



## **Pashtun Attitudes towards the Taliban:**

### **Request for Research Summary**

1. What is the Pashtun attitude towards the Taliban and the negative reputation it brings to Pashtuns?
2. How does it differ by location?
3. Are Pashtuns resentful of the fact that the Taliban are so closely tied to Pashtun identity?

### **Purpose/Justification**

*RRC report follows:*

### Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF)

- It is difficult to define, or even estimate, the degree of support the Taliban might have amongst the Pashtun population in Afghanistan.
- There are documented examples of Pashtuns rebelling against the Taliban. The reasons for these clashes range from anger at Taliban restrictions on girls attending school to forced conscription of village youths to opposition by village elders.
- Disparities between rural and urban areas, as well as the southern and eastern regions of Afghanistan may affect Pashtun attitudes toward the Taliban.
- Lack of security and the absence of an effective central government or court system have left many rural Pashtuns with little or no alternative but to subordinate to the Taliban.

*The Taliban is woven into the fabric of Pashtun society on both sides of the border with Pakistan and almost every Pashtun family has someone involved with the movement.*” Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, U.S. envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan, speaking at Harvard University on March 8, 2010.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Though Pashtuns are intricately linked to the Taliban through tribal affiliation, ethnicity and warfare, the adage that not all Pashtuns are Taliban but all Taliban are Pashtuns has created reputational damage to Pashtuns in Afghanistan. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke’s statement, which set off indignation amongst ethnic Pashtuns, revealed likely fissures between the Pashtuns and the Taliban.<sup>2 3 4</sup> Upon closer examination, there are three noteworthy assertions that surface from Holbrooke’s statement and the response it received: (1) the international community has largely been silent regarding Pashtun suffering at the hands of the Taliban, (2) Pashtuns in Afghanistan are angry at being labeled terrorists, and (3) there is a common misreading of Pashtun culture.<sup>5</sup>

*“Around the world we are accused of being terrorist, but tolerance is in our blood.”* – Mehmood Khan Achakzai, Pashtun politician.<sup>6</sup>

*“We would like to point out that, when Musharaf, the ‘Muslim Leader’ labeled all Pashtuns as terrorists, why were not such protests/condemnations made, especially...from within the Taliban movement? This is a proof that the Taliban do not represent the Pashtun people. Where was Mullah ‘Umar and why did he not condemn these comments against the Pashtuns.”* – Omar Ahmadzai, The Free People of Bajaur Agency, October 10, 2006.<sup>7</sup>

Pashtun attitudes toward the Taliban are not easily measured due to the absence of reliable metrics which could gauge such sentiments in an active war zone. In addition, while attitudes held by Pakistanis toward the Taliban are in some manner quantifiably evidenced by election outcomes, to even roughly estimate the degree of support the Taliban might have amongst the Afghan’s Pashtun population is extremely difficult. Such a task is nearly impossible against a backdrop of war, historically fluid loyalties and weak or decimated traditional societal networks. Furthermore, even if anti-Taliban antagonisms are being expressed by well-informed Afghans, the question arises as to whether or not can it be assumed that people living in the urban confines of Kabul feel the same way as their rural compatriots in Helmand, or other remote areas where the Taliban enjoy greater support? Along with these questions, an overview of Taliban inroads into the Pashtun population, fractures between the two groups as well as the differences between rural and urban attitudes toward the Taliban over the last fifteen years are explored in this report.

