

## **Afghanistan, Taliban and the Al-Qaida – A Brief History**

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**Abstract:** *The Conflict in Afghanistan shows no end in sight and ethnic strife and terrorism continue to plague the country and its nascent government. Afghanistan's neighbouring countries such as Pakistan, Iran and India have interests in the region and continue to influence the affairs in Afghanistan since the fall of Zahir Shah's government. The nature of each country's involvement is determined by its own national ideology and ethos. To complicate affairs further non-regional powers' involvement such as USSR and now the USA provokes the fiercely independent Afghans and provides an excuse for regional powers to intervene. Historically, therefore, superpower involvement only acts as a catalyst for regional powers' actions in the strategically located country. The reasons, however, for over forty years Afghans continue to be molded by foreign influence rather than by their own national interests can be confusing at times. This article attempts to briefly understand the historical background of the Afghan crises, the developments since the 9/11 attacks and its future prospects which is essential to regional stability and security.*

**Keywords:** *Afghanistan, Taliban, Al-Qaida, History*

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Date of Submission: 07-09-2017

Date of acceptance: 20-09-2017

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The region comprising modern Afghanistan began taking shape in 1747 during the reign of Ahmad Shah Durrani.<sup>1</sup> Its modern borders were shaped largely as a result of competition between British and Russian imperialism during 19<sup>th</sup> century. The history of this country has been dominated by a global turmoil and has been a hot bed of conflicts as a result of the Cold War's super power rivalry. Afghanistan became a Soviet-style communist state in the 1970s,<sup>2</sup> a move that triggered more than two decades of civil war. Various guerrilla groups, or Mujahideen, emerged to fight against communism (many with external, particularly US help) and eventually forced Russian troops to withdraw. The communist regime, led by Dr Mohammed Najibullah, in power since 1986, continued with the support of the Soviet Army until 1992.<sup>3</sup> However, a failed coup in the Soviet Union led to the removal of the regime's hard-line supporters.

In 1994 the overwhelmingly Pashtun Taliban, who proposed the creation of an Islamic government, emerged.<sup>4</sup> Consisting largely of Afghan refugees educated at madrassas (Islamic schools) in Pakistan, they obtained success partly by tapping disenchantment at the infighting among the other Mujahideen groups, although their organization and armaments raised suspicions of Pakistani involvement.<sup>5</sup> They were ousted from power in late 2001 by the US. In October 2004 Hamid Karzai, the US-backed leader of the transitional Authority, became Afghanistan's first popularly elected president, with 55.4% of the 4.4 million votes.<sup>6</sup>

Relations between the center and provinces remain unstable. Former militia leaders have control or strongholds in many parts of the country beyond Kabul, and in these regions the influence of the central government is rather weak. Particular concern surrounds issues such as tax collection and the enforcement of law (including the eradication of opium poppy cultivation). Disarmament and disbanding of militias, or their incorporation into national security bodies, remain priorities. There are fears that the new provincial assemblies may become tools for former warlords or the Taliban to turn against the government.

Even as a monarchy, Afghanistan never had a properly functioning central government capable of exerting authority across the entire country. After the Soviet-backed communist administration crumbled, religious, regional, linguistic and ethnic divisions deepened, yielding a patchwork of often-autonomous freedoms controlled by mutually antagonistic, power-hungry warlords, many of whom have re-emerged since the fall of Taliban and some of whom are represented in the government.

### **II. REGIONAL INFLUENCES**

Afghanistan's position at the crossroads of central and southern Asia has long led its neighbours and other great powers to jockey for influence in the country's affairs. In the mid-1970s Pakistani military began to train secretly young Afghan Islamists to challenge Kabul's increasingly pro-Moscow government. Pakistan's inter Services intelligence agency (ISI) first backed the Hezb-i-Islami leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and the bulk of US support was channeled through him.<sup>7</sup> After he failed to consolidate power, the ISI played a role in

creating the Taliban and in 1996.<sup>8</sup> Pakistan was the first country to recognize the new regime.

Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan remain tense and the former's role in supporting the Taliban is the source of most ill feelings. Afghanistan has accused Pakistan of not doing enough to suppress the remnants of the Taliban such as the Haqqani network, many of whom are based in northwestern Pakistan.<sup>9</sup> In addition, there have been tensions over trade. Afghanistan's only access to the sea lies through Pakistan and officials have blamed Pakistan for thefts, delays and border closures that have impeded trade, especially during political clashes between the two nations. For its part, Pakistan is concerned about growing Indian, US and Iranian influence in Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup>

As a landlocked country, Afghanistan depends on transit rights through its neighbors. Traditionally, most of its trade is conducted through Pakistan. The southern city of Karachi is the nearest port. Trade with the Soviet Union rose during the Soviet occupation. Although links with other countries (notably Iran) have improved, Pakistan remains the most important transit route. However, even under the Taliban, trading relations with Pakistan were strained. The Pakistani authorities became increasingly annoyed for blatant smuggling into the country via Afghanistan. Afghans traders do not pay duty to Pakistan for goods imported from a third country, but around 80% of goods entering Afghanistan are subsequently smuggled back to Pakistan.<sup>11</sup> Afghanistan, for its part, has accused Pakistan of arbitrarily holding up goods on the border, cutting off its lifeline to sea borne trade, and of allowing theft of goods traveling from Karachi to Afghanistan.

Iran has also played a growing role in the country. Among Iran's many reasons for being interested in Afghanistan are concerns for the welfare of the Shia Hazara minority and its hope that the remaining Afghan refugees in Iran can return home. They are also concerned about the drug trade.<sup>12</sup> Iran also views the rise of the Sunni Taliban, and Pakistan's support for them, with concern. In 1995 Iran sent troops across the border to help Ismael Khan's fighters, and it welcomed Mr Ismael Khan and hundreds of his combatants when they fled across the border later that year.<sup>13</sup> Iran also sheltered Abdul Rashid Dostum and Hezb-i-Wahdat Karim Khalili after they lost their territories to the Taliban. Mr Ismael Khan resurfaced in Iran after escaping from a Taliban jail in 2000 and Mr Hekmatyar lived there for many years until he was forced out in early 2002 for announcing his support to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.<sup>14</sup>

Afghanistan's economy, meanwhile, has been devastated by years of conflict, but has grown at rapidly since the collapse of the Taliban government in 2001. The economy remains heavily dependent upon inflows of foreign aid to finance the government budget and cover the massive current-account deficit. Afghanistan's most important industry is the cultivation of poppies for heroin and opium production. It remains illegal and foreign agencies have led a three-year campaign against poppy growing, but Afghanistan continues to produce over 80% of the world's opium.<sup>15</sup>

During its rule in the early 1990s, the Jamiat-e-Islami-led administration's main economic policy priority was to secure sufficient funds to meet its military objectives so that it could retain power and extend its control, where possible, beyond the capital, Kabul.<sup>16</sup> The devastated economy's capacity to generate resources for the government was extremely limited. The formal tax system, which was previously scarcely functional, had completely collapsed early in the war. An informal tax system grew up quickly following the mujahideen takeover as local commander's levied arbitrary tariffs on commercial traffic passing through their territory. However, little revenue reached Kabul. The Taliban earned favor in the areas that they conquered by removing the checkpoints erected for this purpose, and received generous donations from grateful local traders, but in the later stages of Taliban rule there was a drift back to the previous system.<sup>17</sup>

### **III. RISE OF TALIBAN AND AL-QAIDA**

Taliban rose to prominence in 1994 as a new religious group formed out of Peshawar, Pakistan. Soon afterwards, this group was used by the government of Pakistan to help open the transit road from Pakistan border through Kandahar to Turkmenistan. Although this group was made of religious students trained in Pakistan, even in their first operation for opening this transit road, ISI agents and even Pakistani armed forces played a major role.<sup>18</sup>

The active involvement of the Pakistani military intelligence establishment in keeping the Taliban and the Hezb-e-Islami (HEI) alive and active is not only attested to by independent reports coming from the NWFP and Balochistan, but is also corroborated by reports in the Pakistani media itself as well as by periodic statements from successive Afghan Presidents, the US diplomats in Kabul and writings by well-known Pakistani experts on Afghanistan such as Ahmed Rashid. The US, with its large intelligence presence in Pakistan and large military and intelligence presence in Afghanistan, is not unaware of the continuing Pakistani complicity with the dregs of the Taliban and the HEI.<sup>19</sup>

