American Foreign Policy Council

Afghanistan

QUICK FACTS

Population: 31,188,077

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): $19.91 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated August 2013)

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, Pakistan-based jihadi groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Tehrik-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi, and transnational jihadi groups like al-Qaeda.

The largest of these groups remains the Taliban, a band of religious students who, under the leadership of Mullah 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 coalition and the Afghan government headed by 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 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan the insurgency persists, threatening a fragile regime in transition as the country prepares for national elections in 2014.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Afghanistan is among the countries most affected by Islamist militancy, as the state continues to wage war against the Taliban-led insurgency thirteen years after the 2001 U.S. invasion. In the first half of 2013 alone, 1,300 Afghan civilians were killed and an additional 2,500 injured, a 23% increase over 2012.[1] Meanwhile, 2013 has been the bloodiest year on record for the Afghan security forces, which have assumed primary responsibility for security from the U.S.-led coalition.[2]

The Taliban's success is owed, in large part, to its appeal to the broader Pashtun population, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan; the Taliban are almost exclusively Pashtun (though not all Pashtun are Taliban). The Pashtun, who dominate the south and east of the country, offer fertile recruiting ground for Taliban, leveraging resentment felt by Pashtuns toward the ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks who have held many of the key leadership positions in the government since 2001. Though President Hamid Karzai is himself a Pashtun, many in the Taliban revile him as a Western puppet.

Between 2001 and 2005, the U.S. invasion effectively degraded the Taliban's capabilities and sent their leadership fleeing into Pakistan. During this period, the northern region of Afghanistan was largely free from Taliban activity. The Afghan north has traditionally been dominated by ethnic Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras who were previously members of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. Their tactics in the early years of the war amounted to sporadic raids on Coalition forces and attacks on major population centers in the country's south, where the Taliban enjoy 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 (Af-Pak) border, they were unsuccessful in launching major attacks against Coalition forces elsewhere. So-called "swarm attacks" on Coalition troops generated heavy losses for the Taliban, which switched to traditional guerilla and terrorist tactics. When pressure was applied to Taliban strongholds, they would simply take refuge across the border in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), where U.S. troops could not pursue them. Within the FATA region, the Tal-

iban and their allies were concentrated most heavily in the North and South Waziristan Agencies. However, the city of Quetta, located south of FATA in Baluchistan province, served as the headquarters for the exiled Taliban leadership and the residence of Supreme Leader Mullah Omar.[3]

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* or Pakistani Taliban, formed, gaining control over parts of Pakistan's Kyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province (formerly known as the Northwest Frontier Province) as well as the FATA. Unlike the Afghan Taliban, with which they share loose links and affiliations, the Pakistani Taliban focused their attacks 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 in the north, and in the west around Herat, while consolidating their hold over the Pashtun-strongholds of Kandahar and Helmand in the south.[4] 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.[5]

During this period, the Afghan Taliban also began to incorporate tactics developed by insurgent and jihadist groups in Iraq (namely suicide attacks and improvised explosive device [IED] attacks). Today, IEDs remain the primary cause of Coalition casualties in Afghanistan. Still, despite the popularity of some Iraqi tactics, the Taliban tended to eschew indiscriminate suicide attacks targeting civilians, 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.[6] Targeting foreign nationals, especially aid workers, was much more effective as a tactic, and significantly downgraded the efforts of foreign aid organizations trying to operate in Afghanistan. Occasionally other Iraqi tactics, such as kidnapping, were utilized as well, although beheadings were generally avoided.

By the inauguration of U.S. President Barack Obama in 2009, conditions on the ground had deteriorated further, and Coalition forces were on the

defensive. Throughout the south and east, Taliban "vanguard units" infiltrated towns in the countryside and began executing pro-Karzai political and religious figures, setting up "shadow courts" that administered swift *sharia* justice, and attacking local Afghan Army and Police checkpoints. The Taliban were lent pseudo-legitimacy by the corruption and ineffectiveness of the Karzai government, its local representatives, the police, and the judiciary. Broad swathes of territory were lost, as the U.S. belatedly began to shift troops from Iraq to Afghanistan with a "surge" in U.S. forces (30,000 troops) and embrace a marked change in counterinsurgency tactics under a newly installed commander, General Stanley McChrystal.

McChrystal attempted to minimize Afghan civilian casualties and to apply force more judiciously so as not to drive tribesmen who suffered "collateral damage" deaths from Coalition operations into the arms of the Taliban. McChrystal made clear that he did not believe the U.S. and its Coalition allies could "kill our way out of an insurgency."[7] In his major policy speech of December 1, 2009, President Obama detailed that the purpose of this surge would be to strategically defeat the Taliban over the course of eighteen months, before beginning to withdraw U.S. troops in July 2011.[8] The offensive against Taliban strongholds in the south and east of the country paralleled an increase in the use of remotely-controlled Predator drone Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) attacks against Taliban targets in Pakistan's remote tribal agencies, resulting in the killing of dozens of "high-value targets" between 2009 and 2013.

