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**HUMAN GEOGRAPHY IN THE AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN REGION:  
UNDERMINING THE TALIBAN USING TRADITIONAL PASHTUN  
SOCIAL STRUCTURES**

by

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**Major, U.S. Army**

**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College, the Department of the Navy, or the Department of the Army.**

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## **Abstract**

The Taliban is a largely Pashtun insurgent movement operating throughout Afghanistan and Pakistan. Much of its ideology is based on Saudi Arabian-influenced Wahabbist thought, and as such is alien to Pashtun culture. It is in direct conflict with the traditional Pashtun social code of Pashtunwali and has subverted the traditional tribal structure of the Pashtun. Coalition Forces should support and strengthen traditional Pashtun tribal leaders and their traditional social structure in Afghanistan and Pakistan in order to isolate the Taliban insurgency, enabling the achievement of Coalition end state objectives.

## INTRODUCTION

More than seven years since the initiation of hostilities in Afghanistan, the U.S. is at war with a resurgent Taliban insurgency and conflict termination is nowhere in sight. The Taliban has grown in strength throughout eastern and southern Afghanistan, controls significant portions of the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) and the Northwest Frontier Provinces (NWFP) in Pakistan, and some analysts now predict that it may be developing into a transnational terrorist organization that threatens the very survival of the current Pakistani regime.<sup>1</sup>

The insurgency now being fought in Afghanistan is inextricably linked to the events taking place in Pakistan, and presents a wicked problem for any strategic thinker or policy maker. To even begin to tackle this, it is important to first define the nature of the problem.

In the words of Carl von Clausewitz:

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking: neither mistaking it for, or trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.<sup>2</sup>

To achieve the desired end state in Afghanistan, coalition forces should defeat the Taliban insurgency. This research paper is necessarily limited in length and scope and does not attempt to provide a “silver bullet” that will bring about a quick and decisive victory. Rather, it will narrowly focus on analyzing the human geography in the Afghanistan - Pakistan region in order to develop specific strategies to undermine the Taliban insurgency. Coalition forces should support and strengthen traditional Pashtun tribal leaders and their

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan S. Landy, “U.S. Experts: Pakistan on Course to Become Islamist State ,” *McClatchy Newspapers*, April 16, 2009, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/254/story/66368.html> (accessed April 16, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 88.

traditional social structure in Afghanistan and Pakistan in order to isolate the Taliban insurgency from its support base among the populace in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This will help to enable the achievement of Coalition end state objectives. The successful counterinsurgent should make effective use of the many tools in the kit bag in order to defeat an insurgency; this paper is intended to add a few tools to that kit bag.

Every insurgency is different, presenting its own unique characteristics and challenges, but there are commonalities. Subject matter experts generally agree that support of the populace, whether willing or coerced, is essential for the insurgent to achieve his ends. Mao Zedong opined that the support of the populace allowed the insurgent to move freely among them as fish swim in the sea. By removing that support, the insurgent is forced into the open where he can be decisively engaged or forced in to hiding where he is no longer a menace.

Understanding the social dynamics at play in the Afghanistan - Pakistan region also allows the counterinsurgent to develop strategies to undermine the Taliban's support among Pashtun tribes of Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as attack the Taliban strategy for maintaining that support. The Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu stated that "...what is of supreme importance is to attack the enemy's strategy. Next best is to attack his alliances."<sup>3</sup>

This paper will start with basic background information on the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the ethnic composition of its populace, and a general overview of the insurgency that is currently active in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The discussion section of the paper will begin by looking more specifically at the Pashtun ethnic group in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, its culture, and its traditional tribal-based social system, known as

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<sup>3</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, translated by Ralph D. Sawyer and Mei-chun Lee Sawyer, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 50.

Pashtunwali. The discussion will then focus on the Taliban and its Wahabbist system of governance, and compare and contrast that system to Pashtunwali. The conclusion will show how Pashtunwali is incompatible with the belief system of the Taliban, and the paper will make recommendations on how to undermine the Taliban by supporting traditional tribal leaders and their social code of Pashtunwali.

## BACKGROUND

Afghanistan is roughly the size of Texas and is composed of 34 different provinces. Its major ethnic groups are Pashtun (42%), Tajik (27%), Hazara (9%), and Uzbek (9%), as well as several other ethnicities scattered throughout the country<sup>4</sup>. The Pashtun are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan (approximately 15 million), and are also present in Pakistan in large numbers (approximately 28 million). Much like the Kurds of Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, the Pashtun are one of the largest ethnic groups on the planet to lack their own sovereign state.

