



TALIBAN

Quick Facts

Geographical Areas of Operation: Europe, South Asia

Numerical Strength (Members): Approximately 60,000 (estimated 2018)

Leadership: Moulavi Haibatullah Akhunzada

Religious Identification: Sunni Islam

Quick Facts Courtesy of the Stanford University's Mapping Militant Organizations

INTRODUCTION

The Taliban is a Sunni Islamist fundamentalist militant group that emerged in 1994 during the Afghan Civil War. The Taliban, or “religious students” in Pashto, were primarily madrassa students motivated by restoring peace, eliminating corruption, and enforcing sharia law in Afghanistan. They formed in Kandahar and initiated a military campaign against regional warlords to capture Afghanistan, effectively doing so by 1996. After the September 2001 attacks on the U.S., the Taliban refused to hand over al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, who was, at the time, under their protection in Afghanistan. In response, the U.S. and allied forces invaded Afghanistan and captured Kabul by November 2001, toppling the Taliban regime in the process. In the nearly two decades since, the Taliban has waged a protracted campaign of asymmetric warfare against an assortment of forces, among them the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces, the Northern Alliance, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). Today, the Taliban continues to attack civilians as well as ANDSF and U.S. military targets even as it negotiates a peace agreement with the latter two parties.

The Taliban’s strategic focus remains largely on Afghanistan, as the group seeks to remove the existing government in order to create an Islamic state and to install sharia law within the country. The Taliban’s strategic motivations are directly influenced by their ideology. The Taliban’s ideological basis is formed by a combination of Pashtunwali, the Pashtun tribal code, and Deobandi Sunni Islam. They combine to form a set of rigid, ultraconservative principles. The group also remains intimately connected to – and supportive of – international Salafi-jihadi groups waging campaigns of terror around the world.

HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

The Taliban, or “religious students” in Pashto, emerged in 1994 in the midst of an ongoing civil war between *mujahideen* factions prompted by opposition to local warlords and a perceived failure to institute

sharia law in Afghanistan. Mullah Mohammad Omar led the fledgling group of primarily Sunni Pashtun *madrassa* students in their early campaign to rid Afghanistan of corrupt and violent warlords. Prior to founding the Taliban, Mullah Omar attended *Darul Uloom Haqqania*, a religious school that promotes Deobandi Sunni Islam and *jihad* against non-Muslims.¹ Mullah Omar took the education to heart, and brought the ideology back to Afghanistan, where it would provide the basis for the Taliban. The Taliban's social, political, and economic ideology rest on a framework that combines Pashtunwali, the tribal code of the Pashtun people who represent the majority of the Taliban, and Deobandi Sunni Islam, the ultra-conservative form of Sunnism often associated with southwest Asian Islamist groups.

The Taliban began their campaign eliminating small time criminals and warlords in southern Afghanistan, ostensibly filling the power vacuum left in the wake of the Afghan Civil War and infighting among the *mujahideen* and atrocities by local authorities.² The goals of the organization grew rapidly, as did its membership. Politically, the Taliban sought to install *sharia* law across Afghanistan and to create an Islamic state there and replace the existing government, which they viewed as illegitimate.

The Taliban scored their first major victory in November 1994, when they captured Kandahar. Over the next 22 months, the Taliban grew exponentially in size and in the area they controlled, and by September 1996 had captured Kabul and Jalalabad and seized control of the Afghan government.³ The Taliban also allowed Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda to return to Afghanistan in 1996, further worsening the situation in the country. Bin Laden pledged allegiance to Mullah Omar to ensure his organization would be treated as a guest and placed under the Taliban's protection.

Socially, the Taliban's policies are ultraconservative and archaic. While ruling Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban banned many western influences including alcohol, music, television, movies, and sports.⁴ They also banned women from being educated and placed extreme restrictions on females.⁵ Prayer became compulsory, any person caught breaking any laws was dealt with in extreme and brutal fashion. (Notably, the peace process underway may shift these policies, or at least moderate them somewhat, as the group has agreed to respect women's rights, social progression, and human rights in general as a condition for the negotiations and its ultimate inclusion as a political party in the future government).

