these militias defect from the Taliban; they must have been aware that their collaboration with the Taliban had earned them many enemies and that the coming collapse of the Taliban regime was not in their interest. Indeed, the former collaborators were often met with reprisals by the re-emergent anti-Taliban factions. Some were killed and most were dispersed and marginalized from power, often losing property in the process. The exceptions were those who managed to negotiate last-minute deals with the opposition, as Hashim Habibi did in Faryab. The motivations of those joining the Taliban varied from ideological sympathy (among the more conservative groups of mujahidin, particularly in remote areas such as Ragh of Badakhshan) to mere opportunism and the desire to continue to maintain power and play a political role, as in, for example, Hashim Habibi’s case (Azerbaijani-Moghaddam, 2009: 251).

The co-optation of selected Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara groups to work under Taliban control in securing parts of the countryside tells us only so much about the attitude of the Taliban leadership toward non-Pashtuns. After all, the Taliban did not have sufficient manpower to garrison every district and needed some local cooperation. At a higher level, there are some signs that the Taliban’s intent was to gradually incorporate mullahs of ethnic backgrounds other than Pashtun in the power system: Maulawi Sayed Ghiasuddin, a Tajik from Badakhshan, figured among the Taliban leadership at a relatively early stage after the formation of the movement; Qariuddin Mohammed, a Tajik from Badakhshan, occupied several junior ministerial posts during the Taliban regime; Mullah Sayyid Ghiath Aga, an Uzbek from Faryab, was minister of Education for a period; Mullah Abdul Rafiq, another Tajik, was minister of Martyrs; and Mullah Abdul Salam Makhdoom, also Tajik, was minister of Labour and Social Affairs (Massud, 2003: 47). Although the positions occupied by non-Pashtun were few and usually junior, the trend was to represent the regional composition of the movement’s clerical base within the government. As the non-Pashtun base slowly expanded through the co-optation of more local religious networks, so did its representation. How far such expansion could have gone if Operation Enduring Freedom had not occurred is, of course, difficult to say.

<sup>1</sup> This information comes from interviews with former commanders of the different groups in Kabul and in the provinces of Baghlan, Faryab, Kunduz, Balkh and Badakhshan, from 2006 to 2009.

## AFTER 2001: RE-ACTIVATING OLD NETWORKS

For a few years after the fall of the Taliban regime, the former non-Pashtun collaborators of the Taliban had to lie very low. Only in the most marginal and remote areas of the country did some of them manage to retain a degree of influence. Two known cases concern a few Tajik commanders in Kahmard, who kept operating on and off depending on the (very occasional) presence of foreign troops in the area, and a Shiite Hazara strongman in Daikundi. The story of the latter is instructive of how separate groups of former collaborators gradually re-established relations with the Taliban.

This Shiite Hazara strongman, named Sedaqat, was in charge of policing Shahrستان for the Taliban from 1998-2001. He had started his political career in Sepah-i Pasdaran, a Khomeninist group that was very strong in the area. After 2001, Sedaqat lingered on with about 100 armed men. With the fall of the Taliban, Sedaqat tried to make the transition into mainstream politics. Akbari, the old leader of the Pasdaran, who had himself cooperated with the Taliban, created his own party but was not in a position to offer Sedaqat a significant appointment. Sedaqat therefore joined a new faction arising out of Hizb-i Wahdat, the party of Mustafa Kazimi. A younger and dynamic politician, Kazimi was the rising star of Shiite politics in Afghanistan until his assassination in 2007. With his death, Sedaqat's chances of being offered an official appointment evaporated overnight. Sedaqat was under heavy pressure to raise funds to maintain his militia. An official appointment seems to have been his preferred option, but after the death of Kazimi he started re-establishing his links with the Taliban, who in the meantime had consolidated their presence on the border with Daikundi (Uruzgan) and were starting to make inroads in parts of Daikundi itself.<sup>2</sup>

Sedaqat used his contacts with the Taliban to blackmail the government into granting him a governor post. When the Taliban briefly overran the district of Kiti (part of Daikundi) in the summer of 2007, the government reacted by appointing Sedaqat as governor of the province. Kabul was presumably hoping that Sedaqat, with his armed

militia, could act as a barrier to Taliban penetration; however, the population of Kiti revolted on hearing the news of his appointment, and the decree was rescinded.<sup>3</sup> Having lost any hope of receiving an official appointment, Sedaqat drifted toward cooperation with the Taliban. In the summer of 2008, Sedaqat kidnapped two French nationals working for an NGO. They were released after several weeks, but inevitably, as is always the case when foreigners are involved, the government was forced to react to the security threat and deployed troops to Daikundi; it is not clear whether any armed clashes took place. In any case, Sedaqat had with this action burned his bridges with the government, nullifying any prospects for a high-ranking appointment. Quite to the contrary, he was now a wanted man (Reuters, 2008).