## Historical Relations between the Pashtun Population and Taliban Movement

At its founding, the Taliban under the leadership of Kandahar-based Mullah Omar recruited thousands of young religiously-trained zealots from Pakistani madrassas.<sup>1</sup> Many of these recruits were orphaned and as young as twelve.<sup>8</sup> Taliban leaders were drawn from the poorest, least literate, rural southern Pashtun provinces of Afghanistan; the dispossessed, uneducated, comprised the recruiting base of the Taliban.<sup>9</sup> Even Mullah Omar's tribal connections and contacts were considered undistinguished. What did appeal to the Pashtuns who joined the movement was Mullah Omar's "visionary dream of a new Islamic order" and pleas for popular justice.<sup>10</sup>

The largest Pashtun tribal confederations were composed of Durranis and Ghilzais,<sup>2</sup> both of which provided a groundswell of support for the Taliban.<sup>11</sup> Pashtun urban intellectuals and rural farmers alike overwhelmingly supported the Taliban.<sup>12</sup> Despite strong support from the local communities, fissures appeared early on within the Taliban power structure due to the makeup of the Taliban's decision-making body, the Supreme Shura. These fissures were the result of this Shura by and large, excluding both Ghilzai Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns.<sup>13</sup> The reason for this split was that the Taliban hierarchy had recruited most of its members from Durrani Pashtuns. In fact, Ghilzai Pashtun commanders griped about not being consulted on military and political issues even though they made up the "lion's share" of the military manpower.<sup>14</sup>

Possessing a shared understanding of the Pashtun socio-cultural environment, the Taliban were a familiar presence in southern Pashtun villages.<sup>3</sup> To facilitate infiltration, the Taliban used their sophisticated knowledge of Pashtun politics to co-opt or "work" with local tribal leaders. On its face, the Taliban disapproved of the tribal jirga system – from which elder tribal members drew their power and influence – viewing it as "un-Islamic," and also opposed the use of jirgas to settle disputes.<sup>4</sup> Pashtun elders, who were seen as threats to Taliban authority, were often murdered or relentlessly intimidated. Seeking further penetration inside Pashtun regions, the Taliban dismantled rival power structures by stirring up regional competition between vulnerable tribal commanders; the more susceptible joined the Taliban.<sup>15</sup>

Years of war and the disintegration of the Pashtun tribal order, managed to swing power from tribal elders to religious leaders; its effects palpably felt by Pashtun youth. In a world where tribalism once shaped attitudes and perceptions, tribal elders exercised less and less command over their members. Instead, young Taliban members were given a sense of belonging and prestige through bonding to military commanders and Taliban members. Bellicosity and aggressiveness, which is inculcated in Pashtun youth, were no longer tempered by village elders, because of the breakdown of the traditional tribal social structure.<sup>16</sup> (*For more information on this subject, please refer to RRC-AFHTAT-10-0011 "Pashtun Generational Differences"*) Generations of orphans and endemic unemployment amongst Afghan youths supplied fighters for the Taliban.<sup>17</sup>

After the defeat of the Taliban by U.S. forces in 2001, a new generation of fighters arose to take the place of the old order. Today's neo-Taliban movement relies heavily on disenfranchised individuals and communities and draws its new recruits from these marginalized populations. Taliban fighters rely upon the clergy and theological partners to provide intelligence on village developments and on the opium trade, from where it frequently gets funding. They have declared jihad on the American-backed government of President Hamid Karzai and Coalition Forces, demanding all foreign troops leave

---

<sup>1</sup> Madrassa reforms in Pakistan under General Zia ul-Haq through state largesse led to an explosion in enrollment in the late 1970s and early 1980's.

<sup>2</sup> Pashtuns dominated three distinct regions of Afghanistan: Mashreki, Jonubi and Kandahar, spanning into western Pakistan.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Coll writes that in Pashtun tribal areas the Taliban mediated disputes, led prayers, educated the youth and comforted the dying. p. 283.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on rule of law in Helmand Province and on the role of the customary *jirga* system "as a restraint on wilder excesses of fundamentalist Islamic law," See Elizabeth Lee Walker, Culturally-Attuned Governance and Justice in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, International Media Ventures, April 2010.

Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> Neo-Taliban efforts to alter their image away from a Pashtun-dominated organization – so to spread its influence beyond ethnic lines – have not always born fruit.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that in the early days of the Taliban, little evidence points to a significant number of mullahs in open support of the Taliban. By the early twenty-first century, however, this dynamic had changed. Mullahs who received religious training in fundamentalist madrasses shared the Deobandi strand of Islam with the Taliban. By 2003, the clergy began to move in the direction of the Taliban, preaching jihad against the government and America. Clerical influence buoyed by Taliban support was first felt in Zabul,<sup>6</sup> followed by northern Helmand, Ghazni and Pakitika. Wardak's mullahs joined Taliban forces in support of jihad as did several mosques in Kabul. By 2006, support for the insurgents was widespread in rural districts throughout Kandahar.<sup>19</sup>

### **Friction between Pashtun and Taliban**

Early on, Taliban rule was marked by strict Islamic codes of behavior banning dancing, singing, loud music. The Taliban enforced strict dress codes for women. General hooliganism of Taliban youths in Pashtun neighborhoods ensued, angering villagers. Rising prices, food shortages and cuts in humanitarian aid set off riots, and<sup>20</sup> Pashtun tolerance under Taliban rule seemed to have thinned. Among the grievances cited by Pashtuns against both the Taliban and neo-Taliban include:

- The Taliban closed schools to young females. These closures angered tribal elders living in the Pashtun strongholds of eastern Afghanistan. Heavily influenced by Pakistan, eastern Pashtuns proudly continued to send their girls to school in spite of strict Taliban edicts.<sup>21</sup> Anxiety over the treatment of women dogged the Taliban when Qalamuddin, a Pashtun tribesman who ran the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice under the Taliban said: "We will be blamed by own people if we don't educate women."<sup>22</sup>
- In 1997, Pashtun uprisings against forced conscription resulted in the murder of Taliban recruiters by Kandahar villagers. Rioting then spread to Wardak and Paktia provinces.<sup>23</sup> Again, in February 2000, uprisings against the draft were organized in Western Afghanistan.
- The Taliban's relationship with village elders has largely been poor, caused by competing interests and deep resentment held by village leaders. In communities where elder influence was robust, infiltration by the Taliban was checked. Several examples of local opposition to Taliban fighters are noteworthy: Achakzai villagers forced out the Taliban in Spin Boldak after a gun battle; Hajj Lalai Mama drove insurgents out of Loy Karez in Kandahar province, raids by Afghan security forces in Kandahar City kept the Taliban at bay.<sup>7</sup> Pockets of resistance were found in Paktia and Khost bolstered by the strength of local Sufi networks.<sup>24</sup>
- In more recent developments, Mullah Ahmad, the head of the Ulema council for Helmand Province strongly rebuffed Taliban claims that it properly dispensed of Sharia law. "The Taliban cannot decide a case properly. This is just propaganda," Mullah Ahmad said. He dismissed claims by supporters of Taliban-styled justice that government courts were too slow to decide cases, although he did say government corruption does exist.<sup>25</sup>
- Former high level Taliban commanders have defected because of religious objections to Mullah Omar's disobedience to Islamic codes and the violent nature of Taliban excesses. Mullah Salaam

<sup>5</sup> A survey of Giustozzi's inventory of successful recruitment efforts on the part of the Taliban reveal that only a handful of Hazaras in Ghazni, pockets of Tajiks in southern districts of Ghor and a larger number of Achakzais climbed on board, mostly due to inter and intra-tribal politics and rivalries. Ninety-five percent of Taliban members still come from the Pashtun population. For additional information see: Giustozzi, Antonio, Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan 2002-2007. Columbia University Press: New York, 2008.:<sup>5</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The Provincial Governor of Zabul admitted that by 2006, province religious leaders all supported the Taliban.