Most Pashtuns, as well as the government of Afghanistan, do not recognize the Durand line separating

Afghanistan and Pakistan as a legitimate border.<sup>5</sup> Pashtuns speak of an area they call Pashtunistan that encompasses ancestral Pashtun lands on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. It is a porous border, with families, clans, tribes, and business ventures frequently stretching across the

Figure 1. The Afghanistan-Pakistan Border and Frontier Area



SOURCE: U.S. Department of State, 2007.

border, conducting daily crossings. Because of this, any discussion of Pashtun society or its relationship to Afghan politics must also include the Pashtuns who reside in Pakistan.

<sup>4</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Afghanistan," *CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html> (accessed April 24, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "No Sign Until the Burst of Fire", *International Security* 32, no. 4 (Spring 2008), 68.

There are approximately 350 Pashtun tribes, each consisting of several clans or *khels*. As the previous map shows, the Pashtun “nation” spreads across the border area. Their “nation” existed long before the establishment of Pakistan or Afghanistan, and a line on the map means little or nothing to them.

Among all the ethnic groups present in Afghanistan - Pakistan, only the Pashtun are present in significant numbers in the Taliban insurgency. This is not to say that all (or even most) Pashtun are Taliban. However, most Taliban insurgents are Pashtun.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, this paper discusses the insurgency largely in the context of Pashtun culture and society.

There are at least three major insurgent groups operating in Afghanistan: the neo-Taliban (formed in the wake of the overthrow of the previous Taliban regime), the Haqqani network, and Hezb-e-Islam Gulbuddin (HiG).<sup>7</sup> In Pakistan, there are the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (“Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Law” or TNSM), as well as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (“Students Movement of Pakistan”) both of which are commonly referred to as the Pakistani Taliban.<sup>8</sup> All of these groups draw the overwhelming majority of their membership from the Pashtun people. While there are disagreements over leadership and alliances are ever-changing, these groups form a loose confederation generically referred to as the Taliban. On any given day any or all of these groups may be participating in insurgent activities in Afghanistan.

After their regime was defeated in 2001, the Taliban never quite disappeared from the scene. Those who managed to flee Coalition Forces crossed the border into Pakistan and set

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<sup>6</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban – Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Anand Gopal, “Key Afghan Insurgents Open Door to Talks,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 19, 2009, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0319/p01s01-wosc.html> (accessed April 25, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Bill Roggio, “Analysis: Pakistani TNSM serves as Taliban front,” *The Long War Journal*, April 11, 2009, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/04/analysis\\_pakistani\\_t.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/04/analysis_pakistani_t.php) (accessed April 25, 2009).

up operations there.<sup>9</sup> Almost immediately, they began to rebuild and rearm. Following a recruiting drive from 2002 onward, there was a steady infiltration across the Pakistan border of Taliban fighters. This eventually spread throughout southeastern Afghanistan reaching as far into the interior as the Ghor and Oruzgan provinces.<sup>10</sup> By 2006 Coalition forces were reporting attacks by as many as 400 Taliban insurgents in the Helmand and Kandahar provinces.<sup>11</sup> In July 2008, Taliban forces attacked and overran a US outpost in the Kunar province, killing nine U.S. soldiers in a surprising demonstration of their increased capabilities since the overthrow of their regime.<sup>12</sup>

The situation has also deteriorated in Pakistan. The insurgency has a massive sanctuary in Pakistan, and it continues to grow. This is a critical factor for the Taliban; the availability of a sanctuary is a common thread running through most successful insurgencies. This allows the insurgent to enter contested territory, conduct combat operations, and then flee to his sanctuary to rest, recuperate, recruit, retrain, and rearm. Virtually unmolested in his sanctuary, the insurgent is then able to make contact with his enemy at the time and place of his choosing.

The sanctuary in Pakistan is unique in that, for all practical purposes, it is sponsored by the government of Pakistan, an erstwhile “ally” in the war against the Taliban. The Taliban has systematically exploited Pakistan’s failure to exert government control over the FATA and NWFP and created a sanctuary. They have successfully engaged the Pakistani

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<sup>9</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent Into Chaos: the United States and the failure of nation building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2008), 270.

