The state of knowledge

Origins

Although much has been written on the post-2001 insurgency in Afghanistan, little of it is systematic in its analysis or has been carefully researched on the ground. The history of the Taliban and how they emerged as a powerful insurgent movement is however quite clear. The best analytical discussion of the Taliban before 9/11 and their transformation into a regime is in Dorransoro (2005). The Taliban’s origins are important to understand their modus operandi after 2001, because the nature of the movement has changed but not wholly transformed. The clerical nature of the pre-2001 Taliban is very clear, for example, and the core of the Taliban as an insurgent movement remains clerical in essence. Before 2001, the Taliban had little experience in handling a guerrilla war. Most of its members had been active in the 1980s jihad against the Soviet Army and the pro-Soviet government, but mainly in junior roles, leading small fronts of fighters and usually not the best organized ones. By 2001, the year when their regime was overthrown by American intervention, the Taliban had expanded their original alliance of southern clerical networks into a nationwide ‘network of networks’, a development which would later help them organize an insurgency on a much larger scale. Similarly the history of the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda until 2001 may be relevant to understand post-2001 developments (Lia 2008; Al-Masri 2005; Brown 2010).

The collapse of the Taliban regime has not been studied in detail, but it seems to have occurred faster than anticipated by the Taliban and their Arab allies. The solidity of the network and of a range of external alliances with militias and former warlords in the face of American onslaught had clearly been overestimated. After the collapse followed a time of demoralization and loss of direction, which lasted some months. By the summer of 2002 there were already signs of the leadership trying to re-organize, although initially with little success. Helped by friendly Pakistani networks, which contributed help and volunteers to start military operations across the Pakistani border, the Taliban managed to gradually re-establish a sense of faith in the movement among a portion of their old supporters, and started actively recruiting a new generation in the madrasas and refugee camps of Pakistan. Although largely under-reported, the insurgency steadily grew from a very low base throughout 2002–5. The year 2006 is usually...
seen as the turning point, when the pace of violence and of the spread of the insurgency accelerated dramatically (Giustozzi 2008). From 2006 onwards the insurgency has arguably been growing without interruption. At the time of writing (August 2010) a debate was still going on, whether 2010 represented yet another year of further expansion for the insurgency or whether the American ‘surge’, started in 2009, had succeeded in containing the insurgency. In any case, the indicators of violence all point to a steady growth of the insurgency year after year without interruptions.

The dimensions of the insurgency

The overall map of the insurgency, its spread and its composition are quite well known. The dominant force within the insurgency is the Army of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, popularly known as the Taliban. It accounts for about 80 per cent of the total force of the political insurgents. The second group in terms of strength is Hizb-I Islami, which accounts for about 10 per cent, but has also links to many former members who operate as part of the Taliban, particularly away from eastern Afghanistan where the organizational structure of the party is strongest. The rest of the insurgency is largely marginal: a couple of small Salafi groups in eastern Afghanistan, with a strength of no more than a few hundred each; some independent commanders here and there, mostly in western Afghanistan, and a number of non-Afghan organizations operating inside Afghan territory. These include mostly Pakistani groups, of which the most active is Lashkar-e Taiba, and Central Asian groups, of which the main one is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The contribution of these groups to the ‘jihad’ in Afghanistan is significant mainly at the local level; eastern Afghanistan for most Pakistani groups and northern Afghanistan for the IMU. Their contribution appears valuable mostly in terms of their indirect support: training seems to be provided to Taliban by both the IMU and the Pakistani groups. Some complex attacks are carried out with the infusion of groups of specialists from Pakistan, which contribute skills in sniping, explosive and team weapons (Giustozzi 2008; Giustozzi and Reuter 2010).