<sup>7</sup> Before falling to the Taliban, Kandahar City would lose twelve mullahs to assassination.

of Musa Qala declared that Mullah Omar and his followers were “violating the ‘orders of God’ as revealed in the Koran.”<sup>26</sup> Salaam was also critical of the Taliban’s strict position on education, which had come under international opposition. In response to his defection, the Taliban tried to kill Salaam on several occasions. Ex-Taliban Hajji Ghloam Mohammad railed against Taliban destruction of the country, and declared his loyalty to the people of Wardak province, whom he promised to serve.<sup>27</sup>

- In January 2010, elders from the eastern Afghani Shinwari tribe, one of the largest Pashtun tribes in a Taliban stronghold, agreed to switch sides to the American-backed government in exchange for \$1 million in US humanitarian assistance. This pact was set in motion by “a specific local dispute and economic tensions” between the Shinwari tribe and the Taliban.<sup>28</sup>

### **Rural versus Urban**

The fractures between Pashtun communities and the Taliban such as those discussed above were more apparent in rural areas than urban ones. In these former areas, weak district governments, a corrupt and derelict central government and an absence in the rule of law created a void which the Taliban has often filled. By 2006, the neo-Taliban movement was seen progressing into Pashtun populations. Reinforcements from government authorities intended to halt the insurgency failed to effectively stem the tide.

Although challenges arise when attempting to measure perceptions in a war-torn country like Afghanistan, several events may have aided in shaping Pashtun attitudes toward the Taliban. During the elections of 2009, villagers largely stayed home due to insurgent threats of violence; warlords and strongmen appointed by a corrupt government that abuses rural populations have alienated many Pashtuns, and the lack of security and a broken judicial system have increased Pashtun concerns over security and appeals to swift justice. Pashtun acquiescence of Taliban rule *may* reveal a passive acceptance of Taliban presence as the latter make inroads into Pashtun strongholds to this day.

Research data has suggested that Holbrooke’s statement was ill-received by Pashtuns living in Afghanistan’s urban areas and in Pakistan, where access to media outlets are greater. Angry responses were observed on a number of internet sites. Such technologies are far more abundant in urban areas of Afghanistan than in rural ones.

### **Resentment of Pashtuns**

After the defeat of the Taliban in 2001 by Coalition Forces, anti-Pashtun violence ran high in northern Afghanistan. Hazara and Tajik soldiers committed violent acts against Pashtuns, killing many in retaliation for abuses committed by the Taliban when the regime ruled Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup> Pashtun communities were stripped of their assets and displaced from their homes throughout northern Afghanistan. Today, with the collapse of the government authority in the countryside, Pashtun presence in northern Afghanistan could be impaired, as resentments mount against them. This alienation may be one contributing factor for Taliban success in Afghanistan.<sup>30</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Relations between the Pashtuns and the Taliban have not always been smooth, with outbursts of violence and dissatisfaction recorded on more than one occasion. Moreover, Pashtun attitudes toward the Taliban differ when taking into account rural and urban dynamics. Views on such topics as education and customs differ between eastern and southern Afghanistan where Pashtuns are in closest proximity to Pakistan. Anti-Pashtun sentiments are highest in northern Afghanistan where an aversion to the Taliban is strongest. In summation, treating Pashtun attitudes towards the Taliban as monolithic can be problematic.

---

The information contained in the report has been compiled by the Human Terrain System (HTS) Research Reachback Center (RRC) at Fort Leavenworth, KS and/or Oyster Point, VA. This report is based on analysis of available open-source material. Products generated within 24-72 hours of the original request should not be considered fully vetted or comprehensive analysis.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nissenbaum, Dion, Holbrooke's Harvard Comments Slammed in Afghanistan, McClatchy, March 8, 2010.

<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2010/03/08/90016/holbrookes-harvard-comments-slammed.html>

<sup>2</sup> Foust, Joshua, Holbrooke, Foot, Mouth. Registran.net, 15 Mar 2010.

[http://www.registan.net/index.php/2010/03/15/holbrooke-foot-mouth/;](http://www.registan.net/index.php/2010/03/15/holbrooke-foot-mouth/)

<sup>3</sup> Holbrooke Must Apologize for Outrageous Anti-Pashtun Comments, Afghanistan Times Daily, 6 Mar. 2010.