<sup>10</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Carlotta Gall, “9 Americans Die in Afghan Attack,” *New York Times*, July 14, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/14/world/asia/14afghan.html> (accessed February 26, 2009).

military and forced the government to accept their terms – to the extent that the government has released Taliban prisoners, returned their weapons, and paid damages.<sup>13</sup>

When pressured, the government of Pakistan has reluctantly confronted Taliban advances outside of the border area, but indicators point to a continued spread of Taliban control in Pakistan.<sup>14</sup> The Pakistani government signed a peace accord with one of the largest Pakistani-based Taliban groups in February of 2009<sup>15</sup> which provided for local institution of Sharia law in the Swat valley (once a popular resort destination referred to as “the Switzerland of Pakistan”) . This effectively ceded control of the Swat valley to the Taliban, and in the ensuing weeks the Taliban has attempted to extend their influence into the neighboring district of Buner.<sup>16</sup> The Taliban is now the *de facto* government in large parts of the Afghanistan - Pakistan border area.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 271-274.

<sup>14</sup> Congressional Research Service, “Afghanistan: Post-War Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy,” September 29, 2008, 41.

<sup>15</sup> Farhat Taj, “Life In Swat After The Peace Deal,” *Pashtun Post* (April 13, 2009), <http://www.pashtunpost.com/news.php?news=230&category=2> (accessed April 13, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Bill Roggio, “Taliban Move on Buner Despite Promise to Withdraw,” *The Long War Journal* (April 10 2009), [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/04/taliban\\_move\\_on\\_bune.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/04/taliban_move_on_bune.php) (accessed May 2, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Jane’s Information Group, “Tribal tribulations - The Pakistani Taliban in Waziristan,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review* (January 13, 2009), [http://www.janes.com/news/defence/land/jir/jir090115\\_1\\_n.shtml](http://www.janes.com/news/defence/land/jir/jir090115_1_n.shtml) (accessed January 15, 2009).

## DISCUSSION

The Pashtun tribes have a historical reputation as jealous guardians of their independence, and are more than willing to resort to violence to maintain their way of life. They are fierce fighters, as witnessed by one British veteran during operations in what is now Pakistan, “Probably no sign till the burst of fire, and then the swift rush with knives, the stripping of the dead, and the unhurried mutilation of the infidels.”<sup>18</sup> They value their independence above almost all else. As a tribesman told a visiting British official in 1809, “We are content with discord, we are content with alarms, we are content with blood...we will never be content with a master.”<sup>19</sup> Every Pashtun sees himself as an independent and free man and accepts no man as his ruler.

This is not so say, however, that the Pashtun are lawless. They have a very strict social code, the cornerstone of which is the code of Pashtunwali, which literally means “to do Pashtun” or “the way of the Pashtun.” It is an “uncompromising social code so profoundly at odds with Western mores that it constantly brings one up with a jolt.”<sup>20</sup> It places great value on a communal sense of independence, justice, hospitality, forgiveness, and tolerance.<sup>21</sup> It can be described as the Pashtun tribes’ collective expectations of their members to conform to accepted social norms and customs.

As might be expected of a people who put great value in their independence, it places a premium on group consensus to resolve conflicts rather than imposition of a judgment from

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<sup>18</sup> General Sir Andrew Skeen, *Passing it on: Short Talks on Tribal Fighting in the Northwest Frontier of India* (London: Gale, Polden, and Aldershot, 1939), 8.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban* (New York, NY: Da Capo, 2002), 134.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Allen, *Soldier Sahibs: The Daring Adventurers who Tamed India’s Northwest Frontier* (New York, NY: Carrol and Graf, 2000), 13.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “No Sign Until the Burst of Fire,” 59.

a higher authority. Most important issues are discussed and resolved as a group.<sup>22</sup> More serious matters – heinous crimes, treaty discussions, and the like – are referred to a *jirga*, which is a traditional assembly of all the adult males of the tribe. The *jirga* is an egalitarian construct driven by group consensus and willing compliance with its decisions; it is traditionally accepted as having the full weight of law. Once a Pashtun submits to be judged by a *jirga*, he is bound to accept its outcome. Should he refuse to accept the *jirga*'s judgment he is subject to having his houses burned and expulsion from the community.