Some degree of the Taliban's success in re-establishing connections with their former collaborators is not surprising, considering that most of them had few options left. In areas less marginal than Daikundi or Kahmard, re-mobilizing pockets of support proved more difficult, and little was achieved until 2006. During that year fragmentary information began to emerge of Taliban attempts to recruit Shiites in Ghazni, mainly from families that had formerly cooperated with them in the 1990s. It is worth noting that the Afghan Taliban never openly attacked Shiism per se, particularly after 2001, and even in the 1990s their mass attacks on Shiites were reprisals for attempts to resist the regime rather than ideologically driven. At least some tens of Shiites seem to have joined, enticed by the offer of high pay rates (Giustozzi, 2008: 86). The presence of Taliban spies among the Shiite population of Ghazni town has been reported more recently; their task would be to inform the Taliban of movement along the highways, so that the Taliban could target individuals for kidnapping or murder.<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, some reports of Taliban agitation emerged in 2009 among the Sunni Hazara (who mostly identify themselves as Tajiks) of western Parwan, among whom Taliban collaborators had been numerous in the 1990s, and among the Uzbeks of Argo in Badakhshan, who have been mentioned above in relation to the 2000 rebellion against Rabbani and Massud. There is no clear indication that former Taliban collaborators among the Uzbeks of northwestern Afghanistan have re-established connections with the Taliban.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication with Martine van Bijlert, December 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication with Niamatullah Ibrahim, research officer, Kabul, April 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication with diplomats and UN officials, Kabul, October 2008 and October 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication with Martine van Bijlert, consultant working for the Dutch government in Uruzgan, December, 2008.

In general, the Taliban's relative success among their former collaborators had limited strategic importance, because these were mainly marginal groups, often with little or no social base. The larger or more influential groups of former collaborators proved less inclined to resume their collaboration, particularly if they had not been completely marginalized in the post-2001 political settlement. Most of the former Tajik sympathizers of Ragh, for example, maintained an anti-Taliban posture as of 2008; one of their leaders, Mawlawi Aziz, was elected to parliament in 2005.<sup>6</sup>

As of 2006, therefore, it seemed that the influence of the Taliban among non-Pashtuns was doomed to remain completely insignificant, apart from some Nuristani and Pashai-speaking communities in Nuristan and Kunar provinces, which had emerged as early supporters of the Taliban, most notoriously in Korengal. The picture started to change, however, in 2007.

#### AFTER 2007: RECRUITING THE DISGRUNTLED FROM AMONG THE ENEMIES

The certainties concerning the virtual invulnerability of non-Pashtun regions of Afghanistan to Taliban infiltration, which still appeared to hold in 2006, started being shaken during 2007. What seemed most shocking was that the Taliban was recruiting among the ranks of their erstwhile bitter enemies. A line of infiltration developed even in the northeast, once the main stronghold of the anti-Taliban opposition. From Nuristan, agents, militants and supplies were brought into Badakhshan province in an effort to mobilize support. The success was limited, with just a few small armed groups of Taliban appearing in the central districts of the province and north of the provincial capital Faizabad in 2008-2009. The Taliban representative in charge of Badakhshan in 2009, Mawlawi Abdul Rashid, was from the Shahr-i Buzurg district, but he was not very active and was even allegedly criticized by the Taliban leadership for his failure to mobilize a greater effort. In 2009, Badakhshan remained the northeastern province in which the Taliban were weakest, and had the dubious distinction (from the Taliban perspective) of being one of the few Afghan provinces that did not experience a rise in

violence during that year (see Table 1, page 7). Delegations and agents of the Taliban were undoubtedly entering the province and in some cases received hospitality. In other cases, however, they were rejected or even chased out (Oxford Analytica, 2009). What was obvious in any case was that the Taliban did not have a sufficient presence on the ground to be militarily active. The primary target of the Taliban is known to have been dissatisfied Jamiati commanders in the province, including some prominent ones, trying to convince them to collaborate. At least one important former commander of Massud actually agreed to assist them in the deployment of suicide bombers in Faizabad, the provincial capital. The former commander had his own reason for wishing some destabilization in Faizabad; he was upset because of his marginalization in government power structures, but he and the Taliban eventually fell out over the timing of the suicide attacks (see Giustozzi and Orsini, 2009: 13; Azerbaijani-Moghaddam, 2009: 263).<sup>7</sup>

