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Report

## **Afghanistan: Taliban's organization and structure**

**Report by Dr. Antonio Giustozzi for Landinfo**



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**Report Afghanistan: Taliban's organization and structure**

## **SAMMENDRAG**

Organiseringen av Taliban har aldri vært sentralisert, men har blitt stadig mer fragmentert fra 2007 og fremover. Den opprinnelige politiske ledelsen som var samlet i Quetta-shuraen har kjempet for å beholde kontrollen over sine 'regionale kommandoer' over Miran Shah, Peshawar og Mashhad. Innenfor Quetta-shuraen har interne maktkamper truet med å undergrave samhørighet siden 2010, og på et tidspunkt ble shuraen delt i fraksjoner som nektet å samarbeide med hverandre.

Per 2017 hadde Taliban allikevel vokst til en stor organisasjon, med et variert militærapparat og en omfattende styringsstruktur. Mens fragmenteringen har vedvart, har Talibans forskjellige shuraer begynt å utvikle seg i ulike retninger; noen er mer militaristiske enn andre, for eksempel, og noen er mer sentraliserte enn andre. Selv spørsmålet om forsoning med Kabul har blitt sett på med svært forskjellige øyne av de ulike shuraene. Fragmenteringen av Taliban er i stor grad forårsaket av skjevheter i regionens finansieringskilder, og vil derfor sannsynligvis fortsette i overskuelig fremtid.

## **SUMMARY**

Never centralised, the organisation of the Taliban became increasingly fragmented from 2007 onwards. The original political leadership gathered in the Quetta Shura struggled to maintain control over its 'regional commands' of Miran Shah, Peshawar and Mashhad. Within the Quetta Shura itself from 2010 onwards internal power struggles undermine cohesiveness and at a time the Quetta Shura openly split into factions, which refused to collaborate with each other.

By 2017 the Taliban had nonetheless grown into a huge organisation, with a diversified military apparatus and a widespread governance structure. As fragmentation persisted, the different Shuras of the Taliban started evolving through somewhat separated paths: some more militaristic than others, for example, or some more centralised than others. Even the issue of reconciliation with Kabul was viewed very differently by the different shuras. To a large extent Taliban fragmentation is due to incompatible sources of funding in the region, and is therefore likely to persist in the foreseeable future.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This report aims at providing a concise picture of how the Taliban are organized. It also provides a short assessment of the Taliban's strength and geographical spread, as well as of their internal politics. In order to facilitate the navigation to the users, the report is structured into sections dedicated to the different aspects of the Taliban's structure, from their membership and to their politics.

The report is largely based on extensive research carried out previously, mostly in 2013-17; no additional research work has been carried out specifically for the purpose of writing it. Public domain sources have been used when available, but they contain very little up-to-date information on Taliban organization and internal politics. The report as such relies heavily on oral sources (primarily face to face interviews and also telephone contacts), mostly Taliban and community elders living in Taliban influenced areas. What is happening in remote areas of the country and inside the Taliban's safe havens in Pakistan and Iran remains difficult to assess fully. Much of the information utilised might therefore be partial, even if the author has tried to be as balanced as possible and has cast a critical eye on all sources utilised.

Over the years the author has carried out (and still carries out) extensive research on the Taliban and other insurgent movements. Some of the output of this research has been published, some is in the process of being published and some might never be published. All of it has been taken into consideration for the preparation of this report.

## 2. MAIN STRUCTURE – THE DIFFERENT SHURAS AND THEIR AREAS OF RESPONSIBILITY

In Taliban's system, shuras are representative organs and commissions, departments and offices are executive ones. Theoretically at the top of the Taliban's structure is the Amir al Muminin (supposedly Mullah Omar until 2015), who however never played a real leadership role until 2015. With the controversial succession of Akhtar Mohammad Mansur to Mullah Omar in the summer of 2015, the Amir al Muminin was finally a real leader and not a ghostly presence, but at the same time large portions of the Taliban refused to acknowledge Mansur as Amir al Muminin on grounds of his rigging of the party congress that selected him. The same has applied to Haibatullah Akhund when he succeeded to Mansur in May 2016, selected by a small clique of leaders. For all intents and purposes, therefore, the Amir al Muminin from 2015 has become a source of division and controversy, rather than a unifying figure. The Taliban no longer have a figure around whom they all unite.<sup>1</sup>

In practice the leaderships of the different shuras are the highest authorities within the Taliban, in terms of formal power. Denominations such as 'Quetta Shura' or 'Shura of

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<sup>1</sup> Barnett Rubin, 'Turmoil in the Taliban', The New Yorker, July 31, 2015; Frederic Grare 'Mission Not Accomplished', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 05, 2015 (<http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/08/05/mission-not-accomplished-pub-60950>); Nick Robins-Early, 'What Becomes Of The Taliban After Mullah Omar's Death? An expert describes challenges for the militants' new leader', Huffington Post, 1 August 2015; Theo Farrell and Michael Semple, 'Ready for Peace? The Afghan Taliban after a Decade of War', RUSI, Briefing Paper, January 2017.

the North' refer to the councils that preside over different Taliban organizations, but are also used to indicate the entire organization subordinated to each shura. So Quetta Shura for example is a shorthand for the Rahbari Shura (Leadership Council), but also for the commissions, offices, and armed groups that operate under the nominal authority of the Quetta Shura.

Inclusion in a shura is by co-optation by the leader or head of the shura, but is usually intended to be based on the influence of each individual. A Taliban figure who contributed large numbers of recruits to the movement is the typical shura appointee, although fund raising success may also be rewarded.<sup>2</sup>

As of mid-2017 the Taliban were organised in the following shuras:

- Quetta Shura, under whose authority operate the following:
  - Miran Shah Shura, based in Miran Shah, North Waziristan, and composed exclusively of the Haqqani network;
  - Peshawar Shura, based in Peshawar, and composed of several small fronts recruiting from the eastern tribes.
- Shura of the North: head-quartered in Badakhshan, it is composed of several fronts, including three large ones (Baryal Mahaz, Jundullah Mahaz and Habibullah Mahaz). It emerged out of the Peshawar Shura at the end of 2015.
- Mashhad Shura: based in Mashhad, Iran, it has a large central force and also relies on some autonomous fronts, which are gradually being absorbed into the central force. Recently the front of Taliban Amir Haibatullah has also joined the Mashhad Shura. This shura is still sometimes described as 'office' by hostile Taliban commentators, because it was established as a regional command of the Quetta Shura back in 2011. In 2016 Abdul Qayum Zakir and his front left the Mashhad Shura and returned to Pakistan.
- Rasool Shura (whose name is High Council of the Islamic Emirate), is reportedly based in Farah (Afghanistan) and despite being still in open opposition to the Quetta Shura, it is closely allied with the Obeidullah Ishaqzai faction of the Quetta Shura, which is de facto outside the Quetta Shura now. Allied with Obeidullah is also Abdul Qayum Zakir.<sup>3</sup>

The Quetta Shura and the two shuras that recognise its authority (Miran Shah and Peshawar) agree on a territorial partition of authority. The Quetta Shura is in charge everywhere except in Loya Paktia and Logar, where the Miran Shah Shura has authority, and Eastern Afghanistan (Nangarhar, Laghman, Kunar, Nuristan) and Kabul region (Kabul, Wardak, Parwan, Kapisa), where the Peshawar Shura operates as a regional command.<sup>4</sup>

The Shura of the North, the Mashhad Shura and the Rasool Shura do not recognise the authority of the Quetta Shura, of its shadow governors, military leaders and courts.

