



# RHETORIC, IDEOLOGY, AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE TALIBAN MOVEMENT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

The withdrawal of NATO troops in 2014 means that a new Afghan government will need to develop a strategy to confront the Taliban's campaign. Commissioned by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) as part of its ongoing commitment to conflict resolution in Afghanistan, this report offers insights into the movement's doctrine, organization, and rhetoric and is intended to inform efforts to end the Taliban violence.

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Cover photo: Mullah Omar's bunker near his palace in Kandahar on December 13, 2001, in Kandahar (City), Afghanistan Documents (Photo by Patrick Aventurier/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

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## Summary

- The Taliban movement commands the loyalty of thousands of Afghans and applies resources and men to the pursuit of political objectives, guided by doctrine and inspired by rhetoric.
- Taliban rhetoric consists of religious and historical references, narratives of recent events, and guidance for Taliban sympathizers.
- The rhetoric asserts that the Taliban are engaged in a righteous jihad aimed at establishing a divinely ordered Islamic system in Afghanistan.
- Taliban doctrine focuses on internal affairs and in particular on maintaining cohesiveness. The Taliban are ruthless in enforcing their doctrine of obedience to the *amir*, or leader.
- The movement has retained a narrow social base, and its power is concentrated in the hands of mullahs from the Kandahari Pashtun tribes.
- Any project to build a plural Afghanistan is likely to include an appeal to the Taliban or the constituency they have mobilized.
- The Taliban's own attempts to regain power rest on a negation of pluralism, rejection of a popular mandate, and assertion of the divine right vested in their Islamic emirate.
- A Taliban rhetoric of peace would require addressing the position of the Taliban's amir, peace as a desirable state, the need for cohesiveness and unity in support of peace, celebration of the withdrawal of foreign troops, Islamic credentials of the government in Kabul, protection of those who sacrificed for the Taliban, peace as conclusion of the jihad, and the new role for the Taliban's cadres.
- After 2014, the Taliban leadership is vulnerable to a hard-line challenge arguing that the political system in Kabul is irredeemably compromised by its collaboration with unbelievers.



## Introduction

For two decades, the Afghan Taliban movement has invested effort and resources into making and projecting the case that its cause is just and requires the use of violence. No other conflict actor in Afghanistan has sustained an organized armed struggle for as long. Taliban rhetoric and the ideology and political ideas it expresses have been instrumental in enabling the movement to maintain high levels of violence despite the major shifts in the political context over the years. Rhetoric has had an impact at individual, institutional, and societal levels. The Taliban case for violence has provided motivation and reassurance to individual Afghans recruited into the movement, giving them a moral cover for the violent actions they commit. The case for violence has been at the core of the Taliban's collective *raison d'être*.

Is it possible for the Taliban to be pro-peace? One of the challenges in transforming a conflict is accommodating what the different sides say about each other, the conflict, and the past. Agreement among Afghans about the causes and rights and wrongs of the post-2001 conflict is likely to be elusive. One of the peacemaking challenges would be for Taliban and anti-Taliban to find ways to accommodate the markedly different ways in which they have represented the political process to their constituencies. What would a Taliban rhetoric of peace look like and what challenges would the Taliban face in embracing it?

This analysis, which focuses on both Taliban organizational structure and the rhetoric used to justify their conflict with other Afghan political actors, is intended to alert other stakeholders to the kind of messages they would be likely to encounter from the Taliban in any peace process.

A Talib veteran interviewed for this study reflected on the legitimacy of Taliban violence based on his experience of eighteen years with the Taliban campaign.<sup>1</sup> He reprised many of the themes addressed here. He went to Afghanistan in 1996, he explained, as a young *madrassah* (traditional seminary) student from Pakistan and so was very much an outsider when he listened to Afghan Taliban accounts of how they cleared the roadside checkpoints of corrupt mujahideen commanders. He affirmed the Afghan Taliban's original case, namely, that they had been idealistic and that there had been no alternative to violence in the 1990s. He was deeply critical, however, of the path the jihad had taken. He took comfort in the knowledge that in his tours of duty he had not killed anyone himself. But he was disturbed by the violence he witnessed and considered barbaric, the extreme violence and desecration of bodies conducted by some of his former comrades in Pakistan's tribal areas.

He elaborated on his dilemma. Authority in the Taliban movements, both Pakistani and Afghan, rested with amirs (commanding officers or leaders), who expected unquestioning obedience but whose knowledge of Islam was imperfect. He, meanwhile, was from a well-known religious family and had graduated from the *madrassah* as a fully qualified *marwvi* (preacher). He was thus loath to bow to the less educated amirs. At the same time, he still considered himself a Talib and would not break with the movement or with its ethos of obedience. On the one hand, he felt a sense of loyalty to comrades and realized that the movement still enjoyed support in the clerical circles that formed his peer group. On the other hand, he knew he could not safely express his doubts openly—some in the Taliban would not tolerate any dissent. Finally, he expressed a deep yearning for peace in the region. He claimed that despite all the sensitivities associated with teaching in a conflict zone, he always taught his *madrassah* students that God's real mission for them was to achieve peace.

In a nutshell, is it possible for the Taliban to be pro-peace? What would a Taliban rhetoric of peace look like, and what challenges would the Taliban face in embracing it?

After twenty years of involvement in conflict, the simplest summary of the Taliban collective identity would be armed mullahs—fighting priests. Both elements, the martial and the religious, are significant. As an organization of clerics, it claims a certain morality that lay people do not have; it also has a sense of exclusivity, restricted to a priestly order. As an armed movement, its methods rely on physical force. But beyond the identity issue, the Taliban have used their rhetoric to claim legitimacy as a quasi-state actor using proportionate and justified violence. Throughout twenty years of fighting, the Taliban have been at pains to distinguish the violence they use from the illegitimate violence of criminals or rebels. The Taliban have designed their case to appeal not only to those who may be inclined to join the movement but also to broader society. The Taliban case for jihad seeks to persuade Afghans as a whole to accept the authority of the movement and to support it in ways that would be inconceivable for a mere armed criminal gang.

If eventually the Taliban movement is to engage in conflict transformation, and to end its involvement in violence, then those leading or supporting the transformation must take account of the mobilization of the past twenty years, much of which will have to be reversed. The importance of a Taliban “in-house” case for peace is that Taliban rhetoric has been very effective in undermining the credibility of mainstream Afghan media within constituencies sympathetic to the Taliban. Taliban members and supporters are largely insulated from the rhetoric and arguments routinely deployed by their enemies or external parties. If the Taliban as a movement is to move away from violence toward political reconciliation, then the justification for the transition must be made by influential figures within the movement, who in turn must build the case consistent with the movement’s ideology and heritage.

## Evolution of the Rhetoric

The Afghan Taliban have been engaged in violent conflict since the emergence of the movement in 1994. The propagation and legitimization of this armed struggle has been a principal function of the movement’s rhetoric throughout its development. At the heart of any appeal to support the Taliban has been an invitation to participate in or support this struggle. However, the Taliban’s rhetorical defense of the use of violence has evolved along with developments in the movement and in the political context.

The Taliban’s armed campaign has passed through four stages and is on the cusp of a fifth in terms of the configuration of the warring parties and their relative strengths. The first phase, from 1994 to 1996, was the emergent Taliban. During that time, the movement progressed from a new armed faction in an arena dominated by many established factions to a formidable group taking control of the national capital, Kabul. They started by fighting individual former mujahideen commanders and their armed groups but moved on to fighting against the Islamic State of Afghanistan, the fractious government formed by the mujahideen in the wake of the collapse of the Communist government.

The second phase, from 1996 to 2001, was the ascendant Taliban. During this period, the movement established its Islamic emirate as the de facto administration across most of Afghanistan and fought against the remnants of the mujahideen forces, by then styled as the resistance. In the first two phases, the Taliban fought exclusively against Afghan forces, though on the Taliban side an international brigade was integrated within the mostly Afghan movement and Pakistan offered assistance, both official and covert.



The third phase, from 2002 to 2006, was the emergent insurgency in reaction to the establishment of the post-2001 Afghan government supported increasingly by international forces. After the rapid defeat of the Taliban army and collapse of their government in late 2001, small armed groups of Taliban fought international forces and the new Kabul government, mostly in the south and east of the country.

The fourth phase, from 2007 to 2014, was the national insurgency, during which the Taliban sought to expand their influence beyond its traditional power bases in the south and east. The alignment of forces was the same as in the third phase. The Taliban, however, though still militarily far weaker than the government spread military operations to all regions of the country and operated a parallel administration.

The conflict is currently moving toward a fifth phase, in which the Taliban are fighting against the Kabul government with severely reduced direct involvement of the international military forces. As a means of testing the shifting balance of force, during the second half of 2014, the Taliban military started launching attacks with larger groups of fighters, attempting to seize territory in each region of the country.

### *Themes*

During the first Taliban period, the main theme was the need to combat the moral corruption of the former mujahideen commanders in control of Kandahar. As ambitions expanded, the rhetoric targeted the former mujahideen generally rather than just the Kandahar commanders. It began by demanding the disarmament of the Kandahari commanders and rapidly progressed to demanding the disarmament of all factions engaged in the civil war. The rhetorical defense of this first phase rested on a critique that the jihad against the Soviet occupation had been betrayed. Those who called themselves mujahideen had shed their legitimacy by engaging in arbitrary taxation and extortion and by enabling an environment of chronic insecurity, sexual violence, general oppression of the civilian population, and violent power struggles. This justified resorting to arms to remove the mujahideen and restore order.

During the ascendant phase, the case for jihad rested on the idea of establishing the authority of the new political vehicle, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA). The Taliban built up the idea of the emirate from 1996 onward, when they orchestrated a gathering of sympathetic *ulema* (Muslim scholars, plural of *alim*) to proclaim the movement's leader as *amir ul momineen* (commander of the faithful).<sup>2</sup> With Mullah Omar as amir and the movement in control of most of the territory, Taliban rhetoric demanded that all other forces in the country submit to their authority. Resistance, it claimed, was tantamount to defying Islam. Until the abrupt collapse of the Taliban in the face of the U.S. intervention, Taliban rhetoric depicted its forces as battling corrupt former mujahideen for defying divinely sanctioned authority and obstructing the Taliban's mission of establishing an Islamic system in the country.

