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Immigration and
Refugee Board of Canada

Commission de l'immigration
et du statut de réfugié du Canada

Afghanistan: Whether the Taliban has the capacity to pursue individuals after they relocate to another region; their capacity to track individuals over the long term; Taliban capacity to carry out targeted killings (2012-January 2016) [AFG105412.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Structure of the Taliban

According to a 2012 report on Taliban networks in Afghanistan published by Dr. Antonio Giustozzi, a research fellow at the London School of Economics who focuses on Afghanistan, the Taliban is "the largest opposition armed group in Afghanistan" and accounts for over 80 percent of insurgents (2012, 20). According to sources, the Taliban is headed by Mullah Mansour, with a command structure of two deputies, one of whom leads the Haqqani Network [1] (Assistant Professor 15 Jan. 2016; BBC 23 Sept. 2015). Falling immediately under this level of command is the *Rahbari Shura* [also called the *Quetta Shura*], an 18-member leadership council, mainly composed of Pashtuns from southern regions (ibid.). The leadership council oversees approximately a dozen commissions or Taliban ministries (ibid.). The "military commission" is responsible for insurgency operations, and "on the ground," the insurgency is operated through a network of regional commanders and shadow governors in the provinces (ibid.). Giustozzi also describes the Taliban as "a network of networks," being predominantly religious and tribal in nature, and led by local commanders known as mullahs (2012, 20-21).

Sources report that since 2015, the Taliban has fragmented into factions over disputes about leadership succession following the death of the former head of the Taliban, Mullah Omar (Assistant Professor 16 Jan. 2016; US 22 Dec. 2015, 18). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, an analyst affiliated with the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), an Afghanistan-based independent policy research organization, explained that the conflict dynamics have become multi-layered as armed groups have fragmented and have competing agendas; civilians are increasingly targeted as a way for multiple armed opposition groups to signal strength or control over an area (AAN 20 Jan. 2016).

For further background information on the structure and intelligence capabilities of the Taliban up to 2011, please refer to Response to Information Request AFG103923.

2. Intelligence Gathering and Ability to Track and Pursue Individuals

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a professor, who is the Director of the Program for Culture and Conflict at the Naval Postgraduate School in California, [2] and who, for three decades, has been conducting and publishing research on Afghanistan and South Asia, explained that the Taliban may be able to find a person who relocates to a different area, and that they have been successful in doing so, particularly when targeting their "well known or well positioned opponents" (Professor 13 Jan. 2016). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an assistant professor at the Institute of National Security and Counterterrorism at Syracuse University, who has published work on post-conflict reconstruction and terrorism in Afghanistan, gave the view that the Taliban generally has the capability to track individuals, through the use of "formal and informal communication" networks to obtain information about a person's whereabouts (Assistant Professor 15 Jan. 2016).

The Professor explained that the Taliban has shadow governors and military commanders in almost all provinces; communication and information-sharing between the command structure is likely, including in efforts to obtain information about a person's background (Professor 22 Jan. 2016). Additionally, there may be communication between mullahs and the shadow governors, particularly in the southern regions, who serve as a source for information (ibid.). The AAN analyst explained that there is some coordination between higher levels within the Taliban, but that information being fed back up from local levels is "not done in a systematic way" and that local level Taliban have a lot of "discretionary power" when carrying out their activities (20 Jan. 2016). The Professor similarly explained that command and control can vary with regional commanders in some areas; for example, in Arghandab, local commanders have a "free hand" with only a small number of fighters and little relationship with the Quetta Shura Taliban leadership, while in other areas, such as Helmand, there is tight command and control over the area (Professor 22 Jan. 2016). He further stated that whether the Taliban will seek information about someone can depend on the relationship between the commanders of the individual's province of origin and the destination province (ibid.). Similarly, the AAN analyst indicated that the strength of the local Taliban in the location where a person relocates to can be a factor in whether their background is detected; Taliban checkpoints and high levels of Taliban activity in an area increases the likelihood of searches of personal belongings and questioning of travellers (AAN 20 Jan. 2016).

