

Emerging Divisions within the Taliban and its Implications for Peace and Security in Afghanistan

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Introduction

Recent developments in Afghanistan have underscored the growing influence of Taliban and its enhanced confidence in pursuing a military line. Taliban's recent territorial gains have brought greater challenges to the reconciliation and reintegration process, particularly at a time when a number of actors including Russia and China have volunteered to restart the peace process. As the President of United States, Donald Trump issues authority to send several thousand additional troops to Afghanistan, the Afghan insurgents have become a major focus for Russia in combating the militant group Islamic State. Many experts fear that the surge in American forces won't achieve any enduring gains. As the war rages on, the complex issue of consensus building, arguably a key aspect of winning the counterinsurgency campaign has taken a backseat. Growing fragmentation within the Taliban makes it further unlikely that the talks may start any time soon.

It has been 16 years since the Taliban was brought down by the US invasion. The Taliban which runs its own shadow government in several parts of Afghanistan saw a major change in power structure with the death of its leader Mullah Omar. A man whose charisma is said to have kept the movement together was reported to be dead in 2013, two years before it was finally revealed. The news spread like fire within Taliban, deepening fragments that had existed for decades. Even as the group continued to engage in its usual spring offensive in 2015, a leadership crisis took root within the higher ranks of Taliban leadership.

The ongoing developments in Afghanistan warrants a comprehensive research conducted with a focus on the visible signs of fragmentation within Taliban. To understand how fragmented the Taliban is, it is important to understand the various contours of the insurgent group and their origin. The paper aims to assess the complex forces that drive the most influential insurgent movement and analyse its implications on the reconciliation and reintegration

process. In an attempt to determine the reasons causing the divisions, the paper will address deep questions about the Taliban movement. An assessment would be done to understand the tribal and regional characteristics in the overall structuring of the movement. Furthermore, the paper will discuss the involvement of multiple actors in the negotiation process and the impact it has on Taliban.

Origin of Taliban

Afghanistan has always been a drama in transition and Taliban its multifaceted and ever-changing subject. The Taliban movement finds its ideological base in an extreme and perverse interpretation of Deobandism, propagated by Pakistani Islamic parties in Afghan refugee camps.¹ The people of Afghanistan, a country that had been in a state of virtual disintegration after the withdrawal of Soviet troops, found hopes in a group that promised them of law and order. The constant power struggle among warlords led to a political vacuum which was eventually filled by the Taliban. The primary motive of the Taliban was to implement an extreme interpretation of Sharia or Islamic law. This appalled not just the West but also the people of Afghanistan for whom Islam has been a way of life.² An assessment of Taliban's worldview of Islam will contribute in understanding the nature of the movement and the divisions occurring within it.

The Taliban as a distinct political movement has its roots in the religious networks that were part of the 1978-1989 resistance movement against the Soviet. The heterogenous resistance that first rose against the PDPA regime in 1978 found unity in their hatred against Soviet atheism and Communist contempt of religion.³ The protests were later reinterpreted exclusively as Jihad when Pakistan officially started supporting the seven Sunni Islamist Resistance Movements. The Madrasa and mosque students were part of such political-military parties, of which the most popular were the Harkat-e-Inqilab Islami led by Maulvi Mohammad Nabi Mohammedi and Hizb-e-Islami which was led by Maulvi Younis Khalis. The latter would go on to give the world one of its most secretive leaders – Mullah Omar.⁴ With money and arms flowing from the CIA pipeline and support from Pakistan, the Islamists managed to denigrate the Tribal structure of Afghanistan. The war between traditionalist Mujahideen parties and

¹Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 89

²Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, 83

³ Thomas Rutting, "How Tribal Are The Taliban", Afghanistan Analysts Network (2010), 10

⁴ Rashid, *Pakistan On The Brink*, 19



Islamists who wanted to impose a radical change on the traditional social structure of Afghan society paved the path for an extremist Islamist movement, the Taliban.⁵

The contradictions within the post Najibullah Mujahideen regime mobilised a moral reaction from the Mujahideen who had returned to their mosques and Madrasas after the collapse of the Soviet support regime. Bloodshed and horror spread across Afghanistan as the warlords fought and divided the country into fiefdoms. The failure of the Mujahideen in building the promised Islamic State led the rise of an ultra-orthodox movement. As Mullah Mohammad Abbas, who became the Minister of Public Health in Kabul reiterated, “The old Mujahideen leadership had utterly failed to bring peace. So I went with a group of friends to Herat to attend the Shura called by Ismael Khan, but failed to come up with a solution and things were getting worse. So we came to Kandahar to talk with Mullah Omar and joined him.”⁶ Growing corruption, abuse at the hands of officials, looting of merchants, refugees leaving for Quetta in large numbers, lent the Taliban a sense of legitimacy. The Taliban gave the people of Afghanistan hopes of peace and collective leadership. Its insistence on only law and order and not on power impressed the ordinary Afghans who were exhausted from the years of war.⁷ They declared their agenda of restoring peace, enforcing Sharia, disarming the population and defending the integrity and Islamic character of Afghanistan.

Under the charismatic leader, Mullah Omar, the Taliban which received immense support and funds from Pakistan went on to gain control of one-third of Afghanistan within two years, two-thirds of the country by three years and nine-tenth of the country by five years. The fall of the Afghan capital Kabul to the Taliban in September 1996 established a new model for a purist Islamic revolution.⁸ Since the capture of Kandahar in 1994 to the seizure of Kabul in 1996, the Taliban mobilized to conquer the entire country. In the quest, they became highly personalised and power hungry, developing the same faultlines as the Mujahideen.⁹

Taliban Developing a Mind of its Own and Attack on the West

⁵ Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan,” *Obris: A Journal of World Affairs* (2007): 73, accessed on 9 June 2017, doi: <http://hdl.handle.net/10945/30471>

⁶ Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, 22

⁷ Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, 46

⁸ Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, 93

⁹ Dick Camp, *Boots On The Ground: The Fight to Liberate Afghanistan from Al-Qaeda and the Taliban*, 2001-2002, (USA: Zenith, 2011), 60