The 2001 U.S. intervention inevitably provoked a change in the Taliban rhetoric. As it became clear that the United States would invade, the Taliban again convened sympathetic *ulema* and obtained a declaration from them calling for armed resistance to the foreign invaders and their local partners on the grounds that they were committing aggression against a Muslim country and challenging an Islamic system. Thus, late 2001 marked the key turning point in the Taliban rhetoric: a shift from excoriating wayward Afghans to a struggle that primarily identified a foreign enemy. There was, however, an element of continuity in that the

Taliban still proclaimed their fight a jihad, which it was incumbent on all Afghan Muslims to support, and highlighted the corruption of the foreigners' local partners, who were of course largely the Taliban's old enemies from the 1990s.

The initial rationale for fighting against U.S. and foreign forces was existential. As the insurgency continued, Taliban rhetoric acquired a set of grievances, including complaints of cruel and oppressive behavior of U.S. forces against civilians and opposition forces in Afghanistan, as well as complaints of U.S. aggression and abuses against Muslims in other theaters of what the U.S. government had declared a global war on terror. By the time of the national-level insurgency, the Taliban still claimed to be fighting primarily against foreign forces but also expanded their denunciation of what they described as a puppet regime and all collaborators with the foreign forces. The rhetoric in this period also clearly sought to appropriate the terminology of the jihad, depicting the Taliban's partisans as the only remaining true mujahideen. The Taliban reinforced this by developing the narrative that the parties and commanders left over from the war against the Soviets surrendered the last of their moral authority by propping up the foreign occupation after 2001.

### *Contemporary Rhetoric*

The impending withdrawal of NATO combat forces in 2014 has clearly transformed one key aspect of the conflict. Taliban rhetoric, however, still projects themes that have accumulated over the various phases and shows no sign that the movement has yet reworked its message. Its four major themes are national sovereignty, military strength, the sacredness of the Taliban's jihad, and the authority of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate.<sup>3</sup> Critics of the Taliban reject all the main elements of the Taliban rhetoric, accusing the insurgency of undermining sovereignty by depending on Pakistani assistance and of practising terrorism rather than legitimate warfare.

Under the national sovereignty theme, the Taliban assert themselves as the only true protectors of Afghan sovereignty. They refer to Afghanistan's history of successful resistance to foreign aggressors and claim that they alone are upholding this tradition. They assert that the primary conflict under way is that of resistance to American aggression. The Kabul-based political system is portrayed as an imposition of America, which represents American interests in violation of Afghan sovereignty. They claim that all that is imported from the West is counter to Afghan traditions. Those who participate in the Kabul-based political system or in Western-style political and cultural activities are therefore puppets and slaves who have shed their Afghan identity.

Under the military theme, the Taliban project their fighters as belonging to a strong and organized military force. They proclaim, and often exaggerate, military successes over both Afghan and foreign enemies. They assert that use of military force is necessary because it is the only way to thwart the enemies' designs. Finally, they claim that Taliban victory is inevitable.

Under the theme of sacred jihad, the Taliban assert that their use of violence constitutes a legitimate jihad and Taliban fighters are the true mujahideen, maintaining the legacy of martyrs to previous Afghan conflicts. Active participation in, or support of, this jihad is obligatory for Afghan Muslims and failure to comply is a rejection of Islam. Conversely, collaboration with the Kabul government is tantamount to siding with the foreign unbelievers and thus also a rejection of Islam. The Taliban's mujahideen are "rightly guided" and subject to the Islamic rules for conduct of a just war.

Under the theme of the Islamic emirate, Taliban rhetoric asserts that decrees and orders issued by the movement and its officials have the authority of Islam. Mullah Omar is still described as the amir ul momineen, and officials of the Islamic emirate serve under his authority.

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Afghans should accept the Islamic shariat, and the only way to do this is to submit to the authority of the emirate. Essentially, Taliban rhetoric asserts that the movement is the final authority in determining what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior in Islam.

### *Implications*

Taliban rhetoric on the eve of the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan is uncompromising and warlike. It presents the case for the continuation of the armed struggle and focuses on the foreigners as the primary enemy and on Afghan “puppets” as a secondary one. But this constitutes a case for the continuation of war against the puppets alone, after withdrawal, regardless of the plausibility of the depiction of the regime as a puppet. The rhetoric implies that all those associated with the Kabul regime are enemies of Islam unless they submit to the Islamic emirate. The rhetoric thus includes an absolute rejection of any notion of the Kabul authorities enjoying democratic legitimacy, both because the system was imposed on Afghanistan by foreigners and because the institutions and means adopted for acquiring a mandate are inherently un-Islamic.

The uncompromising themes of jihad in Taliban rhetoric leave few obvious loopholes to rationalize compromise of the movement to a negotiated settlement, even after international troop withdrawal. In recent Eid addresses attributed to Mullah Omar and other political pronouncements, the Taliban have claimed that they do not seek a monopoly of power and instead want an “Afghan inclusive government.”<sup>4</sup> However, the Taliban have neither elaborated on these ideas nor have they sought seriously to find common ground with other Afghan parties. Thus, the rhetoric remains one of war, and the Taliban have failed to use the period running up to withdrawal to prepare a public case for compromise. The primary reason given by the Taliban for rejecting the legitimacy of the 2004 constitution and successive parliamentary and presidential elections is that these have taken place under the foreign yoke, which prevents Afghans from exercising free choice. Mass citizen participation in the political process during the April 2014 presidential and provincial council elections, combined with international troop withdrawal, strain the credibility of Taliban rhetoric, which depends on the notion of Kabul politics being subservient to foreigners.

### **Internal Organization**

Afghanistan has a rich heritage of political organization. Some 292 parties, associations, and alliances were documented in the most comprehensive analysis of political groupings during earlier phases of conflict in a 1997 study by Fida Yunas.<sup>5</sup> Most of these entities have left little trace in public life and were unremarkable in terms of their political ideas or approaches to organizing. The Afghan Taliban movement is distinctive. The Taliban’s demands for enforcement of shariat and removal of foreign troops, however, are unexceptional in Afghan political history. What sets the Taliban apart from the other 291 entities profiled by Yunas is its approach to organization. The Taliban have evolved an organizational culture that has enabled the movement to survive for twenty years seemingly immune to the hazards of patronage politics, which have weakened and divided other Islamist organizations’ pursuit of their goals.

The main elements of the culture that have contributed to the movement’s coherence and that collectively make the Taliban significantly different from other Afghan organizations are reverence for the leader, centralization, denial of personal responsibility, conformism or suppression of dissent, religiosity, insecurity of tenure, resistance to permanent hierarchy, blurring of civil-military distinctions, a spartan ethos, cliquishness, and rejection of tribalism.

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Any careful observer of the Taliban can find multiple examples of each of these aspects of the organizational culture expressed in the ways that the Taliban conduct their business internally rather than merely in the way they present themselves externally. Some elements, such as the religiosity or cliquishness, can be traced to the mores of the madrassahs from which the Taliban emerged. However, the culture also has a doctrinal basis.

Taliban culture draws on the Koran, the traditions of the Prophet, and early Islamic history to guide the leadership and the base of the movement. Thus, an early tract, *Islami Adalat* (Islamic Justice), provides shariat-based guidance for Taliban administrators and judges in dealing with the populace and promoting good and suppressing evil.<sup>6</sup> A later tract, *De Mujahid Toorah—De Jibad Shari Misalay* (shariat teaching on jihad),<sup>7</sup> draws on similar sources to guide decision-making around the conflict, such as how to make or break truces and how to distribute booty. Between 2009 and 2013, the Taliban's Cultural Commission circulated successive editions of *Guidance to the Mujahideen*, generally known as the *Lahya*.<sup>8</sup> It contains a sprinkling of Koranic quotations but is more concise and prescriptive than the more detailed doctrinal works. The *Lahya* affirms the core doctrine of obedience to the amir but otherwise focuses on the proper behavior of mujahideen and guides their dealings with the population and with the enemy.

A tract by Mufti Rasheed distinctively provides a shariat basis for the internal workings of the movement—the relationship between amir and mujahid.<sup>9</sup> This tract is the main item in the Taliban canon that illuminates the movement's internal affairs, and it is of enduring significance because the ideas laid out by Rasheed still provide a good explanation of the way the leadership runs the movement.

A Pakistani Islamist scholar and mentor of the Taliban leadership, Mufti Rasheed published “Obedience to the Amir”<sup>10</sup> in Urdu in 2000 after touring Afghanistan with the Taliban. As an illustration of the significance of this text, the Taliban had it translated into Pashto and Farsi; Mullah Omar personally dispensed it to visitors to his office, advising them to look to it for guidance on how to operate within the movement.

At the time of writing the piece, Mufti Rasheed headed the Rasheed Trust. Operating from a campus in Karachi, the organization was involved in religious education and welfare activities. During the Taliban's period in power between 1996 and 2001, it emerged as one of the principal conduits for Pakistani assistance to the Taliban movement, including support to the Taliban military. It continued in this role until after the collapse of the Taliban government, when the relationship was marred by disputes over the control of the proceeds of fund-raising and assets that the Taliban hid from the sanctions regime imposed by the United Nations.<sup>11</sup>

Officials serving under Mufti Rasheed had access to the Taliban leadership, including Mullah Omar, and sought to advise him on the challenges of building the Islamic state and resisting what they saw as the threat from the West to this statebuilding project. Even after the collapse of the Taliban government, as the leadership reestablished itself in Pakistan, senior Taliban figures maintained their relations with the Rasheed Trust and the successors to Mufti Rasheed. Among the ideational influences on the Taliban, Mufti Rasheed and his deputies stand out for the coherence of the ideas offered, the successful leveraging of these ideas by combining them with a financial relationship, and the persistence of the relationship through the different periods of the Taliban's development.

### *Doctrine of Obedience*

“Obedience to the Amir” is simultaneously a practical handbook with advice on how to run the Taliban movement and a messianic hagiography lauding the Taliban and their leaders, who

are credited for their commitment toward implementing sharia at the cost of relations with the world's imperialist powers. But Mufti Rasheed's core message, and the one most relevant in explaining the Taliban's coherence, is that the Taliban's success depends on all members of the movement maintaining unity and their obedience to the amir through the command chain leading up to the supreme leader, Amir ul Momineen Mullah Omar. Members are to suspend their individual judgment and temperament for the sake of this obedience. Rasheed essentially argued that God and the amir knew better why the Taliban had to do things that individual members of the movement might not fathom. The rationale for this submission to the will of the leadership was divine purpose: The member must trust that God works through the person of the amir, and so obedience to the amir is equated with obedience to the Prophet and to God. Helping maintain the movement's cohesiveness is equivalent to staying within the fold of Islam, something that would be a fundamental value for everyone in the communities where the Taliban have recruited.