The size of the insurgency is more or less clear too, although there are different ways of counting. The number of full-time fighters in mid 2010 was around 30,000, of which up to 4,000 may have been foreigners; there are also tens of thousands of part-time fighters, facilitators, political cadres, of which almost none are foreigners. There are also tens of thousands of men active in illegal armed groups, which are not directly connected to the insurgency, although sometimes may entertain relations with them. Mostly the latter groups avoid fighting the security forces and the foreign troops, but sometimes clash with the police. The mass of part-timers, facilitators and political cadres are the least discussed component of the insurgency, because they either operate in the shadows or are local in character. Part-timers might sometimes be seen by the Taliban as integral part of the movement, but other times they might be seen as external allies mobilized by communities in defence of their own interests. The degree of involvement of each community can vary greatly, from full Talibanization, where pro-Taliban clerics take over control of the community, to a superficial alliance of community elders who have little to share with the Taliban’s ideology and worldview. There is some evidence that many community elders might have allowed the Taliban into their territory initially as a way of signalling their displeasure to the central government, which has been neglecting local elders since its inception in 2001. The Taliban, however, have demonstrated themselves as quite adept at manipulating local elders for their own purposes and once they establish themselves in a region it has proven difficult to get rid of them (Giustozzi 2008, 2009a, 2009b).
The size of the post-2001 insurgency compared to the 1980s can be a useful benchmark of the overall picture in Afghanistan. Around the peak of that insurgency, there were around 75–90,000 full-time insurgents, with a total of 250,000 active and another 500,000 in non-state armed groups which were not particularly interested in fighting the Soviet Army, but which contributed to the general climate of insecurity. In other words, the size of the insurgency now might be around a third of the size it had reached in the 1980s. The Taliban suffer from some disadvantages compared to the mujahidin of the 1980s: the level of international support is far from having reached the same level (it amounted to US$ billions per year in the 1980s and is in the low hundreds of millions now) and the refugee population in Pakistan, a privileged recruitment ground for insurgents then and now, is much smaller than it was in the 1980s. The quality of the weaponry in the Taliban’s hands is also modest; the Kalashnikovs are not as effective now as they were in the 1980s, because bullet-proof vests have become the standard in NATO armies; anti-tank missiles and Manpads were available in relatively large quantities in the 1980s and are hardly available at all now; plastic mines (hard to detect) were also available in very large numbers then and are not available now. Given these constraints and the greater availability of financial resources to NATO (compared to the Soviet Union) as well as the greater commitment of troops to Afghanistan from 2009 onwards, the Taliban could be said to have done remarkably well as an insurgent movement (Giustozzi 2000, 2008).

**The structure and organization**

Where controversy begins is in the discussion of the internal structure of the insurgency. While Hizb-I Islami is clearly separate from the Taliban as an organization, the relationship of different Taliban networks to each other and to the leadership of the Islamic Emirate is still very much a matter of debate. Undoubtedly, two of the three main regional councils of the insurgents affiliated with the Islamic Emirate have a large degree of autonomy: the MiranShah Shura and the Peshawar Shura. The former is dominated by the Haqqanis, to the extent of being often referred to as the ‘Haqqani network’, while the latter has a strong Islamist presence (as opposed to the ‘fundamentalism’ of the Taliban) (Giustozzi 2009, 2010b; JTSM 2009a, 2009b).

It is also obvious that the insurgents have been trying to develop a system of shadow government. Although on the whole still primitive, there is a consensus that some aspects of it are helping the insurgents to gain a degree of legitimacy; in particular the judiciary sponsored by the Taliban seems to be very popular, not least because the Taliban quickly and ruthlessly implement any sentence or determination. The system of governors put in place by the Taliban has not had much of an impact, except in playing a role in dispute resolution (Giustozzi 2010b; Dressler and Forsberg 2009).

Much information about the leadership of the Taliban is available in the public domain, although the constant changes in the line-up make it difficult to monitor accurately the exact composition at any given time. In general the Taliban are not a very secretive movement; they tend to be quite keen to circulate information and in recent times they have even been encouraged by the leadership to open up to journalists. Much communication occurs openly and is regularly intercepted by the International Security Alliance Force (ISAF); in the aggregate this information potentially provides a lot of information about the way the Taliban operate, although probably ISAF’s capacity to process it might not be sufficient. Several Taliban leaders and hundreds of mid and low-rank commanders have lost their lives due to this relative transparency of the Taliban.

