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Jihadi Commuters: How the Taleban cross the Durand Line

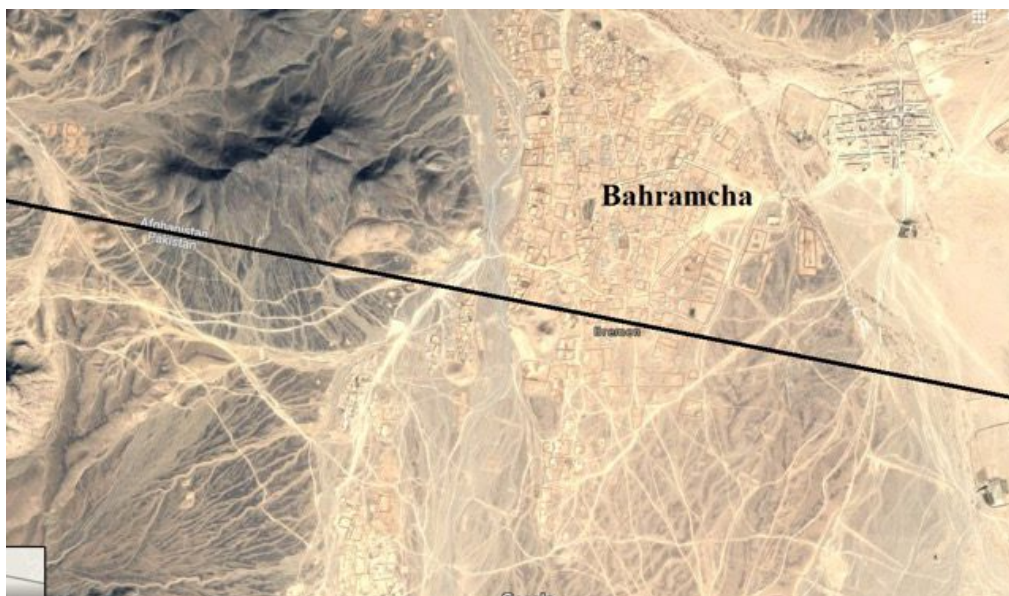
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The Taleban use Pakistan as a sanctuary: most of the movement's leaders are settled there and it is the movement's preferred place for training, meeting and as a rear base. It is also the prime destination for 'rest and recuperation' (R&R) and the rehabilitation of wounded fighters. But how do the Taleban move between the battlefields of Afghanistan and their bases in Pakistan? AAN's Fazal Muzhary and Borhan Osman have been analysing the jihadi 'commuting routes' between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The information in this dispatch is largely based on conversations with Taleban fighters, former Taleban officials who have recently quit the movement, local residents and doctors in southern and south-eastern Afghanistan and with Afghans living in Pakistan's Balochistan province who have contacts with the Taleban. The two authors have been collecting information on this subject since 2014, while doing other research in these areas.

When Mullah Akhtar Mansur was officially taking over the Taleban leadership in 2015, more than 2000 field commanders travelled from across Afghanistan to Quetta, the capital of Pakistan's Balochistan province and the Taleban's effective headquarters. Responding to an urgent call by the leadership council (also known as the Quetta shura) for a 'general assembly' planned for 31 July 2015, they arrived within three days. During that time, according to eyewitnesses, flocks of armed Taleban crossed the Durand Line. Traces of dust followed the convoys, each made up of dozens of cars and motorbikes, driving along the dusty, gravel routes



which cross the border in southern Afghanistan.

The Taliban did not need to think hard about which crossing points to choose for entering Pakistan. Among the dozens of options available, they were familiar with the crossing points used by their comrades who routinely cross the border. They did not need to worry about anyone intercepting or stopping them on these routes. On the Afghan side, most of the territory they were passing through was already under Taliban control. On the Pakistani side, areas near these crossing points were either lawless or manned by government security forces who did not seem bothered by the movement of militants fighting the Afghan government and its allies.

