

Tribal Dynamics of the Afghanistan and Pakistan Insurgencies

By Hayder Mili and Jacob Townsend

THERE IS A RENEWED public appreciation for the role of tribal allegiances and tribal governance in the Afghanistan and Pakistan insurgencies. This is indicated by the U.S. government's announcement of an inter-agency effort to study the insurgencies' tribes, including a search for "reconcilable" elements.¹ The behavior of most insurgent groups along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border is conditioned by tribal identities, allegiances and interests. Some fighters are motivated by pan-tribal or global religious sentiment. Most, however, are strongly influenced by the interests and demands of their tribe. Tribal leaders are often forthright in explaining that their decision to support or undermine the Taliban revolves around tribal interests, not through belief in the insurgency's inherent virtue vis-à-vis the Afghan government or foreign forces.² Many young men are committed to the insurgency by their elders, becoming indistinguishable in battle from other fighters who belong to the Taliban "proper" or to the Haqqani network. In theory, these tribal fighters could be separated from the insurgency by persuading tribal leaders to withdraw them.

If attempts to employ tribes against insurgents are to succeed, the emphasis must be on Pashtun tribes. Although other ethnicities participate in the insurgency, their role is in large part defined by their relationship to the Pashtun tribes that saturate the region. This is true of groups such as the Uzbek fighters, whose fortunes and strength have been heavily conditioned by the hospitality of their hosts, such as the Darikhel, Tojikhel and Yarghukhel (sub-tribes of Ahmadzai Wazir in Pakistan's Waziristan).³

1 Bryan Bender, "US Probes Divisions within Taliban," *Boston Globe*, May 24, 2009.

2 See, for example, Darin J. Blatt et al., "Tribal Engagement in Afghanistan," *Special Warfare* 22:1 (2009); Jerome Starkey, "Tribal Leaders to Sabotage West's Assault on Taliban," *Independent*, December 4, 2008.

3 Vern Liebl, "Pashtuns, Tribalism, Leadership, Islam and Taliban: A Short View," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*

This article focuses on the intersection of tribalism and insurgency. It provides a history of the three major Pashtun confederations in Afghanistan and Pakistan; examines how the Haqqani network and global jihadists have exploited Pashtun tribalism; and identifies how tribal militias have recently been used to combat the Taliban in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Drifting to the Durrani

Approximately two-thirds of Afghan Pashtuns belong to the Ghilzai and Durrani confederations.⁴ The tribes of the smaller Karlanri confederation live in Afghanistan's eastern and southeastern provinces,⁵ providing the strongest kinship bridges into Pakistan. Ghilzai and Durrani tribes, however, are numerically dominant in most of Afghanistan. As a general rule, tribal allegiances and systems of governance are stronger among the mountainous tribes of the Ghilzai and among the Karlanri, while Durrani governance rests more on cross-tribal structures of feudal land ownership.⁶

A broad historical view of the Pashtun tribes would depict the Durrani tribes as political leaders and the Ghilzai as providing the fighters.⁷ From Afghanistan's founding to the Taliban's ascendancy, all of Afghanistan's rulers have been from Durrani tribes with the exception of the ill-fated Mohammad Noor Taraki (and a brief interlude of nine months in 1929). For some, the

18:3 (2007): pp. 492-510.

4 A 1996 estimate suggested that Durrani tribes comprised 29% of Afghan Pashtuns and the Ghilzai 35%. The estimate appeared in "Afghanistan: A Country Study," Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, 1997.

5 Tribes of the Karlanri confederation are demographically strong in Afghanistan's Paktia, Paktika, Logar, Khost, Nangarhar and Kunar provinces.

6 The strength of tribal governance derives from economic, demographic and political circumstances. The Karlanri, for example, tend to inhabit isolated communities with small land-holdings and an overwhelming dominance of a single tribe in each village. See Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "No Sign until the Burst of Fire," *International Security* 32:4 (2008); Thomas J. Barfield, "Weapons of the Not so Weak in Afghanistan," in *Hinterlands, Frontiers, Cities and States: Transactions and Identities*, Yale University, February 23, 2007; David B. Edwards, *Before Taliban* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

7 Barfield.

confrontation between the Durrani's Hamid Karzai and the Ghilzai's Mullah Muhammad Omar is a continuation of the confederations' traditional roles as rulers and insurgents, respectively.