More violent Taliban activity among Uzbeks and Tajiks appeared in some districts of neighbouring Takhar province (see Map 1, page 11). In 2009, 65 violent incidents were recorded in the province, according to the Afghanistan NGO Security Office (ANSO), a 160 percent rise from the previous year (see Table 1, page 7). Small groups of non-Pashtun supporters of the Taliban were active in some parts of Baghlan province, including old anti-Taliban strongholds like the Andarab valley and Nahrin district. Many of the new Taliban appearing in the province had formerly been small local commanders of Jamiat, usually taking their small retinue of supporters with them into the mountains following a promise of support from the Taliban and a failure to receive a government appointment.<sup>8</sup> Initially, there was no clear indication of non-Pashtun Taliban being active in Kunduz, where the movement seemed to be overwhelmingly Pashtun in character (Oxford Analytica, 2009), but some information in this regard surfaced during 2009.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Also based on personal communication with a former UN official.

<sup>8</sup> On former Jamiatis with the Taliban in Baghlan see Sherzai (2009); on Takhar, see Wahidullah (2010).

<sup>9</sup> Personal communication with Christoph Reuter. Kabul, April 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with former Taliban sympathizers from Argo and Ragh, Kabul, 2008.



**Table 1: Violent Incidents in Selected Afghan Provinces, 2008 and 2009**

Province	2008	2009
Kunduz	125	292
Herat	114	229
Baghdis	79	239
Faryab	56	137
Parwan	48	52
Badakhshan	45	43
Baghlan	45	100
Jawzjan	28	48
Ghor	27	83
Takhar	25	65
Balkh	22	87
Samangan	5	10
Sar-i Pul	2	23
Bamian	15	22
Daikundi	20	19
Kandahar	740	970
Uruzgan	108	196

Source: ANSO Quarterly Data Report, Q. 4. (2009).

At the other end of the country, the Taliban were making significant headway among the Aimaqs of Baghdis; one source even claimed that by the autumn of that year the Aimaqs represented a majority of the Taliban rank-and-file in the province, although verifying this is impossible. A large share of the Aimaq recruits were deserters from the local units of the border police; again it is difficult to say whether the Taliban were successful in directly recruiting young Aimaqs, but the geographical scale of their operations, by 2009 encompassing all of Baghdis and even beginning to spill over into Khoshk-i Kohne of Herat, suggests an ample recruitment base and widespread complicity in the villages.<sup>10</sup>

The picture looked quite different in Ghor, a province largely populated by Aimaqs. Still under the strict control of various strongmen and their militias, Taliban infiltration was bound to be difficult there and took the usual form of agreements and deals with individual strongmen. One

of the erstwhile contenders for control over Chaghchran, Ahmad Morghabi, reportedly established relations with the Taliban and facilitated the movement of their supplies toward northwestern Afghanistan, possibly in order to make up for his marginalization from the few sources of revenue in the province. In Dawlatyar, Mawin Ahmad, a qazi and former jihadi commander, may have had links to the Taliban. He was freed from jail in February 2008 following a community mobilization and the storming of the district centre (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 2009; Pajhwok Afghan News, 2008). Finally, several former Hizb-i Islami commanders of northern Ghor were similarly reported to be reconnecting to the Taliban. Despite being Aimaqs, they had been associated with the Taliban regime in the late 1990s and until the collapse of Mullah Omar's regime had been excluded from power and influence after 2001.<sup>11</sup>

During 2009, indications emerged that some former Jamiat and Junbesh local strongmen of the mountainous parts of Faryab, Jowzjan and Sar-i Pul were approached by the Taliban, who made them offers of cash and weapons in exchange for their collaboration. These were usually marginalized commanders, who had been unable to obtain an official appointment after demobilization in 2004–2005, or who had lost whatever official job they had been given. In the remote parts of the north, where people are very poor and road traffic is rare, militias have little opportunity for raising revenue; thus offers such as the Taliban's can be attractive.<sup>12</sup>

For a while it seemed that the Taliban were striking their greatest successes among non-Pashtuns in Herat province. Apart from having infiltrated a number of Pashtun communities, mostly in Shindand district, the Taliban gradually established a connection with a number of disgruntled Tajik former Jamiati commanders in Enjil, Guzara, Pashtun Zarghun and Obek. Among them, the former mayor of Herat city and adversary of the Taliban, Ghulam Yahya Abkari "Shiawshan," emerged as the leading player. Apart from attracting the largest number of armed men, by 2009 he was forming his own network in the districts neighbouring his home area of Guzara, earning the loyalty of local commanders. Indeed, to date,

<sup>11</sup> Personal communication with a British researcher with experience travelling to Ghor, February 2008; personal communication with officials of international organizations; ISAF sources; ANSO sources.

