

# Taliban history of war and peace in Afghanistan

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## ABSTRACT

### **What does conflict in Afghanistan look like to the Taliban and how can greater knowledge of how the movement functions inform better peace policy?**

Misconceptions of the Taliban have complicated efforts to end the war in Afghanistan. A key example is the extent to which the movement represents the grievances of a significant section of Afghan society.

The Taliban are not unified. From inception the movement has included distinct groups with different views on national and international policy. But the core message of the central leadership has resonated widely: Afghanistan needs to return to law and order, and the Taliban are here to dispense security and justice based on Islam. The Taliban's military conquest of Afghanistan has reflected their core belief that holding a monopoly of power is a precondition for the formation of a viable Afghan state.

The movement sees itself as inclusive – not aligned with any group nor based on ethnicity or a political programme but following Islam alone. The Taliban's resurgence in the 2000s mirrored their initial rise to power, facilitated by widespread public discontent with the new government. They see themselves and the US as the real stakeholders in the conflict and so likewise in any reconciliation process.

The Taliban are perhaps less exceptional in Afghanistan than many people would prefer to believe, as they express a much broader discontent that is anchored in local conflict. The Taliban's narrative of the conflict in Afghanistan is not an alternative history, but rather a missing piece of the larger puzzle of how to administer the country peacefully.



Former Taliban fighters line up to hand over their rifles to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan during a reintegration ceremony at the provincial governor's compound May 28, 2012 in Ghor, Afghanistan. © DOD Photo / Alamy Stock Photo

The history of the Taliban remains a phenomenon. Not because it is impossible to explain who they are, why they started or why they were so successful. But because politically motivated alternative narratives have proven even more durable than the group itself. There are fundamental misconceptions about what the Taliban were and are, and what they were not and are not, which complicate efforts to end the war. While the Taliban leadership is made up of distinct groups and individuals, the movement from in the 1990s through to today remains an expression of the sentiment of a significant section of Afghan society. There are many Taliban versions of the past. For all the distortion and propaganda these contain, much is to be learnt from the Taliban's understanding of the Afghan crisis.

## Beginnings

*The Religion of Allah is being stepped on, the people are openly displaying evil, the People of [Islam] are hiding their Religion, and the evil ones have taken control of the whole area; they steal the people's money, they attack their honour on the main street, they kill people and put them against the rocks on the side of the road, and the cars pass by and see the dead body on the side of the road, and no one dares to bury him [...].*

Mullah Omar was addressing the first group of religious students in Panjwayi, describing the situation all around Kandahar in 1994. After the Afghan *mujahidin* had successfully driven out the Soviet forces and the government it had left behind in Kabul, Afghanistan descended into war with itself. Mullah Omar – and

many others – believed that 'control was in the hands of the corrupt and wicked ones'. For much of the Taliban leadership, the men who would follow Mullah Omar, it was clear that the civil war had been fuelled by outside interference, and that the victory of the jihad had been spoiled by the selfishness of the *mujahidin* commanders who were fighting each other in a struggle for power.

But the crisis was more than just a few *mujahidin* commanders and their foreign supporters; the Taliban saw that the Afghan people had lost their way. They had been hiding their religion, which had allowed the chaos and anarchy to take hold as the loosely affiliated networks of local *mujahidin* disintegrated and the commanders turned on communities. A Taliban op-ed from mid-1995, some seven months after the movement had started, is illustrative: 'We all witnessed what happened when there was no shari'a law in the country. The last few years are a good example of the disaster a society faces without a strict code or law.'

There are differing views on matters of national and international policy within the Taliban, and to think of the movement as one group is misleading. Even in their earliest incarnation there were distinct Taliban groups. Nevertheless, the core Taliban message resonated widely – that Afghanistan needed to return to law and order and that they had come to provide security and justice on the basis of Islam.

