ЦЕНТРАЛЬНАЯ АЗИЯ И АФГАНИСТАН В МИРОВОЙ ПОЛИТИКЕ

UDC 327

From the heartlands of jihadism: The politics of chaos in Afghanistan*

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This article examines the phenomenon of jihadist groups operating in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands and argues that the political chaos that reigns in Kabul is contributing to the growth of jihadism in Afghanistan. The administration of Kabul is losing its grip on the security situation and Afghanistan is once again on the brink of an abyss. The future of various jihadist groups, be they the Taliban, ISIS, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan operating on Afghan soil or other smaller groups, appears promising. On the other hand, the prognosis for the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands and the civilian populations living in the rugged and restless region appears bleak. The vicious cycle of violence continues and the entrenched jihadist groups revel in the chaos caused by the failure of central governments on both sides of the border to establish the rule of law and provide services for the local populations. It appears that the borderlands that have always been beyond the control of central governments will continue to be ungoverned spaces for a long time to come.

Keywords: Afghanistan, jihadism, Taliban, ISIS, Pakistan.

* Much of the material presented in this article is based on the author's work and experiences in various parts of Afghanistan between the years 2003 and 2017.

> The British were beginning to understand that Afghanistan was no easy place to rule. In the last two millennia there had been only very brief moments of strong central control when the different tribes had acknowledged the authority of a single ruler, and still briefer moments of anything approaching a unified political system. It was in many ways less a state than a kaleidoscope of competing tribal principalities governed through maliks or vakils, in each of which allegiance was entirely personal, to be negotiated and won over rather than taken for granted. The tribe's traditions were egalitarian and independent, and they only ever submitted to authority on their own terms. Financial rewards might bring about cooperation, but rarely ensured loyalty: the individual Afghan soldier owed his allegiance first to the local chieftain who raised and paid him, not to the Durrani shahs in faraway Kabul or Peshawar (excerpt from Return of a King) [1, p. 25].

Introduction

The rugged, remote and mountainous Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands constitute a buffer zone between the administrations in Kabul and Islamabad. The majority of the population of the borderlands are Pashtun, and most are Sunni Muslims belonging to the Hanafi Islamic school of law. The intricate tapestry of tribes, subtribes, clans and social orders of the borderlands has remained the principal source of identification and allegiance among the people. Identities and group interests are highly local, and often associated with a village, or a clan.

In terms of cultural affiliation, the Pashtun resemble the warrior nomads of the Central Asian plains more than the agriculturalists of southern Pakistan. Customary law is intertwined with a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. Freedom from interference by outsiders is highly valued and independence is fiercely defended. This is especially true with respect to foreigners and non-Muslims, who are often referred to as infidels and must be fought against in the name of Allah.

This article examines the phenomenon of jihadist groups operating in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands and argues that the political chaos that reigns in Kabul is contributing to the growth of jihadism in Afghanistan. The administration in Kabul is losing its grip on the security situation and Afghanistan is once again on the brink of an abyss. The future of the various jihadist groups, be they the Taliban, ISIS[1], Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan operating on Afghan soil or other smaller groups, appears promising. The vicious cycle of violence continues and the entrenched jihadist groups revel in the chaos caused by the failure of central governments on both sides of the border to establish the rule of law and provide services for the local populations. The article concludes with the contention that the borderlands that have always been beyond the control of central governments will continue to be ungoverned spaces for a long time to come.

A line on the map

The conflict-ridden modern history of the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands began when the British drew the Durand Line in 1893 to demarcate the 2,430-kilometre border between Afghanistan and British India. The artificial pen stroke divided the Pashtun

[1] Taliban, ISIS — extremist organizations, prohibited in Russia.

into two separate countries. With the creation of modern Pakistan in 1948, Islamabad inherited the Durand Line, and the status of the border has been a constant source of dispute and tension between the administrations in Kabul and Islamabad. However, the local Pashtun tribes have never acknowledged the existence of the border and cross it at will. In a study of the Central Asian and Afghan borderland, Parham argues that life in a state's border region is closely entwined with life within the two neighbouring states simultaneously rather than in just one state: networks snake back and forth across borders, economic exchange makes use of the borderline, and neighbouring political systems influence domestic policy [2]. This line of argumentation also applies very aptly to the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands.