The Taliban accepted no other Islam but their own.¹⁰ They exported to the world a new kind of Islamic extremism and refused to compromise in any political condition. They cut off Afghanistan from modernity and isolated them from the world. Folk songs, television, art, kite flying, every form of entertainment was banned under the Taliban, unless they promoted Islam. Women vanished entirely from public view as the Taliban's religious police issued new rules that banned them from wearing high heels, working outside, and leaving their homes without a male guardian. Education became rare as most of the teachers were women, who couldn't work anymore. Questioning the strict edicts passed by the Taliban tantamounted to blaming Islam itself. To the Taliban, nothing else mattered than their interpretation of Islam. Their conquest of Kabul further deteriorated the condition of women and children. When in power, Mullah Omar and his commanders promoted their own experience, of living in the most conservative and least literate Southern Pashtun parts of Afghanistan.¹¹

The hardline component of the Taliban has always been the driving force behind the war. They insisted that the West accommodated to the views of the Taliban, instead of pursuing the latter to conform to the rights of women and humanitarian values. They refused to compromise on any of their values and principles, no matter how harsh the consequences were, not just for the population but also for the group. They tightened gender policies, assuming that this would boost the morale of defeated soldiers. Even the suspension of aid programmes by Western NGOs such as United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Save the Children didn't deter the Taliban from pursuing their strict agenda.¹² When the Western governments and agencies tried to negotiate with the Taliban, the hardline lobby made sure that no compromises were made.¹³ Taliban's offensive against the Northern alliance continued even as Afghanistan suffered a severe drought.¹⁴ Prices of food items rose and the Afghani currency plummeted. The advances made by the Taliban horrified the West and sent the countries of Central Asia in

¹⁰ Mujib Mashal, "Taliban Target: Scholars of Islam," *The New York Times*, May 28, 2017, accessed 8 June 2017

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/28/world/asia/uptick-in-killing-of-religious-scholars-as-taliban-look-to-curtail-their-influence.html>

¹¹Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, 110

¹² Nancy Hatch Dupree, "Afghan Women Under The Taliban" in *Fundamentalism Reborn?: Afghanistan and the Taliban*, ed. N. Nojumi, (London: Hurst and Company, 1998), 147-148

¹³Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, 114

¹⁴ Frank Clements, *Conflict in Afghanistan: a historical encyclopedia*, (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2003) 218-219



frenzy.¹⁵ The Taliban had captured several towns on the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border.¹⁶ The fear of regional escalation was immense as Russia, Turkey and Central Asian states blamed Pakistan and Saudi Arabia for supporting the Taliban.¹⁷

Furthermore, Washington's frustration with the Taliban grew as it refused to hand over Osama Bin Laden, the leader of terrorist network Al Qaeda. Even the pressure from Saudi Arabia, its biggest source of fund, couldn't force the Taliban to cede Osama. An insulted Saudi Arabia withdrew diplomatic representation in Kabul and ordered the Taliban charge d'affaires to leave Riyadh.¹⁸ No amount of pressure impacted the Taliban as it continued to engage in intensive bombing of civilian targets and capturing towns. By 2000, the Taliban had become host to extremist groups from Pakistan, Central Asia, Kashmir, Iran and China.¹⁹ Meanwhile, resentment against the Taliban grew from within the country. A collapsing economy, civilian deaths and discontent among tribal Pashtuns led to splits and dissent within the Taliban itself. The escalation in differences between the Kandahar and the Kabul Shura was reflected in Mullah Omar's objection to the implementation of Richardson's point agenda which the head of Kabul Shura, Mullah Rabbani had agreed to implement.²⁰ There were demands for moderate Taliban policies from within the Taliban as Kabul and Jalalabad Shuras became aware of the rising prices, collapsing economy and lack of food. The Taliban, like the Mujahideen resorted to one man rule, with most of the power concentrated in the hands of Kandahar Shura. As the division between the 'moderate' and the hardline Taliban increased, there were fears of intra-Taliban civil war.²¹ The exalted position of Mullah Omar, however, prevented the differences from blowing out of proportion.²²

Who are the Taliban?

Years of conflict have gradually weakened the traditional structure of the Afghan society, particularly the Pashtuns, known as the "most tribalized group in the world." Beginning with

¹⁵ Raja Menon, "The New Great Game in Central Asia," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, accessed 8 June 2017, doi: 10.1080/00396338.2003.9688581

¹⁶ Amir Shah, "Ruling side seizes four towns on Afghanistan-Tajik border," *Amarillo Globe-News*, December 23, 2000, accessed 8 June 2017 http://amarillo.com/stories/092300/usn_rulingside.shtml#.WVr2kNSGPIU

¹⁷ Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, 77

¹⁸ Jason Burke, "Taliban split over Bin Laden," *The Independent*, September 28, 1998, Accessed 10 June 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/taliban-split-over-bin-laden-1201340.html>

¹⁹ Ahmed Rashid, "Afghanistan: The Year in Review," *Eurasia*, 15 January 2001, Accessed 10 June 2017, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav011601.shtml>

²⁰ Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, 103

²¹ Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, 104, Moderate Taliban here refers to a part of Taliban that was keen on moderating Taliban policies so that greater international aid could flow to the cities

²² Johnson and Mason, *Understanding the Taliban*, 80

the 1973 coup, the tribal system of Afghanistan underwent transformation due to the reform efforts made by the Soviet. The Soviet occupation killed more than a million Pashtuns and forced many more to move to refugee camps at the Afghan-Pakistan border. Mass migration of Pashtuns created crisis in the Tribal leadership, rendering the Mullahs as the remaining authority figure.²³ Pakistan's exclusive recognition of the seven Sunni Islamist Peshawar movement at the expense of other resistance groups such as secular leftists and ethno-nationalists, moulded the rise of Islamic identity in Afghanistan.²⁴

Thousands of Afghan Pashtuns, many of whom had spent their lives in refugee camps in Baluchistan and North Western Frontier Provinces (NWFP) of Pakistan found their way into Taliban. Several hundreds of Pakistani Madrasa students crossed the border to join Mullah Omar. Most them had been educated in Madrasas, where they learnt about the basics of Islam as interpreted by their teachers. The young warriors, mostly aged between 14-24 had been brought up away from their homes in Afghanistan and had a rare idea about their tribal lineages.²⁵ Many chose the war because they knew of no other opportunity. The teachings these youngsters acquired from the Mullahs in the strict confines of segregated refugee camp life led them to believe that there was nothing unusual about the measures passed by the Taliban to subjugate women. It was this factor that differentiated them from the former Mujahideen.²⁶

As Ahmed Rashid puts it:

“They had no memories of the past, no plans for the future while the present was everything. They were literally the orphans of war, the rootless and the restless, the jobless and the economically deprived with little self-knowledge. They admired the war because it was the only occupation they could possibly adapt to.”

