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Author

Giustozzi, Antonio

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The Taliban's Adaptation 2002–11: a Case of Evolution?

Antonio Giustozzi
London School of Economics

The Taliban faced overwhelmingly negative odds in 2002 when they launched their insurgency against the new government installed by American intervention in 2001. They adapted to the challenge in a number of ways. The article argues that some of these efforts to adapt can be described as evolution, although not all of them.

Introduction

The evolution of human organizations occurs primarily in competitive environments; few environments are more competitive than wars. Political organizations can be driven by different ideologies, some of which call themselves progressive, that is, they believe in change and in the possibility of constant improvement over time. Other organizations are ideologically conservative: they think that there is nothing to be gained by change *per se*, that evolution cannot represent an improvement because the present (or the past) is already as good as it gets; in fact they fear change as destabilizing and as a source of insecurity. In practice, one organization's ideology is not necessarily a good indicator of the actual attitude to change among its leadership and rank and file. 'Progressive' organizations might well resist change, or some types of change, while conservative ones might endorse it, depending on the circumstances and on whether they perceive change as such. Not all change is the same and is attributed the same value: the adoption of merely technical change might be seen as innocuous even by the most ideologically conservative organizations, while other types of change might be seen as unacceptable, although in reality even technical change can have major long-term consequences which may initially not be clearly discernible.

Conservative organizations, like any other organization, can find themselves surrounded by competitive environments, where their role is challenged. In a competitive environment like war, they might even face annihilation as organizations and their members at least in part physical elimination. Whether they like it or not, therefore, conservative organizations might have to endorse some kind of change: adapt or perish.

One key feature of human organizations is flexibility: that is one of the main rationales for forming organizations. Human beings have been wired by

Corresponding author's e-mail: a.giustozzi@lse.ac.uk

biological evolution to function in a social environment, where their personal limitations can be offset by other members of the group. An effective organization could therefore be described as one which succeeds in harnessing the capabilities of individual members and gains in overall flexibility to adapt to a changing environment.

Organizations, therefore, have by definition an in-built capacity to adapt and evolve, whether they are inclined to use it at any given moment in time or not. This capacity might, however, come under stress if change exceeds what their existing structure and composition can handle. If they are somehow forced to effect change beyond this limit, we can then talk of 'evolution,' particularly if such change is successful in making them fitter for the environment where they operate. In this article I shall examine the case of the Taliban, a shorthand for what should more precisely be called the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan,' as they have been calling themselves since their origins as an organization. The Taliban are second to none in terms of conservatism: they argue that the best model of political organization of the state is that of the second Caliph of Islam (seventh century CE). For this reason they represent a good case-study of how even the most (ideologically) conservative organizations can evolve and adapt.

Who the Taliban Are

The Taliban emerged in 1994 as a movement in the rather peculiar circumstances, which I do not explore in depth here. Suffice it to say that the Taliban can be described as the latest incarnation of a series of clerical movements of opposition to the modern Afghan state, mainly motivated by the defense of the position and role of the clergy within previous arrangements. This included opposition to secularization (even partial), particularly in the field of education, which clerics had dominated entirely until the late nineteenth century. The clerical opposition also strongly resisted gender reform and resented the emergence of a non-clerical intellectual class from the early twentieth century onwards, which it saw as source of competition (see Olesen 1995).

So the Taliban opposed state schools and in particular criticized the low number of hours dedicated to religious subjects; opposed female emancipation; clashed with the secular intelligentsia even when it was Islam-leaning (like the Islamist parties which dominated the 1980s jihad, see below) (Griffin 2001; Dorronsoro 2005; Rashid 2000).

The immediate reason for their emergence was to restore order to a country shaken by civil war and by the lack of a central government; they proposed themselves as a temporary solution, hinting that the restoration of the monarchy may follow in due course. The conservative clergy, however, always had an ambiguous relationship with the monarchy and its mild reformist

tendencies. Once in power, they gave no sign of being willing to move towards the restoration of the monarchy, but never clarified what their long-term aims were and how long they planned to stay in power (Olesen 1995; Rashid 2000).

During the 1990s the Taliban gradually co-opted more and more clerical networks into their movement; they also attracted some non-clerical elements, particularly experienced former commanders of anti-Soviet jihadist organizations. The foot soldiers were mostly simple village youth. This is the social base from which the Taliban would start their insurgency in 2002.[1]

Most of the Taliban had a background in *Harakat-e Enqelab-e Islami*, a clerical insurgent organization that had been the largest anti-Soviet jihadist group in the early 1980s. Despite its size, the contribution of *Harakat* to the jihadist cause was modest. The mullahs who were leading it might have often been courageous and motivated, but with few exceptions they were extremely poorly organized, lacked tactical skills, could not manage the logistics and were slow in developing them. Gradually, *Harakat* was marginalized in the struggle, with many of its commanders and fighters defecting to other, more effective groups such as *Jamiat-e Islami*, *Hizb-e Islami* and others, which also often attacked *Harakat* directly, contributing to a further decline of its influence. The Taliban also co-opted in the 1990s many former members of a splinter faction of *Hizb-i Islami*, led by Yunis Khalis, which was better organized than *Harakat*, and *Hizb-i Islami* itself. However, these members were largely based in eastern Afghanistan, where the Taliban were very weak in 2002–3. Therefore, this organizational human capital was available to the Taliban, reincarnated as an insurgent movement, only in small measure.[2]

