American Foreign Policy Council

Afghanistan

QUICK FACTS

Population: 29,121,286

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%, Shi'a Muslim 19%, other 1%

Government Type: Islamic Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): $13.47 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated July 2010)

Since October of 2001, the United States has been deeply involved in Afghanistan as part of its ongoing effort to confront radical Islam abroad, and to prevent its various manifestations from reasserting their domination in that country. The past year in Afghanistan was characterized by a renewed focus upon the conflict after a number of years of holding operations on the part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and some local successes on the part of the Taliban. In general, ISAF's operations have focused upon breaking the control that the Taliban had established over the southern part of the country, especially in the regions close to the Pakistan border. Sometimes in tandem, sometimes in opposition, ISAF forces and Pakistani forces have succeeded in putting the Taliban on both sides of the border on the defensive. Concur-

rent with this military offensive, there has been a political offensive (focused mainly at the Hizb-e-Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar) to detach some radical Muslims from the Taliban and bring them into the political process.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Violent Islamist activity in Afghanistan can be attributed to several militant groups: the Taliban and their affiliates, including the Haqqani network, foreign elements (mostly associated with al-Qaeda, but also encompassing other radicals from all over the Muslim world and Europe), and the Hizb-e-Islami. Although there is a substantial Shi`ite population in Afghanistan, there is no evidence of radical activity associated with it. The Taliban, the primary locus of opposition, can be viewed in purely religious or in tribal terms. If the conflict is described in religious terms, then the Taliban portray themselves as recreating the events of the 1970s and 1980s, where a minority of Afghans collaborated with an invading foreign non-Muslim force attempting to impose an alien way of life upon Afghans. If the conflict is portrayed in tribal terms, then the Pashtuns, who comprise most of the Taliban's rank-and-file, have traditionally been locked out of power by the country's ethnic Tajiks, who, together with the Uzbeks and others, have tended to dominate the region.

Between 2001 and 2005, the Taliban were largely in disarray. This period of the conflict was characterized by raids upon ISAF forces and sporadic operations in major centers in the country's south (notably Kandahar). In general, the Taliban controlled the countryside but were unsuccessful in attacking ISAF forces directly. Any time pressure was applied to one of their strongholds, elements of the Taliban would take refuge across the border in Pakistan. During this period, the northern section of Afghanistan was largely free from Taliban activity (although Kabul was frequently a target of Taliban attacks).

However, during the period between 2005 and 2008, there was a marked upswing in Taliban operations, and their success. The use of suicide attacks already had become more common in 2004-05,

but this trend multiplied exponentially during 2005-08, to the point where there were approximately 100-130 suicide attacks in the country each year.[1] Much of this activity was associated with the charismatic leadership of Mullah Dadullah (killed in 2007).[2] During this period, the Taliban also benefited immensely from a consolidation of their position in Pakistan; a Pakistani offshoot of the Afghan Taliban, the Tehrik-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan, gained control over parts of Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province and Federally Administered Tribal Areas and plunged that country into a low-grade civil war. Taliban operations during this period expanded into the north (most notably into the area of Nuristan and Kunduz), and west (around Herat), while the region around Kandahar came to be virtually controlled by the Taliban.[3]

With world attention focused upon Iraq during this period, the Taliban began to utilize Iraqi tactics (namely suicide attacks) in Afghanistan, albeit with mixed results. While Iraqi radicals used indiscriminate suicide attacks, killing large numbers of civilians, the Taliban, rooted in the traditional Pashtun honor code, did not target Afghan civilians during 2005-08, viewing such killings as dishonorable and anti-Islamic. Furthermore, most of the large number of suicide attacks that were directed against ISAF soldiers proved unsuccessful.[4] Targeting foreign nationals, usually aid workers, was much more successful as a tactic, and caused the breakdown of most foreign aid programs designed to reconstruct Afghanistan during this period. Occasionally other Iraqi tactics, such as kidnapping, were utilized as well (although beheadings were generally avoided).

By the inauguration of the Obama administration, however, conditions on the ground had deteriorated further, and ISAF forces were on the defensive. President Obama responded with a "surge" in U.S. forces and a marked shift in counterinsurgency tactics under a newly-installed commander, Gen. Stanley McChrystal. According to his major policy speech of December 1, 2009, President Obama detailed that the purpose of this surge would be to strategically defeat the Taliban during the course of the next four years, and then to withdraw U.S. troops in their entirety by the beginning of 2013. Characteristic of this new policy has been the attempt to go

on the offensive against Taliban strongholds in the south and east of the country (which effectively had been under Taliban rule), and to increase the use of drone attacks against the bases of the Taliban in Pakistan. Gen. McChrystal was replaced in June 2010 by Gen. David Petraeus, who had previously commanded the "surge" offensive in Iraq (2007-9). By and large, however, the main thrust of U.S. policy remains the same as of this writing.