General McChrystal was replaced in June 2010 by General David Petraeus, who had previously commanded the "surge" offensive in Iraq (2007-2009). Petraeus launched a more robust effort to rout Taliban insurgents and commenced a policy of using special operations forces to engage in night raids on Taliban hideouts. General Petraeus relinquished command on July 18, 2011. The current commander of the Coalition, U.S. Marine Corps General Joseph Dunford, is focusing on a new role for the U.S. military in Afghanistan to "train, advise and assist" the Afghan security forces in advance of the withdrawal of American troops in 2014.[9] The Obama administration is currently lobbying the Afghan government to sign a security agreement allowing for a continued U.S. military presence of a rumored 10,000 troops after the 2014 deadline.[10]

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,[11] Turkey,[12] Muslims of European descent,[13] as well as other nationalities.[14] (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 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 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.[15]

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.[16] 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. 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.[17]

The third Islamist component is the *Hizb-e-Islami* of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Hekmatyar was an important commander in the anti-Soviet *jihad*. However, as the country's prime minister during the Afghan Civil War, 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 in 2002, he has not been able to mobilize mass support since.[18] Most of the fighters that belong to *Hizb* (there do not appear to be any authoritative numbers in this regard) operate in the north-eastern section of the country, close to the Pakistan border and are ethnic Pashtuns.[19] The principal division between *Hizb* 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 1994-1996. Though the *Hizb* has engaged in talks with the Karzai regime and has been less aggressive in its attacks on Coalition forces, the group does appear to be responsible for several assassination attempts against President Hamid Karzai in 2007 and 2008,[20] 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 region of the Federally Administered Tribal Agencies, and consists of semi-mountainous and arid regions tapering into full desert along the Iranian border.

Ethnically, the 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.[21] 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.[22] Starting in the 1950s, the USSR established close relations with Afghanistan and gradually built up the local Communist party, an effort that culminated 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 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 (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 and local Islamist leaders 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, while the Pashtun lands in the south fell into chaos. The northern mini-states 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 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.[23] 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 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 controlled approximately 95 percent of the territory of Afghanistan.

Lacking international support (outside of Pakistan), the Taliban began to rely upon foreign radical groups like Osama bin Laden's 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."[24]

When President George W. Bush demanded that the Taliban hand over bin Laden and his affiliates after the attacks of September 11, the Taliban refused, at first believing al-Qaeda's denials of involvement. Following the U.S. invasion, Mullah Omar and the Taliban, owing to a strict Pashtun code of loyalty, 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, 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."[25]

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). 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. With membership totaling 502, the *jirga* is drawn from representatives all over the country, with reserved seats for women and religious minorities. Radical Islamists reject the institution of the *loya jirga* however, and some Afghans resent the presence of former warlords on the committee. Such opposition was most notably expressed in December 2003 by Malalai Joya, an Afghan women's rights activist who condemned the criminality of a number of *jirga* members before the council itself. She would later be elected as a member of parliament.[26]

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 have sought to portray the Karzai government as one that is subservient to the wishes of the United States, and corrupt and un-Islamic as a whole.[28] Taliban propaganda, for example, routinely refers to President Karzai as the "new Shah Shujah," a reference to the Afghan king put on the throne forcefully 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] Areas controlled by Taliban had almost no voter turnout during the most recent parliamentary elections held in the fall of 2010. These tactics, however, have not been successful in areas where there is little or no Taliban presence.

There are, however several Islamic parties that are allied with the government or participate in the political process. The comparatively moderate *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 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, meanwhile, has occasionally spoken of the possibility of reconciliation with the Taliban,[30] and has promulgated at least some aspects of *sharia* law in an effort to co-opt the Islamist opposition.

As President Karzai's presidential term expires, he and the Obama administration are pushing for a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. In July 2013, the Taliban opened diplomatic offices in Qatar, with the intention of using the facility as a neutral base from which to enter peace negotiations with the U.S. and Afghanistan. Peace efforts quickly stalled when the Taliban staged a flag-raising ceremony to initiate office operations, and issued unreasonable preconditions for negotiations. The Doha negotiations have remained stalled since.[31] However, there are early signs of a parallel track of engagement being facilitated by Pakistan. In summer 2013, Islamabad released from prison 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]

Hamid Karzai remains the single most influential player in Afghanistan despite his exclusion from candidacy due to term limits stipulated in the Afghan Constitution. Although rumors have circulated in lieu of Karzai making an official endorsement, the common wisdom is that he will end up supporting Zalmai Rassoul. Rassoul is a medical doctor who was Karzai's National Security Advisor from 2002-2010 and has since acted as the Minister of Foreign Affairs.[33] He relinquishes this position with his declaration of candidacy. The most prominent Islamist in the race is Abdul Rab Rasoul Sayyaf, a former member of the Afghan *mujahideen* that fought the Soviet Union in the 1980s.[34] Sayyaf was one of three prospective candidates that received early indications of support from Karzai, but the president has since favored Rassoul. In late September 2013, the Taliban attempted to assassi-

nate Sayyaf, due in part to his association with the Northern Alliance.[35] The Taliban has vocally opposed the election process, not recognizing the legitimacy of the proceedings, and demanding that Afghans boycott the procedure altogether.

ENDNOTES

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