In terms of internal organizational structure, Rasheed referred to some of the key elements that have characterized the movement, though the structure he envisaged was elegantly simple. Supreme and God-given authority rested with the amir ul momineen. Rasheed envisaged the leadership of the movement to consist of a college of amirs, so that each member was attached to and owed complete obedience to his personal amir. In this way, the notion of divine authority resting in the supreme leader was delegated through a command structure.

Rasheed proposed that sound leadership decisionmaking depended on the availability of good advice. He envisaged the *shura* (representative assembly) as a council of the grandees of the movement, although he had little to say about its size or appointment. His legal opinion, based on his own reading of the hadiths (sayings of the Prophet Mohammad), was that the shura's role should be strictly advisory. The amir should make his decisions after considering the advice which alerted him to all possible perspectives on the matter in hand. But decision-making authority should rest unambiguously with the amir, and in the case of a disagreement between the shura and amir, the former should maintain its position of obedience, in the same way as this was incumbent on ordinary members of the movement. The obligation to show unquestioning obedience ends only when the amir issues orders counter to the shariat or is engaged in rebellion.

### *Other Organizing Principles*

Rasheed provided an Islamic basis to a range of the practices that over the years became consolidated as part of the way the Taliban conducted their affairs. He rationalized the rotation of civilian personnel to the military fronts, especially those normally responsible for running offices or stewarding resources. Through the rotation, he hoped to avoid the emergence of a gap between the combatants and noncombatants in the movement and to imbue the office managers with some of the spirit and morale of the armed ranks. They should perpetually be reminded that the movement was engaged in violence simply as part of a jihad. As well as the rotations to the front line, Mufti Rasheed called for appointments and transfers to be for appropriate periods, by which he implied that the tenure in civilian or military commands in the movement should be relatively short. He specified the purpose of the rapid turnover—to prevent office bearers from entertaining the illusion that the post belonged to them by right and that the movement was somehow dependent on them.<sup>12</sup>

Rasheed also provided a rationale for the spartan element of the Taliban organizational culture, calling on the leadership to avoid allowing privilege to attach to office, to ensure that no post is so comfortable that others should covet it, and to discourage personal ambition and lust for of-

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fice within the movement. The architects of the Taliban movement were aware that to advocate this submission of personal entitlement and ambition to the leader for the sake of the greater good, they were pushing contrary to well-established tendencies in the culture of Afghan public life. In this sense of lauding public simplicity, the Taliban have deliberately cultivated an anti-establishment culture, which harks back to traditional Pashtun tribal ideas of egalitarianism. Historically, Afghanistan was characterized by a court culture that emulated the pomp of the Ottoman or Moghal empires, and in modern times anyone aspiring to join the governmental elite felt obliged to indulge in fancy clothes, cars, and furniture. This culture of ostentatious wealth encouraged faction leaders and public officials, both during the civil war of the 1990s and after 2001, to resort to corruption and plunder of public resources. In contrast, Taliban propaganda has projected an image of simplicity and claimed moral superiority over ostentatious rivals.

### *Implications*

The core ideas of the organizational culture that Rasheed projects in the manual can be traced to the Deobandi madrassah movement and its tradition of Sunni puritan reformism. Most madrassahs in Pakistan are part of this Deobandi movement, which in turn traces its roots to the Dar ul Uloom Deoband in Uttar Pradesh. The intellectual foundations of the Deobandi madrassahs are, first, Sunni-Hanafi jurisprudence and, second, political-historical ideas of the struggle to construct both an Islamic state and anticolonialism, inspired by Shah Waliullah (1703–1762) and Syed Ahmad Barelvi (1786–1831).

The important difference between the Taliban and the Afghan mujahideen who preceded them was not just the corruption and brigandry the Taliban challenged in Kandahar. Rather, it was the cohesiveness the Taliban maintained while claiming to implement an ideal Islamic system unpolluted by Western political ideas and the compromises the mujahideen had made.

### **Suicide Operations**

One striking feature of the Taliban's violence has been the reliance on one of the most extreme combat tactics—suicide bombing. Afghan combatants refrained from this tactic during the Soviet occupation and civil war. The first suicide bombing in recent times occurred on September 9, 2001, when two al-Qaeda activists blew themselves up to assassinate Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Masood. In the early stages of the insurgency, suicide attacks were rare—an average of one per year between 2001 and 2004. After this period, they became an integral part of the Taliban campaign, twenty-five attacks in 2005 and more than a hundred per year thereafter. The advent of suicide bombing in Afghanistan followed its adoption in the Iraqi insurgency after 2003.<sup>13</sup> However, the Taliban rapidly developed an infrastructure to train suicide bombers, plan and execute the attacks, and generate the propaganda material drawing on them. Until 2014, much of that infrastructure was located in Pakistan's North Waziristan Agency. In military terms, the suicide operations became the Taliban's preferred strategic weapon, controlled and deployed by the military leadership against its targets of choice. In cultural terms, the suicide operations became part of a cult of militarism. The explosives-filled waistcoat, known as a suicide jacket, came to symbolize an elite cadre of Muslim warriors, those who had been trained to conduct suicide operations.

Filed profiles of suicide attackers, which have now become a standard component in Afghan Taliban multimedia propaganda materials, are assembled from several components. These include the martyr's statement, the valedictory read by a narrator, the collage of pre-martyrdom shots of the martyr, the footage of the operation, and *taranas* (ballads), selected to

reinforce the martyrdom theme. Some of the profiles are packaged as stand-alone pieces and others are nested within longer videos that treat other components of the jihad or a propagandist commentary on the political context.

Their assertions should be seen in the context of the broader debate on the morality of suicide attacks. Islamist critics argue that suicide attacks violate the prohibition on taking one's own life. They also argue that brainwashing would-be suicide bombers during training suspends their conscience or faculty of evaluating whether their orders and targets are shariat compliant. In the Afghan context, the critics point to the ulema's and the mujahideen's refraining from suicide operations during the just jihad against the Soviets. Apologists invoke the Koranic verses promising God's blessings for those martyred during jihad and assert that suicide operations are necessitated in an asymmetric confrontation. Most of the rhetoric in the videos is devoted to the religious case. Each component of the *fidayeen* (those who sacrifice) profiles marshals multiple reasons asserting that their violence enjoys divine sanction.<sup>14</sup> The rhetoric in the videos expects the audience to accept that the *fidayeen* are counted among those who have died in the course of fighting jihad and so self-evidently must be accepted as divinely blessed martyrs.

To understand how the Taliban both explain and leverage their suicide and *fidayeen* campaign, we analyzed seven propaganda videos for this report. Each used an Islamic emirate brand and included suicide attacker profiles. Together, these videos profiled some twenty-seven suicide bombers. Although each video focuses on a different suicide operation, several themes are common to them, and the videos give the impression of belonging to a uniform corpus of work.<sup>15</sup>

### *Personal Profiles*

All of the profiles highlight the personal qualities of the martyrs. The videos deliberately project the *fidayeen* as role models by showing that they conform to a type of ideal Afghan male. The longest list of qualities, which were invoked in different combinations for all profiles, were religious. The martyrs were described as God-fearing and pious.

Most of the profiles use video clips to portray the *fidayeen* as warriors. They do weapons training and physical fitness and hang around with other fighters, sometimes dressed in combat fatigues with white headbands inscribed with Koranic verses. But the narratives ascribe rather fewer warrior-like qualities than religious ones. The most common warrior-like quality is simply brave. Otherwise they refer to the men as heroes or experienced mujahid.

In terms of temperament and morality, the qualities mentioned in the narratives include happy, clever, modest, unselfish, young, and properly educated. With pathos, one of them says simply, "I had a beautiful life."

Some of the narratives clearly set out to establish the social standing of the *fidayeen*, in part to counter reports that they carry out these operations from a sense of desperation, in response to brainwashing, or even while drugged (one makes the point that the operation he has trained for would be impossible to undertake if one were not fully conscious). For example, in one, the *fidayeen* states that he has no personal problems: "No financial problem, no disease, and no family quarrels." About another, the narrative says that he had plenty of property and even himself paid for the vehicle which was used in his *fidai* operation. Others are described simply as honorable. Through these qualities, the narratives assert the *fidayeen's* social respectability, thus implying that they are from the mainstream, able to exercise free will, and worthy of emulation.

The profiles tackle the issue of the martyrs' responsibility to their families. They portray the *fidayeen* speaking respectfully of their parents or other family members, as would be expected

in a society that values filial obedience. None of the fidayeen addresses himself to his own offspring, though some profiles indicate that they do have children. Several state that they are in the fidayeen camp of their own free will and as part of their duty to God. However, none says that he has his parent's permission to participate. Instead, they provide advice or even excuses for their families, with phrases such as "You should feel happy and show patience," "Do not worry about me," "I am here as a reward from God," or even "You should support the mujahideen." They also articulate the classic jihadi rationale for the family by promising them that a martyr in heaven can intercede for seventy family members or that the martyr will plead for his family on the Day of Judgment. In this narrative of fidayeen filial obedience, the Taliban rhetoric transposes Afghans' worldly social values, according to which a son should work hard so as to be able to look after his parents, to the supernatural and promises that the fidayeen will care for their families in the afterlife.

Going beyond the personal attributes of the profiled fidayeen, themes within the substantive narratives can be grouped into four areas. First, the fidayeen and their narrators present the religious argument. Second are the references to and messages for "the foreigners." Third are the references to and messages for the non-Taliban Afghans. Fourth is the battle narrative, the references to the operation which the fidayeen undertake.

### *Rationalizing Extreme Violence*

The religious case as presented in the fidayeen profiles is unsophisticated and mainly nontextual. All the fidayeen invoke religion in explaining what they are doing, but none really speaks like a scholar or relies on the scriptures in anything more than a casual way. They invoke religion more by citing "self-evident" formulae and making references to commonly held beliefs. The Koranic verse most commonly invoked was *ayat* 111 of *sura* Al Tawba, which refers to the believer's covenant with Allah, according to which they have a place in heaven but must be prepared to fight and die for Allah. In most of the videos, at least one of the fidayeen personalizes this covenant, asserting that he must stage a fidayeen attack because all Muslims are a party to the bargain with God that obliges them to fight.