Not as much is known about the other components of the insurgency, except to some extent Hizb-I Islami. The further from the northeast, the weaker the the organizational presence of the party. Strong in Kunar, Laghman, Kapisa and Nangarhar, it is only able to mobilize pockets in
the southeast and does not exist at all in the south, where Hizb-I Islami activists operate under Taliban control. In the 1980s and 1990s, Hizb-I Islami fielded a comparatively centralized and disciplined system of command and control from the centre; this does not seem to exist any longer and Hizb-I Islami appears to operate in the field in a way similar to that of the Taliban, centred on networks and the charisma of individual commanders. Most of the old Hizb-I Islami networks around Afghanistan have not been remobilized into the insurgency; notably not even in Nangarhar, where the party is still popular among the youth. In part these non-mobilized networks even cooperate with the government or with international organizations: quite a few former Hizb-I Islami members are today ministers, governors, chiefs of police, etc. This has led to allegations that some of these individuals have been cooperating with the insurgency. Hizb-I Islami has been expanding since 2002, but despite its ambitions is not getting any closer to being able to compete for the hegemony of the insurgency with the Taliban; its organizational weakness means that much of its insurgent potential does not benefit the party but the Taliban; some estimates suggest that a good quarter of the insurgents or more in some southern provinces have a background in Hizb-I Islami (Giustozzi 2008; Ruttig 2009).

The inner organization of the Taliban, as already mentioned, is one of the topics most debated in the literature. The so-called Haqqani network is often seen as a separate organization, but some authors contest this. The Haqqani network seems to have its own sources of funding, but the level of cooperation with other Taliban networks is very high. Although the Haqqanis are often believed to have been the main sponsors of suicide terrorism in Afghanistan after the death of Mullah Dadullah, as far as the actual implementation of attacks is concerned the different networks seem to cooperate without problems. There are sometimes some significant ideological differences among Taliban networks and other components of the insurgency: as already mentioned, Hizb-I Islami’s Islamism differs from the fundamentalism of the Taliban with regards to women’s rights, elections (both of which the Taliban reject and Hizb accepts) and the role of the clergy (which Hizb-I Islami tends to minimize). Within the Taliban, some members have an Islamist background as well, particularly in the Peshawar Shura. Other sources of friction within the Taliban concern tribal rivalries (thinking tribally is very deeply rooted particularly in the south) and personal jealousies (Giustozzi 2008, 2009a; Ruttig 2009; JTSM 2009b).

Certainly the Taliban operate as a decentralized movement; the field commanders are given some general directives, a set of rules of behaviour, a certain amount of supplies, and a lot of leeway on how to operate tactically. The tendency of the Taliban to form tactical alliances with bandits, communities and other illegal armed groups has produced even more confusion with regard to their operations, leading many observers to believe that there is little role for a central leadership apart from offering incentives to fight, mostly economic ones. However, others have pointed out that the deployment of cadres far away from their provinces, the ability of the insurgency to expand gradually following the development of supply lines and the ability to concentrate force on a number of occasions all point to a strategic vision which must be embodied in a leadership with a degree of overall authority. The role of foreign advisers among the Taliban is also contentious; all that can be said is that the relative sophistication of the Taliban’s strategy seems uncharacteristic of a movement which had little experience of actual guerrilla warfare until 2002 (Giustozzi 2008, 2009a, 2010b; Ruttig 2009).

The exact organization of the leadership is not fully clear yet. There is a Leadership Council, which leads the Islamic Emirate and was originally based in Quetta although it seems to have moved now, there are about ten commissions dependent on it, and then there are four regional military councils (Shuras): Quetta, MiranShah, Peshawar and Gerdi Jangal. The four councils are in charge of managing military operations; provincial commissions deal with the political side of operations at the provincial level. What is not clear is the exact attribution of
responsibilities and powers; the situation gets even more confused by the fact that there is some overlap between the individuals staffing the various commissions and councils. The extent to which the commissions and the councils carry authority as opposed to the individual leaders is not fully clear; documents are issued by the councils and by the commissions but Taliban rank-and-file tend to refer to individual leaders as sources of authority (Giustozzi 2008, 2010b; Roggio 2010a).

