

American Foreign Policy Council

AFGHANISTAN

QUICK FACTS

Population: 31,822,848

Area: 652,230 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Pashtun 42%, Tajik 27%, Hazara 9%, Uzbek 9%, Aimak 4%, Turkmen 3%, Baloch 2%, other 4%

Religions: Sunni Muslim 80%, Shia Muslim 19%, other 1%

Government Type: Islamic republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$20.65 billion



Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated October 2014)

Violent Islamist activity in Afghanistan is perpetrated by a large number of militant groups varying in size, tactics, and political objectives. Key groups include the Taliban and their affiliates, the Haqqani Network, Hizb-e-Islami - Hekmatyar, Pakistan-based jihadi groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, Sipah-e-Sahaba, and Tehrik-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi, as well as transnational jihadi groups like al-Qaeda. The largest of these groups that are active on both sides of the Afghan and Pakistani border remains the Taliban, a band of religious students who, under the leadership of their spiritual leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, seized control of the Afghan state in 1996, effectively ending the Afghan Civil War that followed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979-89). The Taliban regime was subsequently ousted in 2001 by a U.S.-led coalition in response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center – attacks perpetrated by the Afghan-based al-Qaeda group, led by Osama bin Laden. In the 13 years since, the U.S.-led coali-

tion and the Afghan government headed by President Hamid Karzai have struggled to subdue an insurgency waged by the Taliban and its militant allies, which have received safe haven as well as financial and military support inside neighboring Pakistan. On the eve of the withdrawal of U.S. and international forces from Afghanistan at the end of December 2014, the insurgency persists, threatening a fragile Afghan government.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Afghanistan is among the countries most affected by Islamist militancy, as the state continues to fight the Taliban-led insurgency thirteen years after the U.S.-led coalition intervened in Afghanistan. In the first half of 2013 alone, over 1,300 Afghan civilians were killed and an estimated 2,500 injured, a 23 percent increase over 2012.¹ According to UN estimates, in the first half of 2014 alone, civilian casualties sharply rose by 24 percent.² More and more Afghan civilians are killed through ground operations and crossfire than because of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Additionally, since the beginning of the Afghan war, an estimated 21,000 Afghan civilians have been killed.³ Meanwhile, 2013 was the bloodiest year on record for the Afghan security forces, which have assumed primary responsibility for security from the U.S.-led coalition.⁴

The Taliban's success is owed, in large part, to its appeal to the broader Pashtun population, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan from which the majority of Taliban manpower stems, although not all Pashtuns are Taliban. The south and east of Afghanistan, the country's hotspots and where the majority of Pashtuns reside, offer fertile recruiting ground for the Taliban. The Taliban's key tactic in eliciting grassroots support is to leverage resentment felt by local Afghan villagers toward the indiscriminate killing of Afghan civilians in U.S. airstrikes and perceived disrespect toward local Afghan values and religious norms. Although former Afghan President Hamid Karzai is himself a Pashtun, many in the Taliban reviled him as a Western puppet.

Between 2001 and 2005, the U.S. intervention effectively degraded the Taliban's capabilities and sent their leadership fleeing into Pakistan. During this period, the northern part of Afghanistan was largely free from Taliban activity. Afghanistan's north has traditionally been dominated by ethnic Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras who were previously members of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. Taliban tactics in the early years of the war amounted to sporadic raids on U.S. and international forces and attacks on major population centers in the country's south, where the group enjoys the most sympathy. Though Taliban forces were able to control significant swathes of the countryside in the south and east, and along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, they were unsuccessful in launching major attacks against U.S. and international forces elsewhere. So-called "swarm attacks" on U.S. and international forces often resulted in heavy losses for the Taliban, which then switched to traditional guerrilla and terrorist tactics. When pressure was applied to Taliban strongholds in the

south and east of Afghanistan, they simply took refuge across the border in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), where international troops could not pursue them. Within the FATA region, the Taliban and their allies were concentrated most heavily in the North and South Waziristan Agencies and remain so to present day. However, the city of Quetta, located in Pakistan's Baluchistan province, served as the headquarters for the exiled Taliban leadership and where Taliban spiritual leader Mullah Omar supposedly still resides.⁵

The Taliban's fortunes changed between 2005 and 2008. During this period, a radical Pakistani offshoot of the Afghan Taliban, the *Tehrik-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan* (TTP) or Pakistani Taliban, formed, gaining control over parts of Pakistan's Kyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province (formerly known as the FATA). Unlike the Afghan Taliban, with which they share loose links and affiliations, the Pakistani Taliban focused their attacks largely on the Pakistani state, which had largely taken a hands-off approach to the Afghan Taliban residing within its borders.