The fidayeen talk of the merit of jihad in general and martyrdom in particular. They cite the formal Taliban case for the post-2001 conflict—jihad is rendered an obligation by the invasion. The rhetoric frequently uses the term *istesbadi*, or one seeking martyrdom, rather than the more common *shabeed*, a martyr. This is a nuance designed to emphasize the desire for martyrdom (which would be meritorious) as opposed to an intention to commit suicide (which would be reprehensible). On martyrdom, they say that it is a divine blessing and a passport to eternity. One cites a hadith that on the Day of Judgment, God will laugh with the martyr who fought on the front line. Another expresses the obligation to jihad: "All those born in the Muslim religion, have the *kalma*, and so must bleed for their religion until the unbelievers leave." One commentary celebrates the failure of the government to come up with a decisive repudiation of fidayeen attacks.

The references to jihad, martyrdom, and the divine covenant were remarkably divorced from any concrete reality. Even claims that defense of religion from a threat required martyrdom lacked examples of threats that the men had suffered personally. The fidayeen claim instead that "The Koran has been defiled while Muslims sleep," "They insulted our Koran and Prophet," "Religion can only be protected by our flesh and blood," "Allah will reward us for protecting our religion," and "We must seek revenge for the burning of the Koran."

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### *Identifying Enemies*

The fidayeen profiles include multiple references to foreign forces, whether expressed as grievances about their actions, rhetorical messages addressed to them, expression of intentions about them, observations about them, or even comparisons with them. Many of these references are intricately linked with the religious case because the latter draws on the idea that jihad is rendered obligatory by a non-Muslim intervention. However the suicide profiles rarely use the term foreigner explicitly. Most of the references in the profiles to the enemy are expressed as nonbelievers (*kuffar*). The context then makes it clear that the epithet is primarily intended for the foreigners present in Afghanistan, embracing both the military and civilian. In speech, often the fidayeen talk in turns about *us* and *them* or *you* in such a way that the audience is left to understand the *us* and *them* identities from the context. The *us* can be mujahideen, Afghans, or Muslims in general. The *them* is elastic to indicate foreign military forces in Afghanistan, all enemies of the mujahideen, or all Westerners. Indeed, this point about the vague definition of enemy is significant. The references to foreigners, under the heading of nonbelievers, do not make a civil-military distinction, and all are encompassed in the rhetorical grievances and threats.

The fidayeen profiles are compact. Each man is portrayed through a compilation of video clips in which he articulates fragmentary thoughts, slogans, and messages. Some of the profiles are nested within multimedia products that include more developed narratives of the Cultural Commission. The more elaborate narratives place their story of Afghanistan into a telling of the global war on terror story, replete with footage of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and the 9/11 attacks. Whereas the individual fidayeen talks in very vague terms about the grievances of Muslims around the world, the Cultural Commission editors are able to complement this by drawing on a large collection of video clips garnered from satellite television. This small sample of fidayeen profiles included minimal reference to Afghan history, despite that history being replete with examples of successful opposition to invaders.

The profiles analyzed for this study were remarkably lacking in any reference to the real-life experience of the fidayeen themselves. Even the issue of prison conditions was hardly touched on. There was a single reference to the suffering of Muslims in Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, and Pul-i-Charki but no clear statement from any of the fidayeen of having been fired up by personal experience in any of these places. Instead, the profiles seem to recycle images and ideas from the political-religious narrative the Cultural Commission has developed across its wider portfolio of publications and materials.

A handful of references point to more specific and recent political issues. For example, one commentary cites polling in western countries showing public hostility to the Afghan war. Another criticizes the Bilateral Security Agreement as futile, equivalent to selling the country into slavery and a source of instability in the region.<sup>16</sup> Another says that the invaders now want dialogue with the mujahideen, which is an obvious sign of how weak the invaders are. Another dismisses the elections as drama. The fidayeen narrative draws on the idea of “the other” by juxtaposing the merit and strength of the mujahideen versus the inevitable eventual defeat of the nonbelievers or Americans.

In contrast to the fidayeen’s apparent fascination with the foreign or nonbeliever enemy, they have remarkably little to say about non-Taliban Afghans. Even though some of the attacks were directed solely at Afghan targets, the profiles make no obvious effort to construct a

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***Even though some of the attacks were directed solely at Afghan targets, the profiles make no obvious effort to construct a picture of the domestic enemy or even to explain why they are fighting against fellow Afghans.***

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picture of the domestic enemy or even to explain why they are fighting against fellow Afghans. Most of the references to the Afghans are exhortatory, in which the fidayeen appeal to them for cooperation against the “true enemy,” the foreign nonbelievers. They appeal to Afghans as potential allies rather than actual enemies. Within this appeal, the two main themes are a call to end their state of indifference or passivity and to end collaboration.

### *Other Observations*

The final cluster of themes addressed in the profiles concern the operations the fidayeen are involved in. For the most part, the propagandists communicate their operations using video footage taken by observers who accompany the fidayeen, supplemented by scenes which they have recorded from satellite and cable television. Many of these images convey the destructive power of the truck bombs sometimes deployed. The fidayeen speak only briefly. In one attack conducted by suicide bomber Mawlvi Abdul Rashid, which media reported as killing four police, the narrator claims that one hundred security personnel were killed or injured. Another commentary describes how the fidayeen completed a complex attack by launching himself against the Quick Reaction Force and causing heavy casualties. Both examples illustrate how the fidayeen profiles acknowledge that these operations are used against Afghan targets, despite the focus in their narratives about grievances against non-Afghans.

### *Implications of the Profiles*

The theme that runs consistently through the videos and their component parts is the assertion that the Taliban’s violence—in particular the suicide campaign—is legitimate. This legitimacy is asserted by association rather than by argument, however. Visually and in their diction, the propagandists invoke symbols and role models that they expect an Afghan audience to identify with moral rectitude and merit. They make little effort to articulate concrete grievances, and the suicide bombers themselves barely go beyond clichés when they explain why they are undertaking their operations. Even in the choice of associations invoked in the productions are predominantly religious. In this branch of the Taliban propaganda, young men wage jihad, embrace martyrdom, defend religion against unbelievers, and pursue promises of heaven. The suicide program propagandists instrumentalize religion far more than they do either national or tribal values. Furthermore, the videos clearly honor the suicide bombers for struggling against outsiders and unbelievers and downplay the fight against fellow Afghans. In the use of imagery and terminology, the videos are internationalist in depicting Afghan suicide bombers as part of armed resistance against generalized Western oppression of Muslims.

The rhetoric the propagandists of the fidayeen program have deployed can contribute to our political understanding of the Taliban. First, their repeated identification of the enemy as unbelievers rather than as invaders suggests a Taliban departure from the conventional distinction between the civil and the military in international humanitarian law. Declaring war on unbelievers can rationalize the killing of non-Afghan civilians as well as of foreign military. Second, the internationalist spirit of the videos suggests a convergence of Taliban and al-Qaeda narratives, insofar as Taliban previously focused on Afghanistan-specific grievances and actions. Perhaps most significantly, the lack of effort to rationalize the Taliban’s violence against fellow Afghans illustrates how the Taliban have failed to build their public case for continuation of the war beyond the international troop withdrawal. It is partisans of the Haqqani Network who harvest raw footage from the suicide operations and produce their propaganda

materials in what they call a jihadi video studio with its in-house graphic logo. However, the propagandists also use the insignia of, and thus invoke the authority of, the Cultural Commission, an official organ of the Taliban. Thus, primarily the Haqqani Network and secondarily the Taliban movement as a whole are implicated in this dilution of the civil-military distinction, the embracing of jihadi internationalism, and the failure to articulate a case for the “post-occupation” insurgency.

## Movement Membership and Structures

Evaluating the role of supreme leader Mullah Omar and profiles of the upper and middle tiers of the leadership sheds light on the place of the Taliban movement within Afghan society. The power of rhetoric to mobilize depends in large part on the authority of those who articulate it. Despite the Taliban strategy of obscuring identities, other Afghans assess the appeal to violence on the basis of the credentials and social status of the movement’s leaders and commanders. But causality works the other way also, in that the social status of the movement depends on the profile of the cadres it manages to mobilize into the insurgency.

Since its early days, the Taliban movement has been characterized as having emerged from the madrassahs and thus as a clerical movement. The clergy have a long history of involvement in Afghan politics.<sup>17</sup> However, the rhetoric of the post-2001 phase of the conflict has addressed an issue of fundamental national importance, alleged foreign occupation, and has a potential appeal well beyond the clergy. In profiling the Taliban leadership twenty years after the formation of the movement, it is necessary to understand the relationship with the madrassahs and standing in the clergy and to examine the extent to which the Taliban movement has grown beyond its original base.

This profile, which is derived from data provided by movement veterans, starts with the supreme leader, drawing on his words and an interpretation of his significance in the latest stage of the insurgency, and then looks at the next two tiers of leadership, those with overall national responsibility and those with provincial responsibility.

### *The Supreme Leader*

Mullah Omar remains the Taliban supreme leader and the source of all authority in the movement. However, he has played a symbolic role in the post-2001 struggle rather than an active one. He has made no public appearances since exiting Kandahar in December 2001. In effect, the Taliban has become a movement run by deputies. Although Mullah Omar, when active and accessible, did not designate a deputy, the published *Lahya* now calls for obedience to the *imam* and *naib imam*, or leader and deputy leader. The title *imam* is intended to be understood as the head of a Muslim community. In using this term for Mullah Omar, the authors of the *Lahya* try to project him as having a broad civil and military leadership role. Those who are, to an extent, accessible to the rest of the movement and involved in ongoing decision making, can be considered the functional leadership of the movement. The functional leadership of the Taliban have continued to draw on Mullah Omar as a fundamental source for their claim to legitimacy. Their association with Omar underpins their claim to be an Islamic movement with a divinely ordained mission.

The first way in which the leadership has maintained the Mullah Omar “brand” has simply been through insisting that he remain the leader. Communiques, briefings to meetings, and media items simply refer to Mullah Omar as the *amir ul momineen* and leader of the Taliban

movement. The most important way in which the leadership have used Mullah Omar as a vehicle for rhetoric has been through the twice annual Eid messages. These political tracts have become the main set piece communications for the movement and consist of a commentary on the state of the conflict interspersed with religious references, plus statements of Taliban intentions and other strategic messages. However, the willingness or ability of the functional leadership to put into the public domain any evidence that what is being broadcast is actually the word of Mullah Omar has diminished over time.