The Taliban is heavily influenced by the Deobandi interpretation of Islam which was promoted rigorously by religious movements within Pakistan. The Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, led by Maulana Fazlur Rehman set up hundreds of Madrasas in NWFP and Baluchistan. The Madrasas were run by semi-educated Mullahs who provided young Pakistanis and Afghan refugees with free education, food, shelter and military training. Though the Deobandi tradition

²³ Jonathan N Amato, “Tribes, Pashtunwali And How They Impact Reconciliation and Reintegration Efforts In Afghanistan” (MA diss. Georgetown University, 2010)

²⁴ Rutting, “How Tribal,” 11

²⁵ Amato, “Reintegration Efforts in Afghanistan.”

²⁶ Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, 33



is averse to tribal and feudal structure, the Taliban found it difficult to escape its tribal roots. Furthermore, the interpretation of Sharia preached by the Mullahs in the Madrasas was heavily influenced by Pashtunwali.²⁷ This resulted in a group of warriors who fight in the name of Islam but carry with them social attitudes, beliefs and customs of the Pashtuns.²⁸

Due to its Deobandi roots and because several Deobandi leaders from both sides of the border originated from the Durrani Pashtun tribe, the Taliban shares deep relations with the Pakistani Deobandi groups such as JUI and its splinter group Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP).²⁹ In 1998, some of the soldiers of Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan took shelter in Kabul under the Taliban when there was a crackdown on the group following its massacre of hundreds of Shiite.³⁰ Besides contributing foot soldiers to the Taliban, the Deobandi groups also had representation in the Taliban leadership. Three government ministers and twenty-two judges in the Taliban administration were from HuJI. The Amir of HuJI, Qari Saifullah Akhtar, served as an adviser to Mullah Omar. Given the deep bond between the Taliban and the Deobandi groups, militants from almost all Deobandi outfits fought against the US counterattack following the 9/11.³¹

Tribal structure and divisions within Taliban

Tribes remain an important aspect of the Afghan landscape. While the Taliban officially rejects any tribal and feudal structures, the dualistic nature of the movement prevents it from doing so. The Taliban movement, both structurally and ideologically is as segmented as the Pashtun society.³² An individual Taliban fighter just like all the Pashtuns, can recall his place on the Pashtun genealogical chart which constitutes of hundreds of tribes, subtribes, clans and *kor*.³³ The recruitment and succession pattern of the Taliban is a testimony of the strong tribal fissure lines existing in the group.³⁴

After the Mazar-e-Shareef defeat in 1997, there was growing resentment among the Ghilzai Pashtun commanders within the Taliban. The Ghilzais, despite providing bulk of the military

²⁷ Stacey Gutkowski, *Secular War: Myths of Religion, Politics and Violence* (New York: I.B. Tauris and Company, 2014)

²⁸ Amato, "Reintegration Efforts in Afghanistan."

²⁹ Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, 92

³⁰ Stephen Tankel, *Storming the World Stage: The Story of Lashkar-e-Taiba* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013)

³¹ Tankel, *Storming the World Stage*.

³² Rutting, "How Tribal," 13

³³ Rutting, "How Tribal," 6

³⁴ Thomas Rutting, "The Other Side: Dimensions of the Afghan Insurgency: Causes, Actors and Approaches to 'Talks'" Afghanistan Analysts Network, Thematic Report (2009), accessed on June 15, 2017 <http://aanafghanistan.com/index.asp?id=114>

power had no adequate representation in the Durrani dominated Taliban Shura.³⁵ Opposition to the unequal distribution of power spread across the region as non-Kandaharis complained about being kept out of the decision-making process. One of them was Jalaluddin Haqqani, the veteran Pashtun commander from Khost in Paktia province and the leader of Haqqani network who joined the Taliban in 1995. Despite Haqqani providing the Taliban with 3000 Ghilzai tribesmen, they faced a manpower shortage. The fact that the Ghilzais were led by Kandahari officers led to mass desertions while villages around Kandahar refused to enlist their sons with the Taliban.³⁶

The inner leadership circle of the mainstream Taliban continued to lack any representation from the Southeast or elsewhere. Exceptions like Jalaluddin Haqqani and Abdullatif Mansur, who ran their own semi-autonomous networks and hailed from Paktia were considered symbolic.³⁷ Though Mullah Omar appointed Haqqani as commander of all Taliban troops after 9/11 and he was often counted amongst the Rahbari Shura members, experts have found his role very limited. The same was pointed out about Mansur whose appointment as head of the political committee responsible for talks was termed inconsequential. Similar debates exist about Sirajuddin Haqqani, the son of the late Jalaluddin Haqqani, who has been appointed as the deputy of the latest Taliban leader, Akhundzada.³⁸

Conflicts based on tribal rivalry appear evident at the local level. This was reflected in the case of Uruzgan where the Durrani and Ghilzai commanders had been competing for the post of provincial commander. The infighting occurred due the presence of two larger Taliban networks operating in the same province – Durrani operating from Helmand and Kandahar in the South and Ghilzai operating from the Zabul province in the East.³⁹ The Taliban because of its tribal roots has failed to escape the traditional Durrani – Ghilzai rivalry that has been running in the Pashtun society for ages.

The presence of two or more Taliban factions in a single province have grave implications for the security of the people living there. This was the case in Badghis when the Taliban appointed

³⁵ Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, 99

³⁶ Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, 60

³⁷ Rutting, "How Tribal," 13-15

³⁸ "Haqqani network's chief made deputy leader of Taliban to protect him from US, says report", *The Indian Express*, May 8, 2016, accessed 11 June 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/world/world-news/haqqani-networks-chief-made-deputy-leader-of-taliban-to-protect-him-from-us-says-report-2790313/>

³⁹ Rutting, "How Tribal," 14



shadow governor Mullah Dastagir was killed by the US forces in 2009.⁴⁰ Prior to his death, there was constant infighting between Taliban fighters and Tajik commanders formerly associated with Gulbuddin Hakmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami. Additionally, there were two Taliban factions operating in the same province. One faction was led by Mullah Dastagir and the other was commanded by Mullah Jamaluddin Mansoor who was associated with former regional Taliban commander Mullah Abdul Rahman Haqqani. After Mohammad Iimael Barakzai succeeded Dastagir, it was reported that Abdul Rehman Haqqani was set to return from Pakistan to take over the province.⁴¹ Factional and ethnic fighting exacerbated chaos in the rare Pashtun exclave in the north, leaving behind a trail of destruction and killing.