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<sup>2</sup> Interviews with six Taliban leaders and senior cadres from the Quetta Shura, 2015-16.

<sup>3</sup> Interviews with leaders and senior cadres associated with Obeidullah Ishaqzai, Serajudin Haqqani and the Quetta Shura, March, April and May 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

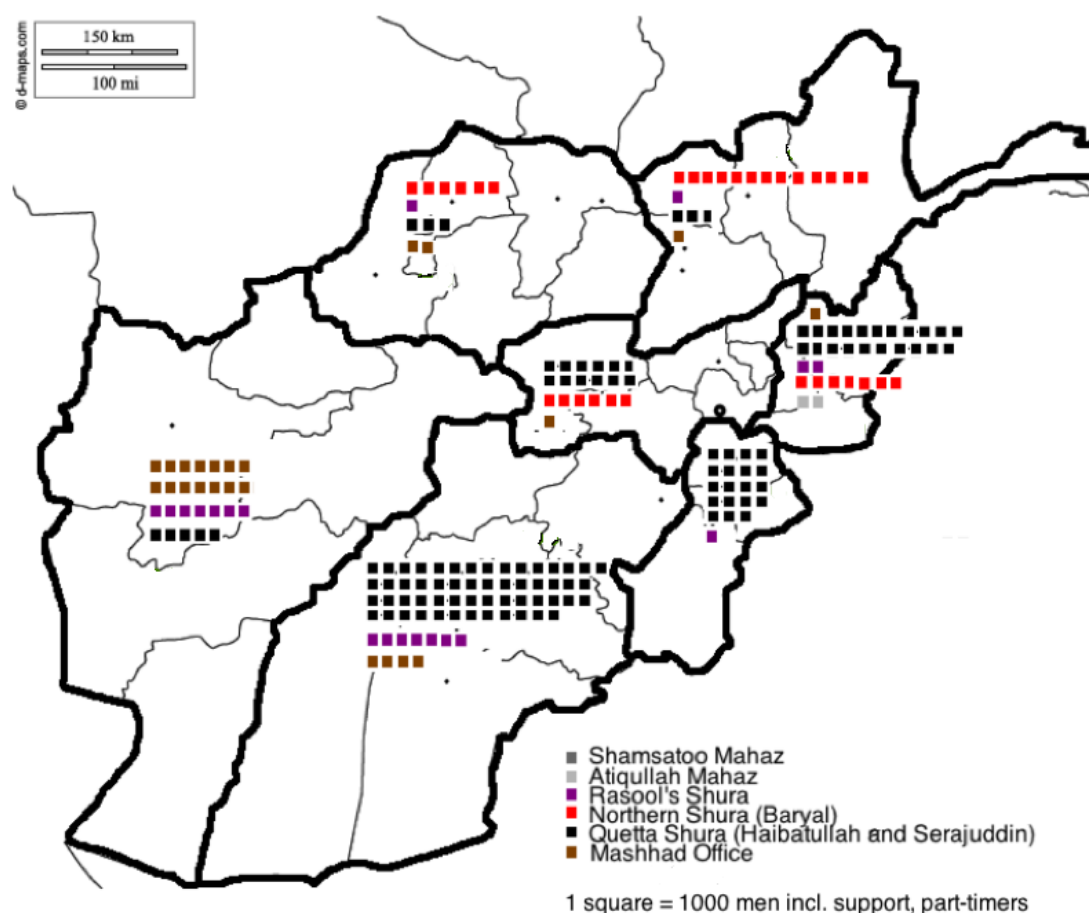
The Shura of the North claims authority over north-eastern Afghanistan and Kapisa, but is also expanding operations into Laghman, Nangarhar and northern Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup>

The Mashhad Shura claims authority over western Afghanistan (Herat, Badghis, Ghor, Nimruz and Farah) but is also expanding operations towards the south (Helmand, Kandahar, Zabul and Ghazni) and towards the north (Faryab, Jowzjan, Kunduz).<sup>6</sup>

The Rasool Shura claims authority over all of Afghanistan, but has a large following only in parts of western and southern Afghanistan, where the fronts of Obeidullah and Zakir cooperate with it.<sup>7</sup>

Map 1 illustrates the presence of the different shuras on the ground:

## 2.1 MAP 1: STRENGTH OF THE TALIBAN SHURAS BY REGION



Source: Antonio Giustozzi 2017

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. and interview with senior cadre of Shura of the North, March 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Each shura in turn is in practice a coalition of different groups or fronts of Taliban, each with his leader. These groups and fronts are able to switch between shuras, and they have been doing that rather frequently in recent years. The entire Shura of the North (formed end 2015) is for example a coalition of groups that once belonged to the Peshawar Shura. Only the Miran Shah Shura is a homogeneous entity, under completely unified leadership (the Haqqani network). Much of the power and notoriety that the Miran Shah Shura/Haqqani network has been acquiring over the years derives from its internal coherence and discipline.<sup>8</sup>

Informal power networks are also important within the Taliban. Not all leaders and shura members are equally important or powerful. Some individuals who have access to funding or the backing of foreign intelligence agencies, particularly when these agencies belong to the country hosting the Taliban, have power which is disproportionate to their real personal following. At present the dominant individuals within the Taliban are:

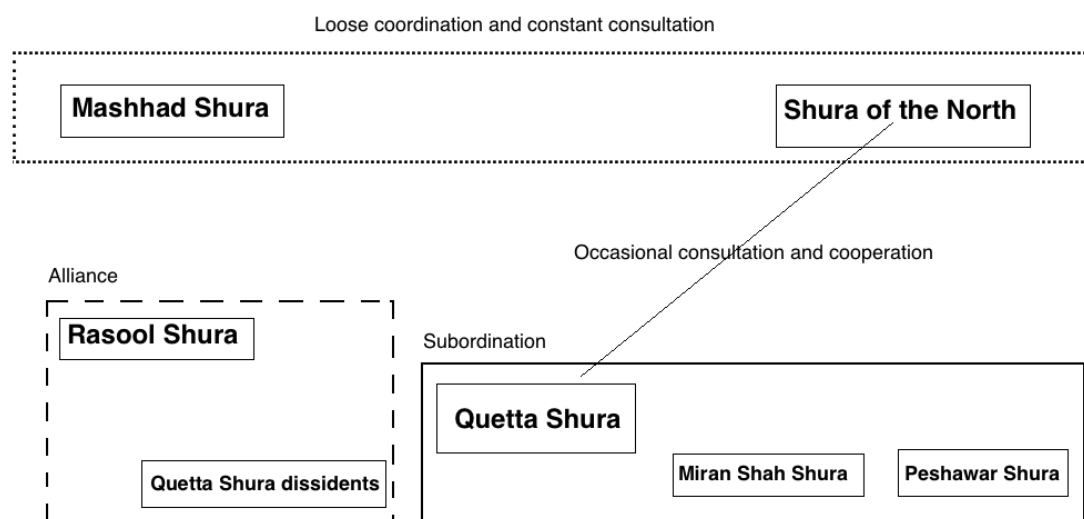
- Serajuddin Haqqani: despite being only the deputy of the Quetta Shura, as well as the head of the Miran Shah Shura, Serajuddin controls all the key commissions of the Quetta Shura, starting from the Finance and Military Commissions, and has placed his brother Khalil at the top of the Peshawar Shura as well.
- Qari Baryal: de facto ‘owns’ the Shura of the North, which he founded, and controls most of the money flowing into it.
- Obeidullah Ishaqzai: controls the treasure accumulated by his cousin Akhtar Mohammad Mansur during the years when he was in power in the Quetta Shura (2010-16), whether as de facto leader or as Amir, and has the support of the Ishaqzai tribe, possibly the best represented of all tribes within the Taliban.
- Haibatullah Akhund: The nominal leader of the Taliban derives his personal power mainly from his direct and close relations with Iran and Russia.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Claudio Franco and Antonio Giustozzi, ‘Revolution in the Counter-Revolution: Efforts to Centralize the Taliban’s Military Leadership’, *Central Asian Affairs* 3 (2016) 249-286.

<sup>9</sup> See Note 3 above.

## 2.2 FIGURE 1: THE TALIBAN’S SHURAS AND THEIR INTERACTION AT LEADERSHIP LEVEL



Source: Antonio Giustozzi 2017

## 3. TALIBAN FRAGMENTATION

The fragmentation of the Taliban started in 2007, when the Miran Shura, better known as Haqqani network, declared its autonomy from the Quetta Shura. The Miran Shah Shura only rejoined the Quetta Shura in August 2015. In 2009 it was the turn of the Peshawar Shura to declare its autonomy, which was only rescinded at the end of 2016 (due to the financial bankruptcy of the Peshawar Shura).<sup>10</sup>

These two ‘declarations of autonomy’ were re-absorbed in 2015-16, but in the meanwhile other segments of the Taliban had rejected the authority of the Quetta Shura leadership. One major factor of this gradual fragmentation was the disappearance of Mullah Omar, who after 2008 was not seen in public anymore. Year 2010 brought a major acceleration in the fragmentation of the Taliban, due to the detention of Mullah Baradar, technically deputy of the Amir al Muminun, Mullah Omar, and in practice the actual leader of the Quetta Shura. The need to replace Baradar gave rise to a series of rivalries among prospective leaders, which continues to this day. For years the two main rivals for the succession to Baradar were Akhtar Mohammad Mansur, an influential political leader who also played some military role, and Abdul Qayum Zakir, a military leader of rising importance.<sup>11</sup>

Nowadays Mansur is dead and Zakir has lost much of his influence after clashing with Saudi donors to the Taliban in 2014, then accepting Iranian patronage, and breaking up with the Iranians as well in 2016. Zakir is struggling now to raise funds for expanding his own front, and holds no official position within any of the Taliban’s shuras. Instead a three-way struggle is going on for the control of the Quetta Shura,

<sup>10</sup> Franco and Giustozzi, cit.; contacts with Peshawar Shura and Quetta Shura cadres, December 2016 and January 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Franco and Giustozzi, cit.

featuring Haibatullah Akhund, selected as ‘Amir ul Muminin’ or leader of the Taliban in May 2016, Obeidullah Ishaqzai, cousin of Akhtar Mohammad Mansur, and Serajuddin Haqqani, leader of the Miran Shah Shura, who was appointed deputy of the Quetta Shura in August 2015, when the two shuras reunified.<sup>12</sup>

Haibatullah Akhund temporarily bailed out of the race, reportedly seeking refuge in Iran in early May 2017 fearing arrest by the Pakistani authorities. He returned only towards the end of July 2017, after protracted negotiations, which ended successfully at the beginning of July. In Iran he was said by Taliban sources to be trying to set up his own shura, aiming to compete with the Quetta Shura, but his efforts were not successful. Haibatullah enjoys Iranian and Russian support and the Mashhad Shura bowed to his leadership, but no other shura recognizes his authority at the moment. As discussed above, in terms of power rankings among Taliban leaders he probably ranked only fourth in May 2017. He might well end up as de facto leader of the Mashhad Shura and no more than that.<sup>13</sup>

In mid-May Serajuddin declared Haibatullah ‘dead’ in order to have a formal justification for assuming full control of the Quetta Shura as acting leader; in this position he will be able to manipulate the process of selection of the next leader, a position to which he aspires. Obeidullah Ishaqzai was the most popular challenger he faced at the time of writing in June 2017, but the two men might reach a power-sharing agreement before the contest is organized in the coming months.<sup>14</sup>

Even before Haibatullah’s departure in May 2017, Serajuddin had the support of half of the Leadership Council (Rahbari Shura) and Obeidullah counted on the support of another quarter. The Miran Shah Shura fully supports Serajuddin, while 60 % of the leadership council of Peshawar also supported Serajuddin. It seems clear that Serajuddin might well be able to seize the leadership position in a ‘party congress’ where around 2,000 top Taliban leaders and senior cadres should be called to vote, assuming he will enjoy the support of the Quetta Shura’s main external patrons, the Pakistani authorities.<sup>15</sup>

Haibatullah’s main policy lines have been:

- to fight actively the competition of the Islamic State,
- to leave the door open to possible negotiations with Kabul but without acknowledging this openly in order to avoid controversy within the Taliban,
- to expand the non-military activities of the Taliban,
- to seek reunification of the Taliban through a tolerant and decentralized style of leadership,
- to downgrade relations with global jihad groups such as Al-Qai’da and the Central Asian and Chinese jihadists,

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<sup>12</sup> See Note 3 above and Farrell and Semple, cit.