Economically, the Taliban banned many illicit forms of revenue generation including opium farming, going so far as attempting to eradicate opium when they ruled Afghanistan. They also heavily taxed all corporations operating in Afghanistan. However, Taliban reneged on these goals after being removed from power, when they shifted to largely rely on the opium trade, as well also conduct weapons, gem, mineral, and timber smuggling, human trafficking, and other illicit forms of financing in order to sustain their campaign against the government.⁶

The Northern Alliance, a group resembling the previous Islamic Unity of Afghanistan Movement, formed in September 1996 from disparate *mujahideen* groups in an effort to combat the surging Taliban.⁷ The Northern Alliance consisted of mix of political, religiously, and ethnically aligned militias, including Jamiat-i Islami, Shura-i Nazar Ahmad Shah Massoud, Harakat-i Islami, Bizb-i Wahdat, and Junbish-i Milli.

Prior to 1996, the Northern Alliance groups held territory across Afghanistan. As the war continued, the Taliban pushed the Northern Alliance into the northeastern provinces of Afghanistan with pockets of resistance in major cities including Kunduz and Mazar-i-Sharif remaining outside of Northern Alliance territory. By 2001, the Taliban controlled the majority of the country with the exception of parts of Kunduz, Baghlan, Badakhshan and Takhar provinces in the country's northeast.

On September 9, 2001, al-Qaeda assassinated Northern Alliance Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud in an effort to support the Taliban.⁸ Two days later, on September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda launched terror attacks against New York and Washington DC. On September 20, 2001, the U.S. demanded that the Taliban turn Osama bin Laden over and close all al-Qaeda bases in Afghanistan.⁹ The Taliban demurred, instead offering to try bin Laden in a Taliban-controlled court in Afghanistan if the U.S. provided evidence

of his complicity.¹⁰ The U.S. rejected the Taliban's offer,¹¹ and launched the invasion of Afghanistan on October 7, 2001. The hostilities were brief; overwhelming U.S. aerial power, as well as collaboration by U.S. Special Forces with the Northern Alliance and Hamid Karzai's militia, led to the fall of the Taliban and the toppling of their government by late November 2001.

Thereafter, a UN-sponsored conference created a provisional Afghan government, bringing together prominent Afghan leaders.¹² The Taliban were deliberately left out of the process. The agreement established a provisional government that would transition power to a permanent government in two years' time, and laid the groundwork for the creation of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

The remnants of the former Taliban government fled Afghanistan to Pakistan over the course of late 2001 and 2002. From Pakistan, the Taliban leadership sought to rebuild the organization and direct operations in Afghanistan. As the Taliban began to spread their influence and regain *de facto* control of some rural areas in southern Afghanistan, the so-called *Quetta Shura* began assigning shadow government positions to various areas and regions where the group maintained a heavy footprint and enjoyed support. The Taliban largely spent 2002 to 2005 recruiting and rebuilding their previous capabilities in an effort to retake Afghanistan. In November 2004, Mullah Omar released a statement that vowed that the Taliban were resurgent and that they would fight the Afghan government and foreign invaders until they once again controlled the country.¹³

But while the Taliban launched attacks and regained some territory between 2003 and 2005, the Taliban did not launch their insurgency in earnest until 2006. The resulting campaign ran from 2006 to 2011, and was defined by bombings and suicide attacks. In response, the U.S. dramatically increased troop levels in the country in September 2008 and February 2009 in efforts to end the fighting. Support for the effort among the U.S. public, however, waned over time and led to troop withdrawals in June 2011. The U.S. and Afghanistan's newly-elected National Unity Government signed a Bilateral Security Agreement in September 2014, which provided the basis for the United States and NATO to leave behind approximately 9,800 U.S. troops and 5,500 coalition troops to support planned operations. The U.S. and NATO halted all combat operations in December of 2014. NATO initiated Operation Resolute Support in January 2015 which remains active and focuses on a train, advise, assist mission set to develop capacities of the ANDSF.

RECENT ACTIVITY

In April 2013, Mullah Omar died in a Pakistani hospital.¹⁴ News of his death was kept secret for more than two years, and during that period the Taliban released official statements under their former leader's name to ensure the movement remained cohesive. Furthermore, the group published Omar's biography in April 2015 to mark his 19th year as the Taliban supreme leader. In July 2015, Afghan intelligence officials revealed the Taliban leader had died years earlier – something which the Taliban subsequently confirmed.¹⁵ Mullah Akhtar Mansour succeeded Mullah Omar after a hasty selection process that was disputed by high-ranking leaders of the movement.¹⁶ Soon after, fractures began to appear in the movement. Some Taliban leaders protested that the late Mullah Omar's son, Mullah Mohammad Yaqoub, should become leader instead and argued that Pakistan had orchestrated Mansour's selection.¹⁷ They accused Mansour of "hijacking the movement because of personal greed," which led to the creation of a splinter group, the High Council of the Afghanistan Islamic Emirate, led by Mullah Mohammad Rasool.¹⁸ The split soon erupted into infighting between the two sides, with Mansour's side gaining the upper hand.¹⁹ Intense clashes under the leadership of Mullah Mohammad Rasool continued well into the Spring of 2016.