Another core principle of Pashtunwali that has occasionally affected the operations and nature of Taliban is the strict Pashtun code of traditional revenge, badal. An important pillar of Pashtunwali, badal is based on the concept of nang, honour.⁴² Maintaining honour is central to any Pashtun. While Badal can be settled in exchange of money or exchange of women, it is insufficient in matters of death. In such a case, a cycle of vengeance takes place which goes on till ages.⁴³ The Taliban experienced such a blunder in 2008 when a local Sufi leader Pir Agha of Pattan was killed in the Chinartu district. The killing set a badal, deepening Durrani-Ghilzai enmity in the village. This led to the local population to establish a local Taliban community to protest the atrocities committed by the Ghilzai commander.⁴⁴ The fear of blood feud was expressed recently when Mullah's Omar's successor Mullah Mansoor was rumoured to be killed in a shootout between senior members of the Islamist movement.⁴⁵ Ahmed Rashid had reported that the blood feud set in motion by the killing of Mullah Mansoor could go on years and decimate the leadership.⁴⁶ Mansoor was later reported to be killed in a US strike in May 2016.

Equations of power and leadership among tribes have significant impact on the structure of the Taliban. As Thomas Rutting puts it, "the tribal character of the Taliban becomes more visible

⁴⁰ Bill Roggio, "US troops kill Taliban's shadow governor for Badghis province," *FDD's Long War Journal*, 16 February 2009, accessed 16 June 2017,

http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/02/us_troops_kill_talib.php

⁴¹ Roggio, "US troops kill Taliban's shadow governor."

⁴² Amato, "Reintegration Efforts in Afghanistan."

⁴³ Amato, "Reintegration Efforts in Afghanistan."

⁴⁴ Rutting, "How Tribal," 14-15

⁴⁵ Jibrán Ahmed, "Taliban leader Mullah Mansour wounded in shootout: sources," *Reuters*, December 2, 2015, accessed 16 June 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban-idUSKBN0TL1XV20151202>

⁴⁶ Ahmed Rashid, "Chaos within Afghan Taliban as leadership struggle intensifies," *The Financial Times*, December 10, 2015, accessed 16 June 2017, <http://blogs.ft.com/the-exchange/2015/12/10/chaos-within-taliban-ranks-as-leadership-struggle-intensifies/?mhq5j=e3>

at the periphery, distant from the Taliban strongholds in the South, its bases in Pakistan and wherever's leadership is weaker."⁴⁷ It was because of this factor that the Taliban *layha* prevented the Taliban fighters from engaging in any "out of area" activity. In case a front commander at the provincial or the district level wants to carry out Jihad outside their area of origin, he must notify the commanders in the province and district.⁴⁸ The Taliban tries to rule out the aspect of tribe by focusing on the movement's Islamist ideology, which aims to maintain cohesion among its fighters and commanders. It is the combination of the religious and tribal component that provides the Taliban movement with a degree of cohesion, a feature that was lacking in the Mujahideen and later the Northern Alliance. The equation between the two components has given the movement a sense elasticity, allowing the commanders to exercise certain degree of autonomy.⁴⁹ Perhaps, this is the reason that despite the splits and fragmentations, the Taliban movement continues to engage in military attacks. Many experts believe that Taliban have created a powerful narrative based on jihad that resonates with the rural Afghan population. Mao suggested that an insurgent only needs 15% of popular support to be successful and they clearly have this.⁵⁰

US War on Terror and Negotiating with the Taliban

The 11 September 2001 attack on the United States brought Afghanistan at the centre of global terrorism. A total war was planned against Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban who had harboured them. Many feared that the US response to the attacks on the Pentagon and Twin Towers could have a huge impact on the geopolitics of the region. Considering potential benefits of the risks, almost all the countries supported America's War on terror. Operation Enduring Freedom, primarily aimed at attacking the Taliban and Al Qaeda forces began on October 7, 2001. The purpose of the US airstrikes on the Taliban positions was to help the Northern alliance and Pashtun anti-Taliban forces to advance.⁵¹ The US and the other forces were, however, sceptical about the Northern alliance taking over Kabul. They feared that attacking armour and artillery positions around Kabul would lead to quick disintegration of

⁴⁷ Rutting, "How Tribal," 14

⁴⁸ Rutting, "How Tribal," 13

⁴⁹ Rutting, "How Tribal," 2

⁵⁰ Thomas Johnson, e-mail message to author, June 17, 2017.

⁵¹ Kenneth Katzman and Clayton Thomas, "Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy," *Congressional Research Service Report* (2017): 6-7

Taliban, allowing the NA to march to Kabul.⁵² That would create further chaos in the country. The NA forces, despite promising the US that they would not enter Kabul did so on November 12, 2001. On December 7, 2001, the Taliban fled their last stronghold, Kandahar.⁵³

The idea of a “Moderate Taliban”

Aftermath the Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001, the idea that a “moderate Taliban” existed within the Taliban emerged. Even as the operation began, Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar emphasised the inclusion of Taliban moderates in any kind of political settlement for Afghanistan.⁵⁴ But, a defeated Taliban was not included in any of the discussions on Afghanistan’s future. They were locked out of the Bonn Conference that was held in December 2001 to build a democratic state for Afghanistan.⁵⁵ However, as the Taliban began to regroup, the prospect of rehabilitation and reintegration of former Taliban members started resurfacing. The idea had a backing of the Karzai government, whose then Chief-of-Staff, Umer Daudzai, confirmed that talks had taken place with “prominent” moderates from the Taliban regime.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, the Karzai government struggled to contain warlordism. The warlords openly defied the Afghan government by freeing Taliban leaders and even giving amnesty to a few. This included Gul Agha Shirzai and Gen. Rashid Dostum.⁵⁷ Many feared that the cabinet established by Karzai would marginalise the country’s majority faction, the Pashtuns, pushing them to seek support from Pakistan.⁵⁸ As Taliban forces launched attacks against the US bases and government officials in the South and the East, the idea of talking to certain “non-criminal” elements within the Taliban grew.⁵⁹ The leading US commander in Afghanistan, General