[http://afghanistantimes.af/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3339%3Aholbrooke-must-apologize-for-outrageous-anti-pashtun-comments&Itemid=69](http://afghanistantimes.af/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3339%3Aholbrooke-must-apologize-for-outrageous-anti-pashtun-comments&Itemid=69)

<sup>4</sup> Legislative Newsletter, Afghanistan Parliamentary Assistance Project, Vol. 3, No. 3, US AID, 15 Mar. 2010.

[http://www.sunyaf.org/pdf/APAP\\_Legislative\\_Newsletter\\_15March\\_2010.pdf](http://www.sunyaf.org/pdf/APAP_Legislative_Newsletter_15March_2010.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Ahmad Shah Katawzai, Holbrooke Needs More Knowledge about Pashtuns, Rohi.af, 8 Mar. 2010.

<http://www.srohi.com/fullstory.php?id=5769&CatID=10>

<sup>6</sup> Ahmed Rashid, Pashtuns Want an Image Change, BBC News. 5 Dec 2006. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6198382.stm>

<sup>7</sup> Ahmadzai, Omar. Comment on the website Hujra.net <http://www.hujra.net/index.php?topic=4397.0;wap2>

<sup>8</sup> Rashid, Ahmed, *Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. Yale University Press, 2001. p. 109

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 110

<sup>10</sup> Coll, Steve, *Ghost Wars, The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, Penquin Books, New York. p. 283.

<sup>11</sup> Rashid, Ahmed, *Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. Yale University Press, 2001. pp. 17-30.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pp. 17-30

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. pp. 98-99

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. pp. 95-104.

<sup>15</sup> Abdulkader Sinno. "The Taliban's Ability to Mobilize the Pashtuns," in Robert Crews and Amin Tarzi, eds. *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, ed by Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA., 2008. pp. 59-89.

<sup>16</sup> Pashtun Generational Differences (RRC-HTAT-10-0011)

<sup>17</sup> Baker, Aryn and Shah Mahmood Barakzai, "The Afghan Age Divide," *Time* 174(7): 36-39. 24 Aug. 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Giustozzi, Antonio, Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan 2002-2007.

Columbia University Press: New York, 2008. pp. 11-29.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. pp. 46-52.

<sup>20</sup> Rashid, Ahmed, *Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. Yale University Press, 2001. pp. 95-104.

<sup>21</sup> Rashid, Ahmed, *Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. Yale University Press, 2001. pp. 105-116.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. pp. 106.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 103.

<sup>24</sup> Giustozzi, Antonio, Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan 2002-2007.

Columbia University Press: New York, 2008. pp. 46-52.

<sup>25</sup> Anonymous. Rough Justice in Helmand, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Sep. 14, 2007.

<http://www.iwpr.net/report-news/rough-justice-helmand>

<sup>26</sup> Ron Synovitz. Afghanistan: Ex-Taliban Commander Lectures Mullah Omar about Koran. Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, Feb 1m 2008. <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1079422.html>

<sup>27</sup> Ibrahim, Habiburrahman. Ex-Taliban Chief: Talks with Insurgents Futile, Institute for War and Peace Reporting. April 14, 2010. [http://www.alternet.org/world/146446/ex-taliban\\_chief:\\_talks\\_with\\_insurgents\\_futile](http://www.alternet.org/world/146446/ex-taliban_chief:_talks_with_insurgents_futile)

<sup>28</sup> Afghan Tribe, Vowing to Fight Taliban, to Get U.S. Aid in Return. New York Times: Dexter Filkins, January 27, 2010.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/28/world/asia/28tribe.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>29</sup> Anti-Pashtun Violence in Northern Afghanistan, Human Rights Watch. March 6, 2002.

<http://www.hrw.org/press/2002/03/pashtuntestimony.htm>

<sup>30</sup> Dorransoro, Gilles. Rising Tensions in Afghanistan: Dispatch from Kandahar. Carnegie Moscow Center. Aug. 18, 2009. <http://carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=23608>