Pashtunwali also encompasses four personal core values: honor, revenge, freedom, and chivalry. First and foremost to a Pashtun male are his personal independence and honor; he answers to no man. His sense of personal honor is paramount; if it is damaged, he is bound by his social code to take revenge.<sup>23</sup> If he fails to do so, he risks complete disgrace, which means he will be completely ostracized and expelled from his community. This is important to remember when conducting operations in Pashtun areas. If soldiers force entry into a Pashtun's home, he is dishonored. If they enter the home's female quarter, his women are dishonored. If he is detained and forcibly removed in front of his neighbors, he is disgraced. He must take revenge to restore his honor.

Pashtunwali is not anarchy, but rather an “alternative form of social organization with and advanced conflict resolution mechanism.”<sup>24</sup> It accomplishes this without courthouses, police, prisons, lawyers, or executioners by using *jirgas*, which are able to resolve an estimated 95 per cent of the cases brought before them.<sup>25</sup> Pashtuns believe that their social

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<sup>22</sup> Jolanta Sierakowska-Dyndo, “Tribalism and Afghan Political Traditions” (Warsaw: Institute of Oriental Studies, University of Warsaw, January 2003), [http://www.wgsr.uw.edu.pl/pub/uploads/aps04/5Sierakowska-Dydo\\_Trybalism.pdf](http://www.wgsr.uw.edu.pl/pub/uploads/aps04/5Sierakowska-Dydo_Trybalism.pdf) (accessed April 25, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> “Honour Among Them,” *The Economist*, (December 19, 2006), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “No Sign Until the Burst of Fire”, 61.

<sup>25</sup> Carl Rochibaud, “Afghanistan's Three Legal Systems,” *Afghanistan Watch* (January 9, 2007), [http://www.afghanistanwatch.org/2007/01/afghanistans\\_th.html](http://www.afghanistanwatch.org/2007/01/afghanistans_th.html) (accessed February 12, 2009).

code produces men who are superior to those produced under the Western model, and they have no desire to have a new social system imposed on them by outsiders.<sup>26</sup> Justice and responsibility are seen as collective requirements and are arrived at through consensus among free men.

Despite their reputation for ferocity in battle, left to their own devices the Pashtun are generally pastoral farmers with little concern for the outside world. Historically, they do not raise standing armies or wage war outside their tribal lands.<sup>27</sup> The very nature of their egalitarian social structure makes the imposition of military command and discipline a near impossibility. For this reason, the British would not allow their enlistment into the British forces in India. Although regarded as good fighters, they were unreliable and would frequently desert once they passed the boundaries of their ancestral lands.<sup>28</sup>

There is an exception: if Pashtuns perceive an external threat, they will temporarily submit to military authority.

Pashtuns have been living for centuries in the distant mountains and valleys of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Despite being more than 50 million on both sides of the border, Pashtuns have remained a tribal society, where each individual is loyal to his clan only. Divided they may live; but for invaders, they are one unified nation, once the crisis is over, each tribe goes back to its enclave with its leaders subsiding in their individual tribe. In such a way of life, where every tribe is independent and loyal to itself only, crisis of leadership is natural to arise.<sup>29</sup>

It is only when invaded that traditional Pashtun autonomy gives way to collective military action. They will voluntarily submit to military authority, which is generally exercised by a respected religious leader (mullah). Incidentally, the invasion of Afghanistan

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "No Sign Until the Burst of Fire", 61.

<sup>27</sup> Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1969), 166-175.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "No Sign Until the Burst of Fire", 50.

<sup>29</sup> Dr Tanvir Orakzai, "Pashtun Leadership: A Historical Review," *Pashtun Post* (April 11, 2009), <http://www.pashtunpost.com/news.php?news=229&category=> (accessed April 16, 2009).

by the Soviet Union in 1979 caused exactly these conditions, contributing to the birth of the Taliban.

This is not without recent historic precedent: British writers from the 19<sup>th</sup> century describe the periodic “mad mullah” movements. Typically, these resulted from Pashtun passions being inflamed by a charismatic religious leader after a real or imagined slight by British forces against Pashtun territory or honor.<sup>30</sup> Generally these movements would result in a period of united Pashtun military activity against the British forces, followed by an eventual negotiated settlement and a return to normalcy.

Aside from the occasional collective military action, the Pashtun are content to govern their day to day affairs by Pashtunwali. This social code has been completely interwoven into every facet of Pashtun life for over a thousand years. Pashtunwali is evident in Pashtun writings since well before the emergence of a written Pashtun language over 500 years ago, and predates Islamic law by centuries.<sup>31</sup> As such, Islamic religious practices and law seem to be layered over a much older tribal social code. The two systems are vastly different, and although they seem to have coexisted in relative harmony throughout Pashtun history, Pashtunwali has deeper roots.