⁵² Ahmed Rashid, “US-British Bombing Raids Seek to Cripple, Not Rout, Taliban Forces in Kabul,” *Eurasianet*, October 8, 2001, accessed 17 June 2017,

<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav100901.shtml>

⁵³ “Armed Taliban flee Kandahar,” *The Telegraph*, December 7, 2001, accessed 17 June 2017,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1364616/Armed-Taliban-flee-Kandahar.html>

⁵⁴ Noreen S. Ahmed-Ullah, “Pakistan creates more distance between itself, Taliban,” *The Chicago Tribune*, 20 November 2001, accessed 26 June 2017, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/sns-worldtrade-distance-ct-story.html>

⁵⁵ Mark Turner, “Taliban ‘must be brought into dialogue’,” *The Financial Times*, January 30, 2006, accessed 26 June 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/2a238cb6-9116-11d9-a628-0000779e2340?mhq5j=e3>

⁵⁶ “Kabul courting Taliban ‘moderates’,” *United Press International*, October 20, 2003, accessed 27 June 2017, <http://www.upi.com/Archives/2003/10/20/Kabul-courting-Taliban-moderates/2211066622400/?spt=su>

⁵⁷ Ahmed Rashid, “Fledgling Afghan Government Faces Scourge of Warlordism-Local Leaders Who Ousted Taliban With Aid of U.S. Are Restoring Old Fiefs,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 16, 2002, accessed 27 June 2017, <http://www.ahmedrashid.com/wp-content/archives/afghanistan/articles/pdf/Copy%20warlords%20WSJ.pdf>

⁵⁸ Ahmed Rashid, “In Afghanistan’s New Government, Disturbing Signs Of Divisiveness,” *Wall Street Journal*, 24 June 2003, accessed 27 June 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1024875930473966240>

⁵⁹ V. Burnett, ‘You don’t have to die, Taliban told: The US has joined Kabul in efforts to bring Afghan foes in from the cold’, *Financial Times*, 17 December 2004, accessed 27 June 2017

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/d4ad2372-4fd1-11d9-86b3-00000e2511c8.html#axzz2xSefTXzq>



David Barno, remarked, ‘If you’re a rank and file Taliban member and you reject your past ... then you can become part of the future of Afghanistan’.⁶⁰ The thought found great support in Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration plan (DDR) which was launched by the United Nations in 2003.⁶¹ The US and the Afghan government sought to weaken the Taliban by getting individual members of the movement to switch allegiances.

The Taliban, on the other hand, with the support of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) regrouped itself in the South of the country by rebuilding its network in four key Southern Provinces including Urzughan, Helmand, Kandahar and Zabul.⁶² Additionally, it entered an alliance with Hekmatyar led Hizb-i-Islami, while the reorganization of the eastern provinces was handled by the Haqqani network.⁶³ By the time Hamid Karzai became Afghanistan’s first democratically elected President in 2004, the insurgency in Afghanistan had become intense. To deal with the deteriorating situation, Karzai created the independent Peace and Reconciliation Commission to encourage Taliban members to give up insurgency in exchange for amnesty.⁶⁴ But the efforts found little success as by 2005, the Taliban insurgency had grown further. Dadullah’s usage of IEDs and suicide bombers saw an escalation in the scale of violence.⁶⁵ Tentative efforts to reintegrate individual Taliban members into the governance of Afghanistan appeared inadequate. Against the backdrop of a failing, “talking to Taliban” agenda, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasauri asked the NATO countries to accept the Taliban and work towards a coalition government that excluded Hamid Karzai.⁶⁶

When it became increasingly clear that the Taliban was not interested in talking to Karzai, various actors stepped in. The willingness to reach out to the Taliban as a “collective movement” was reflected in the approach of the NATO/IASF countries as they engaged in official/secret talks with the Taliban. In July 2005, German officials met with Taliban

⁶⁰ John Bew et al, “Talking to the Taliban Hope over History?,” *The International Centre For The Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence* (2013): 22

⁶¹ Caroline A. Hartzell, “Missed Opportunities: The Impact of DDR on SSR in Afghanistan,” *United States Institute of Peace* (2011): 2-5

⁶² Bew et al, “Talking to the Taliban,” 22

⁶³ A. Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The US and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 243

⁶⁴ Bew et al, “Talking to the Taliban,” 22-23

⁶⁵ Bernd Horn, *From Cold War to New Millennium: The History of The Royal Canadian Regiment, 1953-2008* (Canada: Dundurn Press, 2011), 454

⁶⁶ Ahmed Rashid, “Accept Defeat by Taliban, Pakistan tells NATO,” *The Telegraph*, November 29, 2006, accessed 27 June 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1535524/Accept-defeat-by-Taliban-Pakistan-tells-Nato.html>



delegates. Similarly, there were reports of CIA and the British Service Intelligence having talks with the Taliban.⁶⁷ The involvement of multiple actors in engaging with a single movement that is referred to as network or networks increased confusion. Hopes of a moderate Taliban present in the group increased after Mullah Salam, a senior Taliban commander switched sides under the pressure of NATO/Afghan forces.⁶⁸ The incident, however, didn't provide the participants with a broader strategy to engage with the Taliban. Face with an intensifying conflict, the British Foreign Secretary David Miliband emphasised the need for a political strategy that included reintegration and reconciliation.⁶⁹ The confusion allowed the Taliban to exploit the growing cynicism among Afghans about the Karzai government which was deep into corruption.