<sup>12</sup> Personal communications with ISAF officials and foreign diplomats, Kabul, April 2009; on the links of some Uzbek and Turkmen strongmen with Pakistani figures, see Azerbaijani Moghaddam (2009: 252).

<sup>10</sup> Personal communication with a former member of Hizb-i Islami, Kabul, October 2009; personal communication with a foreign diplomat, Kabul, April 2009.

the Taliban infiltration of these areas remains the main example of success in mobilizing Tajiks to their side. As in the northeast, direct recruitment of radicalized or disgruntled youth appears to have happened on a modest scale in Herat. The majority of the members of Ghulam Yahya's group were either his clients from his own village of Shiawshan and the surrounding area, or other Jamiati commanders still linked to the provincial strongman Ismail Khan. The group also seemed to include, however, a minority of genuine Taliban sympathizers, either former Taliban or fresh recruits.<sup>13</sup>

The reliance on local strongmen and former commanders of other parties turned out to be a weakness of the Taliban in Herat, particularly given the ever-rising capability of the ISAF to target individuals through its advanced electronic monitoring technology. In October 2009, Ghulam Yahya Akbari was killed in an ISAF operation in one of his bases, alongside several of his men and three foreign "volunteers" (two Arabs and an Iranian). The killing certainly disrupted Taliban operations in the area; a number of his men, particularly former Jamiatis, defected back to the government. His son inherited local support (Ghulam Yahya was popular in his own area and his funeral attracted a crowd of thousands), while the wing of the group with the strongest Taliban leanings fell under the control of one of his lieutenants, who was reputedly close to the Arabs. The death of Ghulam Yahya also had negative repercussions for the Taliban in other areas of the province, essentially wherever Ghulam Yahya had managed to establish his influence and patronage. One example concerns a commander in Pashtun Zarghun, who started negotiations with the government for his surrender and then gave himself up in exchange for a promise of amnesty and reconciliation (Partlow, 2010). At the time of writing it was too early to say whether the Taliban would recover their influence in Guzara and in other Tajik areas of Herat.

Throughout northern and western Afghanistan, it is not easy to determine when local strongmen linked to the anti-Taliban parties actually cross the line and join the movement of Mullah Omar. Some of them started violent activities well before the Taliban turned up in northern Afghanistan, for example, in Takhar in 2004. After the appearance of the first Taliban agents in the region, it became feasible for a number of these increasingly marginalized strongmen to implicitly threaten a defection

to the Taliban camp in case their demands for appointments and rewards were not met. Depending on the reaction of the government to these threats, such strongmen might then forge a real alliance with the Taliban, as reportedly happened in one case in Dahana-i Ghorī of Baghlan. In other cases, however, the strongmen backtracked or faced a backlash by elements of the local population or other strongmen, as appears to have happened in parts of Jowzjan. In Badakhshan it is not clear whether the contacts between the Taliban and local strongmen are leading to anything more substantial or long-term than a few IEDs planted and occasional low-level violence.<sup>14</sup>

### RECRUITING A NEW GENERATION OF MILITANTS

During the summer of 2007, it became clear that the Taliban had not just been sending agents to convince and recruit local commanders linked to other factions, but had also begun infiltrating northern and western Afghanistan with their own cadres, creating bases for the direct recruitment of young Uzbeks and Tajiks into the Taliban insurgency. If successful, this type of mobilization will in all likelihood lead to a more resilient and threatening insurgency than that carried out by the local strongmen who shifted to the Taliban side and maintained control over their retinue of followers or even than that carried out by old, remobilized Taliban cadres. In this sense, the consequences for the Taliban of Ghulam Yahya's death might not be exclusively negative.

As the movement of Mullah Omar is prone to doing, the Taliban have displayed a willingness to compromise their principles, rules and regulations in order to break into areas where it has little or no influence. In many cases they have sponsored or encouraged bandits, hoping to destabilize an area and then be welcomed when they move in to restore order (see Giustozzi, 2008: 41-42). Some of the commanders of parties that collaborated or negotiated with the Taliban had either a bad personal record or had previously fought bitterly against the Taliban. In Ghulam Yahya's case, too, the relationship with the Taliban was not smooth: initially he refused to join them because of divergences on issues such as girls' schools (which he did not want to close down). Ghulam Yahya's reliance on

<sup>13</sup> Personal communication with UN officials. Herat, October 2009.