Fighting between tribes and sub-tribes of the same confederation is one indication that the confederation level of analysis has never been adequate.⁸ A notable shift in the current phase of insurgency, for example, has been the groundswell of Durrani fighters beneath the Ghilzai-dominated Afghan Taliban leadership. Distinguishing cause and effect is difficult, but the increasing prominence of Durrani fighters and commanders correlates with the geographical spread of the insurgency through Durrani areas in Helmand, Nimroz, Farah and Herat provinces. Durrani are being recruited at lower-levels and their traditional leaders are becoming insurgent leaders, with varying degrees of integration into the Taliban "proper." Some intra-insurgency tensions appear to be the result of locally-empowered Durrani Taliban commanders disliking the rotation of senior Ghilzai Taliban commanders into "their" territory.⁹ Notably, in 2008 such tensions included disagreement over tax revenue, with a specific concern for drug-derived money.¹⁰

8 The "confederation level of analysis" refers to the notion that the conflict is mainly between Durrani and Ghilzai. As stated by the International Crisis Group, "animosities between particular Durrani tribes far exceed any ill feeling between Durrani and Ghilzai." See International Crisis Group, "Afghanistan: The Problem of Pashtun Alienation," August 5, 2003.

9 Personal interviews, ISAF intelligence officials, May 11, 2009.

10 In previous years, little opium tax actually made it up to the senior leadership. In 2008, there appeared to be a concerted effort to move more revenue to the higher levels. This caused tension for two reasons: 1) low-level commanders use drug tax for subsistence purposes, not to mention their own enrichment; and 2) tribal leaders with whom the Taliban have varying degrees of integration—resented efforts to send money out of their communities (for the same reason they resist government taxation that appears to redistribute revenue out of the villages). Personal interviews, ISAF personnel, May 24, 2009. David Mansfield also refers to increasingly antagonistic relations over taxation between insurgents and the population: "it was suggested that this...was a result of many of their fighters in Helmand and Kandahar not being from the local area." See "Sustaining the Decline?" Afghan Drugs Inter-Departmental Unit of the UK Government, May 2009.

The result is that a government dominated by Tajiks and Durrani is facing off against a Ghilzai-led Taliban that has incorporated significant numbers of Durrani fighters.¹¹ To the extent that the power bases of the Durrani in government depend on rural constituencies in provinces such as

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Helmand and Farah, they must balance official interests with maintaining tribal satisfaction in anti-government areas. Moreover, within this mix are the Karlanri tribes, providing major ethnic bridges between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban by virtue of straddling insurgent strongholds in southeastern Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan.

The Zadran and the Haqqani Network

The Haqqani network is an excellent example of how global jihadists and Taliban fighters have been able to exploit Pashtun nationalism. Jalaluddin and Sirajuddin Haqqani are prominent members of the Pashtun Zadran tribe, and a great deal of their political capital was amassed by Jalaluddin in fighting the Soviets. Former U.S. Congressman Charlie Wilson famously called Jalaluddin “goodness personified”¹² and he received a disproportionate share of U.S. money.¹³ The Haqqanis have also been effective in attracting Arab donations due to their tactical efficiency and assisted by Jalaluddin’s marital and linguistic connection to the Gulf states.¹⁴ The present strength

11 This evolution has often been described as “neo-Taliban.”

12 George Crile, *Charlie Wilson’s War* (New York: Grove Press, 2007).

13 “Interview: Steve Coll,” PBS Frontline, October 3, 2006; Anand Gopal, “The Most Deadly US Foe in Afghanistan,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 31, 2009.

14 “Haqqani Network,” Institute for the Study of War, available at www.understandingwar.org/themenode/haqqani-network.

of the Haqqani network owes much to Jalaluddin’s fighting prowess, accompanying fundraising skills and the power these skills gave Jalaluddin in the Zadran tribe.

Much of the Zadran population live in Afghanistan’s Spera (Khost), Zadran (Paktia) and Gayan (Paktika) districts, which have long histories of resisting foreign influence.¹⁵ The arrival of international forces in 2001 energized a struggle for control over the Zadran between the Haqqanis and Padcha Khan Zadran, a warlord with his power-base in Khost Province. The latter was hardly pro-government, but he positioned himself as anti-Taliban and utilized foreign assistance.¹⁶ In that sense, Padcha Khan was an old-style leader who placed tribal power and independence over external allegiances and interests.¹⁷ Since 2002, the Haqqanis’ reversion to jihadist-aligned resistance has leveraged Jalaluddin’s continuing fame and obtained protection from the Zadran in much of their territory. By contrast, Padcha Khan has entered the *Wolesi Jirga* (Afghanistan’s upper house of parliament) and his power-base has narrowed, a move supported by Hamid Karzai in an effort to neutralize his anti-government appeal.¹⁸ By cooperating with the Karzai government, Padcha Khan has allowed the Haqqanis and, by extension, al-Qa`ida and the Taliban to become the Zadran’s main option for resisting international and government influence.

15 A CIA assessment in 1980 noted Paktia as an area of strength for the insurgency, drawing on “the most traditionally minded” tribes. See CIA Directorate of Intelligence, “The Soviets and the Tribes of Southwest Asia,” CIA Declassification Release, September 23, 1980.