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 Chechnya,[5] Uzbekistan,[6] and Muslims of European descent[7] as well as other nationalities[8] These affiliated radicals cannot be easily distinguished from their counterparts in Pakistan (nor are all of them necessarily members of al-Qaeda "central"), and regularly utilize bases scattered throughout Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province to carry out raids into Afghanistan. While the Taliban have tried to minimize civilian casualties from suicide attacks, al-Qaeda and its allies are not known for such restraint, and are presumed to be responsible for the bloodier mass-casualty, Iraq-style suicide attacks that have occurred in the country since 2005.[9] In addition, the organization carried out one of the most successful penetration suicide attacks against the CIA in Khost on December 30, 2009.[10] However, while al-Qaeda and its allies might supply shock-troops and suicide bombers to the Taliban, their overall role in the fighting is minimal. Rather, al-Qaeda's primary aid to the Taliban is in the form of sophisticated Internet and media propaganda.[11]

The third Islamist component is the Hizb-e-Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Hekmatyar was an important commander in the anti-Soviet *jihad*, but during the 1992 civil war contributed significantly to the destruction of Afghanistan (especially Kabul), and fled to Iran in order to escape the Taliban in 1996. His base of support within Afghanistan collapsed, and although he returned in 2002 he has not been able to mobilize mass support since.[12] Most of the fighters that belong to Hizb (there do not appear to be any authoritative numbers in this regard) operate in the eastern section of the country, close to the Pakistan border, and are ethnically Pashtuns.[13]

The principal division between Hizb and the larger Taliban resistance appears to be personal; as Hekmatyar was one of the major warlords against whom the Taliban fought in 1992-6, and, as an old-style Afghani leader, he is not viewed as being very aggressive in his operations against the ISAF. However, Hizb does appear to be responsible for several assassination attempts against President Hamid Karzai in 2007 and again in 2008,[14] as well as a number of rocket attacks. As of March 2010, Hekmatyar appeared to be conducting negotiations with the Karzai government.[15]

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Located at the crossroads of the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia, Afghanistan is divided by geography and ethnicity. The northern 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 region of the Northwest Frontier Province, and consists of semi-mountainous and arid regions tapering into full desert along the Iranian border.

Ethnically, the Pashtuns comprise about 40-42 percent of the population (speaking Pashtu), located in the south and east along the Pakistani border, while Tajiks make up an additional 30-35 percent (speaking Dari, a dialect of Farsi) and are located in the region around Kabul 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 and Balochis, comprise the rest of the population.[16]

In general Sufism has had a central place in Afghani Muslim 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 (but not with its Shi`ite aspect), while the Pashtuns have been more influenced by the reformist Deobandi movements originating in India and Pakistan. For the most part

Afghani cities had a semi-secular elite that was either pro-western in its orientation or pro-communist during the period prior to the rise of the Taliban in 1996.

Afghanistan generally has been characterized by a weak central government more adept at playing off foreign attempts at domination than actually ruling it. The efforts of reformist rulers such as King Amanullah (1919-29), who sought to establish a strong, liberal regime, were overwhelmingly unsuccessful.[17] Starting in the 1950s, the USSR established close relations with Afghanistan and gradually built up both its interests as well as the local Communist party, culminating in the overthrow of the monarch 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 regime, and invaded the country in 1979. The Soviets remained, and became embroiled in a bloody, protracted fight against the largely Islamist opposition (based out of Peshawar, Pakistan), until ultimately withdrawing in 1989.

Although the conflict ended in defeat for the USSR, Afghanistan's Islamists were unable to adequately exploit the Soviet Union's withdrawal and instead fell to fighting among themselves. The resulting civil war persisted until 1992, when Kabul was finally captured by Northern Alliance chief Ahmad Shah Massoud after a number of the prominent communist supporters switched sides.[18]

The period between 1992 and the rise of the Taliban in 1994-96 was characterized by the balkanization of Afghanistan. Tribal and local Islamist leaders carved out separate fiefdoms throughout the country, and bombarded Kabul whenever they could. During this period, the country's dependence upon the drug trade grew immensely. The Taliban ("the students" in Farsi) first appeared in 1994, portraying themselves as a movement of youth dedicated to eliminating anarchy and chaos.[19] Until 1997, they appeared invincible, capturing Kabul in 1996, and pushing government supporters (led by the charismatic 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 were in control of approximately 95 percent of the territory of Afghanistan.

Especially after 1998, the Taliban under their leader Mullah `Umar, lacking allies or outside support, began to rely upon foreign radical Muslims, mainly (but not exclusively) those associated with Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda organization. Many radicals gravitated to Afghanistan because of the Taliban's strict imposition of *sharia* law, and their influence was indicated by the March 2001 destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan.[20] The Taliban, however, were reluctant to anger the United States overtly, and apparently opposed the September 11, 2001 attacks that were orchestrated and carried out by al-Qaeda.[21] When the U.S. invaded Afghanistan in response during October of 2001, the Taliban and al-Qaeda banded together to oppose it.