During the 1990s the Taliban had structured themselves as a 'network of networks,' each led by a charismatic 'warrior mullah,' relying on religious networks for recruitment and expansion. This type of organization, as we shall see, gave them resilience in terms of absorbing hits, but also limited their capacity to fight effectively, to implement a higher degree of meritocracy in their appointment policy, and to adapt to challenges and opportunities (Giustozzi 2010).

The Odds

The Taliban of 2002–3 were by all accounts ineffective insurgents, even if being arrayed against an even more ineffective Afghan government hid this fact somewhat. When the Taliban resumed an insurgency in 2002, their skills and capabilities were in line with those of *Harakat* in the 1980s. In the 1990s

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[1]Interviews with former high level officials of the Taliban's emirate, Kabul, 2009-10.
[2]Dorronsoro, 2005; interviews with former member of *Hizb-i Islami*, Kabul and London, 2008-10; interviews with members of the Taliban, various locations in Afghanistan, 2011; interviews with UN official, Kabul, 2008-9.

they had not been fighting as an insurgent force, but as a semi-regular militias against comparable forces. As such they gradually evolved to develop a military organization which exploited the weaknesses of their militia rivals, but which was found to be utterly ineffective against a technologically advanced regular army during Operation Enduring Freedom in late 2001. When the Taliban in 2002 embarked on an insurgency, they faced a technologically far more advanced enemy than the Soviet army, a fact which posed new challenges in terms of insurgent tactics and organization. Moreover, they were in a position of numerical inferiority, which had not been the case in the 1980s. Already in 1981 the anti-government and anti-Soviet insurgency numbered at least 30,000 active members, according to Soviet military intelligence estimates which tended to be very conservative. Table 1a shows Soviet estimates of the size of the insurgency. By contrast, the growth of the Taliban insurgency from 2002 onwards was much slower (Table 1b).

Table 1. (a) Soviet military intelligence estimates of the strength of armed opposition in Afghanistan, 1981–91. 'Inactive' refers to groups which at the time of making the estimate had not been involved in operations for a few months (source: Giustozzi 2000). (b) US Army estimates of the Taliban's armed strength, 2003–10 (Sources: Giustozzi 2008; Al Jazeera 2009; Starkey 2010).

(a) Taliban Strength, 1981–91			(b) Taliban Strength, 2003–10	
Year	*Active*	*Inactive*	*Year*	*Numbers*
1981	30,000		2003	1,000
1983	40,000		2004	
1985	50,000	105,000	2005	2–3,000
1986	80,000	125,000	2006	3–4,000
1987	60,000	130,000	2007	16,000
1988	75,000	140,000	2009	25,000
1989	55,000		2010	36,000
1990	55,000	190,000		
1991	55,000	180,000		

The Soviet Army in Afghanistan peaked at about 106,000 troops (excluding advisers), with the pro-government forces reaching a maximum number of 400,000 in 1990, including large militias (Giustozzi 2000). The coalition of foreign armies in Afghanistan post-2001 peaked at about 140,000 troops in 2011, but we should consider that well in excess of 200,000 contractors followed them to take over tasks that in the 1980s had been taken over by Soviet soldiers. By 2011 the combined strength of Afghan army, air force and police was probably around 230,000 (effectively present in the ranks), plus a

wide array of official and unofficial militias, private security guards and security troops. Official militias number about 11–12,000 in 2011 (Local Police, APPF, and Infrastructure Protection Force), while unofficial militias were much larger, numbering several tens of thousands (including the so-called *Arbakai* and others). Private security guards were estimated as high as 70,000, despite plans to disband them. So if we say that the strength of pro-government armed forces was around 350,000, we would not be far from the truth.[3]

Even at the peak of their strength during the period taken in consideration, therefore, the post-2001 insurgents were half or less the size of their 1980s predecessors and faced a larger enemy force than in the 1980s, although it is not easy to account for the contractors in a comparable way. Most importantly, the Taliban used a military technology even inferior to that exploited by the mujahidin in the 1980s: the same Kalashnikovs, RPGs, machine guns, recoilless guns and field rocket launchers, but no anti-aircraft missiles apart from a few completely outclassed *Strela*, no anti-tank missiles, no military (frequency-hopping) radios, and few military mines. The Taliban had in fact to manufacture their improvised mines and the explosive which filled them, while the mujahidin had received huge supplies of advanced military mines, undetectable to counter-measures. Home-made explosive, derived from fertilizer, has a destructive power about 10 times inferior to that of standard military explosive. If the Taliban had the same supply of mines of their predecessors, no armored vehicle used by ISAF would be safe (Giustozzi n.d.).