<sup>14</sup> I am indebted to Scott Bohlinger for these observations (personal communication, March 2010).



indiscriminate kidnapping for fundraising is also against the rules of the Taliban. The evidence suggests that during 2009, Ghulam Yahya violated some other Taliban edicts, expanding the force under his direct or indirect control beyond the limits considered acceptable by the Taliban leadership. The Taliban do not allow any front commander to have more than 300 men under his orders, in an effort to prevent the emergence of “warlords.” By late summer 2009, Ghulam Yahya had probably exceeded that number by some margin. His insistence on kidnappings despite the help provided by the Taliban (which included half a dozen explosive specialists and presumably cash and weapons) seems to suggest that he was not planning to remain one of many Taliban commanders in the province but wanted to become a key regional player (see Giustozzi, 2009: 211). While undoubtedly a short-term loss, his death might pave the way for a more systematic, deeper penetration of the Taliban in the area, particularly if they can count on the loyalty of at least a few Tajik cadres. Some of his followers have relocated to Baghdis and Koshk (northern Herat), a fact that seems to suggest some depth of commitment.<sup>15</sup>

The evidence of Taliban infiltration and direct local recruitment of individuals is stronger as far as northern Afghanistan is concerned. Here the infiltration of Taliban cadres has been taking place from different directions, including primarily from the Pashtun Taliban stronghold of Baghdis (Ghormach and Bala-i Morghab). That pocket of support was being used to infiltrate the neighbouring districts of Faryab province. Two groups of infiltrators seemed to exist, one Pashtun and the other mixed Uzbek/Turkmen, mostly recruits from the madrasas of Pakistan. Supply lines seemed to run through Ghor province, whose population is almost entirely Aimaq. At the beginning of 2009, a group of Uzbek/Turkmen militants was dismantled in the northern districts of the province. Local recruitment was also reported as early as 2008, but might have started sooner, involving some groups of Uzbek youth educated in Pakistani madrasas or in a handful of radical madrasas in Faryab itself. A pocket of militant activity in Dawlatabad (northern Faryab) was at least in part the result of local recruitment and possibly infiltration from Baghdis.<sup>16</sup>

From Ghor and Faryab, the Taliban also started small-scale

infiltration and local recruitment of Sar-i Pul province as early as 2006,<sup>17</sup> using Tajik and Uzbek militants. By 2009, indications of at least some presence of insurgents, probably linked to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and its splinter group, the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), were also emerging in Qush Tepa and Darzab districts of Jowzjan, perhaps Shulgara (a district of Balkh province) and some remote parts of Samangan province as well. As of late 2009, the insurgents seemed to have enjoyed their greatest degree of success in penetrating Uzbek and Turkmen areas in Faryab province, although the relative accessibility to external observers of some of the affected parts of the province might be contributing to the distortion of our perceptions. Dawlatabad district, where at least one radical madrasa is located, seemed the most seriously affected at least in terms of Taliban/IMU penetration of the villages. Researchers trying to access villages in the area were told to leave by the “Taliban’s representative” in the villages, suggesting a degree of local cooptation. Although information is fragmentary, it appears that “opposition elders” in a number of villages were successfully approached by Taliban agents and offered cash and weapons to support them. A deployment of ISAF and Afghan security forces in Ghormach district to stem infiltration in late 2008 does not seem to have had much effect.<sup>18</sup>

Whether or not the “Taliban” Uzbek or Turkmen militants actually belong to the IMU is not clear, nor is it clear whether the IMU operates as an internal component of the Taliban or whether it maintains a fully separate identity. The militants in the north are often referred to as “Tahir Yuldash’s people,” but they do not appear to advertise themselves as a separate organization. Pinning down evidence relating specifically to the IMU is very difficult. A low-key flow of young Uzbeks from the northwest, travelling through Mazar-i Sharif and Kabul all the way to Pakistan, was reported in 2008; the IMU is confirmed to have been operating a training camp for years in the northern, mountainous areas of Zabul province. It seems to have used parts of the surrounding area to do “on-the-job training” for its recruits, allowing them to gain military experience before sending them back north. The IMU appears to have a separate military and territorial structure from the Taliban in the south, suggesting that its primary aim was not to supplement the

15 Personal communication with Scott Bohlinger, March 2010.

16 Personal communications with police officers in Faryab, April 2009; personal communication with Afghan MP from Faryab, April 2009; personal communication with UN officials, Maimana, April 2009 and Kabul, October 2008.