The recruitment

The recruitment base of the insurgents is rather well known, both in geographic and social terms. The Islamic Emirate mainly draws support in the south and in isolated pockets in the northeast, southeast and east and among clerics and religious students everywhere in the country. Hizb-I Islami largely recruits in the east, mostly among students and among families previously linked to the party when it was a much larger and powerful organization in the 1980s and 1990s. Mostly in the south, the Taliban have established strong connections with a number of local communities, which have mobilized to fight on their side. Over half of Afghanistan was in 2010 affected by the politicized insurgency, while illegal armed groups were reactivating themselves almost everywhere, contributing to the chaos (Giustozzi 2008 and 2009a).

As the insurgency spreads, the picture gets more complicated in terms of base of recruitment and constituencies. As of 2010, about 90 per cent of the Taliban’s full-time fighters were Pashtuns; since 2006 the percentage of Pashtuns among the full-time fighters seems to have declined by just a few percentage points, from 95 per cent. However, these percentages do not do justice to the spread of the Taliban to northern Afghanistan. In some areas, by 2009 significant recruitment of non-Pashtuns such as Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmen and Aimaqs was going on throughout the north and northeast of Afghanistan. The recruitment of Tajiks was also confirmed in areas like Logar and Ghazni, where Tajiks live mixed with Pashtuns. The potential for further expansion of the insurgency is inevitably a matter of controversy. Until 2009, few observers believed that the Taliban could really recruit to any significant extent among non-Pashtuns; scepticism remains despite their first signs of success in this regard. The Taliban are known to have been recruiting Tajiks, Uzbeks and others in Pakistani madrassas since the 1990s; the expanding capabilities and logistics of the movement from 2006 onwards have enabled them to deploy some of these old cadres in northern and northeastern Afghanistan to sound out local potential for recruitment and identify suitable pockets where to focus efforts. Once again, it appears that the cadre structure is really what matters within the Taliban: the should and skeleton of the insurgency. Everything else rotates around it (Giustozzi and Reuter 2010; Giustozzi 2010c).

External support

Although the external support received by the insurgents is still a matter of debate at the diplomatic level, almost all analysts agree that a very substantial level of support has been provided since 2002 and increasingly so by the Pakistani authorities; recently leaked documents have only confirmed what nearly everybody was already arguing. Evidence of support coming from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards has also been mounting during 2009 and 2010. Otherwise, there is an agreement that the insurgents have been receiving support from jihadist networks in the Muslim world and particularly in the Gulf and that they raise a growing amount of tax inside Afghanistan and among Afghan communities in Pakistan and in the United Arab Emirates (Waldman 2010b; Giustozzi 2008; Gohel 2010).
Insurgency in Afghanistan

Equipment

The equipment of the insurgents is not very sophisticated by any standard. Standard weapons are Kalashnikovs of various models, Soviet machine guns (mostly PKM and some DSchK), rocket launchers (RPG) and increasingly precision rifles (Dragunov); mortars and recoilless guns are also sometimes used. Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) have been used on an increasingly large scale since 2006 but their technology has not changed much. The insurgents prefer to adapt tactically than to invest in advanced technology. Over the last two years anti-aircraft machine guns have become increasingly common (ZSU-1 and -2); the use of Manpads is sometimes reported but rarely confirmed. It seems to occur occasionally, with equipment left over from previous wars or purchased on the black market in small quantities (Giustozzi 2008).

Aims

The political aims of the Taliban are only understood up to a certain point. There is no question that they aim to get foreign troops out of the country, that they consider to be fighting a jihad and that they oppose most of the changes that have occurred in Afghanistan after 2001. The official line of the insurgents is that they struggle to re-establish the legitimate government of Afghanistan that is the Islamic Emirate led by Mullah Omar. This line seems to be accepted by their allies too, not only the IMU and the Pakistani jihadists, but also Hizb-I Islami, although it is not clear how deeply heartfelt this position is. It is known that Hizb-I Islami uses the same ‘judicial system’ of the Taliban at least in a number of locations. The Taliban are ambiguous with regard to any claim to return to the pre-Enduring Freedom status quo, perhaps because they realize how this would make any alliance with other groups, whether tactical or strategic, more difficult. In the Taliban propaganda the point that they are re-fighting a jihad like in the 1980s against the Soviets is stressed continuously; appeals to other ‘mujahidin’ who fought in the 1980s jihad are constantly repeated.