For a period, until about 2009, the leader occasionally made audio recordings to give an authoritative stamp to important decisions which had to be communicated within the movement. These circulated in Taliban circles. One of the last of these such recordings addressed the status of an errant military commander, Mullah Mansoor Dadaullah, who, in late 2007, Mullah Omar denounced as a rebel for operating outside the command chain.<sup>18</sup> Since then, Mullah Omar's deputy, Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor, has claimed to have received messages from the supreme leader but has shared little tangible evidence to authenticate such communication. The Cultural Commission has circulated audio recordings of the leader's Eid messages, but the voice is that of an actor. The leadership has thus not produced proof that Mullah Omar has any involvement in scripting the messages read in his name. Instead, the Cultural Commission has circulated archive recordings of Mullah Omar that date from before his period of seclusion. The Mullah Omar of the archive recordings is a spiritual figure, useful in asserting divine sanction, but offers no practical political or military guidance. In later years, the Taliban's Cultural Commission published a stream of political and military commentary in Mullah Omar's name but has never been able to authenticate the authorship.

### *The Core Leadership*

The current national-level leadership of the Taliban movement looks very much like the leadership that formed around Mullah Omar in the early years of the movement, except that the veterans are twenty years older. The national leadership is predominantly madrassah-educated clerics from those Pashtun tribes settled in the greater Kandahar area. All members of the leadership are veterans of the pre-2001 conflict, and most joined the movement in its first phase, before the 1996 capture of Kabul—a remarkable degree of continuity. Neither has the new generation of fighters found a place in the national leadership nor have the Taliban made any obvious effort to broaden the movement's base. This continuity of the social and political character of the leadership has been maintained despite the rapid turnover of personnel in many of the top positions.

The formal leadership structure of the Taliban movement consists of the deputy leader, other executive officers, a leadership council or shura, and twelve specialist commissions, including the Military Commission; the Political Commission; the Economic Commission; the commissions for education, prisoners' affairs, martyrs, and disabled; and the Council of Ulema. The most important of these commissions, the military, has a subsidiary in Peshawar to manage the affairs of the eastern province. The leadership culture also has an element of informality. Veteran accounts suggest that membership of the leadership council is more fluid than would be the case in a classic politburo, and a cadre of senior figures have a degree of access to decision making without formally belonging to any shura.

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Mufti Rasheed's organizational doctrine provides a possible explanation for the rather tenuous appearance of the shura. He stressed the shura's purely advisory role and that decision making remains ultimately in the hands of the amir. Thus, shura decisions are nonbinding and the precise composition matters less than it would were the shura to make a binding decision. Taliban veterans' representation of leadership decision making suggests that the handful of men with executive responsibility in the leadership exercise their discretion over the issues to take to consultation. They then summon their peers from the national leadership for this consultation. Over time, a consensus has formed among these peers over who is eligible to be involved in consultation. Insofar as there are ever any meetings that conform to the title *Rehbhari shura* (leadership council), there are occasional meetings of a relatively stable group of a dozen or so senior figure who convene to consider sensitive issues. But the peer group with occasional input into decision making is rather larger and less stable in composition.

In contrast to the flexible understanding and representation of the Taliban's leadership councils, those who hold the senior-most executive positions are well known. For example, Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor, who served as civil aviation minister and head of the Air Force in the IEA government, is now the senior deputy to the amir ul momineen and thus acting leader of the movement. Similarly, Qayyum Zakir, a former military commander who spent a spell as a detainee in Guantanamo, was the deputy to the amir ul momineen with responsibility for military affairs until his resignation and replacement in April 2014. Likewise, Amir Khan Motaqi, the IEA-era education minister, serves as chair of the Cultural Commission.

Together, the heads and members of the national level specialist commissions and the peer group members considered eligible to participate in shura consultations can be thought of as the top tier or national leadership. However, the element of uncertainty over who holds the executive positions at any time or who is eligible to advise the leadership through shuras means that there is no single agreed upon list of the Taliban national leadership—even among the Taliban. This study used lists provided by two Taliban veterans of those Taliban who have influence at national level. One of them provided a narrowly defined list (twenty-one names) and the other a broadly defined one (fifty names). As an additional cross-check, the researcher prepared a more conventional list of national leadership, according to function (heads of commissions and reported members of the small shura). Most names on this list in any case appear on either of the other lists and therefore are not tabulated separately. As a basis for comment on the leadership characteristics, short profiles of the Taliban on the different lists were prepared based on information from key informants. These profiles were then used to populate the frequency tables.

To profile the second tier of leadership, the study focused on the Taliban's shadow provincial governors. The list of governors also is in a state of perpetual flux because of transfers and the impact of detentions and killings. The study used a shadow governor list published by the United Nations, making some minor corrections, as a fixed reference point (see table 1).

**Table 1. Leadership, National and Mid-Level**

	UNSC Shadow 29	Taliban 21	Taliban 50
Madrassah background	22	21	50
Pre-2001 service with emirate	21	21	49
Origin in greater Kandahar	7	20	38
Ethnic Pashtun	22	20	47
Experience of detention post-2001	3	7	8
Highest post before 2001			
Minister	1	9	9
Governor	0	1	7
Provincial police chief	0	0	6
Aide	0	3	3
Senior military commander	7	6	9
Junior military commander	10	0	11
Other position	2	2	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>50</b>
Province of origin			
Kandahar	3	9	28
Helmand	4	6	5
Uruzgan	0	3	3
Zabul	0	2	2
Others	21	1	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>49</b>
Tribe or ethnicity			
Ishaqzai	0	5	7
Nurzai	1	0	12
Alizai	1	4	4
Alakozai	0	1	1
Achakzai	0	4	1
Popalzai	2	1	3
Tokhi	2	2	1
Suleimankhel	0	0	4
Taraki	0	1	2
Kakar	0	0	3
Other Pashtun	16	2	9
Tajik	1	0	1
Pashai	1	0	1
Other	5	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>49</b>
Detention experience			
Guantanamo	0	2	3
Bagram	0	0	0
Afghan prison	0	0	1
Pakistani prison	3	5	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>

## Key Observations

### Provincial governors

- predominantly studied in a madrassah (22 of 26)
- served in the pre-2001 IEA (21 of 27)
- predominantly Pashtun (22 of 29)
- a minority from greater Kandahar (7 of 28)
- predominantly served in the military (17 of 20)

### Leadership inner circle

- all studied in a madrassah and served the IEA before 2001 (21)
- all but one Pashtuns from greater Kandahar (20 of 21)
- a minority detained at some period after 2001 (7 of 21)
- a balance of military-civilian experience (6 mainly military and 15 mainly civilian of 21)

## Madrasah Connections

The Taliban's national-level leadership is still the exclusive preserve of madrassah-educated clerics. This common background for the leadership helps the Taliban operate as a closed network. Individual Taliban in the course of their educational careers migrated between multiple madrassahs, seeing opportunities to study under particular teachers, or simply opting to study successive courses, or *dauras*, in different institutions. Thus, even before entering the Taliban movement, many young men from the madrassahs had associated with large numbers of peers and teachers in the religious institutions. Some members of the Taliban leadership have completed their *dastarbandi*, the madrassah graduation in which they ceremonially don a turban and become a mawlvi or qualified cleric. Others pursued their madrassah studies to a higher level, receiving additional qualifications in Islamic jurisprudence and thus can be considered part of the ulema, the senior clergy. Most senior Taliban, however, are only partly qualified. The simplest explanation is that the young men joined the jihad while studying in their madrassahs and stayed with the movement rather than returning to graduate. The term mullah is used rather flexibly in Afghanistan to denote someone who has had some religious training without specifying how much. The Taliban remains a movement of mullahs rather than of mawlvis—madrassah dropouts rather than madrassah graduates.

Part of the corporate culture that has developed in the madrassahs of Afghanistan and Pakistan is a sense of the other, in that those who have entered the madrassahs consider that they have received instruction in divine knowledge, which is inherently superior to the knowledge gained in worldly educational institutions. Society is thus bifurcated between those who belong to the madrassahs and that world of knowledge and those who exist beyond it and have only imperfect religious knowledge. The Taliban's status as a body of men trained in the madrassahs has implications for their *jus in bello* in that they can claim that their men are equipped with an understanding of the mechanics of righteous jihad. However, the preponderance of dropouts explains the legitimizing strategies the leadership has pursued. They remain vulnerable to the challenge that they are simply not qualified to make pronouncements on doctrinal issues. Therefore, at key points in the movement's development, such as the elevation of Mullah Omar to the title of amir ul momineen or at the start of the U.S. intervention, the leadership has summoned sympathetic ulema and tried to get them to issue helpful pronouncements. Likewise, the Taliban have maintained their own Ulema Commission, made up of senior cler-

ics who are not part of the functional leadership, to provide judgments and religious sanction for executive decision making.

There is some dilution of the monopoly of the madrassahs in the second tier of leadership. A minority of governors have not been educated in a madrassah or studied there so briefly as to render any claim to be a mullah tenuous. A veteran described the leadership's priorities in appointing people to the provincial positions: They seek lieutenants who have proven ability to lead military formations, because of the requirements of the armed conflict, and they want people who can be trusted to be loyal, something evidenced by having worked with members of the leadership. Although the majority of Taliban *walis*, or provincial governors, are still former madrassah students, for the sake of loyalty or military organizing ability, the leadership is prepared to look beyond its preferred pool of peers. For example, the erstwhile Taliban shadow governor of Paktika, "Mawlvi" Sangeen, was primarily a field commander from a family loyal to Jalaluddin Haqqani. He spent much less time in a madrassah than would justify the title he rather grandly assumed, of mawlvi. However, the Taliban national leadership, after 2001, depended upon mobilizing the old jihad-era network of Jalaluddin to provide a base for operations in Waziristan and the greater Paktia area. The certification by Jalaluddin and his family that Sangeen could lead armed men in Waziristan and greater Paktia was therefore enough to qualify Sangeen as a governor, despite his minimal religious education.

Similarly, the movement is still in the hands of veterans of the pre-2001 period. All Taliban who featured on either the short or long leadership list produced through informant interviews were active in the movement before the U.S. intervention. Despite all the attrition, a large chunk of the 1996–2001 cabinet still helps run the movement. The deputy and acting head of the movement served in the cabinet (as civil aviation minister), and the functional leadership also includes former ministers for education, mines and industry, communications, finance, public works, labour and social welfare, interior, foreign affairs, and justice. Even if many of these figures brought few relevant qualifications to their old ministries and served there relatively briefly, their continued presence in the leadership underlines the Taliban's aspiration to national power. One strand of the Taliban's legitimizing narrative for their campaign is that international intervention removed a legitimate, indeed divinely ordained, Islamic regime. The armed struggle, they argue, is therefore required to restore it. The presence of nine or more former cabinet level members of that deposed regime in the current leadership bolsters the Taliban's claim to be fighting to restore the pre-2001 order.