While the Pashtun have traditionally relied on Pashtunwali as a system to govern their affairs, the Taliban insurgency has adopted a much newer (and completely different) social construct – a strict version of Islam known as Wahabbism.<sup>32</sup> Wahabbism is a movement that started in Arabian Peninsula in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Its followers strive to adhere to what they believe is a purer, more conservative type of Islam as practiced by the prophet Muhammad and his original followers. As part of their belief system, Wahabbis follow a

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “No Sign Until the Burst of Fire”, 53.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>32</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban*, 85.

strict version of Sharia law that is enforced by religious clerics.<sup>33</sup> Unlike Pashtunwali, this is not a voluntary system. It is compulsory for all who reside in an area where Wahabbism exists.

Wahabbism is a controversial movement even among other Muslims. Unique among all schools of Islamic jurisprudence, it declares other Muslims to be infidels if they do not practice Wahabbism. This has led to Sufi and Shia Muslims being executed as heretics by Wahabbis, a practice decried by most Muslims. It has no tolerance for any belief system or social structure other than Wahabbism.<sup>34</sup> To be otherwise is to be subject to death.

Wahabbism was relatively unknown in Afghanistan until the Soviet invasion in 1979. Immediately after the invasion, Muslims from around the world flocked to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets, and the Saudi fighters brought with them their Wahabbist form of Islam. Funded by Saudi Arabia and the United States and controlled by Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence directorate (ISI),<sup>35</sup> these groups of *mujahedeen* ("holy warriors") would eventually force a Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Unfortunately, many of them remained, and so did their Wahabbist practices.<sup>36</sup>

The Soviet invasion galvanized the Pashtun tribes to action. There were several Pashtun jihadist movements formed to resist the Soviet invasion. Having been invaded by a foreign power (and a godless infidel, at that) the Pashtun had no problems with temporarily suspending their personal autonomy and submitting to their religious leaders for the purpose of waging a holy war. This was the traditional Pashtun way of fighting outside invaders, and the Pashtun embarked on a holy war alongside their Wahabbist allies.

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<sup>33</sup> Amin Tarzi and Robert D. Crews, *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 292.

<sup>34</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban*, 211.

<sup>35</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent Into Chaos*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban*, 132.

Without engaging in an in depth analysis of the history of the Taliban, suffice it to say that over a period of a decade or more, several of the Pashtun resistance factions became increasingly influenced by their Wahabbist allies. These resistance groups gradually coalesced in to the Taliban movement, which would be heavily influenced by the Wahhabist school of Islamic thought.

With the passage of time, what traditionally was a temporary state for most Pashtuns (subordination to religious leaders for the purpose of war) became almost the normal state of affairs in the minds of many. The religious leaders of the Taliban were ceded more and more authority by their Pashtun foot soldiers. This culminated in the spiritual leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, cloaking himself in the robe of the prophet Muhammad and being proclaimed the “Commander of the Faithful” by the Taliban.<sup>37</sup>

This was a watershed event for the Taliban. By appearing as if he represented a link to the prophet Muhammad, he establishes legitimacy in the eyes of his followers. Not only is he fulfilling the traditional Pashtun role as a religious leader who commands in time of war,<sup>38</sup> he is also establishing himself as the prophet’s personal representative with almost divine authority.<sup>39</sup>

The Taliban regime spread, and with it spread its Wahabbist ways. Women were beaten publicly if they left their homes unescorted. Girls were forbidden to go to school, men were forced to grow beards, and women accused of adultery (including rape victims) were stoned to death. The Taliban also required strict enforcement of a myriad of other rules,

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<sup>37</sup> Norimitsu Omishi, “A Tale of the Mullah and Muhammad’s Amazing Cloak,” *New York Times* (December 19, 2001), <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/19/international/asia/19CLOA.html> (accessed April 19, 2009).

<sup>38</sup> Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “No Sign Until the Burst of Fire”, 63.

<sup>39</sup> Amin Tarzi and Robert D. Crews, *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, 92.

frequently resulting in the use of corporal punishment against adult males and females alike. It was as totalitarian a social construct as any seen anywhere on the planet.<sup>40</sup>

The Taliban social structure, however, is in no way consistent with traditional Pashtun social structure, societal values, or cultural norms. It is an autocratic construct that has been imposed (in some cases forcefully) on the Pashtun tribes. What was initially a voluntary, temporary social mechanism designed solely to satisfy the military exigencies required to repel an invading power was perverted into a dictatorial regime that attempted to impose itself permanently on all Afghans.