The Afghan Taliban, which continued to refrain from attacking the Pakistani state, began regrouping in Pakistan and reconstituting their command structure. They expanded operations in Afghanistan, including to the northern province of Kunduz, where a sizeable and sympathetic Pashtun population lives amid Tajiks and Uzbeks. The Taliban also expanded operations in Kunar and Nuristan provinces in the north, and in the west of Afghanistan around heart province, while consolidating their hold over the Pashtun-strongholds of Kandahar and Helmand in the south.⁶ The use of suicide attacks, which were virtually unknown to Afghanistan before 2001, multiplied exponentially between 2005 and 2008, with approximately 100-130 suicide attacks being carried out in the country each year.⁷

During this period, the Afghan Taliban also began to incorporate tactics developed by insurgent and jihadist groups in Iraq (namely suicide attacks and IED attacks). At present, IEDs remain the primary cause of casualties in U.S. and international forces in Afghanistan, although a large number of suicide attacks that were directed against international forces proved unsuccessful.⁸ Targeting foreign nationals, especially aid workers, whenever possible, was much more effective as a tactic, and significantly downgraded the efforts of international aid and relief organizations operating in Afghanistan, although the number of such targeted attacks on foreign aid workers remains small.

By 2009, before President Barack Obama came into office, conditions on the ground had deteriorated further, and U.S. and international forces were on the defensive. Throughout the south and east, Taliban "vanguard units" infiltrated towns and began executing pro-Afghan government and especially pro-Karzai political and religious figures, setting up "shadow courts" that administered and delivered swift *sharia* justice, and attacking local Afghan army and police checkpoints and outposts. Most crucially, the Taliban were lent pseudo-legitimacy by the widespread corruption and

ineffectiveness of the Karzai government, its local representatives, the police, and the judiciary. Broad swathes of territory were lost, as the United States belatedly began to shift troops from Iraq to Afghanistan with a “surge” of 30,000 troops and embraced a marked change in counterinsurgency tactics under the leadership of General Stanley McChrystal, then-commander of all U.S. and international forces in Afghanistan.

McChrystal attempted to minimize Afghan civilian casualties and to apply force more judiciously so as not to drive local Afghan villagers who suffered “collateral damage” deaths from coalition operations, particularly airstrikes that caused a sharp increase in civilian casualties, into joining the Taliban. McChrystal made clear that he did not believe the United States and its international allies could “kill our way out of an insurgency.”⁹ In his major policy speech of December 1, 2009, President Obama detailed that the purpose of his surge of U.S. troops in Afghanistan was to strategically defeat the Taliban over the course of eighteen months, before beginning the draw-down of American troops in July 2011.¹⁰ The offensive against Taliban strongholds in the south and east of the country paralleled an increase in the use of remotely-controlled predator drone attacks against Taliban targets in Pakistan’s remote tribal agencies, resulting in the killing of dozens of “high-value targets” between 2009 and 2013.

In June 2010, General McChrystal was replaced by General David Petraeus, a war veteran who had previously commanded the “surge” offensive in Iraq (2007-2009). Petraeus launched a more robust effort to rout Taliban insurgents and initiated a policy of using special operations forces to engage in night raids on Taliban hideouts. Although frequent night raids by U.S. special forces proved helpful in dismantling, killing and/or capturing of high-ranking Taliban operatives across Afghanistan, it also triggered local resentments against U.S. and international forces who oftentimes disrespected local culture and religious beliefs by entering private homes at night, mosques, searching Afghan women, and at times holding local villagers in custody without trial. It also simmered tensions between Afghan and U.S. governments after President Karzai repeatedly complained that any such raids on Afghan homes were in violation of Afghan sovereignty and must be conducted in consultation with Afghan security forces. On July 18, 2011, General Petraeus relinquished command and was replaced by U.S. Marine Corps General Joseph Dunford, the current commander of all U.S. and international forces. General Dunford has focused his efforts on a new role for the U.S. military in Afghanistan to “train, advise and assist” the Afghan security forces in advance of the ongoing drawdown of U.S. and international troops in December 2014.¹¹ In the meantime, the United States and Afghanistan has negotiated a bilateral security agreement, yet to be signed by the Afghan government, that will serve as a basis for a continued U.S. military presence of an estimated 8,500 U.S. troops that will remain in Afghanistan beyond 2014 to train and assist Afghan security forces and conduct unfettered counterterrorism operations against al Qaeda and its affiliates.¹²