The wider definition of national leadership includes a cluster of men who served as provincial governors before 2001. The role of the military in the leadership is another feature made clear by the profiling. The men who today serve as shadow governors were before 2001 predominantly formation commanders, police chiefs, deputies to top Taliban commanders, or simply leaders of small groups of fighters. Insofar as there has been any generational transition in the leadership, through the induction of younger men who played no role in the pre-2001 movement, it has happened at the second tier of leadership or below. This limited generational turnover has not markedly altered the social or clerical profile of the movement. The leadership has also established a pattern of making appointments within families that have a long association with the movement. Thus, younger brothers and sons of Taliban veterans have entered the ranks of the leadership.

In terms of place of origin and ethnicity, the national leadership remains a Pashtun movement dominated by the tribes of Kandahar. All but one of the narrowly defined national leadership list were Pashto speakers from the greater Kandahar area. Four-fifths of the Taliban in the top fifty list



are Pashto-speaking Kandaharis. The acting head of the movement and all his top aides are from the greater Kandahar area and belong to the Durrani branch of the Pashtun tribes.

The issue of imbalances in tribal representation within the Taliban leadership does not just relate to the disproportionate presence of Kandahari Pashtuns. The national leadership has acquired a clannish quality because of the significant over-representation of the Ishaqzai tribe. Since the elevation of Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor as acting leader, Ishaqzais from his home area of Band e Timur, in Maiwand district, Kandahar, have received several senior appointments. Both the Taliban director of finance, Gul Agha, and his senior adviser, Samad Sanai, are Ishaqzais. The Taliban have neither invested in developing a national leadership that Afghans might consider representative nor systematically patronized the strongest tribes.<sup>19</sup>

The pattern of ethnicity and origin in the second-tier leadership differs from that in the national leadership. Among the provincial governors is a majority of Pashtuns—twenty-two of the twenty-nine profiled. Of them, Kandahari Pashtuns are a minority. In that part of the leadership that interacts with the population, then, the Taliban pragmatically tends to appoint officials from an ethnic group present in the given province.

### *Shared Detention Experience*

Since 2001, the experience of detention has emerged as an element of common experience within the Taliban leadership. A significant minority of Taliban leaders—one-third of the narrowly defined leadership group—have spent time in jail at some stage since 2001 before rejoining the insurgency. These include several of the movement's senior-most military officials, such as Qayyum Zakir, Saddar Ibrahim, Allauddin Agha, and Rauf Khadim. Among the national leaders, most of those who have been in jail have been imprisoned by the Pakistan authorities rather than by Afghan or U.S. counterparts. This is in large part a simple consequence of the leadership's reluctance to stray into Afghanistan. On the other hand, only three of the twenty-nine provincial governors profiled were detained in Pakistan. However, this figure probably underestimates the true proportion of governors who have spent time in jail.

To extend the analysis of the detention experience to the third tier of leadership, the field commanders, a table was prepared showing detention experience, Taliban service, and religious education for the peers of a veteran of the movement who was released after a long stint in Bagram (see table 1). The results can be considered exploratory because they relate to a small, twenty-person sample of this tier of the leadership or of the prisoners in Bagram. They were revealing nonetheless.

The peers profiled were all men who were active in the insurgency as field commanders at the time of their detention. The majority had received religious education in madrassahs, a slightly higher percentage having finished their studies than among the national leadership. At least four of the peers used their period of incarceration in Bagram to advance their religious studies. Taliban functionaries, aware of the potential for their authority to be questioned because many of them were madrassah dropouts, have sought opportunities for “mid-career training” to complete their religious qualifications. Upon release, all of them found positions of responsibility within the Taliban structures. One served for a period as a provincial governor, but otherwise they operated at a slightly lower level—four, for example, were *uluswals*. More than a third resumed their activities as military field commanders or military trainers.

This profiling covers only one small peer group among the vast number of Taliban who have passed through Bagram and other jails in Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, the ease with which released detainees reintegrated into the Taliban movement and took positions of

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responsibility, despite measures the Afghan intelligence service takes to retrain men after their release, suggests that former prisoners should be considered an important group within the field command. Accounts of life in Bagram and Afghan prisons suggest that prisoners use their association to imbibe and inculcate a sense of participation in the struggle against foreign influence and a corrupt, un-Islamic regime. This constitutes evidence of the emergence within the Taliban field command and its supervisory structures of a cadre of armed clerics who share the experience of struggle while in detention.

### *Implications*

The most concise description of the social base of the Taliban movement when it emerged in 1994 would have been as a movement led by armed clergy recruited from the tribes of Kandahar. Two decades later, the leadership of the movement retains its essential clerical character despite the massive changes in political context and the nature of the conflict in which it is engaged. The ethnic composition is somewhat more complex. Kandahari Pashtuns still dominate the top leadership circles, and the presence of Ishaqzai in top slots is disproportionate. However, the movement has been to some extent successful in mobilizing clerical networks beyond greater Kandahar and from non-Pashtun groups. These non-Pashtun clerics have been admitted to the second and third tiers of leadership but are marginal within the top tier. Overall, the Taliban movement has been remarkably resistant to any notion of broadening its social base beyond the clergy. It continues to function as a sort of Afghan Islamist vanguardist movement—a closed group that claims a divine mission to transform Afghan society without the need for a popular mandate.

The clerical nature of the Taliban movement has endured despite more than a decade of mobilizing Afghans around a nationalistic opposition to the presence of foreign troops rather than the agenda of shariat implementation, which the Taliban pursued while in power. This trajectory contrasts with that of post-2001 Kabul politics, where, in discourse and praxis, the Karzai regime focused on balancing the access of different ethnic groups to power and opportunities. The absence of any form of popular mandate is one reason the movement has continued to depend on its supreme leader Mullah Omar as the basis of its claim to legitimacy, despite his inability to communicate with the movement he nominally heads.

The Taliban movement has been remarkably successful in coping with the challenges of an invisible leader. However, the position of the supreme leader includes vulnerabilities. Although the leadership has generally succeeded in passing off its pronouncements as the word of Mullah Omar, they have limited ability to defend against any challenges to the authenticity of such material. As a result, they must exercise some discretion in what they attribute. The Taliban doctrine also makes no provision for a leadership succession; if the leadership ever tried to replace Mullah Omar, its members would be hard-pressed to attribute the same degree of legitimacy for the successor as they have for the original amir ul momineen. Similarly, the rather modest religious scholarly credentials of the leadership means that it continues to depend on external validation by more qualified elements of the unarmed clergy. Conversely, the leadership faces a perpetual risk of challenge from more qualified and respected ulema than it has been able to deploy in arguments regarding the jihad, particularly as contextual developments such as the completion of the transition process and the gradual withdrawal of international troops increase the resonance of clerical critiques of a resort to violence.

The Taliban's cliquish approach to leadership also indicates the potential for a hard-line challenge from within the armed ranks of the insurgency. The leadership has tolerated no open

politics within the movement and done little to accommodate non-Kandaharis in decision-making structures. Those involved in the middle tiers of the movement have increasing shared experience of armed insurgency and detention. Both are settings well known for their opportunities for radicalization. The risk is high that radical enthusiasts for broadening the jihad could capitalize on the leadership's narrow base and organize within the Taliban's ranks.

## Toward a Rhetoric of Peace?

As illustrated, the Taliban movement has in 2014 remained strategically committed to sustaining the insurgency despite the impending withdrawal of foreign troops. Although its rhetoric highlights the movement's confrontation with foreign military forces, the reality in recent years is that the Taliban leadership has increasingly pitted its forces against Afghan forces defending the government in Kabul. The Taliban decision to fight on through the withdrawal period suggests that the most likely outcome after 2014, at least initially, is a continuation of the conflict. Discussion with Taliban veterans indicates that the leadership is far from monolithic in terms of commitment to open-ended conflict. Hard-liners, encouraged rather than deterred by the departure of foreign forces, advocate sustaining the fight until military victory over the Kabul government is achieved. But the movement's functional leadership also includes senior moderates who claim to favor an early negotiated end to the conflict, even if they have had little tangible impact on Taliban strategy. Taliban politics, for now, take place within the logic of a movement dedicated to armed struggle.

Any leaders or members of the Taliban movement who eventually seek to transform the conflict and end the Taliban's jihad will face a significant challenge in legitimizing such a move and mobilizing support for it. Part of the challenge would be to articulate a Taliban rhetoric of peace that did not invalidate the case for jihad that has prevailed for the past two decades. A general cessation of violence would result if the functional leadership of the movement called a ceasefire associated with a political process. In this case, the leadership would likely seek to use a rhetoric of peace to justify its move and convince the Taliban base to stay with it, maintaining unity of the movement. A divided movement could result if the functional leadership tried to sustain the armed struggle but Taliban pragmatists, in an organized fashion, pushed for an end to the conflict. In this case, the rhetoric of peace would be articulated by Taliban pragmatists acting as a forward bloc struggling for control of the direction of the movement. A further possible scenario would result if Taliban pragmatists sought unofficially to de-escalate the conflict rather than challenge the functional leadership, which continued to support the jihad. In this case, Taliban pragmatists would avoid openly articulating a rhetoric of peace, although they might deploy the arguments locally while trying to subvert the leadership-mandated war effort. The Taliban leadership is likely to find it increasingly difficult to sustain the hitherto impressive cohesiveness of the movement in the face of a serious peace process, whether it chooses to embrace that process or not.

Thus a Taliban rhetoric of peace would be used either by a leadership trying to maintain the unity of the movement going into a peace process or by a faction of pragmatists trying to carry as much of the movement as possible into a peace process. The rhetoric of peace would in either case be presented to the movement's base to demonstrate that exiting the conflict was not only consistent with the Taliban core ideology and history of struggle but also the optimal course of action in the circumstances. The critical contradiction would not be between the Taliban and their erstwhile enemies but instead between those Taliban embracing peace and those seeking to sustain the armed campaign regardless.

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The analysis of a possible Taliban rhetoric of peace is intended to alert other stakeholders to the kind of rhetoric they would be likely to encounter from the Taliban in any peace process. One of the challenges in transforming a conflict is accommodating what the different sides say about each other, the conflict, and the past. Agreement among Afghans about the causes and rights and wrongs of the post-2001 conflict is likely to be elusive. One of the challenges in peacemaking would therefore be for Taliban and anti-Taliban to find ways of accommodating the very different ways in which they represented the political process to their constituencies.