Where it has regained traction, the Taliban rules the local populace.<sup>41</sup> They supplant or subvert the existing tribal structure and impose their form of Sharia law. This is a social construct that is alien to Afghanistan in general and is particularly at odds with Pashtunwali. Whereas a traditional Pashtun sees himself as completely independent and takes orders from no man, the Taliban enforces its version of Sharia rule through its religious leaders. These mullahs have a strict hierarchy, with the infamous Mullah Omar at the head of the organization.

Pashtunwali, in contrast, recognizes the complete freedom and independence of every adult male. In principle, no adult male Pashtun may give orders to any other adult male Pashtun. He must obtain consensus. In the case of wrongdoing, the worst punishment a jirga hands down is typically a fine, agreed upon by all members of the jirga. The death penalty is never handed down. This is in stark contrast to the Taliban, who frequently impose the death penalty for homosexuality, adultery, drug use, and a host of other offenses.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Amin Tarzi and Robert D. Crews, *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, 135.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

Taliban strategy has been to usurp the traditional Pashtun social structure with its own social construct. Once they are able to assert their authority over the tribes, they have a formidable support base and a large pool from which to recruit trained military forces. They exploit traditional tribal concepts of sanctuary and hospitality to insulate themselves from any outside forces, and use pre-existing tribal loyalties to strengthen their alliance.

The Taliban have gotten some voluntary support from the Pashtuns by portraying themselves as legitimate defenders against an invading power. Coalition airstrikes that result in collateral damage among the civilian populace have been used very effectively by the Taliban to drum up anti-coalition sentiment. The Taliban use a legitimate grievance of the populace to undermine support for the Afghan government and then paint themselves as the true defenders of the Pashtun.

In cases where they have not gotten the willing support of the populace, they have resorted to force and terror. The Pakistani Taliban has killed literally hundreds of Pashtun elders in Pakistan in a bid to undermine the traditional tribal structure.<sup>43</sup> They are then more than capable of stepping in to fill the resulting power vacuum, having coerced the support of the populace who are too terrorized to resist.

The Taliban has also been able to cultivate its own home-grown recruits from among the Islamic schools, or *madrassas*, that are prevalent in Pakistan. Many of these schools teach an extreme jihadist ideology to young Pakistani boys, and often are the only schools that exist in the border area. If parents wish to send their sons to school so that they may learn to read and write, a madrassa may be the only option available. Along the way, however, the youth will receive an extensive indoctrination in Wahabbist ideology, making them prime targets for Taliban recruiting efforts.

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<sup>43</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent Into Chaos*, 275.

In the 1980's there were just a few hundred of these madrassas; now there are thousands<sup>44</sup>. These madrassas form both a fertile recruiting ground as well as an additional means by which the insurgents spread their agenda and control the populace. To date, Pakistan has done little to rein in the militant madrassas despite international public outcry that they do so.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 236.

<sup>45</sup> International Crisis Group, "Pakistan: Karachi's Madrasas and Violent Extremism," *Asia Report* no. 130 (March 29, 2007), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?l=1&id=4742> (accessed February 16, 2009).

## CONCLUSIONS

Although a formidable opponent, the Taliban is vulnerable. Support of the populace is critical for the insurgent, and right now the Taliban enjoys a significant amount of popular support. This support has two distinct flavors: voluntary support that comes from the portion of the populace that has deliberately aligned itself with the Taliban, and involuntary support that comes from those under the dominion of the Taliban who have no real option to resist. There are many reasons why a portion of the populace may come to voluntarily support the Taliban, but it stands to reason that they believe the Taliban to be a legitimate and powerful entity. By attacking that legitimacy and eroding the Taliban's power, that support can be weakened.

The cornerstone of the Taliban's claim to legitimacy stems from the traditional Pashtun concept of armed struggle for legitimate self-defense against an outside invader. If the Taliban can legitimately sound the call to jihad then Pashtun men will support them. However, take away the cause for jihad, and the Taliban can no longer claim to be defenders of the Pashtun. With no legitimate grievances or cause for armed struggle to distract the populace, the Taliban is left with no legitimate role in the traditional Pashtun society. They will be exposed for what they truly are – followers of an alien belief system whose main interest is grabbing power and subjugating the populace.