The Taliban continued to splinter as the Islamic State's Afghan faction grew in power in eastern Afghanistan. In January 2015, news emerged that Mullah Abdul Rauf Alizai swore allegiance to the or Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISK), and had been appointed its deputy commander, after falling out with the Taliban. The following month, however, Alizai was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Helmand

province.²⁰

In May 2016, Mullah Mansour was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Balochistan, Pakistan.²¹ Mansour was reportedly returning from a scheduled trip to Iran. The Taliban confirmed Mullah Mansour's death and announced that Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhunzada, a Taliban religious scholar with no military experience, would lead the organization.²² They also announced that Sirajuddin Haqqani and Mullah Mohammad Yaqoub, son of Mullah Mohammad Omar, would serve as deputies. Akhunzada effectively left the operational command of the movement in the hands of his deputies.²³ The two deputies divided Afghanistan in two with each wanting to control his own front. The Afghan government urged the new Taliban leadership to consider joining a peace process to end the fighting, but Taliban leadership announced the Taliban would not participate in peace talks and would remain committed to fighting.²⁴ The decision was driven by the conviction of many of the movement's commanders that a political settlement to the conflict is not a desired option, given that military victory over the Afghan government is attainable. This view was strengthened by the movement's 2015 and 2016 offensives across the country's 34 provinces. The capture of major cities including Kunduz in September 2015 and again in August 2016 provide symbolic and strategic significance to the Taliban.²⁵ The ANDSF retook Kunduz both times with significant help from U.S. special operations and air support. The Taliban primarily focused on capturing smaller district centers, but would launch attacks on major cities to initiate the summer fighting season each year.

Since assuming power in September 2014, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani prioritized reconciling with the Taliban by reaching out to Pakistan to facilitate negotiations. He has also helped establish a Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), which includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, and the United States, in pursuit of a peace settlement with the Taliban. However, the Taliban continued their offensives and refused to come to the negotiating table to engage in peace talks. As a result, in the first quarter of 2016, Ghani effectively eschewed amnesty and passivity as a policy option toward the insurgency but continued to welcome those Taliban members who wished to reconcile.²⁶

On August 21, 2017, the Trump administration announced a new Afghanistan and South Asia strategy that shifted to a conditions-based approach for a peace process and withdrawal of US troops.²⁷ The strategy loosened rules of engagement for U.S. commanders in Afghanistan, took a harsher stance on Pakistan attempting to address duplicitous behavior in fighting terrorism, and called on India to assume a large role in Afghanistan's development. The White House reaffirmed the importance of the peace process and that the door was open for negotiations with the Taliban while increasing both the number of US troops in Afghanistan and combat operations. On February 14, 2018, the Taliban released a letter addressed to the United States and the American people; in it, the group attempted to remind the American people of the costs of the war in Afghanistan, the Taliban's continued willingness to negotiate peace with the US government, and corruption in the Afghan government.²⁸ The letter spurred the Afghan government to move towards peace. On February 28, 2018, President Ashraf Ghani made an overture to the Taliban by outlining a bold peace proposal during the Kabul Process Conference in front of high-level international representatives from 25 countries.²⁹ Ghani's peace proposal invited the conciliatory Taliban members to enter peace talks without any preconditions. The peace proposal states that the Afghan government will recognize the Taliban as a legitimate political group, issue Taliban members and their families passports, release Taliban prisoners, remove sanctions on Taliban leaders, and provide amnesty, security, and financial guarantees to Taliban members who resettle in Afghanistan. The Taliban would in turn be required to respect the rule of law, women's rights, and the sovereignty of the Afghan government. In December of 2018, Taliban leadership announced that they were ready to restart negotiations.³⁰ The Taliban excluded the Afghan government from their list of parties with which they wished to negotiate, as the group believes the government is illegitimate and does not represent the population effectively.

In January 2019, Taliban and U.S. delegations met in Doha, Qatar for six days of peace negotiations, after which both sides stated that progress was made, but several issues remain unresolved.³¹ On February

6, 2019, Taliban and GIROA delegations met in Moscow, Russia for a subsequent two days of peace negotiations, during which the two sides charted out a peace process that relied on the removal of foreign forces from Afghanistan and the Taliban committing to protecting human rights.³² On February 25, 2019, Taliban co-founder and chief of the Taliban political office Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar met with U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad to discuss the peace process.³³ The meeting suggested increasing seriousness on part of the Taliban to reach a peaceful resolution.