Taliban advocates of peace can be expected to construct their rhetoric by drawing on the movement's core ideology, history of struggle, or prior rhetoric to show that these are compatible with conflict exit. The Taliban has already begun marshalling arguments to provide a cover for new departures. In June 2013, Taliban leadership published a declaration justifying its opening of a representative office in Doha with the clear purpose of being receptive to peace proposals if not to actually engage in a peace process. The declaration was a rhetorical device calculated to fulfil requirements of the host, Qatar, as well as the United States, which had pushed for the office to be opened, and finally to legitimize the Taliban's engagement with the Afghan government and the United States. Also during 2013, former Taliban finance minister and Quetta shura political committee chair Mohtasim Agha Jan gave a series of media interviews and press releases in which he articulated the case for the Taliban to exit the conflict.<sup>20</sup> In so doing, he positioned himself as the highest profile Taliban pragmatist—someone prepared to advocate political action to pursue objectives rather than relying exclusively on violent jihad. The Doha declaration is an example of a minimalist approach to peace rhetoric, whereas the Mohtasim interventions are much more far-reaching in terms of the peacemaking program he advocates. As an example of an earlier attempt at peace rhetoric, when senior Taliban figure Abdul Wahid (alias Rais Baghran) exited the insurgency in 2005, his first act was to conduct a television interview in which he gave a rhetorical defense of his move.<sup>21</sup>

Based on these declarations, as well as consistent elements in Taliban rhetoric over the past two decades, eight issues are likely to feature in any Taliban rhetoric of peace, whether articulated by leadership and pragmatists alike in a general cessation or by pragmatists acting as a forward bloc.

### Position of the amir

The Taliban peace advocates' preferred position will be that the amir has endorsed the move to peace. This would mimic the established practice from the post-2001 struggle of invoking the name of the amir, backed up with whatever proof they can muster that the decision was authentically his. If the advocates were to sustain their claim that the amir had ordered the peace process, the weight of twenty years of preaching obedience to the amir would count heavily in their favor. If they are confident that no one with better access to Mullah Omar can convincingly refute them, the architects of the peace rhetoric will assert that the amir has endorsed the process and that obedience is therefore obligatory. Any faction seeking to fight on would be forced into open defiance of the amir, something that would put them in the position of rebelling against the authority of the movement, undermining the main source of legitimacy—not to mention cohesion and durability—of the post-2001 insurgency.

An alternative rhetorical approach would be for the Taliban to revisit the conditions for exercise of the authority of the amir. In extremis, a peace rhetoric could argue that Mullah Omar no longer fulfils the criteria for an Islamic amir because of his inaccessibility to the faithful. A rhetorical attempt to legitimize the peace process without the authority of the amir

would likely invoke shariat arguments on the basis that Taliban doctrine obliges obedience to the amir only as long as he complies with shariat. Shariat arguments available to justify a peace rhetoric include the idea that peace served the common good of the Muslim *ummah*, or the idea that force is illegitimate when a peaceful option exists.

### Peace as a desirable state

When Taliban veterans discuss the prospects for peace, their most common opening observation is that peace is a natural and desirable state in human society and is the ultimate goal of all Taliban endeavours. Such a claim, essentially the idealist case, is likely to feature large in the Taliban peace rhetoric even if the process itself involves much realpolitik. Such rhetoric would claim that the Taliban had achieved that for which they had struggled. The affirmation of peace as a desirable state, in the context of a process that safeguarded Taliban objectives and interests, would delegitimize any dissident attempts to sustain their violence.

### Cohesiveness and need for unity in peace

Taliban peace rhetoric is likely to invoke the movement's core doctrinal element and enduring political priority: the idea of maintaining the unity of the movement at all costs. The peace rhetoric would proclaim that compliance with the terms of any agreement is binding on all partisans of the movement and would seek to apply to the process of achieving peace the doctrine that proved effective in the armed struggle.

A forward bloc advocating peace could still appeal to Taliban unity even while being opposed by a functional leadership seeking to sustain the war. In this case, the rhetoric would depict the warmongers as ill-advisedly splitting the movement. However, peace advocates would be at pains to assert their credentials as loyal members of the movement acting with due consultation. The rhetoric would distinguish the forward bloc both from the rump war mongers and from previous Taliban figures who accommodated Kabul and were disowned by the movement as turncoats. We already have an example of this in Mohtasim's public positioning. However, to have a tangible impact on the course of the conflict, a forward bloc would need to garner greater support in the movement than Mohtasim had done.

### Foreign troops

Taliban peace rhetoric would have to provide a rationale to the base as to how participation in a peace process affirmed the Taliban's struggle against foreign occupation. The most obvious way would be to assert that the withdrawal of NATO troops in 2014 amounted to an end of the occupation, which the Taliban had demanded. The rhetoric could claim that the NATO decision to withdraw was prompted by the Taliban's resistance and that Taliban participation in the peace process was necessary to ensure a complete withdrawal and to allow the Taliban to set terms for future security arrangements. Should the leadership take a political decision to pull back from a violent post-NATO power struggle inside Afghanistan, the rhetoricians should find no difficulty in claiming consistency between the decade-long fight against NATO and entering a peace process as NATO forces withdrew. The peace rhetoric could build on previous Taliban claims that peace would come after the foreigners left, even if those claims had been disingenuous at the time.

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### Government fulfilling criterion of an Islamic government

If a peace process entails a Taliban accommodation with the Kabul government, the peace rhetoric can be expected to include a declaration that the government has Islamic credentials, which would in turn allow the peace rhetoric to assert continuity with the Taliban's declared mission, in all stages of its struggle, for supremacy of the shariat. Such a proclamation would allow the Taliban leadership to reimagine the movement's quest for an Islamic system and to accept that the government had some role in Islamizing society rather than to claim a Taliban monopoly over the process. Such a device would be important in reconciling the Taliban's impulse toward radical Islamist reform with the idea of constitutionalism. Taliban antipathy to demands that they embrace the Afghan constitution has been based not so much in objection to specific clauses but in the belief in a fundamental contradiction between the constitution and shariat. Similarly, a Taliban declaration that the government was Islamic would provide another basis for delegitimizing further violence against it. Those holding back from the peace process would be declared rebels for defying the authority of an Islamic government. It is not clear which practical measures would suffice for Taliban rhetoricians to accept a Kabul government as Islamic. However, the Afghan Taliban movement has twenty years of cohabitation with the Pakistan political system, which is based on a democratic constitution. This provides a precedent suggesting that the movement's requirements need not be too onerous.

### Affirmation and protection of the interests of those who have sacrificed for the Taliban

Those who sacrificed for the movement, including the martyrs, disabled, prisoners, and their dependents, would feature prominently in the rhetoric of peace, mirroring the way in which Taliban rhetoricians have long invoked them to legitimize the jihad. First, the rhetoric would reaffirm their bona fides as martyrs who sacrificed in a righteous cause. Second, the leadership would be bound to claim that the move to peace advanced the cause for which the martyrs sacrificed. Third, the rhetoric would claim tangible benefits from peace for those who had sacrificed or their dependents. The Taliban leadership has been under pressure during the insurgency to maintain its internal legitimacy by providing financial compensation to dependents and pursuing the release of detainees. A leadership trying to justify the decision to embrace a peace process will claim that the decision is made in the best interest of the movement's large pool of martyrs, disabled, and prisoners.

### Affirmation and logical conclusion of the jihad

During the manoeuvring of the Taliban leadership over the opening of a representative office in Qatar in the summer of 2013, they carefully refrained from any declaration or commitment that either suggested a weakening of their commitment to the idea of jihad or even that any element of their campaign fell short of the requirements for a legitimate jihad. Leadership would face similar imperatives in building the case for a full-fledged peace process. Prior Taliban rhetoric elevates jihad to the position of a hallowed institution, the significance of which for Islam globally extends far beyond the political calculations around the fighting on any one national front. A Taliban rhetoric of peace would present the case that this move upheld the commitment to jihad, which in no sense could any Taliban rhetoric be expected to renounce. The most obvious ways in which rhetoric could achieve this would be to establish that the Taliban had achieved the goals of the current phase of the jihad. The alternative would be to depict the peace process as a continuation of the struggle through nonviolent means. To build

this argument, the Taliban would need access to ample Islamic discourse on the nature of jihad and its armed and unarmed variants. The key point is that it should be anticipated that the Taliban would affirm the general legitimacy of jihad to defend Muslim interests. They would assert that their campaign had constituted legitimate jihad but argue that any further violence during or against the peace process was no longer rightful jihad.

### **A new role for the armed mullahs of the Taliban**

Taliban rhetoric during the war clearly laid out a role for the movement's base of fighter-clerics. Participation in the jihad has become an integral part of the career or lifestyle for two generations of madrassah-trained clerics. To find resonance with the movement's base, a rhetoric of peace would have to lay out a new postconflict role for armed mullahs. Articulating a role that engages their self-image as moral guardians and defenders of the religion, but is tenable in peacetime conditions, will be an entirely different challenge from previous efforts at reintegration of so-called layman combatants. Building on the idea that the time for armed jihad has passed, the leadership can be expected to appeal to the movement's base to safeguard the values of the jihad by peacefully promoting the religion. Given the long association of the Taliban movement with the madrassah networks, the leadership will likely advocate a return to the madrassahs, encouraging the erstwhile armed mullahs to use madrassahs in Afghanistan as their base for their new peaceful role.

## **Conclusions**

Throughout the Taliban's two-decade existence, its leadership has deployed a specific rhetoric to claim legitimacy and to persuade people to support its jihad. The means for disseminating the rhetoric have varied—from Mullah Omar's broadcasting speeches in the 1990s over a military radio network to the websites, Twitter feeds, and glossy magazines of today. The core of the rhetoric communicated over these new media, however, shows continuity. This rhetoric consists of religious and historical references, narratives of recent events, and guidance for Taliban sympathizers.