The Taliban seem to see the large pool of active and inactive non-state armed groups in the country, mostly staffed by former mujahidin, as a key potential reservoir of new recruits. Starting from 2006, they have enjoyed some success in attracting former mujahidin who had not been previously involved with the Taliban. Although those who joined up with the Taliban only represent a small percentage of the non-state armed groups in the country, they have had an impact in specific areas. They mostly come from Hizb-I Islami (both the Hekmatyar and the Khalis wings of the party), Jamiat-i Islami and Ittehad-i Islami (Giustozzi, 2009a, 2010b; Giustozzi and Reuter 2010; Ruttig 2009; Tellis 2010).

The relationship with Hizb-I Islami is also of some importance in order to establish the credibility of the Taliban’s claim that they are open and even keen to ally with other Islamic groups. The alliance with Hizb-I Islami was threatened by a major clash in Baghlan province in 2010, where the local front of Hizb-I Islami was virtually annihilated by the Taliban. Opinion remains divided with regard to the long-term consequences of this clash; other smaller clashes have occurred in Kapisa, Logar and other places, usually as a result of local rivalries.

The relationship with al-Qaeda is probably not one of the most important aspects of the Taliban insurgency, but attracts a disproportionate amount of media and policy interest, not least because the relationship with al-Qaeda was the cause of American intervention in the first place. If al-Qaeda had been reduced to a negligible presence on the ground, the intervention would lose its original justification. We know from the memoirs of former jihadists that the pre-9/11 relationship between Taliban and al-Qaeda was not smooth; Mullah Omar
might have been upset by Bin Laden’s behaviour and the disgrace it brought to the Taliban, although he seems to have kept cooperating with al-Qaeda after 9/11, probably because of the funding al-Qaeda could offer to help remobilizing the Taliban. The role of al-Qaeda in running the insurgency in Afghanistan seems to have declined gradually; US intelligence sources indicate that perhaps just 100 al-Qaeda operatives were left in Afghanistan by 2010 (Brown 2010; Al-Masri 2005; Lia 2008; Roggio 2010b). Opinion was still divided in 2010 over the Taliban’s relationship with al-Qaeda, although a growing number of analysts believe that al-Qaeda was by 2010 a marginal force in Afghanistan. Denouncing al-Qaeda is one of the preconditions that Western negotiators are likely to place in the event of a peace deal being discussed.

An accurate mapping of the Taliban, of their internal currents and of any internal differences can only be done through extensive fieldwork, which is difficult and expensive under the current circumstances. The most pressing question at the time of writing concerned the inclination (or disinclination) of the Taliban towards negotiations with the Afghan government and their vulnerability to buy-off offers from ISAF and the Afghan government. As for the first question, the signals sent by the Taliban until the summer of 2010 were mixed, sometimes indicating a readiness to negotiate, but also showing inflexibility about preconditions and terms to be offered. Analysts remained therefore much divided over whether the Taliban were likely to make a deal or not (Giustozzi 2010b; Masadykov et al. 2010; Waldman 2010a).

**Strengths and weaknesses**

The secret of the Taliban’s success is still a matter of debate. One explanation is simply that democracies are not very good at fighting wars away from home, where arguing that a defensive war is going on is hard sell back on the home front. As far as the Taliban themselves are concerned, one factor that might explain their resilience has been their decentralized structure, which limits their ability to develop sophisticated strategies, but at the same time allows for a very high degree of resilience. Great damage can be taken by the Taliban without long-term harm being inflicted. The availability of a sanctuary in Pakistan (and according to some views increasingly in Iran too) is certainly a factor of strength for the Taliban, although as argued above the same factor was present in even greater strength in the 1980s.

There is plenty of evidence that the Taliban have been facilitated since 2002 by the Pakistani security agencies, particularly the Frontier Corps and the ISI, but the actual extent of Pakistani support is unclear. The degree of dependence of the Taliban on Pakistan is another issue that has been discussed with increasing frequency from 2009 onwards. Iranian supplies, although still much smaller than Pakistan’s, seemed by 2009 to have reached the stage where they could affect relations between the Taliban and Pakistan, emboldening the former (Waldman 2010b; Giustozzi 2008).