17 As claimed by the Taliban themselves; available evidence dates back to around 2008.

18 Personal communication with ISAF officers, April 2009; personal communication with AREU researcher, Kabul, October 2009; personal communications with Krystof Gosztonyi (who visited the region in winter 2010), January and February 2010.

Taliban's fighting force there. By now, they might well have sufficient numbers of Afghan cadres to be able to operate in northern Afghanistan without dispatching many of the original cadres from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.<sup>19</sup>

The presence of the IMU and IJU in Kunduz and Takhar has also been reported, with occasional arrests or killings of members reported by the security agencies (Right Vision News, 2009). As already illustrated, however, in the northeast the typical recruits of the Taliban appear to be disgruntled commanders of Jamiat-i Islami, the main party in the region, who are upset due to their perception that they were forgotten in the distribution of the spoils after 2001. The commanders would take their retainers with them into the Taliban (see above). It should also be remembered that from 2006 onward, the Taliban had some success in recruiting Tajiks in areas with mixed Pashtun-Tajik populations, such as the areas surrounding Ghazni town and in Logar province; however, the nature of this recruitment is unclear. In Logar, some individual recruitment of youth seems to have occurred. It should be noted that there are relatively strong madrasa networks in Logar, which could have offered potential for recruitment to the Taliban.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, the Taliban face major hurdles in recruiting northern Tajiks and Uzbeks. This is not because these groups are necessarily more liberal than Pashtuns, as a substantial reservoir of very conservative sentiment exists in the Tajik and Uzbek communities, but rather because of the negative experience of Taliban rule in these regions during which Taliban "armies" committed abuses against several northern Tajik and Uzbek communities. Interestingly, in areas that are conservative and not easily accessible, Taliban/IMU propaganda language varies significantly, depending on whether it is targeting Pashtuns or Uzbeks. In the case of Charbolak (Balkh), the "night letters" written in Pashto "would presume that their audience supported their cause and exhort them to act upon such sympathies," while "those written in Uzbek would spend their length explaining the virtues of Jihad in the first place," which could be read as a reflection of

weaker sympathies for the cause of jihad among Uzbeks.<sup>21</sup> Whether this is a division of labour with the IMU or adaptation by the Taliban themselves, it shows at least an awareness that different constituencies in the north have to be dealt with in a flexible way.

So far little reaction to Taliban infiltration has been noted among the old anti-Taliban factions based primarily among Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras, except for the formation of anti-Taliban militias in Faryab. Their attention has mostly been focused on the reappearance of the Taliban among northern Pashtun communities. Like all "professional" insurgents, the Taliban and the IMU are likely in any case to be trying to keep a low profile now that they are in the more vulnerable phase of establishing their presence.

### STRENGTHS AND CONSTRAINTS OF TALIBAN PENETRATION AMONG NON-PASHTUNS

The main modus operandi of Taliban infiltration seems to be through clerical networks; among Afghan clerics, sympathy for the Taliban is widespread, although by no means universal. Typically, emissaries from the insurgency's headquarters in Pakistan would travel to every corner of Afghanistan, trying to mobilize support. Many Tajik and Uzbek clerics were already preaching against the foreign presence and, in some cases, even in favour of jihad before the Taliban reached out to them; this happened even in areas that used to be strongholds of the anti-Taliban coalition, such as southern Takhar.<sup>22</sup> The attitude of the mullahs is not surprising: the more Afghanistan opens to the world, the less influence the clergy will enjoy, particularly its more conservative elements. It should be remembered that the Taliban regime used to curry the favour of the mullahs, a fact that many of them will not have forgotten, which allows the Taliban to present themselves in a favourable light.

As the Taliban established bridgeheads into the northeast, they demonstrated the importance they attribute to the region and to its predominantly non-Pashtun population by appointing as regional commander Haji Abdul Rahim,

19 Personal communication with ISAF officials, Kabul, October 2009; personal communication with foreign diplomat, Kabul, October 2008; interview with commander Mullah Mohammad Nadir Haqjo bin Merza Raheem in *Al Somood* n. 42 (October 2009); see also *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor* (2009), December 23; personal communication with Scott Bohlinger, March 2010.