For the Taliban, their early success was not built on their superior military might but was an expression of the widespread discontent and desperation about the steadily deteriorating situation. As Mullah Omar explained in

1995: 'We asked the religious scholars for their advice and received a shari'a-based decree from them. In the light of this decree from our religious scholars, we started our armed resistance to the corrupt regime in Kabul. We started this movement for the protection of the faith and the implementation of the shari'a law and the safeguarding of our sovereignty.'

After their momentous success in taking Kandahar province, the Taliban's growing momentum soon convinced them to turn their sights nationwide. While they only established an official government after the fall of Kabul in 1996, by spring 1995 they had already transformed themselves from a loosely structured network of separate groups. They organised as the *mujahidin* groups of the 1980s had, developing their capabilities to raise finance, fight and negotiate. Within four months of starting they had not only managed to expand their reach to within a few kilometres of Kabul, but had also established committees and departments that, however poorly they performed in practice, were meant to fulfil government functions of international diplomacy, healthcare and economic development – alongside the movement's core goals of providing security and justice.

### **National conquest: 'peace, justice, security and Islam'**

The Taliban's primary objectives were informed by what they considered to be the precondition for the formation of a viable Afghan state, ie holding the monopoly of power. While they expanded their territory and ranks mostly through incorporation and negotiation, the Taliban's understanding was that as long as the option to fight existed then there would be fighting, or Afghanistan as a whole would fracture. As Mullah Ghaus, the Taliban's first acting minister of foreign affairs, would explain, 'the Taliban are facing opponents [...] who want to increase their military advantage through war. There are too many arms in Afghanistan; the war would not end until they were disarmed. [The] Taliban would continue to fight until all Afghans were disarmed and the country secure.'

To much of the outside world, this seemed to be little more than the Taliban requiring all other Afghan factions to lay down arms and surrender. The Taliban's point of view, however, was markedly different. In contrast to how they were perceived externally as well as by some other Afghan factions, the Taliban did not consider themselves to be party to the civil war of the early 1990s. They had come to end the civil war and so were a group apart. This mission, according to the Taliban, was not about excluding people. Quite the opposite. As they often claimed, they were not aligned with any group, were not based on ethnicity or a political programme, but were following Islam alone.

Islam would provide the framework on which others should be operating. From this perspective, the central goal of an Islamic government based on shari'a could not seriously be disputed since this had been what all Afghan *mujahidin* had fought and died for in the jihad against Soviet forces. As Mullah Omar stated in the summer of 1995, which must have been confusing to the outside world at the time: 'the Islamic movement of the Taliban was trying its best and making all sorts of possible efforts to prevent any potential conflict in the country.' Much of what the Taliban actually did, however, was reactive. They were making things up as they went. The overall goals they propagated – peace, justice, security and Islam – resonated widely. But they were also loosely defined and the details were often discussed as issues arose.

In September 1996, the Taliban took Kabul. Mullah Omar announced that 'After this, a pure Islamic government will rule over Afghanistan.' The Taliban would go on to form a government – which meant for the most part reopening previous ministries and encouraging people to return to their workplace. But at the time of Mullah Omar's statement, the Taliban did not rule Afghanistan. The ministers that were appointed then were 'acting': theirs was a transitional government, and Afghanistan's future was to be decided once the war had ended. Meanwhile, the Taliban would focus on their main mission of preventing a return to chaos and harvesting the fruits of the hard-won jihad.

Kabul, long the motor of innovation and modernity in Afghanistan, seemed for much of the Taliban to be the epicentre of what had gone wrong. After all, it had been in the capital that unhealthy ideologies such as Communism and Muslim-Brotherhood-inspired Islamism had seeped into society. To this end the *Amr bil Ma'rouf*, better known as the Ministry for Vice and Virtue, was created soon after Kabul fell – having previously been established only as a department. In line with some of the core tenets of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, much of the Taliban leadership believed that shari'a was meant to create a society that allowed people to be good. The mixture of rural village culture and religious education that formed the socio-educational background of many senior Taliban leaders had created a highly ritualistic and outward-oriented religious understanding: if something could corrupt people, it should not be allowed.