The Taliban also enjoy a reliable recruitment ground in the madrassas of Afghanistan and particularly Pakistan, which not only produce a steady output of recruits but also guarantee their ‘high quality’ in terms of commitment and indoctrination. Perhaps this is the greatest strength of the Taliban, because a homogenous core of cadres and fighters is important to maintain the functionality of the movement in a situation where ‘bureaucratic’ command and control is very difficult. Oversight of operations on the ground cannot take place effectively through occasional radio or mobile phone calls, because of ISAF listening all the time. Messengers and couriers are employed and a sophisticated ‘mail system’ has been developed, but inevitably this is not a technology that can allow micromanagement on the ground. Decentralization can only allow an
insurgent movement to aim for strategic targets and the leadership to retain a degree of control if there is a pool of committed cadres large enough to be present in all areas affected by the insurgency. It could indeed be argued that the production of cadres by the Taliban has been the main factor enabling them to expand; their presence allows the Taliban to exploit local grievances and social discontent in an ever growing number of corners of the country (Giustozzi 2008, 2010b).

The nature of the insurgency is still largely a matter of debate. Sometimes the Taliban are described as a nationalist reaction to foreign presence, other times as an umbrella organization offering a multitude of disgruntled communities the possibility of mobilizing for collective action, other times still as a Ghilzai tribal revolt against the dominance of Durrani tribes in government (Johnson and Mason 2007; Ruttig 2010; JTSM 2009a; Giustozzi 2008).

Recent writings on the Taliban are increasingly exposing the nature of their organization as a clerical movement, which pragmatically allies with local causes in order to gather strength against the government and the foreign forces. It is from the clergy that the ‘cadres’ of the movement are taken. Certainly xenophobia (more than nationalism) plays a role in the recruitment of rank- and-file fighters, who are often illiterate village or urban boys (Giustozzi 2008, 2009a, 2010b).

The impact of counterinsurgency on the Taliban was the object of bitter debates from 2006 onwards. Several counterinsurgency approaches and strategies have been applied during this lapse of time, which makes assessing their impact difficult. One relatively consistent effort in counterinsurgency since late 2007 has been the deliberate targeting of Taliban commanders; this is a relatively uncontroversial approach, but the degree of its success is disputed. There is no question that every year hundreds of Taliban commanders have been killed since at least 2008, accounting for a large percentage of the field leadership. The Taliban clearly have been able to replace the losses, but the average age and experience of the new commanders has been steadily declining, until it stabilized at around 20, a very low level. The matter of dispute is whether this decline in the average age of commanders represents a sign of crisis of the insurgents, or not.

Population-centric counterinsurgency, adopted with great fanfare in 2009, did not outlive its original promoter, Gen. McChrystal. In practice it proved difficult to implement against an adaptive and tactically flexible movement like the Taliban; experiments carried out in Helmand in 2010 did not produce conclusive results, despite the massive (and unsustainable) commitment of troops. In many areas, the Taliban had enough of an underground structure to continue operating even when facing a strong military presence of ISAF and Afghan government forces (Dorronsoro 2010; Keane 2010).

As for the issue of the vulnerability of the Taliban to reconciliation from the bottom, that is the co-optation of individual commanders onto the government side, during 2009 and 2010 there was much optimism in ISAF in this regard. Contacts in the field seemed to be yielding positive answers in many cases, but after a year and a half of intensified engagement, there has still been little to show. Most observers are sceptical about the prospects of luring significant numbers of Taliban cadres away from the insurgency; many of those who reconciled in 2002–9 went back to fighting for a variety of reasons, and other regretted having reconciled in the first place. Some factors appeared particularly important in preventing reconciliation efforts from taking off: threats from the Taliban who in many areas maintained an underground structure of cadres and hit teams; the danger of mistreatment and worse from the government security forces, often driven by personal hostility to the Taliban; the desire for high status and recognition, as well as financial packages capable of offsetting the loss of face involved in reconciling and the possible necessity to relocate (Waldman 2010a; Masa- dykov et al. 2010; Giustozzi 2010b).
**Recommended readings**


**References**


Giustozzi, A. (2010c) *The Taliban beyond the Pashtuns*, the Afghanistan papers no. 5. Waterloo (Ontario): CIGI.