The area on the Pakistani side of the border is referred to as FATA or the Federally Administered Tribal Area. FATA is composed of seven autonomous areas: Khyber, Mohmand, Bajaur, Kurram, Orakzai, and Northern and Southern Waziristan. All the aforementioned areas are adjacent to the Afghanistan and Pakistan border except for Orakzai. In addition, six other areas are considered to be parts of what are called the Frontier Regions.

On the Afghan side of the border there are ten provinces, which include Badakshan, Nuristan, Kunar, Nangahar, Paktiya, Logar, Khost, Paktika, Zaul and Kandahar. The Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands are renowned for opium production and smuggling. There are many mobile laboratories found in the area where opium is processed into heroin to be smuggled into Russia, Europe and China (see [3] for a thorough analysis of the drug trade).

The Khyber Pass connects Afghanistan's Jalalabad with Pakistan's Peshawar. It is the only major border crossing between the two countries. The Macedonians, Persians, Scythians, Mongols and Afghans traversed the 50-kilometre-long rocky pass. In the 19th century the British army guarded the restless border in the Khyber Pass.

The borderlands can be thought of as a shatter zone where the ambitions of outsiders have always been shattered. For example, during the heyday of ISAF (International Security Assistance Force), almost 70 percent of the casualties were from Kunar province. War correspondent Sebastian Junger's documentary *War* is situated in Kunar's Korengal Valley, where the Americans fought a futile battle against a relentless and tough enemy [4].

On the Pakistan side of the border, the writ of Islamabad has always been weak. In fact, the tribal areas do not even fall under the jurisdiction of Pakistan's constitution. Rather, these areas are governed through the Frontier Crimes Regulation of 1901, which is a legacy of the British Empire. The Governor of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa administers the areas as an agent of the President of Pakistan. However, in practice, the tribal areas are governed by tribal customary law and practices. The efforts of the administration in Islamabad to establish the rule of law in the tribal areas or to provide services are weak and at times resisted by the locals. An example of this are the difficulties faced by health workers in administering polio vaccines in north and south Waziristan, dooming the region to be one of the last places on earth still plagued by polio.

A mosaic of jihadist groups

The restless Afghanistan-Pakistan border has been the heartland of jihadism for over 17 years. After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, both Taliban and al-Qaida fighters

retreated to the mountains to wage war against the fledgling government in Kabul and its foreign supporters led by NATO. One of the better-known foreign fighter groups that has nested itself into the borderlands is the Central Asian group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which has strong connections to al-Qaida. Perhaps the most well-known jihadist group in the area is the Haqqani network, which has specialized in high-profile terror attacks against Western and Indian interests in Kabul [5]. For example, they are thought to be responsible for the massive 31 May 2018 attack in Kabul, which caused extensive damage to the German embassy. The Haqqanis are considered to be operating under the directives and protection of Pakistan's military intelligence, also known as Inter-Services Intelligence or ISI (see [6] for an in-depth account of the history of ISI).

In addition, many other jihadist groups can be found in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands (see for example [7] and [8]). These include such groups as the Tora Bora Jihadi Front, Fedayi Karwan, the Siaspushan fighters, al-Qaida, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Laskkar-e Islam, Jamaat ul-Ahrar, Junud-e Khorasan and Amr bil Ma'ruf wa Nahi an al-Munkar.

All of these groups share a radical Islamist worldview. For the radical, Islamism is both a political ideology and the religious belief that all political power rests with Allah. The groups all seek to implement sharia, but their understanding of what it entails varies. It is often infused with local customary law and beliefs. For all the jihadist groups, the administrations in Kabul and Islamabad represent apostate regimes. The administration in Kabul is particularly problematic as in the view of the jihadists it is propped up by foreign infidels.

The shaky government of national unity

The present government of national unity (NUG) is best seen as a coalition that rests on a Pashtun/Uzbek pillar of support around President Ashraf Ghani and a Tajik/Hazara pillar of support around Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Abdullah Abdullah. The NUG came into existence after extremely difficult and highly contested presidential elections in 2014. The position of CEO is a result of a compromise regarding the electoral impasse and essentially a kind of quasi-prime-ministerial post with more managerial than executive powers. Despite many shortcomings, the NUG can be considered an achievement of sorts, especially if the alternative was outright prolonged violence between the two contesting camps.