20 Personal communication with former members of Hizb-i Islami from Logar, Kabul, October 2009.

21 Personal communication with Scott Bohlinger, March 2010.

22 Personal communication with an UN official, October 2007.

formerly Minister of Refugees during the Taliban era and currently a member of the High Council. Although an Uzbek, he nonetheless experienced serious difficulties in handling an ethnically mixed rank-and-file. In Takhar, such difficulties were more pronounced than elsewhere. The Taliban recruit Tajiks, Uzbecks and Pashtuns in the province, and indeed their provincial commander in 2009, Mawlawi Moshin, was a Tajik from Farkhar district. The Taliban's main Pashtun commander in Takhar was Mullah Wazir, a former commander of Hizb-i Islami. However, Moshin does not seem to have been able to impose his leadership on Wazir, who had direct connections with some key members of the Taliban leadership in Pakistan (Oxford Analytica, 2009).

**Map 1: The Taliban Presence In Non-Pashtun Areas**



Source: Adapted from United Nations, Department of Field Support, Cartographic Section (2009).

This ethnic tension is not new and might have contributed to the decision to largely “sub-contract” the recruitment of Uzbek insurgents to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) on the basis of an agreement with its leader Tahir Yuldash (now reportedly defunct). The position of the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) in this is unclear. The IJU split from the IMU over personal rivalries and strategic and doctrinal differences, but then rapidly internationalized itself and now recruits Turkic speakers from far beyond Uzbekistan alone. It is believed to be more organically linked to the Taliban, and its presence has been reported at least in the northeast. The movement seems to be trying to attract attention with high-profile attacks, and, contrary to the IMU, revels in highlighting its focus on attacking foreign troops in Afghanistan; it is not clear whether

it is involved in any attempt to create a base among the population (De Cordier, 2008; Steinberg, 2008; Sandee, 2008).

While the expansion of the Taliban westward is facilitated by smuggling routes coming out of Iran, the Taliban might also be facing some logistical constraints in their expansion northward. In 2009, a shortage of ammunition and weapons among the Taliban ranks in the north was reported, at a time when even in the south supplies were no longer as plentiful as they had been in the past. The shortages in the north might be due to the very fast growth of the insurgency there in 2009, as well as to long supply lines. The local black market for weapons and ammunition has contracted as well, although it does not appear to have collapsed altogether. The northeastern strongmen associated with rival groups such as Junbesh and Jamiat-i Islami were reported to have organized meetings to discuss the growing Taliban infiltration and have decided to stop selling weaponry from their stock on the black market, in order not to favour the advance of the Taliban. Weapons smuggling coming from Tajikistan through Takhar and managed by criminal elements is also likely benefiting the Taliban.<sup>23</sup> The appearance of the IMU and IJU along Afghanistan's borders with the Central Asian states may compel the authorities of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to tighten their controls over weapons smuggling (Sahak, 2010).<sup>24</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As of March 2010, there was little doubt left that the leadership of the Taliban was deliberately trying to mobilize non-Pashtuns in its military effort. Such ambition seems in line with the Taliban perception of themselves as a clerical movement engaged in a national jihad throughout Afghanistan. Even if the reasons behind this effort were merely opportunistic (expand the war, destabilize the north), in practice it might make little difference if the Taliban are determined to allocate sufficient resources to the northern and western fronts. There is evidence that human resources have been committed, with hundreds of cadres having moved north and west, while funds and weapons might be on their way. If there is little doubt about the Taliban's intentions, the issue of what potential exists there for the insurgency to expand among non-Pashtuns remains open. As of late

<sup>23</sup> Email communication with Kristóf Gosztonyi, March 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Although substantial amounts of weaponry were being sold from the northern militias, it is impossible to determine who was buying them; there appears, however, to have been a flux from the north to the south from around 2006 onward.



2009, the largest contribution to the Taliban insurgency north of the Hindukush was still coming from Pashtun communities in Kunduz and Baghlan.

The Taliban themselves have made only modest inroads in terms of direct recruitment so far among Tajiks and Uzbeks (the main exceptions being the Aimaqs of Baghdis and the Tajiks of Logar), but not enough information is available to analyze these two case studies in depth. The emerging success in recruiting young Uzbeks and forging a significant Uzbek base in the north might or might not derive from the reliance on the IMU, whose mostly Uzbek cadres would be better placed to approach the local population. Many Uzbeks in northern Afghanistan maintain bitter memories of the Taliban occupation in 1998–2001; it is also obvious that Pashto speakers would not be as welcome in the villages as Uzbek speakers would. The Taliban too, however, had a few Uzbek cadres to start with. Even though the Taliban have a number of Tajik cadres, they have not been able so far to penetrate Tajik communities to any significant degree. Until that happens, the Taliban's ability to be present in strength in the northeast in particular is going to be dependent on the presence of Pashtun pockets. At the same time, the predominant attitude within NATO, of dismissing the potential for the insurgency to spread among non-Pashtuns, seems ill-advised and could possibly leave the door open to unpleasant surprises in the future.