16 Michael Hirsh and Scott Johnson, “A Defiant Warlord Threatens to Sink the New Afghan Leader,” *Newsweek*, February 13, 2002; Michael V. Bhatia, “Paktia Province: Sources of Order and Disorder,” in Michael V. Bhatia and Mark Sedra eds., *Afghanistan, Arms and Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2008).

17 At one point, Padcha Khan was fighting Tani tribal leaders, resisting the government’s writ and attempting to undermine Haqqani’s influence over the Zadran. See Illene R. Prusher, Scott Baldauf and Edward Girardet, “Afghan Power Brokers,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 10, 2002.

18 Personal interview, Western intelligence official, Kabul, June 16, 2009.

The Haqqani network’s solid control of Miran Shah in Pakistan and most Zadran districts in Khost, Paktika and Paktia in Afghanistan¹⁹ gives it an effective base for operations in Afghanistan. The Haqqanis have consistently pledged their allegiance to the Taliban, but United Nations and ISAF sources agree that the Haqqanis have demonstrated greater imagination, intent and capability for complex attacks than regular Taliban commanders.²⁰ While difficult to confirm, the Haqqanis have also been credited for driving the growth of suicide bombings in Afghanistan.²¹

The Haqqanis’ continuing effectiveness draws on and reinforces their long-standing relationship with al-Qa`ida’s leaders. Historically, this was demonstrated in Usama bin Ladin’s choice of Haqqani territory for al-Qa`ida’s first significant training camps in Afghanistan.²² Currently, Western and Afghan intelligence officials assess that al-Qa`ida places greater trust and accompanying funding in the Haqqani network to execute complex attacks.²³

The Haqqanis’ reliance on Zadran territory is not a fatal vulnerability, but it does offer the possibility of constraining their operational capability. Jalaluddin’s apparent implacability and Sirajuddin’s turn toward greater radicalism²⁴ make it highly unlikely that Zadran areas can be pacified through engagement with the Haqqanis. A better strategy would work from the ground up, particularly in Paktia, where leaders combine affection for Jalaluddin with an often stronger concern for the local welfare of their tribe.²⁵ In the short-term, the

19 UN assessment of district-level control, provided in a briefing to the author in May 2009.

20 Personal interviews, UN and ISAF officials, Kabul, June 2009.

21 Gopal; *Haqqani Network*; Jonathon Burch, “Q+A: Afghanistan – Who are the Haqqanis?” Reuters, March 23, 2009.

22 Marc W. Herold, “The Failing Campaign,” *Frontline* 19:3 (2002).

23 This appears to be a generalized trust, however, instead of one requiring consultations with al-Qa`ida on targets and tactics. Personal interviews, UNAMA, ISAF and ANDS officials, Kabul, May-June 2009.

24 *Haqqani Network*; Burch; Imtiaz Ali, “The Haqqani Network and Cross-Border Terrorism in Afghanistan,” *Terrorism Monitor* 6:6 (2008).

25 Personal interviews, UNAMA officials, May 2009. While the Haqqanis receive widespread respect as war-

most realistic accomplishment would be to increase the reluctance of Zadran community leaders to allow direct access to and through their villages by the Haqqani network. As in other “pro-insurgent” areas, some Zadran communities would prove willing to cooperate with the government when enjoying an ongoing security presence and constructive engagement to support self-policing and immediate reconstruction benefits.

Lashkars and Arbakees

The Afghanistan and Pakistan governments have also tried to leverage tribal networks to support their objectives. Both countries have armed and supported anti-insurgent tribes to combat the Taliban, the Haqqani network and al-Qa`ida. In FATA, this has taken the form of *lashkars*, tribal militias formed either within one tribe or through an alliance of several tribes following a *jirga* decision.

The Mamond tribes and the Salarzai tribe (a small sub tribe of the Tarkani Pashtuns who live in two valleys of Bajaur Agency) have raised their own *lashkars* and can be legitimately considered anti-Taliban/al-Qa`ida.²⁶ The price has been high and scores of tribal elders have been assassinated since the start of the movement. For example, in November 2008 four “elders” of the Mamond tribe and several Mamond *lashkar* members were killed after a suicide bomber detonated at a tribesman’s house in Bajaur.²⁷ Other tribes that reportedly raised *lashkars* are the Orakzai of Orakzai Agency in FATA.²⁸ This has naturally created tensions between the Orakzai and more militant tribes such as the Mehsud in South Waziristan.²⁹

rriors, this does not necessarily translate into obedience from tribal leaders who must answer directly to their communities. In the words of one village elder in Herat Province, speaking to the author on July 16, 2009, “they [Taliban leaders] have respect for being good fighters, but fighting does not always bring us bread.” In southeastern Afghanistan, Darin Blatt and colleagues suggested that “all the tribes are concerned mostly with providing for their immediate future.” See Blatt.