The Soviet withdrawal set the stage for the rise of Osama Bin Laden, the son of a billionaire Saudi businessman, a member of the Afghan Mujahedeen against the Soviet invasion and backed by the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Together with Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood leader, Abdullah Azzam, Osama bin Laden ran one of the seven main militias involved in the fighting.<sup>20</sup> They established military training bases

in Afghanistan and founded Maktab AL Khidamat, or Services Office, a support network that provided recruits and money through worldwide centers, including in the U.S.<sup>21</sup>

Bin Laden decided to establish Al-Qaeda in 1988, based on personal affiliations created during the fighting in Afghanistan as well as on his own international network, reputation and access to large sums of money. The following year Azzam was assassinated. After the war ended, the Afghan-Arabs, (as the mostly non-Afghan volunteers who fought the Soviets were known) either returned to their countries of origin or joined conflicts in Somalia, the Balkans and Chechnya. This benefited Al-Qaeda's global reach and later helped cultivate the second generations of Al-Qaeda terrorists.<sup>22</sup>

Following the first Gulf War, Al-Qaeda shifted its focus to fighting the growing US presence in the Middle East, particularly in Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's most sacred shrines.<sup>23</sup> Al-Qaeda vociferously opposed the stationing of U.S. troops on what it considered the holiest of Islamic lands and waged an extended campaign of terrorism against the Saudi rulers, whom bin Laden, deemed to be false Muslims. The ultimate goal of this campaign was to depose the Saudi royal family and install an Islamic regime on the Peninsula.<sup>24</sup> The Saudi regime subsequently deported bin Laden in 1992 and revoked his citizenship in 1994.

In 1991 bin Laden moved to Sudan, where he operated until 1996. During this period, Al-Qaeda established connections with other terrorist organizations with the help of its Sudanese hosts and Iran.<sup>25</sup> While in Sudan, Al-Qaeda was involved in several terror attacks and guerrilla actions carried out by other organizations. In May 1996, following U.S. Pressure on the Sudanese government, bin Laden moved to Afghanistan where he allied himself with the ruling Taliban.<sup>26</sup>

Al-Qaeda did not have a single headquarters. From 1991 to 1996, Al-Qaeda worked out of Pakistan along the Afghan border, or inside Pakistani cities. Al-Qaeda has autonomous underground cells in some 100 countries, including the United States. Law enforcement has broken up Al-Qaeda cells in the United Kingdom, the United States, Italy France, Spain, Germany, Albania, Uganda and elsewhere.

#### **IV. GROUND REALITIES**

The terrorist infrastructure of the Taliban and the HEI in Pakistani territory continued to be intact under the protection of the ISI.<sup>27</sup> While helping the US to put an end to the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan post-9/11, the ISI, ensured that the Taliban's organizational capability and terrorist infrastructure remained unaffected so that Pakistan could use them to protect its strategic interests in the future. The Amir of the Taliban Mullah Omar, Gulbuddin Hikmatyar and many of their senior colleagues and Jihadi cadres were given sanctuary in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Balochistan.<sup>28</sup> Not only the provincial Government of the NWFP, which is run by the fundamentalist coalition called the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), and of Balochistan, in which the MMA is an active partner in a coalition with the Pakistan Muslim League, the surrogate political party of Musharraf, but even the Pakistani military intelligence establishment has been providing funds, protection and sanctuaries to the Taliban and the HEI in Pakistan territory.

There is a difference in the US perceptions of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. It looks upon Al-Qaeda as continuing to pose a threat to US homeland security. The US is therefore, determined not to relent in its war against it, until after having killed bin Laden, Al-Zawahiri and its other senior operatives too are captured or killed. While it perceives the surviving Taliban as posing a threat to peace and security in Afghanistan, it does not view it as a threat to US homeland security. Its pre and post-9/11 anger against the Taliban was due to its action in giving shelter to Al-Qaeda and its terrorist infrastructure in Afghan territory.<sup>29</sup>

Considerable supports exist for both Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in southern Afghanistan and Within the Pakistan border regions of Afghanistan. In addition, Al-Qaeda's support network outside Afghanistan receives considerable backing from international terrorist groups. These associations may or may not be fulltime members of Al-Qaeda, but clearly support the Organization's objectives.