But, Taliban officials made clear, that peaceful resolution would only come if the group's demands were met. On June 1, 2019, Taliban Leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhunzada pledged to continue fighting until the organization's goals were achieved.³⁴ The message proclaimed that the Taliban wanted a government that is representative of all Afghans and an end to the conflict in Afghanistan. As the same time, continued Taliban military action – such as the September 2019 killing of foreign soldiers and Afghan civilians with a vehicle borne improvised explosive device (VBIED)³⁵ – infuriated the White House and caused at least temporary derailments and delays in peace talks with Washington.³⁶

The conflict between U.S. and Taliban forces remained violent throughout the year, despite sporadic diplomatic contacts between the group and Washington, with 180 U.S. troops wounded and 17 killed in action.³⁷ However, Taliban-U.S. peace negotiations picked up speed at the beginning of 2020 and, on February 21, 2020, the two sides initiated a seven day reduction in violence.³⁸ The reduction in violence held between the two sides over the course of the week and, on February 29, 2020, the U.S. and the Taliban signed a formal peace agreement.³⁹

The agreement is broken down into four parts, including prevention of the use of Afghanistan as a base by groups that threaten the security of the United States and allies, removal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan, initiation of negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban, and a permanent ceasefire between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The U.S. and Afghan governments also signed a joint declaration on February 29 demonstrating continued commitment to find a peaceful solution to the conflict.⁴⁰

On March 1, 2020, however, President Ghani stated that the government would not abide by the terms set for prisoner release in the U.S.-Taliban peace agreement signed days earlier.⁴¹ The agreement envisioned 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 Afghan government prisoners being released prior to the upcoming March 10th peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. President Ghani's statement led to the Taliban refusing to attend then-upcoming peace talks in Oslo, Norway. Ghani relented somewhat, and after some delays, a smaller number of prisoners (100 total) were released by the Afghan government in support of the peace agreement.⁴² The Taliban, however, were dissatisfied by this, and stepped up their violent activity in the late Spring and early Summer of 2020, resulting in the deaths of scores of civilians and members of the Afghan military.⁴³ On May 20, 2020, the U.S., the Afghan government, and Taliban leaders met to revive the faltering U.S.-Taliban and Afghan-Taliban peace deals.⁴⁴ Those talks were ultimately successful, leading to a reconciliation – still in process as of this writing – between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan.⁴⁵

The United States is also forging ahead with its plans made under its 2020 truce with the Taliban. As of late May 2020, the Trump administration appears to be well ahead of its troop withdrawal schedules as enumerated under the February deal.⁴⁶ This does not, however, mean that U.S.-Taliban hostilities have ceased; throughout the summer of 2020, Taliban attacks against Afghan military and civilian targets precipitated U.S. airstrikes.⁴⁷

GLOBAL REACH

Taliban operations are largely restricted to within the borders of Afghanistan, although violent clashes in the frontier areas with Iran, Pakistan, and Tajikistan have occasionally been reported. The Taliban have occasionally threatened attacks against NATO countries whose soldiers are operating in Afghanistan including the US, UK, Spain, and Germany although none of the terrorist attacks in any of these countries have ever been attributed to the Taliban. Despite those threats, the Taliban have never truly sought a global agenda. In the fall of 2009, the Taliban tried to promote a new “foreign policy” by releasing several statements on their website declaring the movement poses no regional or international security threat. Mullah Omar repeated this rhetoric in one of his two annual *Eid* statements to the Afghan people, which appeared in mid-November 2010.⁴⁸ The Taliban do maintain connections to and are supportive of foreign Salafi-*jihadists* with international missions and motivations including al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, Jaish-e Mohammad, Lashkar-e Taiyba, and Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan.⁴⁹

Within Afghanistan, the Taliban have demonstrated the capability to reach all corners of the country. Over the course of the war in Afghanistan, the Taliban have controlled territory and district centers in all 34 of Afghanistan’s provinces. They also maintain the ability to execute suicide attacks, indirect fire attacks, insider attacks, and raids across the country on ANDSF, U.S. and NATO military, and Afghan civilian targets. The Taliban focus on military and Afghan targets, but occasionally attack non-government civilian targets.

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