The NUG is very much an elite political deal, although it can be seen as more inclusive than the previous administration of Hamid Karzai. Nonetheless, two years after the formation of the NUG, the exact role of the CEO is still unclear. President Ghani is often accused of micro-management and the over-centralization of powers to the presidential palace, which leaves the CEO on the margins of decision-making processes. It is no surprise that the NUG is rife with arguments, disagreements, deep mistrust and mutual suspicion, not only between the president and the CEO but also between the supporting camps of the two leaders. The supporting camps fuel the incessant disagreements over appointments, management styles and reform agendas. There are fundamental disagreements on how the elections went, why the NUG came into being, and what it means for the balance of power and legitimacy of the partnership. Since the NUG represents a fragile balance between many players and interests, it is hardly capable of delivering the various ambitious governance, economic and electoral reforms it has set for itself (see [9] for a brief overview of the history of the NUG).

To complicate matters further, in addition to the Taliban there are powerful former government officials and ministers who have a warlord background and who form a strong opposition to the NUG and its reform agenda. This opposition bloc is at times referred to as the 'Jihadi Council'. The persistent political uncertainty continues to undermine private-sector confidence and affect economic activity in Afghanistan. The interaction among rogue government elements, their political patrons and networks, drug traffickers and insurgents perpetuates an ongoing cycle of violence, extremism and corruption.

The international community present in Kabul, particularly the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA), the US and the EU become extremely concerned every time a disagreement between the president and the CEO is brought into public arenas. The US, EU and UN envoys seek meetings with the two leaders and their supporting camps in an effort to defuse the situation and prevent it from escalating beyond repair. This state of affairs is indicative of the fact that the NUG was built on shaky ground, and since 2014 there has been a real danger that if push comes to shove, the weak coalition government will tumble, leaving the international community with a dilemma over who would then be the legitimate interlocutor and representative to engage with.

The political situation will become even more confusing in the near future as the country is gearing up for parliamentary and presidential elections. As of March 2018 it is unclear when the elections will be held or whether the technical preparations needed for them will be completed in time. Of more importance, however, is the highly problematic security situation as it will be very difficult to set up polling stations in many parts of the country that are de facto controlled by the Taliban and other jihadist groups.

Security situation in a steady downward spiral

Despite the massive input invested in stabilizing the country by the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and subsequent Resolute Support (RS) mission, the security situation in Afghanistan remains extremely fluid. The control of whole districts frequently changes hands between the government forces and the Taliban insurgents. The insurgency does not show any signs of abating. According to some estimates, approximately one-third of the country is in the hands of the government, 40 percent is controlled by the Taliban, while the remaining third is a contested no man's land [10]. Other reports contend that 70 percent of the territory is actually in the hands of insurgents [11].

The temporary loss of Kunduz to the Taliban in the autumn of 2015 was disastrous for the Afghan government. Kunduz is one of the major hubs in northern Afghanistan and the very fact that it fell to the insurgents was symbolically a tremendous blow to the government. Although Afghan security forces recaptured the city after heavy fighting, the damage to the credibility of the government as a security provider had already been done. With the onset of the 2016 fighting season, Lashgar Gah in the south was almost overrun by insurgents, forcing the UK and US to deploy special forces and advisors to an area from which they withdrew with much fanfare at the end of 2014, having 'accomplished the mission'. As of late October 2017, the Taliban were on the verge of overrunning many other district centres.

Northern Afghanistan, which was previously considered to be a relatively stable region, has seen government control shrink by a drastic 60 percent within the space of

two to three years. From a regional security policy perspective, it appears as if a decision has been made that only the triangle between the cities of Mazar-i-Sharif, Kunduz and Pholi-i-Kumri is worth defending. Incidentally, the only road between this strategic triangle and the capital, Kabul, is frequently cut off by ambushes. The provinces to the east, namely Takhar and Badakshan, and to the west, namely Faryab and Jawzjan, appear to be written off as strategically unimportant. It is worth noting that during the ISAF years these very provinces were patrolled by German and Norwegian troops.

The situation in the north is symptomatic of the larger dynamics at play in Afghanistan. One by one, district capitals are either overrun by insurgents and/or the Afghan security forces abandon them by pulling back to 'strategically more significant' areas. It is worth noting that many of the so-called government-held areas amount to very little in the first place. In fact, at times, a lone police HQ or district governor's office with a tattered flag fluttering in the wind behind barbed wire and a defensive perimeter has been denoted as government-held territory. The immediate vicinity of such compounds is controlled day and night by the insurgency. While the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) may succeed in winning individual battles, they are unable to hold onto territory for prolonged periods of time.