<sup>13</sup> Contact with Mashhad Shura cadre and with Quetta Shura cadre, May 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Contact with Quetta Shura cadre, May 2017; interview with close collaborator of Serajuddin Haqqani, May 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Contact with Peshawar Shura cadre, March 2017; contact with Quetta Shura cadre, December 2016.

- to seek funding and alliance beyond the traditional main supporters of the Quetta Shura (Pakistan and Saudi Arabia).<sup>16</sup>

By contrast both Obeidullah and Serajuddin have:

- opposed reconciliation talks with Kabul and advocated jihad until victory,
- favoured coexistence or even an alliance with the Islamic State and other global jihad groups, particularly Central Asian and Chinese ones,
- opposed Haibatullah's openings to Iran and Russia.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, Serajuddin favours a centralized, militarist approach and opposes spending large amounts of cash on non-military structures such as courts, clinics, etc. Obeidullah is less military oriented than Serajuddin and it is quite possible that his opposition to reconciliation might be an opportunistic statement of a candidate to the leadership position; he does not oppose funding for non-military activities. It is unlikely that Obeidullah as a leader could organize a serious military campaign without placing somebody like Serajuddin or his ally Zakir in charge of it, because he lacks military experience (like Haibatullah does, and was severely criticized for).<sup>18</sup>

Some of the Taliban shuras and loose networks coordinate operations and share information with each other:

- The Shura of the North cooperates on and off with the Quetta Shura and with the Mashhad Shura and maintains cordial relations with the Rasool Shura;
- the Mashhad Shura cooperates with the Shura of the North (not always) and in 2016 started coordinating with the Quetta Shura, although this is now coming to a halt after Haibatullah fled to Iran;
- the Rasool Shura collaborates with the fronts of Obeidullah and Zakir (technically part of the Quetta Shura) and on and off with the Shura of the North as well.<sup>19</sup>

There is still only one Taliban propaganda office, under the Quetta Shura. It publishes reports from all the shuras that maintain relations with Quetta: Miran Shah, Peshawar, Shura of the North and recently Mashhad Shura as well (it had been ostracized in 2014-16); never the Rasool Shura. The political statements released by the propaganda office all come from the Quetta Shura, usually after consultations with the other shuras, but not necessarily. Other shuras might well not feel bound by them. The 2017 strategy of the Taliban, announced on the web site, was for the example the work of Amir Haibatullah, and stressed mainly non-military aims:

- 'establishing mechanisms for social justice and development'

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with close collaborator of Haibatullah, October 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Obeidullah's associate, January 2017; interviews with close collaborators of Serajuddin Haqqani, May 2016 and May 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with senior cadre of Shura of the North, March 2017; interview with senior member of the Rasool Shura, September 2016.

- ‘institutions will be erected’
- ‘special dawah [proselytizing Islam] and propagation apparatus will be set up’.

In practice, as discussed below, large parts of the Taliban were indifferent if not hostile to the non-military efforts of the Taliban. Most military coordination and cooperation happened at the operational level, not at the tactical or strategic ones, and had to be negotiated ad hoc. In the north-east in 2017, for example, large-scale attacks were all joint operations between the Quetta Shura and the Shura of the North. But the Mashhad Shura completely ignored the strategic objectives set by the Quetta Shura, and even the Northern Shura only followed them when it suited its own aims.<sup>20</sup>

In 2015-17 armed clashes between the forces of the Rasool Shura and of the Quetta Shura have been frequent, with significant loss of life. After the Rasool Shura turned away from Iranian support in the summer of 2016, clashes started also with the forces of the Mashhad Shura. The disappearance in Pakistan of Mullah Rasool in June 2016, who was key to Iran’s support for the Shura, led to a complete realignment, with Arab Gulf sources of funding stepping in. The Rasool Shura is often accused by other Taliban, particularly in the Quetta Shura, of colluding with Afghan government forces. Taliban sources more sympathetic to the Rasool Shura indicate that the relatively weak Rasool Shura needed to avoid being caught between two fires and signed local agreements with Afghan government forces where it was under greatest pressure. There were also efforts by the Afghan security services to infiltrate the Rasool Shura and foster intra-Taliban infighting, sometimes successfully.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4. THE SIZE OF THE TALIBAN

The total manpower of the Taliban, including combatants and support elements, exceeds 200,000. The fighters are about 150,000, of whom around 60,000 are in full-time, mobile units and the rest are local militias. The mobile units are mostly based in Pakistan and Iran and deploy to Afghanistan during the fighting season, in part for logistical reasons and also because many fighters have family in those countries. The Taliban have moved many of their assets into Afghanistan, including offices, training camps and even stockpiles, so they are increasingly able to keep large numbers of mobile forces inside Afghanistan even during winter. Because of the leave system (Taliban fighters are entitled to 3 months of leave a year) and because some forces are always kept in reserve, rarely if ever the number of full-time mobile Taliban deployed inside Afghanistan exceeds 40,000 at the peak of the fighting season.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Contacts with sources in the Shuras of Quetta, Mashhad and of the north, June and July 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with close collaborator of Haibatullah, October 2016; contacts with Taliban cadre in Quetta Shura throughout 2016 and first half of 2017.

<sup>22</sup> These estimates are based on a reconciliation of ISAF’s estimates of the full time fighters deployed to Afghanistan in various years, the Afghan National Directorate of Security’s estimate of Taliban strength, and the Taliban’s own assessment of their manpower.

The local militias are found in communities which have close relations to the Taliban; this can fluctuate as a community can opt out of supporting the Taliban, or join in at any time. Recently (2016-17), for example, the Shura of the North co-opted several communities in Baghlan, while several tribes withdrew their militias from the ranks of the Miran Shah Shura in Loya Paktia.<sup>23</sup>

The large majority of the members of Taliban are still Pashtuns, although there is a growing minority of Tajiks, Uzbeks, Baluchis, and even several hundred Hazara members and even fighters (including Shia's) are with them now. These join mostly due to local infighting. In some areas the Taliban are already predominantly non-Pashtuns, as they draw recruits from the local population. This is the case of Badakhshan, for example. Most non-Pashtun Taliban are found in the ranks of the Shura of the North and of the Mashhad Shura, where Tajiks in a number of cases play prominent roles. The Miran Shah Shura is the only one that explicitly bans the recruitment of Shi'as in its ranks; all other shuras have some Shi'as in the ranks, usually local militias operating at the southern fringes of Hazarajat. Most Shi'as are found in the Mashhad Shura and in the Quetta Shura, although the rising power of Serajuddin Haqqani in Quetta is driving many Shi'as of the Quetta Shura to transfer their allegiance to the more sympathetic Mashhad Shura.<sup>24</sup> The presence of Shi'as in the ranks of the Taliban is in decline due to the emergence of Iran-linked militia formations, which take over the task of protecting exposed Shi'a communities.