Political Reconciliation: Prerequisite to Peace in Afghanistan

The failure in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table led many to question the discussion surrounding the presence of a “moderate Taliban” within the Taliban movement. Experts such as Thomas Rutting concluded that there was no organized or recognizable moderate faction in the Taliban that would outweigh the hardliners. The Taliban constitutes of a group of people who are pro-talks and want a practical political solution but still are conservative Islamists. They are, however, moderate when compared to the hardliners who only believe in a military solution. Both the groups compete for the allegiance of the foot soldiers.⁷⁰ The analysis was reflected in the actions of the Mullah Bardar, deputy of the late Mullah Omar who believed that the peace talks were in the favour of the Taliban as it would allow them to negotiate from a position of strength considering the Taliban virtually controlled several provinces.⁷¹ His actions, however, were not appreciated by Sirajuddin Haqqani, the leader of the Haqqani network which shares a close relationship with Pakistan. The element of tribe also affected the equation given Haqqani belonged to the Zardan tribe from eastern Paktia while Bardadar hailed from the Popolzai tribe in Kandahar.⁷² The arrest of Bardadar by Pakistani security services at a

⁶⁷ Bew et al, “Talking to the Taliban,” 22-24

⁶⁸ Bill Roggio, “Low-level Taliban leader surrenders in Afghanistan,” *The Long War Journal*, September 14, 2009, accessed 28 June 2017, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/09/low_level_taliban_leader_surre.php

⁶⁹ Bew et al, “Talking to the Taliban,” 28

⁷⁰ Rutting, “How Tribal,” 24-25

⁷¹ Hassan Khan, “To talk or not to talk: the Taliban’s internal divide,” *The Foreign Policy*, 10 December 2009, accessed 29 June 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/12/10/to-talk-or-not-to-talk-the-talibans-internal-divide/>

⁷² Khan, “Taliban’s internal divide.”

time when he was said have met UN's senior official Kai Eide, brought into light the determination of Pakistan to remain the central to the peace process.⁷³

Despite several efforts and the second Bonn conference in 2011, it became increasingly clear that that Taliban had no intention of moderating their tactics. Many of the former Taliban members who couldn't get back to their tribes were forced to return to the movement.⁷⁴ After 2006, the recruitment base of the Taliban expanded beyond the clerics and clerical students to include disenfranchised and frustrated youth. These fighters had little to do with the ideology of the movement but formed a strong force.⁷⁵ There was a growing belief within the Taliban movement that they would soon retake full of Afghanistan. The accidental 'Qur'an burnings' at Bagram Air Field and the massacre of 16 Afghan civilians in Kandahar by an American soldier further boosted the hardliners.⁷⁶ Lack of any significant political alternative played into the hands of the Taliban.

From a quasi-government struggling to establish a state like structure, the Taliban remoulded itself into an insurgent or a guerrilla movement. It established a shadow government, running parallel to the Karzai government. Despite Karzai winning the 2009 elections, the Taliban continued to use the name and signature of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan on online publications, night letters and official correspondence, treating themselves as a legitimate state representative.⁷⁷ The Taliban also developed an accommodating attitude towards communication technology.⁷⁸ With many of the older generation Taliban leaders either arrested or killed, it became likely that the Taliban would see representation of both old and new generation at the decision-making level.⁷⁹ The Taliban remained united under the charisma of Mullah Omar while the prospect of negotiations took a back seat. The initial idea of dividing the Taliban to negotiate with them would however run into problems after it emerged that the leader of the Taliban movement, Mullah Omar was dead.⁸⁰

⁷³ Bew et al, "Talking to the Taliban," 30-31

⁷⁴ Rutting, "How Tribal," 9

⁷⁵ Antonio Giustozzi, "Negotiating with the Taliban: Issues and Prospects," *The Century Foundation* (2010): 11-13

⁷⁶ Bew et al, "Talking to the Taliban," 38

⁷⁷ "Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Afghanistan: Night letters [Shab Nameha, Shabnamah, Shabnameh], including appearance (2010-2015)," *Refugee Board of Canada*, 10 February 2015, accessed 28 June 2017, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/54f02a6c4.html>

⁷⁸ Rutting, "How Tribal," 20-21

⁷⁹ Rutting, "How Tribal," 21-22

⁸⁰ "Mullah Omar: Taliban leader 'died in Pakistan in 2013'", *The BBC*, 29 July 2015, accessed 28 June 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33703097>

Dealing with factions: Taliban post Mullah Omar

In the last three years, the Taliban has seen two leadership changes. Both the promotions were accompanied by controversies as reports emerged of oppositions within the Taliban to the appointment of first, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor and later of Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada. Various Taliban members including Mullah Mohammad Rasool, who was later appointed as the leader of breakaway Afghan Taliban faction, disagreed with the way both the leaders were appointed.⁸¹ Following the installation of Mullah Mansoor as the head of Taliban, it was reported that the Taliban Shura Council was not consulted before the appointment of the new leader.⁸² Three of the 18 men constituting the Rahbari Shura accused him of engineering the succession.⁸³ Additionally, three senior members of the Taliban's political commission that has been based in Qatar since 2011 resigned to protest Mansoor's leadership. The head Tayyeb Agha disagreed with the appointment on the basis that it had been made outside Afghanistan and that Mansur had concealed Mullah Omar's death.⁸⁴

As Mansoor established surrounded himself with loyal members and demoted or removed leaders like Mutasem Agha Jan, Abdul Rauf Khadem and Abdul Qayum Zaker, Rasool launched his own faction. He named the faction the "Higher Council of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" and has managed to gain sympathy among Taliban networks.⁸⁵ Rasool found a strong leader in Dadullah who was appointed as his first deputy.⁸⁶ Dadullah's relationship with the Taliban as its subject had always been uneasy. However, before Dadullah could consolidate his position and that of Rasool's faction, he was reportedly killed by Mansur's fighters on 12 November 2015.⁸⁷ The rival faction currently includes prominent members such as Baz

⁸¹ Shereena Qazi, "Afghan Taliban: Haibatullah Akhundzada named new leader," *The Al Jazeera*, May 26, 2016, accessed 18 June 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/afghan-taliban-haibatullah-akhundzada-leader-160525045301080.html>

⁸² Shereena Qazi, "Taliban leaders dispute appointment of Mullah Mansoor", *The Al Jazeera*, August 4, 2016, accessed 18 June 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/taliban-leaders-dispute-appointment-mullah-mansoor-150731151533576.html>

⁸³ Borhan Osman, "Toward Fragmentation? Mapping the post-Omar Taleban", *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, November 24, 2015, accessed 20 June 2017, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/toward-fragmentation-mapping-the-post-omar-taleban/>

⁸⁴ Osman, "Toward Fragmentation?"