A second major component of Islamist activity in Afghanistan is al-Qaeda and the foreign *jihadis* that support it. Although the core of al-Qaeda is Arab, its ranks also include fighters from Uzbekistan,¹³ Turkey,¹⁴ Muslims of European descent,¹⁵ as well as other nationalities.¹⁶ (Contrary to popular perception, no Chechens have been killed, captured or arrested in the Afghan theater of operations). These affiliated radicals cannot be easily distinguished from their counterparts in Pakistan (nor are all of them necessarily members of al-Qaeda Central), and they regularly utilize bases scattered throughout Pakistan's tribal areas, particularly in North Waziristan, to train, plan and plot, and undertake raids against U.S. and foreign forces in Afghanistan. While the Taliban have tried to minimize civilian casualties from suicide and IED attacks, al-Qaeda and its allies have not shown such restraint, and are presumed to be responsible for the many mass-casualty suicide attacks that have occurred in the country since 2005.¹⁷ In addition, al-Qaeda carried out one of the most successful penetration suicide attacks to date against a CIA base in Khost, Afghanistan on December 30, 2009.¹⁸ During the operation, an al-Qaeda double agent, claiming to work for the CIA, detonated a suicide bomb among a group of CIA agents, killing eight of them and makes it a single largest casualty in CIA's history. However, while al-Qaeda and its allies might supply shock troops and suicide bombers to the Taliban, their overall role in the insurgency remains limited. Rather, al-Qaeda's primary aid to the Taliban is in the form of sophisticated Internet and media propaganda.¹⁹

The third Islamist component is the *Hizb-e-Islami* group led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Hekmatyar was an important commander in the anti-Soviet *jihad* allegedly backed by Pakistan's military and intelligence apparatus. However, during his small stint as the Afghanistan's prime minister during the Afghan civil war in 1990s, he contributed significantly to the destruction of Afghanistan, later fleeing to Iran in order to escape the Taliban in 1996. His base of support within Afghanistan collapsed, and although he returned to Afghanistan in 2002, he has not been able to mobilize mass support among Afghans. Most of the fighters that belong to *Hizb-e-Islami - Hekmatyar* (there do not appear to be any authoritative numbers in this regard) operate in the north-eastern parts of the country, close to the border with Pakistan and many hail from Pashtun ethnic group.²⁰ The principal division between *Hizb-e-Islami - Hekmatyar* and the larger Taliban resistance appears to be personal, as Hekmatyar was one of the major *mujahideen* warlords against whom the Taliban fought in between 1994 and 1996. Though *Hizb-e-Islami - Hekmatyar* has engaged in talks with the Karzai government and has been less aggressive in its attacks on U.S. and international forces, the group does appear to be responsible for several assassination attempts against President Karzai in 2007 and 2008,²¹ as well as a number of rocket attacks.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Located at the crossroads of the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia, Afghanistan is divided by geography and ethnicity. The central section of the country is bisected by the Hindu Kush mountains (impassable except through the Salang Pass), while the southern section is divided from Pakistan by the mountainous FATA region and consists of semi-mountainous and arid regions tapering into full desert along the Iranian border.

Ethnically, the estimated 15 million Pashto-speaking Pashtuns of Afghanistan comprise about 40 percent of the population, dominating Afghanistan's south and east along the Pakistani border. Dari-speaking Tajiks make up an additional 25-30 percent of the population and are located in the northeast and along the Iranian border to the west. Significant other minorities include the Uzbeks (approximately 9 percent) located along the border with Uzbekistan to the north, and Hazaras (approximately 9 percent) located in the central mountainous region. A number of other minorities, including Turkmen, Aimaks, Pashais, Kizil Bashis and Baluchis, comprise the rest of the population.²² Although there is a substantial Shi'ite population in Afghanistan, mainly ethnic Hazaras, they have traditionally not been prone to violent Islamist activity.