Despite US military presence and the presence of an international security assistance force, Remnants of the former Taliban regime, the terrorist Al-Qaeda network, and other groups hostile to the current government and Americans, as well as criminal elements, remain active throughout the country. Al-Qaeda elements have been known to be trying to establish new strongholds both inside and outside Afghanistan. Terrorist actions include, but are not limited to suicide operations, bombings, assaults and Kidnappings. Other terrorist threats include attacks by conventional weapons, improvised explosive devices and possible chemical and biological warfare agents.<sup>30</sup>

Pakistan and Afghanistan are acknowledged epicenters of international terrorism.<sup>31</sup> Taliban was a byproduct of this action. Seeing the well oiled organization that recruited, armed, trained and controlled Taliban, it would be reasonable to assume that the key players in Pakistan too are appropriately motivated by the ideology of terrorism. With key players being the Army, ISI and political parties, it is difficult to assess how President Musharraf has so very easily switched over to helping USA bomb the Taliban into oblivion. It is difficult to believe that the entire society's mindset has changed diametrically. There is therefore, a real danger of reverse Talibanization of Pakistan society abetted by over 4,000 madrassas.<sup>32</sup>

Lt Gen Ahmed Mahmud, Director General of ISI and Lt Gen Muzaffer Usmani, Deputy Chief of the Army Staff were amongst the senior generals who were sacked as they had radical Islamic views and reported to be staunch supporters of the Taliban.<sup>33</sup> Their replacements were officers whose thinking was more in line with Musharraf's new policy toward Kabul. "The Taliban's days are numbered" he had declared.<sup>34</sup> However the alliance of Islamic parties, Muttahida Majlis Amal (MMA), government in the North West Frontier province, adjoining Afghanistan, is allowing greater Taliban activity against the Afghan government. The president with whatever little Knowledge of political administration will be hard pressed to de-radicalize the entire society.

## V. CONCLUSION

Prior to US military operations in Afghanistan, Islamist extremists from around the world, to include North America, Europe, the Middle East, and central, south, and Southeast Asia used Afghanistan as a training ground and base of operations for their worldwide terrorist activities. The former Afghanistan government, the Taliban, permitted the operation and training and indoctrination facilities for non-Afghans and provided logistic support to members of various terrorist organizations and Mujahedin, including those waging jihad in Chechnya, Lebanon, Kosovo, Kashmir, and elsewhere.<sup>35</sup>

It is therefore unlikely that the present Pakistani establishment will do a volte-face and stop supporting the elements it has been in Afghanistan since the 1970s anytime in the near future. The reason for this unlikely outcome is simple – that the Pakistani establishment has no incentive to shift away from a policy which puts a pro-Islamabad government into power in Kabul. To affect this outcome, the Pakistan establishment shall continue to use the Pashtuns who are concentrated in the southern and eastern districts of Afghanistan, form the largest ethnic group within Afghanistan and have close ties of kinship within Pakistan's NWFP. It is of no consequence whether this happens through an organisation with an ideology of extremist Islam as long as it is friendly to Islamabad and provides it with the strategic depth it so earnestly seeks in the west.

The US meanwhile has already spent time in Afghanistan fighting a war which has been the longest in its history. The Al-Qaeda and Taliban have been severely weakened, but the war continues with the Haqqani Network, a Taliban proxy and having the same ideological goals as the Taliban based out of lawless Afghan-Pak border and supported by the Pakistan ISI. The US thus seeks to forge an exit strategy and pull its troops out of a war that is essentially unwinnable. In doing so, it seeks to transfer the task of providing stability to the nascent Afghan government whose ability to do so is questionable at best. The country is still very much divided along ethnic lines and it is alleged that the representation of the largest ethnic group, i.e., the Pashtuns is still miniscule in the new Afghan Security Forces. Such lack of representation is obviously because of the close kinsmanship between the Pashtuns and the Taliban.

Throughout its history Afghanistan has been at the crossroads of civilizations and its modern history has been influenced by its larger neighbors. Whether the new Afghan government shall be able to withstand its final crucible after the military drawdown and lay the foundations of a new Afghanistan or wither away like so many before it in the face of its ethno-tribal differences remains to be seen.

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International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 4593, Journal no. 47449.

Dr Ashutosh Singh. “Afghanistan, Taliban and the Al-Qaida – A Brief History.” International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention(IJHSSI), vol. 6, no. 9, 2017, pp. 62–66.