Such ease of movement between the two countries has made it possible for local Taliban cadre to commute, on a regular basis, from one side of the de facto border to the other. Before going into details about two of the Taliban's favourite crossing points, it might be useful to have an overview of the general cross-border movements of people between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The border is too long to be sealed

The Durand Line, which serves as the de facto border between the two countries, is about 2,400 kilometres long and passes through a third of Afghanistan's provinces. It is non-demarcated and extremely porous, arbitrarily dividing communities who continue to maintain relations across the line. According to a former Pakistani ambassador to Afghanistan, [Rustam Shah Mohmand](#), there are 235 crossing points along the border, which translates into almost one crossing point per 10 kilometres. Only 20 of them are used frequently and only two of them have all the essential border controls in place, such as immigration, customs and security checkpoints. These are the most frequented: one is the Torkham Gate in eastern Nangarhar province and the other is the Wesh–Chaman Gate in the southern Kandahar province. While these two crossing points are used by people from across Afghanistan, the 18 other frequently used crossings are used mostly by the local population on both sides of the line and are motorable. They are also used by smugglers and traffickers of illicit drugs, as well as by militants fighting in both countries who want to reach major urban centres in Afghanistan or Pakistan. The rest of the crossing points are mostly local trails connecting one community or part of a community to another, but they do not usually lead to major cities in either Afghanistan or Pakistan.

The multiplicity of routes along the long, porous Durand Line and the rugged terrain it runs through have long made it, in practice, impossible to completely 'seal'. Long before the current wave of insurgency, in the 1980s, demands to seal the border were much stronger than they are now. Then, anti-government mujahedin insurgents regularly moved across the Durand Line to launch attacks inside Afghanistan. Like the Taliban, the mujahedin used Pakistan as a sanctuary, training centre and supply base, but in a much more open, public way. The then government in Kabul with support from the Soviet Union tried much harder to stop the cross-border movement of fighters and weapons. They failed. A declassified [CIA report](#) from 1981



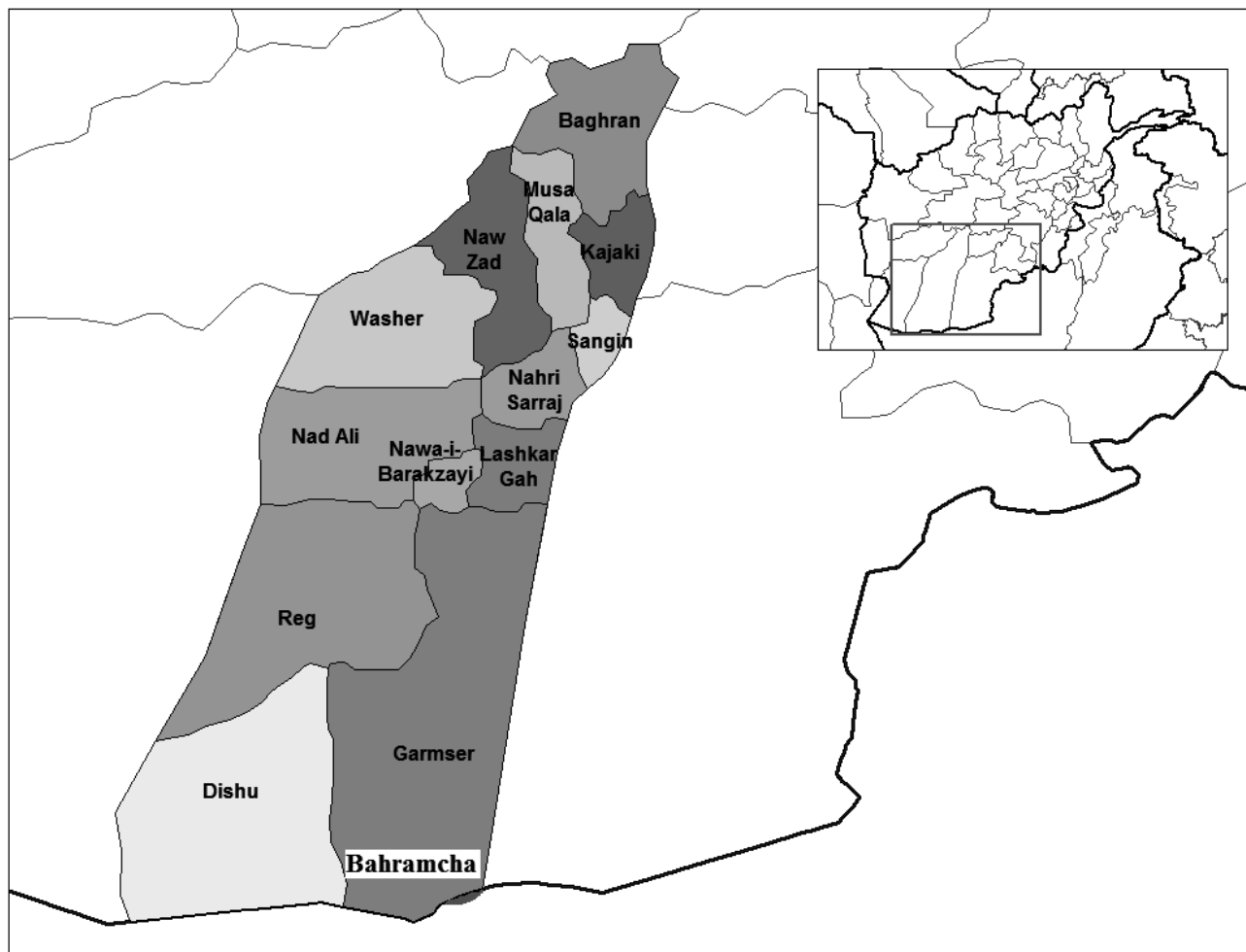
concluded that closing the border to insurgent infiltration was not feasible unless the Soviets and the government in Kabul conducted massive and long-term operations and put in far greater resources than the Soviets were then doing. Taleban 'commuting' is therefore a time-honoured technique and its effectiveness well-proven.