The fighters of the Taliban are typically young, 16-25 years old. Anybody with some skills or charisma would be promoted during his twenties, and become team commander. In 2015-17 there has been a shift away from local militias, towards mobile, full time forces, which tend to be recruited more in line with official Taliban rules (i.e. no under-age recruitment). Many fighters tend to quit the Taliban once they get married and have children, because of the risk involved; they can usually quit without problems if their commanders agree with their request (usually reported to the Taliban command as 'family reasons'). Others of course die. The casualty rate of the Taliban is today significantly lower than at the peak of western intervention in Afghanistan in 2010-13, but casualties are more concentrated among the mobile units, which bear the brunt of the fighting nowadays. Physical fitness is a factor that prevents most fighters from staying in combat groups after the age of 30: a lot of running is required for the average Taliban fighter to stay alive.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with senior Haqqani network figure, May 2017; Interview with senior cadre of Shura of the North, March 2017; interviews with elders and Taliban commanders in multiple locations, 2015-16.

<sup>24</sup> Interviews with Taliban cadres and leaders of all the shuras, 2015-16; interviews with Taliban commanders in multiple locations, 2015-16.

<sup>25</sup> Interviews with former Taliban commanders, 2015-2016; interviews with community elders, 2015-16.

## 5. THE SHADOW STRUCTURE

The Taliban does not have a unified shadow government; the Quetta Shura and the Rasool Shura both run separate governance systems (pretty weak and limited in the case of the latter), while the Miran Shah runs its own system only nominally under the supervision of the Quetta Shura. The Mashhad Shura up to now has not been doing governance at all. These three (or four if we count Miran Shah as separate) governance systems are organised in rather similar ways.<sup>26</sup>

The Taliban's shadow government is in principle mimicking the Kabul government's structure; hence the Taliban have a power distribution department even if all it does is collect payments for electricity delivered by Kabul's power department. The Agriculture Commission for example is largely idle, and its staff members reportedly are assigned other tasks, such as writing up threat letters on behalf of the Taliban's intelligence department.<sup>27</sup> Only relatively few of the Taliban's Commissions and Departments therefore have genuine activities inside Afghanistan:

- The Local Commissions (Quetta Shura, Rasool Shura) manage provincial and district governors, who have a mixed military and governance role. It is mostly district governors who handle day to day relations with community elders, whereas provincial governors are busy with more military-oriented tasks.
- The Justice Commissions (Quetta Shura, Rasool Shura, Shura of the North) manage systems of courts, active in many of Afghanistan's districts.
- The Education Commissions (Quetta Shura, Northern Shura, Rasool Shura) fund and manage a network of madrasas in Afghanistan, deploy cadres to monitor the activities of state schools, pay teachers to carry out propaganda work for the Taliban, etc.
- The Health Commission (Quetta Shura): Apart from supporting the Taliban combat units with medics and doctors, it also maintains some clinics which are open to villagers as well. The Health Commissions of the other shuras have not opened their clinics to the public yet.
- The Companies Commissions (Quetta Shura, Rasool Shura, Northern Shura) tax all economic activities.
- The NGO Commissions (Quetta Shura, Rasool Shura) regulate humanitarian and development access.
- The Ulema Commissions (Quetta Shura, Rasool Shura): Apart from advising the Taliban's leaders, they pay salaries to pro-Taliban clerics, who preach in favour of the Taliban.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with senior cadre of Shura of the North, February 2017; interview with close collaborator of Helmand governor, February 2017; interview with Miran Shah Shura cadres, 2015-16.

<sup>27</sup> Contacts with Quetta and Miran Shah Shura cadres, various occasions, 2016-17.

<sup>28</sup> Interviews and contacts with senior cadres of the commissions, Quetta, Miran Shah and Peshawar, 2015-17; A. Giustozzi and Claudio Franco, 'The Ongoing Battle for the Schools: Uprisings, Negotiations and Taleban Tactics', Berlin; Afghanistan Analyst Network, 2013; A. Giustozzi, C. Franco and A. Bazko] 'Shadow justice: how the Taliban run their judiciary', Kabul: Integrity Watch Afghanistan, 2013.

The spread of the Taliban's governance system unsurprisingly tends to follow rather closely the spread of the military forces of the Taliban. Some groups of Taliban do not believe much in governance and tend to invest less in it, or nothing at all. They have been arguing particularly after the withdrawal of most western troops at the end of 2014 that the Taliban should invest all their resources in the military effort and end the conflict as quickly as possible.<sup>29</sup>

Apart from the above-mentioned Mashhad Shura, the list of disbelievers in governance includes the Miran Shah Shura and the Haqqani network (which also deploys away from the areas under the Miran Shah Shura), the front of Abdul Qayum Zakir, and some groups of hardline Taliban in eastern Afghanistan.<sup>30</sup>

As of mid-2017, the Taliban's governance system was stronger in north-eastern and southern Afghanistan; in the east and in Kabul's region it used to be strong too, but declined from 2015 onwards due to the financial crisis of the Peshawar Shura. The Quetta Shura has only taken over the Peshawar Shura in autumn 2016 and is still in the process of synchronising what is left of the old governance system of the Peshawar Shura with its own.<sup>31</sup>

The Taliban's governance system was originally rolled out in remote areas, but has in recent years been extended to more heavily populated areas as the territory controlled by the Afghan government has been shrinking after 2015. At present over 20 district centres are administered by the Taliban, who have taken over the town administrations with the officials who stayed in places and replacing those who fled with their own appointees, under a Taliban major. Among the most important towns and bazaars controlled by the Taliban are Musa Qala and Sangin in Helmand.<sup>32</sup>

The Taliban's shadow government has limited activities in some cities, such as Kabul, Jalalabad and Khost. Activities are usually limited to the Companies Commissions and the NGO Commissions, which have cadres in charge of collecting payments and of inspecting NGO/humanitarian projects when required. In some cases Taliban shadow governance operatives might be based in the cities, but do not deliver 'services' there.<sup>33</sup>

The role of the Taliban's 'political police' in enforcing governance is not discussed here, as it is dealt with in a separate report; *Landinfo report Afghanistan: Taliban's Intelligence and the intimidation campaign*.<sup>34</sup> However, policing is arguably an important aspect of Taliban governance. Criminal policing is carried out by ordinary local Taliban militias, under the authority of the chief of security, who responds to the shadow governor, and under the guidance of the Taliban judges. Investigative activities are carried out by the shadow judges, as Taliban commanders and fighters have no capacity in this regard. 'Political policing' is instead carried out by both ordinary Taliban units, who patrol villages and set up checkpoints on the roads, and

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<sup>29</sup> Contacts with Quetta Shura cadres, 2015-16.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with senior cadre of Shura of the North, February 2017; interview with close collaborator of Helmand governor, February 2017; interviews with Taliban cadres in eastern Afghanistan, summer 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. and contacts with cadres in the Quetta Shura, March 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with close collaborator of Helmand governor, February 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Contacts with cadres in the Quetta Shura, Peshawar Shura and Miran Shah Shura, April 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Published on [www.landinfo.no](http://www.landinfo.no) on 23 August 2017.

by specialised underground units, operating under the orders of the intelligence departments of the Military Commissions.<sup>35</sup>

## 6. COMMAND AND CONTROL

The Taliban has a convoluted command and control system, which also varies from shura to shura.