Between 1996 and the end of their Emirate in early 2002, the Taliban continued to try and redress the core issues they considered to be the reason for the Afghan crisis. While they did engage in various negotiation tracks to try to end the war with the opposition, none yielded any results. The Taliban saw the opposition as untrustworthy and so the war

continued, as opposition forces either consolidated around Ahmed Shah Massoud or fled the country. The problems the Taliban faced while trying to institute a functioning government and state were the same that many aspiring administrations had encountered before: establishing both authority over a fiercely independent population and a monopoly of violence within the country's sovereign borders.

It was arguably their understanding of the underlying causes of the Afghan crisis and the solutions to these that separated them from previous rulers. Rather than orientating themselves towards Western countries promoting modernisation or following foreign ideologies, the Taliban brought with them a mixture of rural Pashtun customs and religious education that informed what they thought needed to be changed, mostly in urban centres. A closer look at how they ruled in much of Afghanistan showed that in practical matters of governance, in particular the rural hinterlands, more often than not they relied on similar arrangements to those that had allowed other governments before them to rule – at least nominally.

### **Fall from power and insurgency**

The Taliban's international relations soon came to be dominated by links with Osama bin Laden and other foreign nationals accused of involvement in terrorism. The list of concerns of the international community, and particularly of the US, had been growing since the Taliban emerged in Kandahar: from opium production, to the treatment of the population and especially women and girls, and then to bin Laden and terrorists. The US and Saudi Arabia had been first to protest about bin Laden, but his presence in Afghanistan soon started to dominate much of the Taliban's interaction with the world.

From the Taliban's perspective there seemed little difference between meeting a US diplomat or a representative of the UN. The US was, in their words, 'finding [...] excuses against the Emirate and the top one is the presence of Arab *mujahid*, Osama bin Laden. [...] even if Osama got out of Afghanistan, they would still not formally recognise the Islamic Emirate and neither would Osama's departure put an end to their pretexts.' Diplomatic efforts bore little fruit. Bin Laden continued to threaten the US and other nations and was held responsible for the 1998 bombings of two US embassies in East Africa.

The US retaliated with cruise missile strikes and later imposed sanctions on the Taliban aimed at forcing them to hand over Bin Laden. UN sanctions soon followed, which, to the Taliban, only confirmed the UN as little more than another US tool. To this day, much of the Taliban leadership not only maintains strong doubts as to bin Laden's involvement in the 1998 bombings but also about the

September 11 attacks three years later. Still, many among the Taliban leadership feared that Afghanistan would pay the price for the attack, and searched for a peaceful solution. Many wanted bin Laden gone. However, even after an *Ulema* conference in Kabul had advised that bin Laden should be asked to leave, Mullah Omar made it clear he would not expel him.

**“ The former warlords and parties to the civil war of the 1990s won positions in the new administration, using their recently acquired power to enrich themselves and their supporters.”**

The US, meanwhile, was mobilising rapidly in response to 9/11. The Bush doctrine held that the US 'will make no distinction between those who planned these acts and those who harbour them'. Operation Enduring Freedom launched in October 2001 saw the US use small teams of special forces alongside Afghan opposition groups – who were familiar faces to the Taliban. In north Afghanistan the US built up the loosely affiliated groups of the Northern Alliance, almost all of whom had been part of the civil war of the early 1990s. These included General Mohammed Fahim, who had been the intelligence officer of Ahmed Shah Massoud; Ismail Khan, who had carved out his own fiefdom in western Afghanistan; and the Uzbek commander Abdul Rashid Dostum, who was notorious for switching allegiance. In the south, Gul Agha Shirzai, the same man the Taliban had expelled from Kandahar in 1994, mobilised men in Pakistan and marched towards Kandahar supported by US air power.