The Early Phases of the Insurgency

During 2003 the Taliban started making some inroads in portions of southern Afghanistan against a weak Afghan government. Remote parts of the south started falling under their control, particularly sparsely populated mountain districts. The opposition they faced initially was composed of pro-government militias, controlled by an array of often rival strongmen, and a ragtag police force, mostly made up of portions of those same militias. While these forces were often fairly motivated in their fight against the Taliban, they were ridden by personal rivalries, unable to coordinate their effort, disorganized, and most importantly inclined towards indiscriminate violence in their effort to repress opposition. The Taliban were also disorganized, operating in a number of networks, often not very friendly to each other, but had some greater coherence than their rivals and had a strong ideological/religious motivation (Giustozzi 2008).

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[3]These are personal estimates based on conversations with NATO officers in Afghanistan and Afghan police and army officers.

The biggest advantage of the Taliban was what Arab political theorist Ibn-Khaldun would have described as an example of a tribal cycle: the leaders of the militias now in power, flooded with money from the narco-traffic, their Western allies, and previously unimagined economic opportunities, were drawn into the cities to indulge in all the benefits deriving from their now privileged position. Their influence on the rural communities started declining, while the Taliban had little alternative but to dwell in remote mountain villages, trying to make friends and mobilize support. While unable to convince even most of their former members to re-mobilize for war, the Taliban managed to obtain from them valuable intelligence on the political situation, the divisions among their enemies and the grievances of the population, which they set out to exploit (see, as an example, Giustozzi and Ullah 2007).

The support of foreign states seems to have been very limited at this stage, as the Taliban did not look to be a very sensible foreign policy investment yet. However, some support came from the Pakistani services, which also allowed various jihadist groups, mostly Pakistani, to help the Taliban militarily and financially (Giustozzi 2008).

With these limited resources, the Taliban started making modest inroads, enough to attract some attention from the generals in Kabul. Although the threat of the insurgency was very much under-estimated by the western military and diplomatic leaders at this stage, the Americans in particular deployed small numbers of troops or, more often, trained militias and police forces to deal with them. Even this modest American commitment turned to be a hurdle for the Taliban insurgents, whose organization had continued to rest on an array of autonomous and sometimes even rival networks, centered around a few charismatic warrior mullahs. The networks were patrimonially owned by their leaders, rarely cooperated with each other, and were not meritocratic in the selection of the leadership at various levels. Their ability to conduct relatively sophisticated military operations was extremely limited, even if they were developing some political or ideological appeal among sections of the population. They had little understanding of how to wage a guerrilla war; those who had experience of the 1980s were now mostly sitting in Pakistan trying to lead the insurgency remotely. Moreover, as pointed out earlier, even these did not have a record of great effectiveness as guerrilla fighters against the Soviets.

Tactical Adaptation

Having recognized their weak military capacities, in 2003 the Taliban embarked on an effort to become a more effective military force, first by developing a more integrated military leadership. The central leadership gradually acquired some capability to mobilize and deploy military force of its own, i.e. independently of the networks. In the early days this took the shape of

advisers, trainers, and teams of specialists being deployed away from their native provinces. Although the networks remained absolutely predominant, this improved system facilitated geographical expansion and allowed for some increase in the sophistication of tactical operations. The recruitment of young fighters in the refugee camps of Pakistan, or in Pakistani madrasas, no longer necessarily served the interest of single networks; the leadership acquired some capability to concentrate some of the output of this recruitment in areas of strategic interest (Giustozzi 2008). This change was not seen as a challenge by the networks which composed the Taliban and it did not imply any radical change in their ideology or way of thinking.

During 2004 and 2005 the Taliban were able to start infiltrating some of the flatter, more heavily populated areas around the main southern cities of Kandahar and Lahkargah at a time when the Western militaries were slowly beginning to react to the signs of Taliban revival, which had emerged in 2003.

The effort to improve the military effectiveness of the Taliban started bearing visible fruit by 2005–6, when they started emerging for the first time as a serious military challenge in southern Afghanistan. The most advanced example of what the new system was able to produce was the mobilization for the Pashmul campaign in the summer of 2006. The Taliban's leadership approved a plan by Mullah Dadullah, their military commander, to concentrate the newly mobilized force raised in Pakistan in a rugged area near the key city of Kandahar, hoping to attract western troops to fight on difficult ground there, defeat them, and score a major tactical and political success, maybe even convincing the Canadians to withdraw their troops deployment to Kandahar. Although Pashmul actually ended in a tactical defeat for the Taliban, the mobilization effort was remarkable: up to 2,000 men might have been deployed there, many after having been trained, and with the assistance of foreign advisers (Giustozzi 2008; Bradley 2011; Wattie 2008).