The first conclusion to be drawn from this investigation of the Taliban rhetoric of armed struggle is that the movement deserves to be taken seriously as a political-religious organization. Twenty years after the launch of the movement, the Taliban continue to command the loyalty of thousands of Afghans and to apply resources and men to the pursuit of political objectives, guided by doctrine and inspired by the rhetoric analyzed in this study. For those who have submitted to the authority of the Islamic emirate, it constitutes not so much a parallel administration as a primary source of legitimacy and legality, one that has displaced the state in their imagination. The Taliban case for violence does not just provide a moral-legal case for adherents to resort to violence; it sanctions punishment of those who fail to support the jihad. The Taliban movement's accumulated rhetorical and ideological framework has helped render the movement arguably the most effective organization in Afghan public life.<sup>22</sup> In large part, this framework compensates for the Taliban's inferior firepower relative to the Afghan National Security Forces. The centrality of the rhetoric and ideology of jihad in the Taliban's imagination also renders inadequate any explanations of insurgent motivation that stress criminality, greed, or proxy relationships with regional powers or that depict factions outside central control.

Taliban rhetoric has evolved through the two decades of involvement in conflict during which the movement has faced Afghan enemies, then foreign enemies and a combination of

both. A constant in the rhetoric, however, has been the Taliban assertion that its members are engaged in a righteous jihad aimed at the establishment of a divinely ordered Islamic system in Afghanistan. The centrality of this assertion to the case the Taliban have built up means that rhetoricians tasked to explain the movement's future directions will be bound to retain this appeal to jihad. The departure of foreign military forces from Afghanistan should not be expected to render the Taliban any less of a jihadi organization.

One of the reasons for the Taliban's effectiveness as an organization is the focus of the movement's doctrine on internal affairs and in particular on maintaining cohesiveness. Although during their period in power the Taliban experimented with realization of a Sunni-Hanifi Islamic state, the rhetoric considered here devotes little attention to the issue of the end state of the war. In contrast, the Taliban are ruthless in enforcing their doctrine of obedience to the amir. Many of the distinctive aspects of the movement's behavior can be explained with reference to a coherent body of doctrine. The resulting discipline and cohesiveness help explain the movement's ability to sustain its struggle, avoid splits, and deter dissidents or unauthorized peacemakers.

Although this rhetoric and doctrine have helped build a disciplined movement, linking its leadership cadres in Pakistan and fighters in Afghanistan, the movement has retained a narrow social base. The Taliban is not a mass movement and cannot even be considered a national movement because power is concentrated in the hands of mullahs from the Kandahari Pashtun tribes, who have built limited alliances with clerical networks from other regions and tribal groups. The traditional authority of the clergy in Afghanistan, in particular in the Pashtun south and rural areas of other regions, means that Taliban rhetoric has some resonance. Thus, any project to build a plural Afghanistan is likely to include an appeal to the Taliban or the constituency they have mobilized. However, because their social base is so narrow, the Taliban's attempts to regain power rest on a negation of pluralism, rejection of the idea of a popular mandate, and assertion of the divine right vested in their Islamic emirate.

Ultimately, however, the Taliban operate in the real world and, in pursuing their political-military strategy beyond rhetoric, will be obliged to factor in availability of resources, the attitude of regional patrons, the military balance, and the willingness of their forces to continue the fight. Nonetheless, the rhetorical edifice the movement has constructed around the armed struggle will affect the ability of the leadership to move toward compromise and transformation of the conflict. If either the leadership as a whole tries to take the movement out of the war or, in a more likely scenario, if Taliban pragmatists challenge the leadership's attempts to fight on, then they will require a Taliban rhetoric of peace. This will build on the case that the movement has articulated over the years but also demonstrate that the Taliban's mission now requires compromise and peaceful means. The actions of Taliban peacemakers, and the outcome of their efforts, will depend on their ability to make their rhetoric for peace resonate with the movement.

Whether those who endeavour to transform the Taliban campaign do so from a position of controlling the leadership council or as a forward bloc, some part of the movement can be expected to launch a rhetorical case for fighting on beyond the transition. The new rhetoric of armed struggle will claim that the political system in Kabul is irredeemably compromised by its collaboration with unbelievers. The role of the Taliban movement will be shaped by a contest over how to imagine and depict the role of Taliban in a future Afghanistan. Taliban rhetoric is due to evolve further.

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***The actions of Taliban peacemakers, and the outcome of their efforts, will depend on their ability to make their rhetoric for peace resonate with the movement.***

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## Notes

1. Interview with Pakistani religious scholar who served with Afghan Taliban, January 2014.
2. This title is adopted by the original Muslim caliphs and can be interpreted as indicating the Taliban's pretensions to claim the allegiance of all Muslims. It invokes the idea of both military command and religious authority and is evocative of the glories of the early Muslim conquests. The controversy around it was revived in 2014 when the head of militant group Islamic State declared himself caliph and thus implicitly rejected the notion that Mullah Omar was commander of the faithful. The word amir used by itself indicates commander and the Taliban think in terms of a hierarchy of amirs exercising authority under the commander of the faithful.
3. For two recent detailed statements of the Taliban public position, see Political Office of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, "Position of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan on the Foreign Troops Pull Out, the Afghan Issue and Reconciliation in the Country" (Kyoto, June 2012); "Text of speech by Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to research conference in France," December 24, 2012, <http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamooona/28777-text-of-speech-enunciated-by-islamic-emirate-of-afghanistan-at-research-conference-in-france>. This position is updated in twice annual Eid messages attributed to Taliban leader Mullah Omar.
4. See, for example, "Message of Felicitation of Amir-ul-Momineen on the Auspicious Eve of Eid-ul-fitr," July 25, 2014, <http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamooona/47579>.
5. Fida Yunas, *Afghanistan: Political Parties, Groups and Movements and Mujabideen Alliances and Governments, 1879–1997* (Peshawar, 1997).
6. Nuruddin Turabi, "Islami adalat," Ulema Commission of the Ministry of Justice, Islami Emirate of Afghanistan, Kabul, 2000.
7. Mawlvi Abdul Haleem Ahmadi, "Da mujahid toorah," Cultural Commission, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 2013 (Taliban instructional book circulated in Peshawar).
8. Secretariat of the IEA, "Da mujahideeno lapara lahya," Quetta, 2009 [soft copy circulated by email]; "Da mujahideeno lapara lahya," Cultural Commission of the IEA, Quetta, 2013 [hard copy circulated as pamphlet].
9. Mufti Rasheed Ahmad, "Taliban mujahideen lashkar nabavi, ahkam alhia – ita'at ameer" (Karachi: Rasheed Trust, 2000).
10. Rasheed's use of the term amir refers both to the supreme commander (amir ul momineen) and to lieutenants lower in the command chain.
11. UN Security Council resolutions 1267 in the year 1999 and 1333 a year later sanctioned the Taliban movement and al-Qaeda. Thereafter the Taliban circumvented an asset freeze by asking associates to hold money on their behalf.
12. Abdulkader Sinno attributes the success of the Taliban movement to superior organization relative to other civil war actors. He notes frequent rotation of officials as one aspect of Taliban's effective centralization. Abdulkader Sinno, *Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 222–53.
13. The first serious study of suicide bombings in Afghanistan was published by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) in 2007: UNAMA, "Suicide attacks in Afghanistan 2001–2007," September 2007.
14. Adopted among Islamists to signify those fighters who have been trained to conduct suicide operations. For Koranic references in Middle Eastern jihadi rhetoric, see Jeffrey Halverson, Bennett Furlow, and Steven Corman, "How Islamist Extremists Quote the Qur'an," Center for Strategic Communication, Report no. 1202 (Phoenix: Arizona State University, July 9, 2012); for a case study of Afghan Islamist rhetoric, see Florian Broschek, "Inciting the Believers to Fight: A Closer Look at the Rhetoric of the Afghan Jihad," Afghanistan Analysts Network, Briefing Paper no. 01/2011 (Kabul: Afghan Analysts Network, 2011).
15. The videos analyzed were "Ghazi caravan 9" (Manbeh al Jihad), "Badri Lashkat 1" (Manbeh al Jihad), "Fateh Caravan" (Manbeh al Jihad), "Ghazi" (Alemara jihadi studio), "Koodakyan tsok di?" (Alemara jihadi studio), "Badri Lashkat 4" (Manbeh al Jihad), "Fateh Caravan" (Al Hijrat). All claimed to have been produced under the authority of the IEA Cultural Commission. The Manbeh al Jihad label is used by propagandists of the Haqqani Network, which operates as part of the IEA and runs military operations mainly in southeast Afghanistan and suicide operations around Kabul.
16. Proposed agreement between Afghanistan and the United States establishing the status of U.S. forces stationed in Afghanistan after 2014.
17. Episodic mobilisations conducted by charismatic ulema. Barnett Rubin, "The Fragmentation of Afghanistan" (Lahore: Vanguard, 1996), 44.
18. Audio recording acquired in Quetta and confirmed by Taliban veterans as Mullah Omar's voice.
19. The Durrani branch of the Pashtuns, which dominates greater Kandahar, comprises seven main tribes, within which the Ishaqzais were originally ranked sixth by population. Ludwig Adamec, *Historical Dictionary of Afghanistan* (New Delhi: Manas, 2006), 90.

20. See, for example, Mohtasim Agha Jan, interview, May 2013, <http://pashto.talkforpeace.org/?p=702>.
21. Abdul Wahid argued in an interview that Mullah Omar had in December 2001 authorized him and other leaders to approach Hamid Karzai and hand Kandahar over to him. This amounted to Mullah Omar's relinquishing the leadership that released Abdul Wahid from his oath to Omar.
22. The Taliban are effective as an organization in the sense that funds received are spent according to organizational objectives, the leadership is able to enforce appointments and transfers, and the base and middle level of the organization tend to comply with leadership directives.



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Between 2001 and 2014, the United States invested heavily in assisting a democratic political system focused on Kabul. Since 2005, the Afghan government, supported by the United States, has launched a series of initiatives to persuade fighters from the main insurgent movement it faces, the Taliban, to accept its authority and to renounce violence. The withdrawal of NATO troops in 2014 in a context of ongoing insurgency means that a new Afghan government will have to develop a strategy to confront the Taliban's campaign. This report offers insights into the movement's doctrine, organization, and rhetoric and is intended to inform ongoing efforts to end Taliban violence in the country.

## Related Links

- *Getting It Right in Afghanistan* edited by Moeed Yusuf, Scott Smith, and Colin Cookman (USIP, 2013)
- *The Taliban and the 2014 Elections in Afghanistan* by Antonio Giustozzi (Peaceworks, April 2014)
- *Reintegrating Armed Groups in Afghanistan: Lessons from the Past* by Deedee Derksen (Peace Brief, March 2014)
- *The Taliban's View of the 2014 Elections* by Michael Semple (Peace Brief, January 2014)
- *Dangerous Liaisons with the Afghan Taliban* by Matt Waldman (Special Report, October 2010)