The Taliban's defeat by the US and the return to power of their old foes came as a shock. Overwhelming US airpower had been decisive. But the social contract of the Islamic Emirate had begun to dissolve well before then, as the popular support the Taliban had once garnered had long started to dwindle in the light of new laws and policies enforced by their government. In power, the Taliban's relationship with the rural communities rehashed the same struggle faced by all central authorities before them – to develop a working relationship with the peripheries. In particular, rural tribal communities were opposed to growing interference in their local affairs by the Taliban government in Kabul. The opium ban that the Taliban enforced especially soured the relationship with many rural farming communities by eroding their livelihoods. Following the swift demise of the Emirate, the shell-shocked Taliban retreated, many returning to their home



villages and mosques and madrasas, others fleeing across the border to Pakistan.

In the first couple of years after the end of the Emirate it seemed that the Taliban were indeed a spent force. Many members of the senior leadership contemplated joining the new political paradigm in Kabul or returning to their previous lives before the movement. But it seemed that there was no safe space for them for them to demobilise. The US continued to pursue its war on terror, while Washington's Afghan allies used their newfound support to settle old scores. The former warlords and parties to the civil war of the 1990s won positions in the new administration, using their recently acquired power to enrich themselves and their supporters. People who had previously been close to the Taliban, or who were branded as having been close, found themselves targeted.

The return of the Taliban as a potent insurgent movement would take a few years. Much like their first rise to power in the 1990s, their resurgence was facilitated by widespread public discontent with the new government – the interim council headed by Hamid Karzai, and then his administration. As before, the new mobilisation comprised a conglomeration of local conflicts brought together under one umbrella by former Taliban leaders. Much time and effort was invested in creating a coherent organisation that would work within the Taliban's framework. The leadership circulated several rulebooks outlining rules and responsibilities to be followed, the so-called *Layeha*. The Taliban established a shadow government that looked to feed off the failings of the corrupt government in Kabul and the cultural ignorance of the foreign forces.

## Reconciliation?

The Taliban questioned the Kabul government's credibility and legitimacy, seeing it as both installed and controlled by a foreign power. This is why the Taliban saw themselves and the US as the real stakeholders in the growing conflict in Afghanistan – and hence in any reconciliation process towards a political settlement. Their statement regarding the 2009 election is illustrative:

*Our people surely remember that the Islamic Emirate always maintained that the real decision about the results of elections is made in Washington. The elections are held to throw dust in the eyes of people and hide their colonialist agenda under the cloud of elections.*

The at times seemingly contradictory position of the US towards the insurgency further complicated things. For example, under the Barrack Obama administration, while Secretary of State Hillary Clinton endorsed the idea of

talks between the government in Kabul and the Taliban, President Obama announced a troop surge. Post-surge efforts at reconciliation seemed to the Taliban little more than an offer of amnesty in response to their capitulation. As a Taliban statement at the time reveals,

*contrarily, the Pentagon is at present making preparation for new military operations in Helmand province, south Afghanistan. Similarly, they put forward conditions, which are tantamount to escalating the war rather than ending it. For example, they want the mujahedeen to lay down arms, accept the constitution and renounce violence. Nobody can call this reconciliation.*

Around the time of the surge, President Karzai was calling for the Taliban to lay down their arms and join him. His government established the High Peace Council (HPC) in 2010, tasked with bringing about a reconciliation process, facilitating talks or in any other way supporting an end to the conflict. The Taliban saw the HPC as little more than another organ that worked under the command of the foreign forces. Mawlawi Kabir, a member of the Taliban's central council, explained a few months after the HPC was founded that '[the] peace council is a one-sided entity, having been established to protect their unilateral goals and interests. The council consists of people who practically support the Americans, though they claim being jihadist figures and leaders. But by siding with the American invaders, they had forfeited their credibility.'

Negotiation has only made sense to the Taliban with people they see as holding real power – ie the US. In June 2012 the Taliban announced that they were 'ready to open a political office abroad to reach a peaceful solution of the Afghan issue and understanding with the US'. Over the next year, the Taliban would repeat that it was the 'US which is the true independent counterpart to the Taliban. [...] The Americans have been utilising the Karzai administration as a tool for prolonging their occupation.' A year later the Taliban opened a political office in Qatar, intended as a major milestone in advancing a political process.