This relative achievement eventually brought over retaliation in the shape of an escalating commitment of military force to southern Afghanistan by NATO armies. The introduction of the 'night raids' in 2007 represented a major shift, even if the commitment of Special Forces was still modest then in comparison to what it had become by 2011. The modest concessions to centralization, made from 2003 to 2006, soon turned out to be insufficient in the wake of enemy escalation.[4]

The evolution of the Taliban's tactics had therefore to continue after 2006. The Taliban moved decisively towards the adoption of asymmetric tactics, initially primarily improvised mines and suicide bombers, but then also ambush tactics, sniping, tunneling, etc. The massive shift towards using improvised mines on a large scale is particularly noteworthy because of its

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[4]Personal communications with UN official and with British and American officers, Kabul and Kandahar, 2006-10.

implications: the Taliban had to develop a small industry for the production of explosive devices. Considering what the Taliban were until 2005 and the predominant cultural patterns of southern Afghanistan, this development is remarkable. The recruits who were being attracted to the Taliban were typically young men and boys eager to leave a life boring and without perspectives in the village and exchange it with a life of adventure, a cause they could understand and identify with, a rifle, and a motorbike, the typical equipment of the Taliban combat units. While they made keen and aggressive fighters, these human resources seemed not particularly suitable for a more asymmetric type of warfare, which requires more advanced training and greater discipline (Giustozzi n.d.).

The development of tunnel networks in parts of southern Afghanistan and the manufacturing and deployment of improvised mines are two post-2005 developments which instead required a conversion of the Taliban's manpower to other tasks. It is not clear what manpower the Taliban relied on to build the tunnels; however, the fact that they were discovered by chance and not reported by spies suggests that the Taliban did not rely on a commercially hired workforce. The manufacturing of improvised mines might in part have been commercially run, particularly when it reached an industrial scale, although evidence is scant in this regard. Certainly the Taliban's 'sappers' also manufactured their mines on a small scale before deploying them. Whatever the case, the original 'warrior mullahs' had to acquire a stronger organizational dimension in order to manage the effort, not least because supplies had to be managed too. Even the deployment of improvised mines was at odds with the original warrior ethics, which the Taliban had been relying on. Many saw it as a cowardly way of fighting, not least because of its indiscriminate character, which easily caused a large number of civilian casualties. Some Taliban commanders quit the fight over this issue.[5]

Despite significant tension, by and large the adaptation process was successful. The opposition to the tactical transition was more motivated by a village Pashtun warrior ethos, than by any ideological consideration. By 2010, improvised mines had become the weapon of choice of the Taliban, with tactics often being reshaped around the use of this weapon. The Taliban also managed to reshape the participation in the war of foreign fighters. In the early years of the insurgency, groups of Pakistani Pashtuns, Arabs, or Central Asians would enter Afghanistan and fight on their own, independently of the Taliban and typically without any coordination. This was not very effective for a number of reasons, including their lack of familiarity with the terrain, the lack of language skills, etc. It also antagonized the villagers, who did not know what to make of these strangers, who seemed to attract American retaliation as a calamity. By

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[5]Interviews with Taliban commanders, southern Afghanistan, 2011; Giustozzi (n.d.).

2010, however, such groups were rarely seen any more; only in eastern Afghanistan they still appeared, but typically during major bursts of fighting to help the Taliban achieve particular objectives. Instead, foreign fighters mainly operated as advisers, trainers, and weapon specialists, attached in small numbers to Taliban units. The Taliban eagerly recognized the contribution of these advisers to improving the (once very poor) proficiency of Taliban fighters in aiming and in handling squad and heavy weapons.[6]

In part thanks to the conversion of the foreign fighters into advisers and trainers, military training became compulsory for commanders and fighters alike, with new training camps being set up in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Military manuals were developed, and codes of conduct developed and widely distributed to strengthen the discipline of the force. The new stress on military training contrasted sharply with the original amateurish attitude of many commanders and fighters, who assumed they already knew how to fight. Marksmanship skills among the Taliban were very poor originally, sniping was almost entirely a preserve of foreign fighters. Mortar skills were also very poor, with virtually no Talib mastering the art of ballistics. RPGs were fired instinctively, without aiming.[7] This tactical adaptation however occurred essentially within the original framework of the Taliban, utilizing its inbuilt flexibility.

Organizational Adaptation

The military adaptation discussed above is recognized in the literature, but another dimension of the process of adaptation which went mostly undetected had to do with organizational change. Placed under growing military pressure, the Taliban invested a considerable effort to increase their ability to react to the challenges posed by the enemy, that is, increase their capacity for strategic maneuver. I have already mentioned above the first steps taken by the Taliban to acquire such a capability, essentially using recruits from the refugee camps. These uprooted individuals, who had lost their tight identification with a particular community, were more suitable than locally based combat groups for a mobile, strategic warfare. However, by 2010 the changing strategic environment was forcing the Taliban to tinker with their organization on a larger scale. A few thousand mobile combatants were no longer enough and the enemy was mobilizing a much greater number of troops (through President Obama's 'surge') and investing billions of dollars in the development of the Afghan army and the police. The answer to the strategic dilemma of how to respond to this challenge was increased centralization of the command and control system of the Taliban, which in turn was meant to increase the capacity

[6]See note 5 above.
[7]See note 5 above.