²⁶ It should be noted, however, that individuals belonging to these same tribes have joined the Taliban.

²⁷ *Dawn*, November 18-24, 2008.

²⁸ Shaheen Buner, “Pashtun Tribes Rise Against Taliban In Pakistan Tribal Area,” AHN, July 19, 2008.

²⁹ Shazadi Beg, “The Ideological Battle: Insight from

Overall, however, these efforts have not resulted in any significant losses for the Taliban. In fact, until the recent forays by the Pakistani military against the Taliban, the Taliban encountered relatively little tribal resistance as they quickly and brutally established their hold across FATA and the NWFP. The tribes in FATA are quite scattered and little unity exists, particularly against

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a Taliban movement recruiting from almost every tribe (excluding Shi`a Turis). This failure was most obvious in North and South Waziristan when the *lashkars* of 2003 and 2007 were effectively impotent.³⁰ Nevertheless, the *lashkars* have had some positive effects in pressuring the Taliban; for example, Taliban spokesman Maulvi Omar’s August 2009 arrest was credited to the work of a *lashkar* in Mohmand Agency.³¹

Another region where Pashtun tribal militias have been utilized is in southeastern Afghanistan’s Loya Paktia, the area encompassing Paktika, Khost and Paktia provinces.³² In this region the Afghan equivalent of *lashkars* exists. Apparently an institution limited to Loya Paktia,³³ the *arbakee* (guardians)

are the traditional tribal security of the southeast. The *arbakees* (like the *lashkars*) do not exist permanently in every district, but are an ad hoc and reactive force. The *arbakee* is also used by the *jirga* as a law enforcement tool, which makes the *jirga* in this region far more powerful than in southern and eastern Afghanistan where this tradition does not exist.³⁴

The capacities of Afghan military and law enforcement are minimal in Loya Paktia and they often count on the support of *arbakees*. The tribal elders identify those citizens who will be used to support the police to ensure effective interventions. According to the Tribal Liaison Office, a European-funded NGO,

Despite the fact that each *arbakee* has a clear leader (*amir*), accountability goes back to the tribal council (*jirga* or *shura*) that called upon the *arbakee*, which in turn is accountable to the community. Furthermore, *arbakees* only function within the territory of the tribe they represent. Their fighters are volunteers from within the community and are paid by the community. This emphasizes again that their loyalty is with their communities and not an individual leader.³⁵

One important demonstration of the government’s reliance on *arbakees* was the continuous funding until at least 2007 for 40-60 *arbakee* members in each district in the southeast, including a sizeable expansion of force numbers to secure the 2004-2005 elections.³⁶

Pakistan,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 2:10 (2008).

³⁰ Mukhtar A. Khan “The Role of Tribal Lashkars in Winning Pakistan’s War on Terror,” *Terrorism Focus* 5:40 (2008).

³¹ Noor Mohmand, “TTP Mouthpiece Nabbed,” *Nation*, August 19, 2009.

³² Masood Karokhail, “Integration of Traditional Structures into the State Building Process: Lessons from the Tribal Liaison Office in Loya Paktia,” Tribal Liaison Office, 2006, available at www.tlo-afghanistan.org/fileadmin/pdf/SchAfgahnEn.pdf.

³³ In Paktia specifically, the tribal structures were preserved and have emerged more or less intact from communist rule and years of conflict. This includes a functioning system of traditional justice.

³⁴ Karokhail.

³⁵ Karokhail. This cooperation between tribal levees and Afghanistan’s “proper military” has a long tradition. Indeed, the 1929 rebellion was catalyzed by the government’s attempt to change the system and recruit the army on a national basis, cutting through the role of tribal leaders in organizing self-defense. The ANA is considered a relative success partly because it is recruited and rotated nationally, yet few Pashtuns in the ANA come from the areas in which *arbakees* are common.

³⁶ B. Schetter et al., “Beyond Warlordism: The Local Security Architecture in Afghanistan,” *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft* 2 (2007).

Conclusion

As Afghanistan's and Pakistan's insurgent conflicts drag on, the stress on tribal structures will continue, pressured by jihadists and the international community alike. Both antagonists have a long-term interest in undermining tribalism, but both also have an interest in using tribalism to support immediate military aims.

For the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan and their international supporters, this implies a difficult trade-off. Immediate military interests in bargaining with tribes require subordination of interests in issues such as human rights and good governance. Notably, as the *arbakee* tradition illustrates, a resort to tribally-mediated security structures implies a continuing devolution by the central government of its core responsibilities. This may be functional in the short-term, but will likely leave unchanged the uneasy relationship between relatively progressive governments and conservative tribal traditions—an uneasiness that proved fertile ground for jihadism in the first place.

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