A 2012 report published by the European Union's European Asylum Support Office (EASO) quotes the Director of the Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (AHRDO) [3] as stating that the Taliban may also use social media to track down persons of interest, such as human rights activists who voice their opinions online (EU Dec. 2012, 28). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the Professor, particularly in rural areas of Afghanistan, people are "extremely perceptive of their environments" and "know when a new person comes into the village or travels through it" (13 Jan. 2016). Similarly, the AAN analyst stated that unless an outsider has a very good cover story, their background is likely to become known due to the close-knit nature of Afghan communities (AAN 20 Jan. 2016). The same source explained that factors impacting a person's ability to conceal their background include: tribal/local connections to elders and family, regional accent differences, last names which may refer to origin, religious affiliation and prayer rituals, and higher education profiles which may identify the individual as belonging to a higher social class (ibid.).

Sources report that the Taliban allegedly obtained information about people who were believed to be NGO employees during their September 2015 assault on Kunduz city, and used this information to look for those identified (AAN 20 Jan. 2016; AI 1 Oct. 2015). According to Amnesty International (AI), the Taliban's list allegedly included the names and photos of activists, journalists and government workers in Kunduz (AI 1 Oct. 2015). AI further notes that during the assault, the Taliban gained access to addresses, phone numbers, and photos of NGO staff, government employees, and security force personnel by raiding government and NGO offices (ibid.). An October 2015 briefing note by the Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS) [4] similarly states that the Taliban has been able to gather personal information about NGO staff, government employees, and security personnel, which "may increase the likelihood of these groups being targeted in future" (ACAPS 13 Oct. 2015, 1).

3. Urban Areas

According to the Professor, "it is more difficult to track people [who] have moved into urban environments, but even there the Taliban have spies and members who can gather considerable information" (13 Jan. 2016). The same source explained that tribal networks still operate in urban areas, and gave the example of the Taliban infiltrating and obtaining information from large refugee camps near Kabul (22 Jan. 2016). The analyst stated that the Taliban conducts local-level intelligence gathering in Kabul, and therefore have been able to carry out targeted attacks in some urban centres (AAN 20 Jan. 2016). A 2015 article by the *Christian Science Monitor* reports on one instance in which a Western journalist attended a large

Pashtun wedding in Kabul as a guest of one of the Afghan attendees; several days later the attendee and his family received threats and was accused of working as a spy for coalition forces (18 Nov. 2015).

According to an article by Agence France-Presse, the Taliban has "spies" within the police and military (AFP 2 Nov. 2012). Further information on the Taliban's tracking of people in urban areas could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. Tribal and Family Connections

The AAN analyst explained that when people move from one location to another area where they have tribal or family connections, this could potentially shield the person's background from being uncovered; however, these same connections could also be their greatest liability in the sense that a person's connections could also be used as a way to locate the person (20 Jan. 2016). The Professor stated that

Afghans are a tribal people and this allows them to, in part, know the circumstances of people in their tribe or ethno-linguistic group. This is obviously easy to do at the local, district and Provincial level of their home locality but because of extended families and other dynamics, it [one's identity] is often hard to hide even when an Afghan leaves their home locality. (Professor 13 Jan. 2016)

Without providing details, the Professor stated that it is "[m]uch easier for Pashtuns to track people because of their cultural norms than other ethno-linguistic groups" (ibid.). According to the Professor, the Taliban "keep tabs" on people by exploiting tribal leaders' and families' knowledge of the whereabouts of their family members or tribe members (ibid.). Sources also report that the Taliban exerts pressure on family members of wanted individuals (Professor 13 Jan. 2016; AAN 20 Jan. 2016) and that a targeted person's family may be punished in their absence (Professor 13 Jan. 2016). The Professor explained that in addition to exploiting tribal connections when pursuing a person of interest, the Taliban

can apply pressure and draconian measures on the person's family members to gain information. This is probably their most important means in tracking down a person: "tell me where he/she is or we will kill your family." Such intimidation is usually a fairly successful tactic. (ibid.)

The professor stated that if the Taliban uncovers the background of an ordinary person, which the Taliban perceives to be questionable, this would create problems for that person (22 Jan. 2016). The AAN analyst explained that if the person in question is someone who has worked as an interpreter, for example, and relocates, if the Taliban becomes suspicious of that person's background, they might contact another district's commander to find out more about the individual (AAN 20 Jan. 2016). The AAN analyst gave the view that the concern for someone in a situation like that is about the possibility that their background would be found out in their new location; however, for someone who has a higher profile, for example a district governor who has spent time overseas and then returns, the Taliban can more easily track down such an individual from one location to another location (AAN 20 Jan. 2016). The Professor stated that the Taliban's tribal networks are very well established and tribal law can cover long distances; people know what is occurring in their district and that traditional ways of locating people through tribal networks still apply (22 Jan. 2016).