There is also evidence of local deals struck by the insurgents and lone Afghan National Army (ANA) garrisons in Taliban-held territory that neither will attack the other. The Taliban are left to operate in broad daylight and govern the areas under their control, and they are ready to leave the garrisons in peace as long as the ANA do not venture outside their bases. The overall grip of the government will gradually erode to the point where most of the districts and even urban centres, with the exception of a few major cities and the capital, will remain outside government control. Within Kabul itself, a "Green Zone" has been established where the international community and key government institutions, such as the presidential palace and the foreign ministry, are hunkered down behind massive blast walls, checkpoints and barbed wire.

To complicate matters further, the current conflict is not only about the fight for territory and power between the Taliban insurgents and the Ghani-Abdullah government. In addition, local powerbrokers, warlords and narco-traffickers have stakes in the conflict. At times, it is a fight for control of local turf and communities, and at other times, a fight for control of lucrative resources such as opium and/or minerals, oil and gas or gemstones. Interestingly enough, at times, this state of affairs does not really matter to the local people as they do not really care who is in control as long as they are left in peace. It is the civilians who bear the brunt of the conflict. From the viewpoint of civilian protection, 2017 was tragic as it was a year in which UNAMA recorded 10,453 civilian casualties (3,438 deaths and 7,015 injured) [12].

In August 2017 President Donald Trump unveiled a new policy for Afghanistan that was part of a larger South Asia strategy. New emphasis was placed on training Afghan army special forces and equipping the Afghan air force to better deal with the insurgency. This may well boost the morale of the government forces, but if ISAF with all its assets could not turn the tide of war, it is questionable as to whether the much weaker Afghan army will be able to do it. Nevertheless, the point worth noting is that for the first time Washington sent strong public messages to Pakistan to stop supporting terror networks such as the Haqqanis to destabilize the situation over the border. It remains to be seen how this policy will affect the course of the war in the future.

Nevertheless, tracking trends in security has become more difficult, as more areas suffering conflict have become inaccessible and those fighting — both Afghan and international forces — less transparent. According to Ruttig, the Afghan war became more violent and widespread in 2017 [13]. It is unlikely that this will change for the better in the near future.

Enter ISIS

A new player that entered the scene in the jihadist mosaic of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border lands was ISIS, or Daesh as it is better known locally (see [14] for details of how ISIS established a presence in Nangahar). The Taliban movement's grip on power in the borderlands has always been slightly weaker than in the Taliban heartland of Kandahar. In addition, many of the leaders of the other jihadist groups changed in 2015. ISIS was able to exploit the confusion and bring to its fold many Taliban and other jihadist fighters that were unhappy with their own leadership.

Many were Afghans who had left to fight with al-Nusra in Syria and subsequently came back home. Furthermore, many former TTP members from Pakistan who were fleeing military operations conducted by the Pakistani army joined the ranks of ISIS. The military wing of the Taliban, that is the Peshawar shura and the Haqqani network, formed an alliance with ISIS. The political wing of the Taliban, namely the Quetta shura, did not join the cooperation pact, however, as they did not want to pledge allegiance to the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Nevertheless, in January 2015 ISIS declared the birth of the Islamic State of Khorasan Province IS-KP. At first, the National Directorate of Security (NDS) even encouraged the presence of ISIS in the borderlands as a counter-force against the Taliban. In the beginning, IS-KP did not attack government forces and facilities, but the situation quickly changed in the summer of 2015, and ever since then there have been constant violent exchanges between them. IS-KP has conducted a number of high-profile attacks in Kabul against Shia mosques and government, Western and Indian interests. IS-KP was even able to penetrate the well-fortified Green Zone and conduct a suicide attack killing a number of civilians in late 2017. By attacking Shia mosques, IS-KP is trying to bring sectarianism into Afghanistan. The Taliban strongly condemned these attacks.