In the Quetta Shura there are now two parallel command and control systems.

- One is controlled ultimately by the Rahbari Shura through the Local Commission; on the ground the shadow governors are the main agents of this system. The provincial shadow governors concentrated in their hands control all the non-military activities of the Taliban, as well as the local Taliban militias.
- The other command and control system is controlled by the Military Commission, which runs all the mobile forces of the Quetta Shura Taliban. These forces are of two types. The first type is ‘owned’ by the Military Commission and completely controlled by it. These units are controlled centrally and allocated to different provinces depending on the Military Commission’s plans and assessments. The second type is semi-autonomous fronts (Loy Mahaz), with their own leaders and chain of command. These fronts coordinate with the Military Commission, which has to negotiate with them their deployment and participation in the operations it plans.<sup>36</sup>

Under the Miran Shura, as a heritage of the time when it was autonomous from Quetta, the system is different. There is no Military Commission and no Local Commission; the governors are controlled by the Local Commission in Quetta, but do not have any control over the Haqqanis’ local militias. Instead the Miran Shah Shura has four commissions that do the job of respectively managing the local militias, the mobile units, the ‘special forces’ (complex attacks teams), and the mine campaign.<sup>37</sup>

The Rasool Shura has a system similar to that of the Quetta Shura, but independent of it.<sup>38</sup>

The Shura of the North and the Mashhad Shura instead have a single chain of command, in which all units – regardless whether local militias or full-time mobile forces – are under the control of the Military Commission. The governors who operate in areas under the control or influence of these two shuras are appointed by the Quetta

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<sup>35</sup> Giustozzi, Franco and Bacsko, cit.

<sup>36</sup> Franco and Giustozzi, cit.; interview with close collaborator of Serajudin Haqqani, May 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with senior member of Rasool Shura, September 2016.

Shura and by the Rasool Shura. They are mostly tolerated, but they have no power over the forces of these two shuras.<sup>39</sup>

The shadow governors always have some armed groups under them, even in areas dominated by the Mashhad Shura or the Northern Shura. This accounts for much of the territorial overlap between Quetta Shura, the Rasool Shura and other shuras as shown in Map 1.<sup>40</sup>

There are some loose Taliban fronts which do not respond to any chain of command and control except their own; the main examples are the fronts of Obeidullah and Zakir, mainly operating in southern and western Afghanistan. Some Taliban fronts have been ‘captured’ by other organizations in full or in part, like the organization Dost Mohammad Mahaz in Eastern Afghanistan, which after the death of Dost Mohammed in 2013 and the loss of funding that followed, has been practically taken over by Al-Qai’da.<sup>41</sup> There are also groups of ‘free Taliban’ who are only concerned with their villages and do not recognise any superior leadership.<sup>42</sup>

As a result of the fragmentation described above, there are also several ‘codes of conduct’ circulating, depending on the shura. They are reportedly similar to each other and try to regulate Taliban behaviour, in particular preventing arbitrary violence and abusive behaviour.<sup>43</sup>

The degree to which the codes of conduct are known and respected varies depending on the attitude of individual commanders. The Taliban leadership in general insists that the commanders should spend time familiarising the fighters with the code of conduct, but spot interviews in various locations suggest that although the average fighter is aware of the existence of a code of conduct, he is usually only vaguely aware of its content. One problem the Taliban have faced in spreading knowledge of the code of conduct is that many Taliban commanders are illiterate or have poor literacy skills and hence cannot read and absorb the text themselves, let alone spread it to the bulk of the fighters.<sup>44</sup>

Taliban and community elders, when asked about respect for the code of conduct among the Taliban, could indicate cases of Taliban fighters and commanders or cadres punished for having violated the rules. However, they could also cite episodes of Taliban getting away with obvious violations of the code without being detected. Given the decentralised character of most Taliban operations, the leadership inevitably struggles to enforce rules on its forces. The expectation that villagers would report

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with senior cadre of Shura of the North, February 2017; interview with cadre of Mashhad Shura, June 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Interviews with Taliban commanders and governors, 2013-16.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with close collaborator of Helmand governor, February 2017; interview with Al Qai’da cadre, May 2017.

<sup>42</sup> A. Giustozzi, ‘The splintering Taliban: examining the proliferation of dissident factions in Afghanistan’, *Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor*, 6 March 2015.

<sup>43</sup> See Kate Clark, *The Layha: Calling the Taleban to Account*, AAN Thematic Report 6/2011, (Kabul, Berlin: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2011); Thomas Johnson and Matt Dupee, ‘Analysing the new Taleban Code of Conduct (Layha): an assessment of changing perspectives and strategies of the Afghan Taleban’, *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 31 issue 1, 2012, 77-91; Yoshinobu Nagamine, ‘The Legitimization Strategy of the Taliban's Code of Conduct: Through the One-Way Mirror’, Palgrave MacMillan, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Interviews with Taliban commanders, 2013-15; A. Giustozzi and A. Baczko, ‘The Politics of the Taliban's Shadow Judiciary, 2003-2013’, *Central Asian Affairs*, 1 – 2014.

Taliban abuses to the Taliban courts or to governors and military commissioners is rarely met, because villagers are afraid of criticising the Taliban. Abuses such as arbitrary, ‘extra-judicial’ executions are still being reported, as are violations of agreements with NGOs, unregulated use of mines, sale of weapons on the black market, embezzlement of taxes collected on behalf of the Taliban, extortion for personal gain, and even theft. No complaints about sexual abuse of girls was reported, however.<sup>45</sup>

The punishment of those Taliban caught breaking rules is rarely communicated to the villagers. Some cases of executions are reported, but mostly the Taliban culprits would be taken away to Pakistan and never be heard of again, or resurfacing after years.<sup>46</sup>

The fragmentation of the Taliban has made enforcing rules among the Taliban harder; individuals and groups sanctioned by one shura might join a rival shura.