⁸⁵ "High Council of Afghanistan Islamic Emirate", *Global Security*, accessed 26 June 2017, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/hcaie.htm>

⁸⁶ "Breakaway group names Mulla Mohammad Rasool as leader," *The News*, November 3, 2015, accessed 27 June 2015, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/15517-breakaway-group-names-mulla-mohammad-rasool-as-leader>

⁸⁷ Nasim Hotak, "Dadullah killed by Mullah Mansoor loyalists: Zabul police chief," *Pajhwok*, November 12, accessed 27 June 2017, 2015, <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2015/11/12/dadullah-killed-mullah-mansoor-loyalists-zabul-police-chief>



Muhammad Haris who has a history of hostility with Mansoor, Raz Muhammad who controls most of the Zerkoh area in Shindand, Mullah Abdul Manan Niazi and Sher Muhammad Mansur.⁸⁸ All of them have held a significant role in the Taliban insurgency but have now joined Rasool's faction. Another group that has been increasingly hostile to Mullah Mansoor is the Fedai Mahaz that split from the mainstream Taliban in 2012. It tried grabbing media attention by claiming the murder of Swedish journalist in March 2014.⁸⁹ Fedai Mahaz, even made the claim that Mansoor had assassinated Mullah Omar.⁹⁰ Despite efforts, the group has failed to make any significant marks.

Current leader, Akhundzada, on the other hand, is derided in many quarters of Taliban for his lack of battlefield experience.⁹¹ The head of Military Council, Mullah Ibrahim Sadar, recently defied his demands, by refusing to send the cash from opium rich Helmand to the Quetta Shura. He went a step further and asked Akhudzada to leave the safe heavens of Pakistan and shift to Helmand.⁹² Complex relationships of power and authority that have been built over the decades appear to be breaking down as the divisions within Taliban multiply fast.

Over the years, several calculations have been made by actors who have accepted that the Taliban are significant power broker in the politics of Afghanistan. However, the involvement of multiple actors, as it was in case of the Northern alliance, has prevented the Taliban from rising above its factional interests and work towards a peaceful solution. The multiple lines of communication initiated by the groups have caused further chaos and confusion in the negotiation process.⁹³ The mode of communication adopted by the participants are often based on their convenience. Considering the growing divisions within the group, it becomes even more difficult to address the question about who to talk to within the movement.

The Taliban today is dictated by fragments of varying attitudes. The fear of a strengthening extreme hardliner fragment that is influenced by the ideologies of Al Qaeda and the Islamic

⁸⁸ Osman, "Toward Fragmentation?"

⁸⁹ Borhan Osman and Kate Clark, "The Murder of Swedish Journalist Nils Horner: an assessment of the Fedai Mahaz claim," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, March 19, 2014, accessed 28 June 2017, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-murder-of-swedish-journalist-nils-horner-an-assessment-of-the-fedai-mahaz-claim/>

⁹⁰ "Mullah Omar was poisoned to death, claims Fidayi Mahaz," *The Khaama Press*, August 1, 2015, accessed 28 June 2017, <http://www.khaama.com/mullah-omar-was-poisoned-to-death-claims-fidayi-mahaz-11350>

⁹¹ "Taliban facing financial crisis as civilian deaths deter donors", *The Guardian*, November 29, 2016, accessed 26 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/29/afghan-taliban-facing-financial-crisis-as-civilian-deaths-deter-donors>

⁹² "Taliban facing financial crisis"

⁹³ <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/ICSR-TT-Report.pdf>



State has made the situation even more complicated and dangerous. Meanwhile, the struggle of the lobby that is based in Doha drags on as the situation in Qatar worsens.⁹⁴ Even as President Ashraf Ghani tackles the crisis of confidence in his government, a part of Taliban has shown keen interest in the approaches made by Russia. In a statement posted on December 29, the Taliban praised the Moscow Tripartite; which includes China, Pakistan and Russia.⁹⁵ According to Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, the three countries have agreed to a flexible approach to remove certain Taliban members from United Nations sanctions lists as part of peaceful negotiations between Kabul and the Afghan government.⁹⁶ Many fear that the growing relationship between Russia and the militants will give the Taliban legitimacy as a potent military cum political force.

The hardliner component of the Taliban have succeeded in prolonging the war.⁹⁷ Despite the lack of a central authority, leadership and level of popular participation, the hardliners see no contradiction in achieving the status they had in 1996. Caught between a tribal society and an ultra-orthodox form of Islam, the network of networks claims to fully control 34 districts of Afghanistan.⁹⁸ The recent advancements made by the Taliban has further encouraged the group to follow a military line.⁹⁹ However, considering the divisions, appearance of the militant group Islamic State and continuing economic crisis it would be difficult for the Taliban to achieve an outright victory. Furthermore, external support to certain fragments and factions of Taliban might further deprive the group to rise above their interests and work towards a peaceful solution. The divisions within Taliban today are not just determined by internal contradictions but also by external forces including Russia, Pakistan, Iran and China.¹⁰⁰

Affiliated insurgent groups and Pakistan

Haqqani Network

⁹⁴ Katie Hunt, "Middle East freezes out Qatar: What you need to know," *The CNN*, June 7, 2017, accessed 20 June 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/06/middleeast/qatar-middle-east-diplomatic-freeze/index.html>

⁹⁵ Harsh V Pant, "Resurgent Russia Joins Great Game in South Asia," *Yale University*, March 28, 2017, accessed 25 June 2017, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/resurgent-russia-joins-great-game-south-asia>

⁹⁶ Thomas Joscelyn, "Russia's New Favorite Jihadis: The Taliban," *The Daily Beast*, March 1, 2017, accessed 25 June 2017, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/russias-new-favorite-jihadis-the-taliban>

⁹⁷ Ahmed Rashid, e-mail message to author, 15 June 2017

⁹⁸ Bill Roggio, "Afghan Taliban lists 'Percent of Country under the control of Mujahideen,'" *FDD'S Long War Journal*, March 28, 2017, accessed 20 June 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/afghan-taliban-lists-percent-of-country-under-the-control-of-mujahideen.php>

⁹⁹ Sanjay Kumar, "Ahmed Rashid on Afghanistan's Challenges in 2016," *The Diplomat*, March 24, 2016, accessed 25 June 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/03/ahmed-rashid-on-afghanistans-challenges-in-2016/>