In general, Sufism – a less rigid, more mystical variety of Islam – has held a central place in Afghan society. There are three major Sufi orders: the Naqshbandiyya (which tends to be closer to mainstream Sunnism), the Chishtiyya (associated with India) and the Qadiriyya (which is pan-Islamic). The Tajik population has traditionally had a close cultural relationship with the Sufi heritage of Persia, though they are not Shi'ite, while the Pashtuns have been more influenced by the reformist Sunni Deobandi movements originating in India and Pakistan.

Before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Afghanistan was largely ruled by a semi-secular elite that was either pro-western in its orientation or, later, pro-communist. Afghanistan has traditionally hosted a weak central government more adept at resisting foreign attempts at domination than actually ruling the country. The efforts of reformist rulers such as King Amanullah (1919-29), who sought to establish a strong, liberal regime, were overwhelmingly unsuccessful.²³ Starting in the 1950s, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) established close relations with Afghanistan and gradually built up the local Communist party, an effort that culminated in the overthrow of the Afghan last monarch, King Mohammad Zahir Shah, in 1973 and the establishment of a Communist-dominated regime there five years later. This regime based its power upon the Pashtun Durrani tribe (in opposition to the traditional cultural domination of the Tajiks), but was quickly beset by popular opposition. The USSR came to the aid of the Afghan Communist regime, invading the country in 1979 to bolster it. After the initial invasion, the Soviets remained and

became embroiled in a bloody, protracted fight against the U.S.-backed Islamist opposition or *mujahideen* fighters (based out of Peshawar, Pakistan) before ultimately withdrawing in 1989.

Although the conflict ended in defeat for the USSR, Afghanistan's Islamist *mujahideen* were unable to adequately exploit the Soviet Union's withdrawal and instead fell to fighting amongst themselves. The period between 1992 and the rise of the Taliban in 1994-96 was characterized by the balkanization of Afghanistan. Tribal, *jihadi* and local Islamist leaders were in a frenzy for territory, carved out separate fiefdoms throughout the country and attacked Kabul at will. The ethnic-tribal conglomeration that had been forcefully put together by the Afghan kings in the late 19th century fell apart when central rule collapsed. Separate Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara mini-states were created in the north and west of Afghanistan, while the Pashtun lands in the south and the east fell into chaos. The Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara strongholds were ruled over by strongmen or "warlords" such as Ismail Khan and General Rashid Dostum, who brought a modicum of stability to their regions. During this period, the country's dependence upon the illicit drug trade grew immensely.

The Taliban ("the students" in Farsi) first appeared in Pakistani *madrassas* (schools of Islamic learning) in 1994, portraying themselves as a movement of youth dedicated to eliminating anarchy and chaos.²⁴ This tribal-religious movement spread into Afghanistan among the Pashtuns living in the country's war-torn south, where *mujahideen*-turned-bandits preyed on the common people. In response, a group of religious students, or Talibs, united under a local *mullah* named Omar and created vigilante groups. These then moved through the Pashtun south, disarming *mujahideen* groups and enforcing strict *sharia* law. By 1995, the Taliban had conquered most of the Pashtun south and had begun to move against Tajiks in the northeast.

Until 1997, the movement appeared invincible, capturing Kabul in 1996, and pushing government supporters led by then-leader of the Northern Alliance, Ahmad Shah Massoud, into the far northeast corner of the country. While the Taliban suffered reverses in 1997 and 1998 (and responded with massacres), by 2001 they controlled approximately 95 percent of the territory of Afghanistan and ruled the country with their draconian laws, including banning girls from attending schools and introducing capital punishments.