Bellum omnium contra omnes

The co-existence of IS-KP and the Taliban soon turned sour. IS-KP was not content to be yet another actor on the battlefield, but wanted to gain more territory and establish a strong foothold in areas that had traditionally been under the rule and/or influence of the Taliban movement. IS-KP also declared itself to be 'the one and only true' representative of Islam. IS-KP fighters committed brutal acts of violence and the public executions of village elders and some local Taliban leaders caused the local population to turn away from IS-KP. There were increasing violent exchanges between IS-KP and Taliban forces particularly in eastern Nangahar and parts of Kunar.

As a result of the conflict between the two jihadist groups, the borderlands witnessed not only a conflict between Afghan security forces and the Taliban, but also a conflict

among all three sides. There are also a number of pro-government militias fighting in the borderlands. The most notorious example is the militia of the former deputy speaker of Wolesi Jirga (the Lower House of the Afghan Parliament), Haji Zahir Qadir. His forces killed a number of IS-KP fighters and put their heads on display in Achin district, Nangahar [15].

The Pakistani Taliban (TTP) has not fought IS-KP, and their relationship on the Pakistan side of the border is better than the situation on the Afghan side. One of the reasons for this is that TTP is a loose alliance of jihadist groups and they lack a structured chain of command as is the case with the Afghan Taliban. In addition, the Persian Gulf supporters of TTP do not appreciate infighting amongst jihadist groups in Pakistan when the goal is to overthrow what they consider to be an apostate regime in Islamabad.

The future of jihadist groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands

The future of the various jihadist groups, be they the Taliban, IS-KP, TTP or other smaller groups, appears promising. The administration in Kabul is steadily losing ground against the jihadists, not only in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands, but across the country. The upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections will result in further confusion and political paralysis.

Islamabad, on the other hand, has not been able to pacify the restless FATA region. Despite a joint military offensive launched in June 2014 (operation Zarb-e-Azb) by the Pakistani army in North Waziristan against various militant groups, the jihadist scene in Pakistan is still going strong. There was a decrease in violence and terrorist attacks for a period of time following clearance operations, but Pakistan has again witnessed a resurgence of terrorist incidents. The tribal region attracts new jihadist groups that are emerging from the various splinter groups of TTP and others. In addition, the region is a haven for foreign fighters such as IMU and al-Qaida-linked operatives.

As Rashid points out, the problem in Pakistan is that the Pakistani leadership has allowed the jihadist groups to grow on their own home turf in order to use them as proxies against India, the Western interests in Afghanistan, and the Afghan government [16]. This is now backfiring badly and the prospect of a stable and democratic Pakistan seems ever more unlikely.

On the Afghan side of the border, it appears that the Taliban and IS-KP have come to some form of understanding, and a truce between them is holding for now. As the Caliphate crumbled in Iraq and Syria, the central leadership of ISIS in the Middle East lost sway over the local forces in Afghanistan. In a pattern typical of jihadist group dynamics, IS-KP also split into two rival camps. This led IS-KP to mend fences with the Pakistani authorities and the Taliban political leadership in Quetta (see [17] for details).

The Taliban have always regarded IS-KP (and other jihadist groups for that matter) as a distraction from their main aim of fighting the Afghan government. Hence, they have sought to quell the fighting between the Taliban and IS-KP forces. Yet there is evidence from other parts of Afghanistan such as Helmand, Farah, Zabul and Logar, where some dissident ex-Taliban commanders have shifted allegiance to ISIS, that the Taliban leadership has sought to re-gain control from ISIS-affiliated contenders. A curious exception can be found in Jawzjan province where two districts are (for now) under an ISIS-affiliated commander [18].

The fact that there are constant violent border skirmishes between the Afghan army and Pakistani army forces further undermines the already weak government presence in the borderlands. As the two armies waste resources confronting each other, the jihadist groups are able to take advantage of the chaos and further strengthen their foothold in the borderlands.

The prognosis for the Afghan-Pakistan borderlands appears bleak. The vicious cycle of violence continues and the entrenched jihadist groups revel in the chaos caused by the failure of central governments on both sides of the border to establish the rule of law and provide services for the local populations. It appears that the borderlands that have always been beyond the control of central governments will continue to be ungoverned spaces for a long time to come, in very much the same way as the British discovered the case to be in the early 19th century. Interference and attempts to exercise control by outsiders, be they local Kabul or Peshawar elites, foreigners some 180 years ago, or the current administrations in Kabul and the foreign supporters of the Afghan government in contemporary times, have come to nothing thus far. Disturbingly, the view from Islamabad towards the frontier does not look any better.

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