of the leadership to impose on the combat groups and the networks its decisions, based on an overall view of the conflict and not just on each field commander's localized perceptions. The process of centralization, described above when it was still in its infancy, strengthened after 2006. Some of the smaller networks, particularly more poorly funded, were taken under the direct authority of the central leadership in exchange for better supplies. More individuals were recruited by the centre.[8]

In parallel but with inevitable repercussions on the command and control system, the Taliban also started developing a civilian dimension to their operations, which had originally been completely absent. After 2003 a system of governance was gradually developed, with shadow provincial and district governors being appointed to an ever-growing number of provinces and districts. This system of governance, based on provincial and district governors and judges, was gradually strengthened, with the task of handling the relationship with the civilian population and obtaining some political legitimacy for the Taliban. A judicial system also came into being, to rival the government's (see also below).[9]

This system of governance involved an internal dynamic that forced the Taliban to develop a more centralized decision-making process. The governors had to be selected and relying exclusively on the reaching of a consensus on candidates by the different Taliban networks operating in each province proved to be impossible. The centre often had to intervene and negotiate. It took some time to work out a mechanism for getting everybody on the same page concerning the selection of capable and agreeable candidates. A specific commission, representing the main Taliban networks, was set up for that task. The Taliban also realized that keeping governors for too long in a place risked turning them into some kind of warlord, developing fiefdoms which then the leadership could not control. From this awareness developed the decision to regularly rotate governors, typically every six months. That again strengthened the need for a central management system. The same applied to the judges, who were rotated every few years, and to the top military cadres in the field.[10]

The apotheosis of centralization was reached in 2010, when the Taliban tried to establish a system of rotation of all military commanders, which would have weakened the hold of the old patrimonial networks and strengthened decisively the hand of the centre. The military commanders would have seen their roots in a particular community weaken and would as a result have grown more dependent on the central leadership. To consolidate the shift, the leadership also started claiming the right to all Taliban revenue, for the purpose of redistributing it more rationally according to strategic priorities (as

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[8]Based on an on-going field research project by Claudio Franco and Antonio Giustozzi.
[9]Interviews with Taliban commanders, southern Afghanistan, 2011.
[10]Based on an on-going field research project by Claudio Franco and Antonio Giustozzi.

opposed to the richer provinces gathering more and therefore being better equipped and resourced). The leadership realized that a monopoly over revenue would also have strengthened their control over the combat units in the field.[11]

These efforts, if successful, would have reshaped the Taliban radically. In practice, in 2011 the order to rotate military commanders even at the combat unit level was rescinded, for several reasons. The first and most immediate one was that rotations were leading to heavy casualties: commanders refused to rotate without their men and the movement of 30–40 armed men was often noticed by the increasingly alert American military intelligence. The Taliban acknowledge that many of their commanders were spotted and killed exactly during these rotations. Another reason, less publicized by the Taliban, is that the rotations were not popular with the commanders, not just because of the risk involved, but because they felt more comfortable operating in their own area. They must have realized that operating out-of-area weakened their autonomy vis-à-vis the leadership. Finally, the villagers do not seem to have liked the presence of out-of-area Taliban, who were perceived as more difficult to lobby for the villagers' advantage. Similarly, the centralization of revenue faced strong resistance in various parts of the country and particularly where the Taliban were collecting more revenue locally.[12]

Extreme centralization (by the Taliban's standards) proved to be a dead end, at least in the conditions prevailing in 2010–11. Another key measure, taken around 2007 but systematized in the years to 2010, appears to have been more successful. A parallel system of 'political commissars' was added to the military structure on the ground, in order to consolidate command and control. This was important because the 'political commissars' allowed the leadership to establish a second command, control, and reporting line on top of that constituted by the networks. This reporting line was meant to give the leadership the capability to balance the information provided by the networks and their commanders with another, directly dependent source of information. Although information in this regard is scant, the Taliban also appear to have strengthened their intelligence branch, which also served as a separate chain of internal reporting. It is known that reports by the Taliban's spies have led in some cases to the prosecution of undisciplined commanders.[13]

Centralization did go against the Taliban's original ethos and a long tradition of clerical opposition to a centralized state in Afghanistan. As the Taliban's leadership started moving in this direction, it pushed the organization beyond the limits allowed by its inbuilt flexibility.

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[11]Interviews with Taliban commanders, southern Afghanistan, 2011.
[12]Interviews with Taliban commanders, southern Afghanistan, 2011.
[13]Interviews with Taliban commanders, southern Afghanistan, 2011.

Ideologization as a Form of Adaptation

Finally the Taliban sought to stiffen their ranks through the strengthening of the ideological dimension of the struggle. This is a typical adaptation strategy of insurgent movements, which have to operate in at least a relatively decentralized way (although as discussed above there is sometimes room for a degree of centralization), and need to develop an intense sense of belonging among their rank-and-file in order to offset the difficulty of supervising their activities from a remote location.