## 7. TALIBAN’S RELATIONSHIP WITH LOCALS

The Taliban employ a mix of coercion and co-optation to woo local support. Elements hostile to the Taliban and government collaborators are usually warned to mend their ways or cooperate with the Taliban; after a minimum of three warnings the Taliban might include them in their black lists for targeting. The killing of hostile elements and collaborators has an exemplary and intimidatory function: the Taliban do not allocate sufficient resources to target all the people who they classify as collaborators (of whom there are close to 1 million), but are clearly trying to subvert the central government by spreading fear and are also trying to convince people to choose the smoother path of collaborating with the Taliban.<sup>47</sup>

The Taliban know that they cannot compete with the Afghan government in the delivery of services and economic development to the population. There are segments of the population, particularly in remote areas, that have either been excluded from any positive fall-out of international intervention in Afghanistan after 2001, or see the fall-out in negative terms. However, the bulk of the population in areas that have benefited from the spreading wealth in 2002-14 sees the Taliban as a potential threat, that could interrupt access to this wealth. Without an at least implicit threat of coercion, the Taliban could not have asserted their social control measures. The need for Taliban coercion was reduced after 2014, as the government lost some of its ability (direct or indirect) to deliver economic growth and services to the population.<sup>48</sup>

The local Taliban militias play a key role in linking the Taliban up with local communities. Typically, Taliban teams are recruited in the villages following agreements with local elders, mediated by the village’s mullah. The local Taliban are

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<sup>45</sup> Interviews with Taliban commanders, 2013-16; interviews with community elders, 2013-16; A. Giustozzi and A. Baczko, ‘The Politics of the Taliban’s Shadow Judiciary, 2003–2013’, *Central Asian Affairs*, 1 – 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> See separate *Landinfo* report *Afghanistan: Taliban’s Intelligence and the intimidation campaign*, published on [www.landinfo.no](http://www.landinfo.no) 23 August 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Interviews with community elders, 2013-16.

influenced by the elders, but respond to the Taliban's governor. The presence of local Taliban in a village represents a source of protection against marauding gangs, abusive foreign fighters and out-of-area Taliban, and gives the village elders some say with the Taliban governor. The Taliban leadership reserves the right to select the commanders of these militias, and the mullahs represent the Taliban's interests at the local level.<sup>49</sup>

Despite efforts by the Taliban to make sure that the local Taliban militias respond to them, undoubtedly the local Taliban have often taken the side of the villagers vis-à-vis the foreign fighters and the out-of-area Taliban, for example by sheltering NGO projects or schools which were not abiding to Taliban rules. A post-2014 trend has been that Taliban leaders have increasingly transferred to the local Taliban the responsibility for laying mines, in order to minimize civilian casualties. This was reportedly the result of lobbying to community elders, but was also made possible by the fact that reliance on mines decreased dramatically after the withdrawal of the bulk of the western troops in 2014. When the Taliban have tried to rigidly impose their rules concerning NGOs and humanitarian access, relations with the local communities have often been compromised. This is the case most noteworthy of several tribes in Loya Paktia in 2016-17 (Zazai, Mangal, Mandozai, Tanai, Khosti).<sup>50</sup>

According to Taliban rules, Military Commissioners and judges should not be recruited locally, but all other Taliban 'officials' are mostly recruited locally. This gives them local connections, but also involve them in local tribal and intra-communitarian disputes and feuds. The negative consequences of this practice increased as the Taliban fragmented internally; the decision of joining one or the other shura is often dictated by intra-Taliban tribal, community and personal rivalries.<sup>51</sup>

The attitude of the Taliban to local traditions and customs varies, but over time they have clearly tended to seek accommodation. In the judiciary, for example, it is now standard practice to let the elders try and sort out disputes and family issues according to local customs (such as Pashtunwali); only if they fail the Taliban intervene. It is not by chance that Salafi groups like the Islamic State criticise the Taliban for their 'impure' Islamic practices.<sup>52</sup>

Aside from co-opting communities, the Taliban also try to influence the population directly, particularly the young generation wherever they can. For this purpose, they recruit teachers in schools and in madrasas, on top of funding their own madrasas in the hundreds. They also pay mullahs in the mosques, while much of the efforts by the local Taliban militias is about influencing and controlling the population. Social media and internet are also used, but overall play a secondary or subsidiary role in the Taliban's propaganda campaign.<sup>53</sup>

Over the years the Taliban have relaxed their rules concerning women's freedom of movement and access to jobs. The Taliban now allow women to be employed as

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<sup>49</sup> Interviews with community elders, 2015-16; interviews with commanders and former commanders of Taliban militias, 2015-16.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. and interview with close collaborator of Serajuddin Haqqani, May 2017.

<sup>51</sup> Giustozzi and Baczko, cit.; Franco and Giustozzi, cit.

<sup>52</sup> Giustozzi, Franco and Baczko, cit.

<sup>53</sup> Interviews with Taliban student cadres, 2015; interviews with members of the Taliban's ulema commissions, 2015.

teachers, nurses and doctors, as long as they operate within the Taliban rules, which include gender segregation. Women should still always be accompanied by a family member while moving around. Girl's schools are now allowed as long as they meet strict Taliban conditions: gender segregation, no teaching of English, Taliban curriculum and textbooks, Taliban supervision.<sup>54</sup>

Some of the Taliban leaders seem to think that service delivery is a source of political legitimacy. Due to financial limitations, however, the Taliban delivers only very few services, with the exception of justice. The decision by Haibatullah Akhund in 2016 to open up Taliban clinics to the general population was only implemented in a haphazard way for lack of funding. There have been cases of Taliban taxing the local population for specific projects, such as road building. Taliban-provided education is limited to some hundred madrasas.<sup>55</sup>

Otherwise, the Taliban simply hijack government services, as in the case of education: Taliban impose their own curriculum, textbooks and teachers, while the government continues to pay salaries and all other expenses. The Taliban also stamp NGO and humanitarian agency projects with their seal of approval, often even sending their representatives to the inauguration of projects alongside government officials. The image of the Taliban as anti-developmental has been muted, therefore, but it still sticks to them as community elders are well aware of where the money comes from and fear funding would dry up if the Taliban were in full control.<sup>56</sup>

The Taliban impose control over population movement, because they are afraid of spying activity against them in areas where they are in control. Anybody visiting a remote area, or moving from a Taliban held area towards a government controlled area and coming back would be viewed with suspicion unless he previously reported his intention. He might be interrogated. If unlucky enough to travel near the time of a successful raid against the Taliban in the area, he would be at serious risk of being suspected of being a spy. Possession of radios and satellite phones would be considered incriminatory evidence.<sup>57</sup>

## 8. NEGOTIATIONS WITH KABUL

The propensity of the Taliban to negotiate with Kabul is probably at an all-time low. Haibatullah Akhund, approached by the Afghan government and by Chinese diplomats in late summer and autumn 2016, had signalled his interest in negotiations with Kabul, but his position within the Quetta Shura, already weak then, has weakened further since. Haibatullah is not now in a position to negotiate with Kabul and carry with him a significant number of Taliban towards a peace deal. Within the Taliban the mobile forces and their leaders tend to be opposed to reconciliation, in part because they

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<sup>54</sup> Giustozzi and Franco, cit.; interviews with members of the NGO commissions, 2015.