¹⁰⁰ Ahmed Rashid, e-mail message to author, 15 June 2017



The Haqqani network operates as a crucial element of the Afghan Taliban. Over the years, it has managed to become more regional than tribal, expanding beyond the classical tribal boundaries to Wardak, Logar and Kabul provinces.¹⁰¹ The Haqqanis learned military technology from Al Qaeda and thus have better trained cadres. Sirajuddin Haqqani publically reaffirmed his allegiance to Mullah Omar in November 2011.¹⁰² In 2012, Sirajuddin himself denied claims that the Haqqani Network is a separate entity, instead describing his followers as one of many “fronts” within the Taliban.¹⁰³ However, the network’s closeness to the Pakistan army and ISI is not appreciated by many Taliban networks, who are unwilling to be controlled by the Pakistanis.¹⁰⁴

Experts believe that the Haqqani network has always been with the Taliban but at the same time it has been able to assert some independence. Siraj Haqqani as the deputy of Akhudzada is now the number two in the Taliban military committee. Taliban’s support for the Haqqani network was reflected recently when it defended the Haqqani network saying, none of their Mujahideen including those of Haqqani Sahib had any role in the deadly Kabul bombing on May 31.¹⁰⁵ Afghanistan National Directorate of Security blamed the Haqqani network for the blasts. Analysts believe that though the Haqqani network project certain independence in matters of sensitive military operations, when it comes to the politics of the Taliban, they are very much a part of the movement.¹⁰⁶

Hizb-e-Islami

Hizb-e-Islami is led by former warlord and once a sworn enemy of the Taliban Hekmatyar Gulbuddin. After the September 2001 attacks, he returned from Iran to fight with the Taliban. He has praised attacks on the US and International Forces. The relationship between Hizb-e-Islami and the Taliban is often termed turbulent. The equation came under question after Hekmatyar advised his supporters to help the Islamic State in its fight against the Taliban.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ Rutting, “How Tribal,” 23

¹⁰² Mark Silinsky, *The Taliban: Afghanistan’s Most Lethal Insurgents* (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2014): 140-142

¹⁰³ Thomas Joscelyn, “Taliban again affirms Haqqani Network is an integral part of group,” *Long War Journal*, June 2, 2017, accessed 28 June 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/06/taliban-again-affirms-haqqani-network-is-an-integral-part-of-group.php>

¹⁰⁴ Giustozzi, “Negotiating with the Taliban,” 14

¹⁰⁵ Joscelyn, “Taliban again affirms Haqqani Network.”

¹⁰⁶ Ahmed Rashid, e-mail message to author, 15 June 2017

¹⁰⁷ Tahir Khan, “Enemy of enemy: Hekmatyar support for IS stuns observers,” *The Express Tribune*, July 7, 2015, accessed 28 June 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/916168/enemy-of-enemy-hekmatyar-support-for-is-stuns-observers/>

The network also signed a peace deal with the Ghani government, paving the path for Hekmatyar, who had been living in exile to make a political comeback.¹⁰⁸

Pakistan

A recent report by the Pentagon said that many “Afghan-oriented militant groups, including the Taliban and Haqqani Network, retain freedom of action inside Pakistani territory and benefit from support from elements of the Pakistani government.”¹⁰⁹ Pakistan remains a major supporter of the Taliban. However, if reports are to be believed, the relationship between the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan hasn’t always been cosy. According to 2012 report prepared by ISAF interrogators, various low-level and high-level detainees have described Pakistan as “untrustworthy,” “manipulative,” “controlling,” and “demeaning.” They also complained of Pakistan’s “willingness to immediately arrest any Taliban personnel deemed uncooperative. The detainees spoke about the tight control Pakistan’s intelligence agency exerts over them. They concluded that they have little choice but to accept it so long as they require a sanctuary in Pakistan.”¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, Pakistan remains central to sustenance of the Taliban.

Conclusion

Since 2000, the Taliban has experienced several intra-Taliban differences, but it has managed to stick together and operate as a strong insurgent movement. The death of Mullah Omar, however, has exposed serious fissures within the Taliban movement, particularly with regards to the successor of the former *Amir-ul Momineen*. While both Mansur and Akhundzada have made a claim to his title, neither of the leaders command the kind of devotion as possessed by Mullah Omar. The fragmentations have however not stopped the group from engaging in military assaults. Over the past 16 years, the Taliban has gathered strength and has inflicted massive violence upon civilians, Americans, the Afghan government and various forces fighting them.

The United States has once again reenergised the military dimension by sending as many as 5000 troops to Afghanistan. But many fear that it is too late. When James Mattis, was called

¹⁰⁸ “Afghanistan: Hezb-i-Islami armed group signs peace deal,” *Al Jazeera*, September 23, 2016, accessed 28 June 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/09/gulbuddin-hekmatyar-group-signs-afghan-peace-deal-160922093420326.html>

¹⁰⁹ “Haqqani network and Taliban retain freedom of action in Pakistan: US,” *The Khaama Press*, June 22, 2017, accessed 29 June 2017, <http://www.khaama.com/haqqani-network-and-taliban-retain-freedom-of-action-in-pakistan-us-03000>

¹¹⁰ Michael Kugelmann, “When the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban Unite,” *The Foreign Policy*, March 25, 2014, accessed 29 June 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/25/when-the-afghan-and-pakistani-taliban-unite/>



before the Senate Armed Services Committee to testify about the conflict in Afghanistan, he said: “We are not winning in Afghanistan right now”. Meanwhile, there have been increasing demands among warlords, politicians and Ghani’s cabinet members asking for him to resign. The anger towards Ghani is also reflected in the mood of the population who have taken to the streets to protest the government’s inability to protect them.

As devastating suicide bombings hit Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan, it is the Ghani government that will suffer the most. As a political crisis unfolds in Afghanistan, the people are once again left with no option but to accept their fate. With America's attention divided between the Islamic State and the Taliban, return of warlords who are threatening the government, growing opposition against the government and a collapsing economy, the situation in Afghanistan is expected to worsen. Pakistan, despite its criticisms, remains a key player in dealing with a fractured Taliban. As President Ashraf Ghani issues the last call for Taliban to join peace talks, any collapse in the political leadership will term to be catastrophic for the entire region.