In general, since 2002, there has been a much closer ideological relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda than there was previously. While the pre-September 11 Taliban had elements in their leadership that strongly opposed globalist attacks—even according to some accounts sought to warn of the coming al-Qaeda attacks[22]—after losing power the two ideologies converged more closely. There still is some tension between the Taliban, whose roots are in the Deobandi reformist school of north India and its ramifications in Pakistan, and globalist radical Muslims, whose roots are Arab-centered and purely Salafi. Traditionally Deobandis have not cultivated the same abhorrence of Sufism that is characteristic of Salafism, and thus were able to win support among the Pashtuns (themselves largely influenced by Sufism) and other Afghanis. However, currently Taliban commanders regularly comment favorably concerning al-Qaeda; a good example is that of Mullah Dadullah (killed 2007), who stated: "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."[23]

A major factor in the success of the Taliban has been to portray

themselves as the representatives and guardians of Islam in Afghanistan. Because their primary opponent, the ISAF, is separated from the Afghan people by language, culture and religion, and has frequently employed air-strikes that kill inordinate numbers of civilians, the Taliban have been able to mobilize popular support effectively. As guerillas they have sought to create chaos and disrupt public order in order to highlight another major selling point for Afghans: that they imposed order during the period of 1994-2001, and removed the corrupt and violent warlords that had dominated the country in the wake of the Soviet departure. Although most of the Afghan *ulema* at present decry the tactics of the Taliban, there is surprisingly little opposition to the movement on religious grounds. Interviews with Afghan religious elders reveal a view of the Taliban as good but "misguided" Muslims.[24]

Perhaps the most contentious issue from both a socio-economic and a religious point of view is that of opium cultivation. Opium serves as the mainstay of the Afghan economy in the southern section of the country.[25] Once harvested, it is taken either northward over the mountain passes through Central Asia to Russia, eastwards to Pakistan or, less commonly, westwards to Iran. After the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, opium cultivation regained prominence in the south, and although ISAF and a network of NGOs have tried to either eradicate it or offer more constructive alternatives to the farmers, opium production continues to be an economic mainstay in southern Afghanistan. There is ample evidence that the Taliban and other radical Muslim organizations protect the cultivation of opium and benefit financially from it.[26] Annual intake from the cultivation of opium poppies is estimated to be approximately $4 billion.[27] According to some sources, the Taliban earn between $100 and $300 million each year from this trade.[28] One of the primary goals of ISAF's "surge" has been to break this economic support for the Taliban.

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

NGOs) in order to survive.[29] Traditional tribal support is reflected in the institution of the *loya jirga*, a tribally appointed body that ratified the Afghani constitution in December 2003. Members, numbering a total of 502, were drawn from all over the country, and were elected with reserved seats for women and religious minorities. The institution of the *loya jirga* is one that is rejected by radical Muslims because of its tribal character, and some Afghanis resent the presence in it of former warlords and those who are guilty of crimes during the period 1992-96.

The government's support for political Islam is reflected in Chapter 1, Article 2 of the Constitution, where it states "The religion of the state of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is the sacred religion of Islam."[30] In general, the Islamists have sought to portray the Karzai government as one that is subservient to the wishes of the United States, and is corrupt and un-Islamic as a whole.[31] Although the Taliban have not been as dogmatic in their opposition to democratic elections (in 2005 and 2009) as have other radical Muslims, they have frequently threatened voters with violence.[32] These tactics, however, have not been successful (although Afghans are far from satisfied with their elected officials). Because of the violent opposition towards the Sufi practices of most Afghans, the Taliban and al-Qaeda also suffer from a public relations problem.

There are, however several Islamic parties that are allied with the government or participate in the political process. The Jami`at-i Islami, led by Dr. Abdullah Abdullah (who served as foreign minister in the Karzai regime) consistently either supports the government or participates in the elections. 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 regime, in its turn, attempts to do everything that it can to maintain its Islamic legitimacy and give the radicals no opening for accusations of being non-Muslim. Occasionally, Karzai himself has even spoken of the possibility of a reconciliation with the Taliban or even of himself joining their movement.[33]

ENDNOTES

[1]Figures Figures are drawn from both the official United Nations report on suicide attacks in Afghanistan (listing 123 for 2006, and 77 for 2007 [until June 30]), and the *Afghanistan Conflict Monitor*, listing approximately 150 for 2010. See United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, "Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan (2001-2007)," September 9, 2007, http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2007.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/EKOI-76W52H-Full_Report.pdf/$File/Full_Report.pdf; and "Security Incidents," Human Security Report Project *Afghanistan Conflict Monito*r, September 2010, http://www.afghanconflictmonitor.org/incidents.html.

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[4] Williams, "Mullah Omar's Missiles"; For a general overview of the Afghan conflict, see Brian Glyn Williams, *Afghanistan: The Longest War* (Pittsburgh, PA; University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

[5] As cited in Tom Vanden Brook, "Marines Fighting Taliban Strive to Win Afghan Locals' Trust," *USA Today*, August 3, 2009, http://www.cnas.org/node/3065.

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[9] Williams, "The CIA's Drone War in Pakistan, 2004-2010."

[10] Bryan Glyn Williams, *Afghanistan Declassified: A Guide to America's*

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[11] Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), esp. chapter 7.

[12] Brian Glyn Williams, "On the Trail of the Lions of Islam: A History of Foreign Fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 1980 to 2010," *Orbis* 55, iss. 2, (2011).

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