Ideological commitment can be instilled in a number of ways:

- the sharing of intense participatory experiences; this is important, but difficult to manipulate for a leadership;
- deliberate indoctrination particularly if occurring at a young age; there is evidence that the Taliban have invested in mobilising children into the madrasa (religious seminar) system, particularly trying to herd them towards the more radical madrasas, sympathising for the Taliban, clearly expecting many of them to join the Taliban wholeheartedly after graduation or even before that;[14]
- repeated exposure to the ideology, particularly if exercised in conditions of monopoly or near monopoly; the Taliban tried to achieve this by exposing their fighters to preaching in the camps inside Afghanistan and presumably in some of the refugee camps inside Pakistan;
- media domination; the Taliban have invested resources into the creation of their own media services, particularly focusing on the mass production of video CD and DVDs in the early years; gradually they have developed web sites, which however proved vulnerable to counter-measures, and have appeared on Facebook and other forms of web interaction; vice-versa, the Taliban maintain a negligible presence in the radio-TV world, but have advised their commanders to seek contact with journalists in order to deliver their own version of events; Taliban propaganda media stressed the character of jihad against Christian crusaders, while training/indoctrination camps were set up in Pakistan to form a new generation of fighters intensely loyal to the cause (ICG, 2008);
- the development of an intrinsically attractive ideology.

On the latter point, the Taliban from the start could count on good proto-ideological material, which had the potential to appeal widely to the Afghan population: a particular interpretation of Islam, which has relatively wide currency in the Afghan countryside. As a result, the Taliban did not invest major efforts in developing a coherent political ideology as long as the

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[14] Interviews with community elders in southern Afghanistan, 2011.

prospects of final victory remained remote. As of 2011 they were still left with a rather incoherent set of statements and principles that never fully coalesced into a real ideology. The Taliban never had their Khomeini, that is, somebody able to formulate a coherent ideological and political justification for clerical rule. Repeatedly, the Taliban have mobilized groups of Ulema to endorse the jihad or Taliban leadership in a time of emergency. However, clerical rule in the long term was never formally endorsed.[15]

This did not initially hamper the Taliban's use of ideology as a tool of mobilization and social control, because of the ready availability of a conservative interpretation of Islam which meshed well with the beliefs of much of the rural population. As the Taliban tried to expand their appeal, however, their propaganda has taken an increasingly nationalistic tone. In this regard the Taliban faced significant challenges, in particular the widespread perception among the Afghan population that the Taliban were a Pakistani stooge. For years the Taliban have sought to sideline the problem and have focused their increasingly nationalistic campaign against foreign troops. From 2010 onwards, however, their criticism of Pakistan has intensified. Although this is certainly related to a worsening of relations with the Pakistani army, it might also be part of an attempt to shake off an image of being subservient to Pakistani interests.[16]

Political Adaptation

For all political organizations political adaptation is particularly difficult. If done quickly, it may involve a loss of face and a deligitimisation of the leadership, with potentially very negative short-term consequences. This is not the kind of situation any leader fighting a war would like to find himself in. As a result, political adaptation in time of war tends to be subtle if not slow.

The Taliban realized rather early that in order to compete for political legitimacy they had to provide some services to the population. Because many Taliban cadres were trained or semi-trained clerics and because in Islam the training of clerics includes the administration of justice, it was natural for the Taliban to focus on offering judicial services. Launched in 2003, the effort intensified in subsequent years; by 2010 there were 600–700 Taliban judges spread around the 180 districts were the Taliban were operating. From about 2007 onwards the Taliban also started making an effort to provide at least some semblance of other services to the population, particularly in terms of education. This involved offering incentives to the opening of religious seminars where potential for recruiting more students seemed to exist,

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[15]Interviews with Taliban commanders, various locations, 2011.
[16]Interviews with Taliban commanders, various locations, 2011. See also Yousufzai and Moreau (2011).

encouraging the opening of private secular schools and also seizing control over state schools. The Taliban also tried to encourage NGOs to bring development projects to areas under their control, but seem to have had only a modest degree of success in achieving this. Still it is clear that the Taliban were taking in the demands of the village communities, which wanted jobs and development projects. The perception among villagers seems to have been that the main weakness of the Taliban vis-à-vis the central government was its inability to even remotely match the level of expenditure on development, even considering the high level of leakage afflicting the handling of development money by the government.[17]

Apart from the Taliban judiciary, which by all accounts was quite successful, the Taliban's effort to compete with the government in the field of providing services to the population has not gone very far, at least up to 2011. What was driving the Taliban's effort in the civilian field? The desire for political legitimacy, certainly; but also more generally the awareness that a hostile population would have harmed them in fighting their insurgency. In 2006, when the Taliban first entered densely populated rural areas well connected with the cities, their strict religious mores were found not to be popular among the villagers. In 2007 Mullah Omar had to issue an edict, which authorized his men to ignore his 1990s social edict banning music and imposing other strictures. The Taliban's violent campaign against the schools in 2006 proved particularly unpopular, prompting again the Taliban to seek remedy. In 2007 negotiations over the re-opening of schools started, private schools were encouraged, etc (Giustozzi 2010).