5. Intimidation and Targeted Assassinations

The Professor stated that targets of interest to the Taliban are those who work for, or are perceived to support the government in Kabul and such people are targeted for "violent actions" (22 Jan. 2016). NYA International, a crisis management and response consultancy (NYA International n.d.) produced a *Global Kidnap for Ransom* report in April 2015, which states that in Afghanistan, "the risk of kidnapping ... remains severe, especially for those associated with the government or security forces, NGOs or western aid groups," with civilians and NGOs remaining the principal targets (NYA International Apr. 2015, 10). According to the AAN analyst, when an individual wanted by the Taliban relocates or returns to their province of origin and if their background is revealed, they can be intimidated, taken by the local Taliban for extortion or blackmail purposes to raise funds for the local district commander, or used as leverage in exchange for prisoners held by the government (AAN 20 Jan. 2016). People in this situation have been subjected to intimidation, threats, night letters, and higher taxation by the local Taliban (ibid.). For further information on night letters, please refer to Response to Information Request AFG105047. For further information on the situation of locally employed NGO staff, including kidnapping, please refer to Response to Information Request AFG105413.

The AAN analyst explained that when an individual wanted by the Taliban relocates or returns to their province of origin and if their background is revealed, depending on the individual's profile, as well as the political climate of the day, that person could be killed, which has occurred (AAN 20 Jan. 2016). According to the professor, targeted assassinations carried out by the Taliban are aimed towards people perceived as "facilitators" of the government in Kabul (22 Jan. 2016). Xinhua News Agency similarly indicates that civilians considered to be supporting the government and persons involved in "peace and reconciliation efforts" have

been the object of targeted killings by Taliban and armed groups (6 Mar. 2015). Examples of people who have been the object of assassinations and killings of civilians include:

- Judicial officials (RFE/RL 15 May 2015; UN Aug. 2015, 52; Tolo News 15 May 2015);
- Government employees (Xinhua News Agency 6 Mar. 2015; UN Aug. 2015, 52);
- Religious leaders (Xinhua News Agency 6 Mar. 2015; UN Aug. 2015, 52);
- Tribal elders (Xinhua News Agency 6 Mar. 2015; UN Aug. 2015, 52);
- Aid workers (UN Aug. 2014, 52);
- Teachers (Professor 22 Jan. 2016);
- Female police officers (Xinhua News Agency 18 Sept. 2013).

According to the UN, the exertion of influence through fear and intimidation by anti-government groups has "resulted in a high level of targeted killings" (UN 1 Sept. 2015, para. 18). UNAMA recorded 474 civilian casualties (337 deaths) from targeted killings in 2013, and 1,114 civilian casualties (753 deaths) from targeted killings in 2014 (UN Feb. 2015, 53). UNAMA reports that casualties from targeted killings rose by 57 percent in the first six months of 2015 (compared to previous reporting periods), causing 440 deaths and 259 injured (UN Aug. 2015, 8). The same source indicates that targeted killings were the leading cause of conflict-related civilian deaths in Afghanistan in the first half of 2015 (*ibid.*, 2).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The Haqqani Network is one of a number of armed groups fighting in Afghanistan who the UN refers to as "Anti-Government Elements," and which includes those identifying as "Taliban" or other armed groups, such as: Hezbe-e-Islami, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Lashkari Tayyiba, Jaysh Muhammed, Daesh, and others (UN Aug. 2015, 2).

[2] The Professor's publications on Afghanistan and South Asia have appeared in a wide variety of peer-reviewed journals and media sources and he continues to conduct regular field research in Central and South Asia (19 Jan. 2015).

[3] AHRDO is an Afghan NGO "committed to the promotion of democracy, non-violence and human rights," whose programming is conducted principally through "arts and theatre-based programmes" (Insight on Conflict n.d.).

[4] ACAPS is "a non-profit initiative of a consortium of three NGOs (Action Contre la Faim - ACF, Norwegian Refugee Council and Save the Children International) created in December 2009, with the aim of supporting the humanitarian community with needs assessments" (ACAPS n.d.).

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Internet sites, including: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit; Bakhtar News; Daily Outlook Afghanistan; ecoi.net; Factiva; Freedom House; International Crisis Group; Institute for the Study of War; Institute for War and Peace Reporting; Samuel Hall; United Nations – Refworld; United States – Department of State.

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