Those who involuntarily support the Taliban need to be provided with the opportunity to choose an alternative; they already have the motive. By its very nature, the Taliban alienates its host populace. Its use of corporal and capital punishment constitute deadly insults to any Pashtun (and his family members) who suffer them, and must be avenged. They might not be avenged immediately, but honor is at stake and must be satisfied. As a

Pashtun proverb says, “I took my revenge after a hundred years, and I only regret that I acted in haste.”<sup>46</sup>

Under the old Taliban regime, stories abounded of the Afghan people chafing under the oppressive rule of the Taliban. In areas where the Taliban has regained control, those stories are manifest again. One need only log on to any one of several Pashtun or Pakistani forums to see widespread discontent for the Taliban and their version of Sharia law. This discontent can be exploited; weaken the Taliban and allow the traditional Pashtun structure to deal with the Taliban in the manner it has dealt with interlopers for thousands of years.

The Taliban’s ability to use vast areas of the border region in Pakistan as a sanctuary has been a significant advantage for them. They are free to come and go at will in relative safety. While there have been a limited amount of targeted strikes in the border area, there have been no large-scale military operations aimed at destroying the Taliban’s combat power. As long as they are able to safely mass forces in Pakistan, they will be a threat to stability in Afghanistan.

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<sup>46</sup> “Honour Among Them,” *The Economist*, 5.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In order to avoid inadvertently alienating the Pashtun populace, recommend that all personnel who will be deployed to Pashtun areas receive training in the Pashtun culture as part of the pre-deployment training process. Leaders should receive additional training on the Pashtun tribal structure in their operational area so that they are familiar with existing tribal alliances and politics. This will help leaders to effectively engage local tribal leaders without triggering undesired second and third order effects from adjacent (and potentially rival) tribes.

Whenever possible, leaders should engage the traditional tribal leaders and participate in the jirga process. For example, if laborers are needed for a construction project, it might seem trivial to approach the jirga to hire workers and negotiate wages and employment conditions. However, this shows respect for Pashtun traditions, lends prestige to the jirga, and reinforces the Pashtun social order. The tribal elders are honored, their standing is strengthened, and they are less vulnerable to outside threats from the Taliban.

Reconstruction projects in Pashtun areas should be coordinated with tribal leaders through the jirga. The jirga has a vested interest in the tribal area it serves, and the jirga should be treated as a legitimate entity of local government. Reinforcing the jirga strengthens traditional social order, making the populace less susceptible to Taliban influence.

As the Karzai government seeks to extend its control beyond Kabul and into the Pashtun tribal areas, it should be encouraged to partner with the legitimate local tribal authority figures. By governing with the advice and consent of the jirga, the central

government gains the voluntary support of the Pashtun. Failure to do so would dishonor the Pashtun, pushing them away from the government and closer to the Taliban camp.

Coalition forces should reexamine their existing practices and attempt to eliminate collateral damage when conducting combat operations. Granted, this may be impossible. However, the Afghan populace is particularly sensitive to civilian casualties. As the author was reading Pashtun literature and web forums while researching this paper, it became apparent that even the most pro-coalition writers were passionately opposed to ANY civilian casualties, *even when the targets were senior al-Qaeda figures residing in Pakistan*. Given the Taliban's ability to exploit this sentiment to gain support for their cause, recommend that coalition forces consider tightening the criteria used for approving kinetic strikes.

The Taliban should be denied sanctuary wherever possible. The government of Pakistan should be encouraged to assert its control over the FATA and NWFP. Recommend any future aid to Pakistan be tied directly to its efforts to defeat Taliban forces in the border area. Recommend all military aid to Pakistan be restricted to enabling the Pakistani military to defeat the Taliban.

Pashtun tribes that have not aligned themselves with the Taliban should be rewarded with increased reconstruction and infrastructure projects. At the same time, tribes that have supported the Taliban should be targeted with information operations to make them aware that they too will enjoy this largesse, as soon as the Taliban is ejected from their tribal areas.

Finally, recommend that the coalition develop a comprehensive information operations campaign targeting the Pashtun populace. It should emphasize respect and support for traditional Pashtun ways, and portray the Taliban as a foreign Wahabbist movement that seeks to subjugate all Pashtuns. It should remind Pashtuns that their

individual and collective honor is at stake, and that honor will only be cleansed when the Taliban is no more.

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