Such political change has been taking place in stages, or under the cover of not really being substantial change. The 2007 edict of Mullah Omar authorized the field commanders not to implement his social edicts if they judged that the implementation risked alienating the population in their area of operations. In practice, very rarely the Taliban have implemented the social edicts since 2007. By not entirely rescinding them, however, Mullah Omar saved face and did not alienate the more radical commanders, who were still free to implement them if they wanted to.

Similarly, in 2011 the leadership of the Taliban appears to have authorized the re-opening of girl schools in areas under Taliban control, where they have been systematically attacked before. The way the leadership proceeded was by having a few provinces removing the ban, while it remained in place in others. Again this appears to have been a way to allow the commanders in the field move in accordance with their own ideological attitudes. Change happened but at a careful pace, without calling itself change. The leadership justified it with concessions being made by the government with regard to the curricula, the

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[17]Giustozzi (2012) and on-going field research on the topic.

teaching staff and the textbooks. The leadership might have inflated such claims in order to justify a change, which was meant in reality to appease the village communities (Giustozzi and Franco, 2011).

In sum, the Taliban threaded carefully with political adaptation and tried as much as possible to maintain it within the limits of the 'political doctrine' of the Islamic Emirate in the 1990s.

'Genetic' Mutation

While the Taliban demonstrated a fair degree of flexibility and capacity to adapt, their evolution faced a number of constraints, particularly as long as the Taliban remained fully faithful to their original social base, which was essentially conservative-rural. Their natural way of organizing was network-based, which is also the way the Sunni clergy gets organized. In part adaptation could take place by relying on different components of the organization to play a greater role in particular circumstances. More moderate elements could, for example, be used to carry out diplomatic or political tasks, while the radical elements were being confined to military activities. There was however only so much mileage that such shuffling around of internal components could earn. Developing a new model of organization, more centralized, demanded not only significant reform, but also recruitment beyond the original group of southern clerics.

The adoption of technologies which the Taliban had originally resisted implied itself an expansion of recruitment. The Taliban, once hostile to photography, were soon producing masses of propaganda videos featuring their fighters. Recently Mullah Omar reportedly ordered each Taliban unit to own at least a laptop. Education in English was once resisted, but again Mullah Omar has reportedly ordered the units to employ at least an individual able to speak English, presumably in order to interact with NGOs. The Taliban also strove to recruit doctors and nurses to treat their injured combatants. Initially, these new technologies and new tasks were handled by foreigners, mostly Arabs or Pakistanis. This is particularly the case of the propaganda machine based outside Afghanistan, which required a significant number of university-educated staff to function. Cleary the Taliban's media operations, with their reliance on modern media (including the internet), are not entrusted to exclusively madrasa-educated mullahs. While this could in principle be handled by foreigners, inside Afghanistan, or to handle the increasingly centralized system of command and control, the Taliban needed however Afghans educated in secular schools.[18]

It is worth noting that the organizational forms gradually adopted by the Taliban after 2003 were, at least in part, imported from the Islamist parties,

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[18]Interviews with Taliban commanders in various locations, 2010-11.

which in the 1980s had been the rivals of *Harakat-e Enqelab* (see above). The Islamist organizations counted within their ranks hundreds of university educated cadres, which facilitated their organizational development. The Taliban, by contrast, lacked such cadres initially.

After 2003 the Taliban apparently tried to bring into the movement individuals with technical skills such as computing, but also management, languages, etc. How did such injection of external 'DNA' take place? We know that many former members of *Hizb-i Islami* have joined the Taliban, mostly because of the inability of their original party to reorganize effectively in much of Afghanistan after 2001. Although these members were typically low rank, they might have brought some organizational know-how with them into their new organization. A much smaller flow into the Taliban was members of such Islamist organization such as *Ittehad-i Islami*, Yunis Khalis' branch of *Hizb-i Islami*, and *Jamiat-i Islami*, again mostly limited to low-rank members. There is also some evidence of the Taliban recruiting high school and university students directly, although in the universities the Taliban mostly attracted students from the faculty of Islamic Law. Finally, the Taliban relied on old-timers who had been exposed not just to religious education, but to state education as well; this group tended to come from Eastern Afghanistan, where access to state education has always been stronger than in the south.[19]

The Taliban also appear to have benefited from a foreign advisory effort. In some cases the process of adaptation might have been initiated by the Taliban spontaneously and without prompting; however it is clear that the bulk of organizational innovation was both initiated on the advice of foreign sponsors and implemented with their help. Evolution in conditions of direct external assistance is not uncommon, although this type of evolution is not always successful. The post-colonial states of Asia and Africa have largely followed such an evolutionary path, with varying degrees of success.