Lacking international support with the exception of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, the Taliban began to rely upon foreign radical groups like al-Qaeda organization for financial support. Islamist *jihadi* groups began gravitating toward Afghanistan because of the Taliban's strict imposition of *sharia* law. Their influence was symbolized by the March 2001 destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, Afghanistan's greatest historical site, because they were deemed to be "heathen idols."²⁵

When President George W. Bush demanded that the Taliban hand over bin Laden and his affiliates after the attacks of September 11th, the Taliban refused, at first believing al-Qaeda's denials of involvement. Following the U.S.-led invasion, Mullah Omar and other Taliban leadership, owing to a strict Pashtun code of hospitality, doubled down on their relationship with the al-Qaeda.

Yet the Taliban and al-Qaeda do not occupy the same ideological space. The Taliban, whose roots are in the Deobandi reformist school of north India, generally differ from the global *jihadis* of al-Qaeda, who tend to be Arab by ethnicity and Salafi-Wahhabi in ideology. Deobandis, for example, generally do not express the same abhorrence of Sufism and Shi'ism that is characteristic of Salafis. Nevertheless, the Taliban commanders regularly comment favorably on al-Qaeda. Former Taliban leader Mullah Dadullah famously explained: "We like the al-Qaeda organization. We consider it a friendly and brotherly organization, which shares our ideology and concepts. We have close ties and constant contacts with it. Our cooperation is ideal."²⁶

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The central government of Afghanistan is weak and relies upon the support of both local elites (meaning traditional tribal elders and city-based elites) and foreign aid (both governmental and from non-governmental organizations). Traditional tribal support is reflected in the institution of the *loya jirga*, the tribally-appointed consultative body that ratified the Afghan constitution in December 2003. The government's support for political Islam is reflected in Chapter 1, Article 2 of the Afghan Constitution, where it states: "The religion of the state of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is the sacred religion of Islam."²⁷ In general, Islamists sought to portray the Karzai government as one that is subservient to the wishes of the United States and its Western allies, and corrupt and un-Islamic as a whole.²⁸ Taliban propaganda, for example, routinely referred to President Karzai as the "new Shah Shuja," a reference to the Afghan king put on the throne by British invaders in the 19th century. Although the Taliban have not been as dogmatic in their opposition to democratic elections when compared to other radical Islamist groups, they have frequently threatened voters with violence.²⁹

There are, however, several Islamic parties that are either somewhat allied with the government or participate in the political process. One such example is the comparatively moderate *Jami'at-i Islami*, led by Abdullah Abdullah who previously served as foreign minister in Karzai's government and was the front-runner in 2014 Afghan presidential elections, have participated in elections and political process. Other Islamists maintain an antagonistic relationship with the state, hoping in the near future to supplant it, and return the country to *sharia* rule. The Karzai government, during its time in office, often spoken of the possibility of reconciliation with the Taliban,³⁰

and promulgated at least some aspects of *sharia* law in an effort to co-opt the Islamist opposition into the Afghan government, although most of its overtures to the Taliban leadership yielded little to no results.

The Afghan government and the Obama administration are pushing for a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. In July 2013, the Taliban opened diplomatic offices in Doha, Qatar, with the intention of using the facility as a neutral base from which to enter peace negotiations with the United States and Afghanistan. Peace efforts quickly stalled when the Taliban staged a flag-hoisting ceremony thought by the Afghan government and its Western allies to have been a Taliban government in exile, and after they issued unreasonable preconditions for negotiations. While the office was quickly closed, the Doha negotiations with the Taliban have remained stalled ever since.³¹ Other signs of a parallel track of engagement are purportedly facilitated by Pakistan. In the summer of 2013, Islamabad released several high-level Taliban prisoners from its custody, including Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the long-time second-in-command to Mullah Omar before he was imprisoned by Pakistani forces in 2010. Baradar is believed to be one of the few Taliban commanders who could serve as an interlocutor in Afghan-Taliban peace talks, and was rumored to be exploring that option in 2010 shortly before his arrest.³² However, Baradar's release has not yet yielded any significant results in kick-starting the stalled peace negotiations with the Taliban.

In April 2014, Afghanistan held presidential election, a protracted process punctuated by allegations of fraud and political uncertainty. In September 2014, the two leading candidates, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, struck a power-sharing agreement and formed a unity government and created a new position of Chief Executive (equivalent of a prime minister) for the runner-up in the vote. Subsequently, Ashraf Ghani was sworn in as Afghan president. It remains unclear, however, what the position of the new government in Kabul will look like toward the Taliban.

ENDNOTES

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