The opening of the Qatar office turned into a diplomatic disaster, however, with Taliban representatives speaking in front of the official flag of the Islamic Emirate. President Karzai, who had been negotiating a bilateral security agreement with the US, called off the negotiations and announced that the HPC would not join talks in Qatar as long as the peace process was not Afghan-led. This came as a surprise to the Taliban who in a statement claimed not only that designating the office as an official agency of the Islamic Emirate had been agreed upon beforehand, but that they would maintain their commitment to using the

office as a vehicle to talk with representatives of dozens of countries and members of the HPC. Karzai's outrage over the flag seemed another excuse to end the talks before they had started in earnest.

Despite the breakdown of official contact, the US and the Taliban in 2014 agreed on a prisoner swap. Five Taliban prisoners were released from Guantanamo prison in exchange for Bowe Bergdahl, a US army soldier who had been taken captive by the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2009. But while some hoped that the exchange would result in more talks, little has materialised since. Looking at the official communications of the Taliban, little seems to have changed over the past eight years. In their eyes: Afghanistan continues to be occupied by foreign forces; the US determined the outcome of the disputed 2014 election by negotiating the formation of the Nation Unity Government; new President Ashraf Ghani signed the bilateral security agreement with the US that allowed American troops to stay in the country; and Abdullah Abdullah became Afghanistan's first chief executive. The Taliban saw these changes as more of the same – an illegitimate and corrupt government propped up by the US and others.

In a statement commemorating the 15-year anniversary of Operation Enduring Freedom, the Taliban questioned the foreigners' achievement in relation to their stated goals: to make Afghanistan self-sufficient; to end narcotic production and trade; to form a government according to the will of the Afghan nation; and to establish peace, stability and security in the country. The Taliban stressed that, in fact, in the 15 years of US occupation much had got worse: Afghanistan remained one of the poorest countries in the world; drug production was at a record high; the government in Kabul seemed one of the most corrupt in the world, 'run by thieves and gangs of evil'; and security and justice were non-existent.

## Conclusion

In 2015 it was revealed that Mullah Omar, the founder and leader of the Taliban, had died two years earlier. A small

group of Taliban leaders had pretended he was still alive and had ruled in his stead. The news of his death saw Mullah Mansour become leader, but the accompanying leadership struggle meant that the enduring differences between the various Taliban networks now began to develop cracks and then the first signs of actual ruptures. A year later, Mullah Rasool announced the first splinter group. Mansour managed to consolidate his hold over the wider movement and introduced significant innovations, even suggesting that he was not ruling out a political solution to the Afghan conflict. But the US assassinated him in May 2016. Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada became the next Amir of the Taliban. Meanwhile, the Islamic State, having achieved international notoriety in Iraq and Syria, had started to branch out. The formation of the Islamic State in the Khorasan (ISK) in eastern Afghanistan was announced in 2015. Arguably an outcome of increased internal strife among different jihadi and other militant groups, ISK grew into a formidable foe of the Taliban, which soon found itself in open conflict with the newly formed group.

The Taliban today draw parallels with the situation in the early 1990s when Afghanistan descended into civil war. They see many of the same people in powerful positions around the country, as well as a comparable local security situation and similarly unacceptable behaviour by security forces. The Taliban's narrative of Afghanistan's history casts them in the role of righteous victims. In many ways the Taliban are less exceptional in Afghanistan than many would like them to be. Many of their messages echo the grievances of a significant section of Afghan society, and they remain the expression of a much broader discontent that is anchored in local conflict. No group can survive in Afghanistan without local support, support which can never be won by fear alone. This reality is abundantly clear from the failure of every Afghan government to extend its reach into the hinterlands. And it shows that the Taliban's narrative of the conflict in Afghanistan is not an alternative version of Afghanistan's history, but rather a missing piece of the larger puzzle of how to administer the country peacefully – a piece that remains ignored by much of the West.