It can be argued that compared to the assistance provided to the Taliban's enemy (the Kabul government), assistance provided to the Taliban was more effective. The Taliban have been successfully holding their own against vastly superior forces and have received in assistance a fraction of what Kabul has received. A number of more sophisticated organizational techniques were introduced, as discussed throughout this article, and technologies were gradually and selectively absorbed.[20]

However, even Pakistani assistance to the Taliban has not gone without friction, controversies, and negative or even perverse side effects. As the

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[19]Interviews with former member of *Hizb-i Islami*, Kabul and London, 2008-10; interviews with members of the Taliban, various locations in Afghanistan, 2011; interviews with UN official, Kabul, 2008-9.
[20]On adviser efforts in general and in Afghanistan in particular see Giustozzi and Kalinovsky, 2013 forthcoming.

Pakistanis sponsored the centralization effort within the Taliban, they became also the target of much resentment from commanders who were not so keen to be centralized. They were also scapegoated for all that could go wrong on the battlefield and beyond. Among other things they often acted as 'policemen' of the leadership, incarcerating for varying periods of time Taliban figures who did not play by the rules. More generally, a feeling gradually developed among the Taliban that the price paid to the Pakistanis for their support was growing, in terms of the autonomy of the organization. Perhaps these feelings were strengthened by a deliberate effort of the leadership to justify change in terms of an external imposition, avoiding to have to justify it ideologically and politically.[21]

Regardless of how the Pakistani-Taliban relationship will evolve in the future, it is clear that it will leave behind some 'genetic' heritage. This is likely to take the shape of an improved human capital, as Taliban cadres have absorbed skills that they did not have before and perhaps a few individuals have been brought into the Taliban, whose membership would have been actively sought otherwise. The need for the Pakistanis to have the Afghans to be in the lead all the time and for the Pakistani themselves to remain as remote from the forefront as possible is likely to have favored capacity building among the Afghans. Most of the time they had to implement Pakistani 'advices' on their own, contrary to Afghan government officials who were often in a position to either ignore any advice or to let the advisers de facto replace them.[22]

Another aspect of the genetic mutation of the Taliban had to do with the need to rapidly produce a number of cadres sufficient to replace the high losses in the battlefield and at the same time continue expand the ranks of the combat units. Relying on clerics, whether fully or half trained, became more and more difficult, while promotion from the ranks of non-clerical cadres became increasingly common. Although at the time of writing there was no way of measuring the proportion of the rank and file of the Emirate that they represented, it is clear that over time this could lead to a significant change in the nature of the Taliban as an organization.[23]

Conclusion

The Taliban as an organization found itself under heavy evolutionary pressure after 2001. The organization was in disarray after the defeat inflicted by Operation Enduring Freedom in late 2001. The rank and file were demoralized

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[21]Interviews with Taliban commanders, various locations, 2011. See also Yousufzai and Moreau (2011).

[22]On the impact of advisers on the Afghan government see note 20 above.

[23]Interviews with Taliban commanders and village elders in various locations, 2011.

and scattered. If the Taliban were to survive as an organizational entity, it was pretty clear to all that they had to adapt to the new environment. As far as we know, the Taliban did not explicitly argue that change and adaptation was necessary. This is typical of ideologically conservative organizations, which under competitive pressure have to change, but deny that they are changing in order not to delegitimize their own ideology.

Change occurred in a number of ways. Least controversial was tactical adaptation. This did not challenge the Taliban's ideology, but rather the attitudes of many among the ranks-and-file. Organizational adaptation was more of an issue, because the Taliban incarnated the original clerical opposition to the modern Afghan state and the defense of the network-based organizational model, particularly as far as it concerned the clergy but by implication concerning also society as a whole. In order to evolve and match the challenges which they were facing, the Taliban had to start increasingly resemble the state that they had hated.

Political adaptation was the most difficult and long-delayed, because it challenged the Taliban's ideology. Significantly, the Taliban's effort to produce a constitution for the Taliban emirate, which continued into the early post-2001 period, never produced any result. The process of drafting a constitution was bringing to the surface all the implicit contradictions between the Taliban's ideology and the practice of government. By 2011, the Taliban were hinting that they had mobilized sympathetic Ulema to explore the issue of the future organization of a re-established Taliban emirate; at least they demonstrated awareness of the problem of how to reconcile development, which was in higher demand than ever in Afghanistan after western intervention fostered 'addiction' to high level of state and external spending among the population.

The tension caused by the contradiction between the Taliban's slow political adaptation and the political and military reality on the ground generated a slow motion 'genetic' adaptation of the Taliban: change occurring in the margins of the movement was more acceptable than change occurring at the top of it. However, the incorporation of recruits from non-clerical origins was bound to enact change over time and as the new recruits gradually grew in numbers. 'Genetic' mutation might therefore end being the price to pay for the Taliban's quite successful adaptation (so far) to the very major challenges that they had to face during their struggle to get back to power.

In conclusion, the Taliban's organizational change, particularly concerning centralization, and the 'genetic mutation' which occurred gradually and largely below the radar screen amounted to a process of evolution. The best evidence that the Taliban grew better adapted to the surrounding environment is the very fact that as an organization they were still alive and kicking in early 2012, as they had undoubtedly faced extremely unfavorable odds in 2002.

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