<sup>55</sup> Contact with cadre in Quetta Shura, December 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Giustozzi and Franco, cit.; interviews with members of the NGO commissions, 2015; meeting with foreign diplomat, Kabul, June 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Interviews with community elders, 2013-16.

traditionally recruit among the most hardline Taliban, and second because they feel that the conflict is turning to their advantage, if slowly. The perception of the Afghan government as weak and divided also discourages the Taliban from taking the prospect of negotiations seriously.<sup>58</sup>

There are a few exceptions to this pattern.

One is found among local Taliban militias, which have seen their funding cut because the military leadership of the Taliban is throwing more funds at its mobile forces. These are seen as more useful in the current stage of the conflict, which is essentially no longer one of guerrilla war. These local militias, embedded as they are in local communities, do not however need to reconcile formally with Kabul. They simply quit the Taliban.<sup>59</sup>

Another one is found among former members of Hizb-i Islami, who joined the Taliban mostly in 2005-2009. Now some groups of former Hizb-i Islami who joined the Taliban in eastern Afghanistan are considering the opportunities that the reconciliation of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his party could bring for them if they reconciled too; they are reportedly approaching Hekmatyar for this purpose.<sup>60</sup>

It is of course perfectly possible that reconciliation might come back in fashion in the future. A main driver of reconciliation would be Pakistani, Saudi or Iranian support for it; even this would only push towards reconciliation part of the Taliban, as others would resist it based on the different sources of support for the different shuras. Such a change of attitude is not very likely anyway in the current predicament, but the situation can always change. Another driver of reconciliation would be an improved performance of the military forces of the Kabul government, or the mobilisation of large warlord militias alongside the government forces. None of this seems about to happen.

## **9. CONCLUSION: TRENDS IN TALIBAN ORGANIZATIONAL EVOLUTION**

In recent years the Taliban have increasingly fragmented internally. The emergence of the Rasool Shura at the end of 2015 was particularly significant, because for the first time a group of dissident Taliban decided to wash the Taliban's dirty laundry in public, announcing the formation of a separate, rival entity.

The Taliban leadership has tried to fight back these centrifugal tendencies, and has scored some successes in this regard; the Miran Shah Shura and a downsized Peshawar Shura (the first two shuras to question the primacy of the Quetta Shura) have been

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with close collaborator of Haibatullah, September 2016; contacts with Quetta Shura cadres, 2016-17; interview with close collaborator of Serajuddin Haqqani, May 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with close collaborator of Serajuddin Haqqani, May 2017.

<sup>60</sup> Contact with senior member of Hizb-i Islami, May 2017; contact with Taliban cadre in Shura of the North, May 2017.

brought back to the fold, although at the price of giving to the leader of the Miran Shah Shura, Serajuddin Haqqani, a predominant share of power in Quetta.

Nonetheless, fragmentation is likely to have become a permanent state of the Taliban, making the way the Taliban functions very convoluted and chaotic. For the Taliban, this internal fragmentation means that they are not able to deploy a coherent strategy; in fact, often different Taliban shuras work against each other. When they cooperate in large-scale operations, it is mostly the result of negotiations and ad hoc agreements, sometimes lengthy negotiations. The Taliban's military effort has certainly been weakened.

The almost permanent Taliban offensive against Afghan government forces has been burning substantial financial resources, forcing the Quetta Shura to cut the budget of the Commissions not directly linked to the military effort. The increasing power of Serajuddin Haqqani, who is sceptical of non-military efforts, is another factor. Taliban governance efforts as a result seem to be past their peak, although they have by no means been completely abandoned.

The Taliban's judiciary grew somewhat more accommodating of local traditions and views in recent years, although it remains to be seen what kind of impact the rising power of Serajuddin Haqqani might have in this regard. In general, the same trend towards a degree of accommodation can be seen in several fields: from a violent campaign against schools, towards a focus on co-opting educational staff; from the rejection of all aid and development altogether, to the establishment of a framework for allowing access. The Taliban have also tried to reduce their own arbitrary violence, imposing rules on the use of mines and on the punishment of prisoners. All these efforts are however complicated and lose much of their effectiveness because of the Taliban's fragmentation, with some of the shuras not recognising the judgements of the judges of other shuras, for example.

The future prospects of the Taliban from the organizational point of view are necessarily a matter of speculation. It seems however likely that the succession to Haibatullah at the top of the Quetta Shura, when it will be finally engineered, could result in the inclusion of the Quetta Shura dissidents (Obeidullah and Zakir) and perhaps of the Rasool Shura. This is already the main debate going on in Quetta. Depending on the funding available and other dynamics among donors to the Taliban, who are now a very heterogeneous lot, there might also be a possibility of co-opting the Shura of the North towards some formal acceptance of the new Amir al Muminin.

Still it is likely that new splits and visions will emerge in the future, incentivised by offers of foreign support. The pattern has been one of centrifugal and centripetal tendencies alternating for years, but tendentially with the former becoming stronger and stronger.

The Taliban do not need to entertain friendly relations with the communities as much as they did when they were fighting a guerrilla war against a vastly superior coalition of western forces, particularly in areas where they are not challenged by rival insurgents like the Islamic State or by pro-government groups. Only those Taliban leaders who consider the possibility of a transition of the Taliban from insurgent movement to political party keep advocating greater investment in non-military activities. The shadow governors are on the other hand able to play a greater role today than at the peak of ISAF's kill and capture campaign of 2007-2013, when they were driven completely underground.

If the fragmentation of the Taliban has affected their ability to act cohesively in a negative way, it has also facilitated their penetration of Afghan society and their overall expansion, for at least two reasons:

- The different shuras of the Taliban are able to adapt to their operational environment more easily as they are free of unsuitable diktats coming from the top leadership; a good example is the Shura of the North, which has gone further than most Taliban leaders would have liked in empowering Tajik Taliban, a precondition of its success in establishing a solid foothold in north-eastern Afghanistan.
- Competing donors try to outmatch each other's offers to Taliban leaders in groups in order to secure their loyalty, leading to an overall increase in funding accruing to the Taliban.

Finally, the prospects of Taliban starting a serious reconciliation process with Kabul are as dim as ever. The last leader to have seriously invested in trying to get that going was killed in a US drone strike (Akhtar Mohammad Mansur, May 2016). The strongman of the Quetta Shura, Serajuddin Haqqani, is resolutely opposed to reconciliation. It is far from impossible, however, that things might change again in the future and a leader more inclined towards peace talks might emerge.