The first signs of significant Taliban recruitment among Uzbeks and Turkmen seems to suggest that as long as culturally suitable cadres are available, there is potential for an insurgency, even in northern Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup> The same might be said to some extent of the west too: Ghulam Yahya was attracting significant numbers of recruits while he was alive. The indications are that the more deprived and remote areas of the north and west, having benefited little or not at all from the post-2001 reconstruction process and the division of the spoils by the partners of the anti-Taliban coalition, are drifting toward the opposition. Undoubtedly there is a reservoir of highly conservative attitudes in the more remote parts of Afghanistan, which is likely to predispose some communities to receiving the Taliban message with a sympathetic ear. These communities have not been exposed to the state much in the past; their cultural and political attitudes have not been broken up by the imposition of more “modern” ones by the state (see Giustozzi, forthcoming). At the same

time, the majority of the clergy remain opposed to the foreign presence in Afghanistan despite efforts of the Afghan government to buy it off. Young, freshly-trained mullahs continue to flock to the mosques and madrasas of northern Afghanistan from Pakistan; they are likely to have some impact on the attitudes of the local population, particularly the youth.

With the exception of emerging pockets of support among the Uzbeks of some areas, it could be said that the more committed groups of insurgents in the north are still largely Pashtuns. It is even truer that the penetration of densely populated, relatively affluent areas is still limited to Pashtun insurgents, while non-Pashtun participation takes place almost exclusively in remote, underdeveloped areas. While plentiful distribution of aid seems to have had little impact on insurgent dynamics among Pashtuns, there are some signs that it might be having some impact in non-Pashtun areas, where the “ideological” drive toward the insurgency is weaker. For example, the predominantly Pashtun area of Chardara (Kunduz) is at the epicentre of the insurgency in the north, while massive aid inflow in the Tajik and Uzbek areas of Jurm and Baharak (Badakhshan) might have played a role in preventing militancy from taking hold, even with high levels of attendance of religious madrasas.<sup>26</sup>

All in all, the potential constituency for the Taliban among non-Pashtuns remains a minority one, but one sufficient to turn northern and western Afghanistan into a mess if the trend of expansion continues. Table 1 shows how the security situation in much of the north is becoming more precarious. Most of the Taliban cells and groups in the north are still keeping a low profile and rarely engage in violence, opting instead to consolidate their networks and bases; it is therefore quite possible that violence will get worse next year in a number of provinces. Counter-mobilization, whether sponsored by Kabul or the ISAF or spontaneously by local communities, is happening and will continue to happen among the ranks of local strongmen who feel threatened by the rise of the Taliban. This could well result in a “leopard skin” situation, with areas of control under armed groups of varying affiliation, each with its own agenda, sometimes openly opposed to the central government, sometimes ambiguously supportive. The psychological and political impact of even a partial destabilization of northern Afghanistan would be out of all proportion to the actual military significance.

<sup>25</sup> For a similar argument see Azerbaijani-Moghaddam (2009).

<sup>26</sup> Personal communications with Kristóf Gosztonyi and Scott Bohlinger, March 2010.

## GLOSSARY

*Harakat-i Islami (Islamic Movement)*: One of the Shiite parties that participated in the anti-Soviet jihad and was part of the Northern Alliance or United Front.

*Hizb-i Wahdat (Unity Party)*: An ethnic-based party led by Hazara clergymen that participated in the anti-Soviet jihad.

*Hizb-i Islami (Islamic Party)*: A radical Islamist party that took part in the anti-Soviet jihad and has a history of hostility toward Jamiat-i Islami.

*Islamic Jihad Union (IJU)*: A splinter group of the IMU (see below) with international jihadist aims and a wider recruitment base.

*Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)*: Islamist organization formerly led by Tahir Yuldash whose main aim is the overthrow of the regime of President Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan.

*Ittehad-i Islami (Islamic Union)*: Islamist party founded in the 1980s that is led by Prof. Abdur Rab Rasul Sayyaf. It is influenced and financed by radical Islamist groups in Saudi Arabia.

*Jamiat-i Islami (Islamic Society)*: A moderate Islamist party led by Prof. Burhanuddin Rabbani which played a key role in the anti-Soviet jihad and was a leading member of the Northern Alliance or United Front.

*Junbesh-i Milli (National Movement)*: A secularist party based in northern Afghanistan.

*Qazi*: Islamic judge.

*Sepah-i Pasdaran*: A Khomeinist organization primarily comprising Afghanistan's Shiites and influenced by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

*Taliban*: Shorthand for Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and Army of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

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