The Taleban's favourite entryways for infiltration and exfiltration

To illustrate the Taleban's movement across the Durand Line in some detail, here is a brief description of the two crossing points most frequented by the insurgents along the southern zone, the Baramcha and the Badini crossing points:

1. The Bahramcha crossing point

Located in Helmand's remote Dishu district, the Bahramcha crossing point is 300 kilometres south of the provincial capital, Lashkargah. The border passing through Dishu is 163 kilometres long. On the Pakistani side of the border line lies Chaghi, a predominantly Baloch district Chaghi, a district of Balochistan province, with the Gerdi Jangal (sometimes spelled Jungle) town and refugee camp. The majority of the population on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border used to be Baloch, while, particularly on the Pakistani side, Pashtuns – mainly from the Eshaqzai tribe – have moved south latest since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 as refugees. Dishu has been out of the control of the Afghan government since as early as 2003.



The wider area in which the Bahramcha crossing point is located saw some of the earliest signs of insurgency, starting in 2002, a year after the fall of the Taliban, according to the memoirs of one of its participants. Neither the Afghan government, nor the Pakistani authorities have any offices for registering the movement of people and supplies in Bahramcha. It is used both as a foot and motor crossing. It is the most used route for drug trafficking in Afghanistan and the border area hosts one of the biggest networks of heroin labs. The terrain is divided between sandy and mountainous environments.

Bahramcha is one of the most important crossing points for Taliban fighters, especially those from the south and south-western, as well as western provinces, such as Helmand, Farah, Nimroz, Herat and Ghor. (Kandahari and Uruzgani Taliban mostly use a crossing point in the Registan district in Kandahar province). Bahramcha and the broader Dishu district is lawless in terms of there not being a regular government, leaving the area to be ruled by the shadow government of the Taliban. The insurgent movement is in control of the drug market and its lucrative tax flow. Bahramcha is not only a major hub of drug processing labs, but also home to Taliban training camps and bomb production factories. This infrastructure supplies the Taliban



battlefield in Helmand as well as in neighbouring Farah and Nimroz provinces.

The Afghan Taleban use this point for moving their fighters and transferring their wounded for treatment in Pakistan. Wounded fighters are mostly taken to private hospitals in the closest towns on the Pakistani side of the Durand line, namely Dalbandin and Chaghai. Those in need of further or more complicated surgical operations are taken to Quetta or Karachi. The Taleban also use this crossing point to connect to one of the main meeting places of the movement, Gerdi Jangal. Situated 360 kilometres from Quetta and 90 kilometres from the Afghan border, Gerdi Jangal is inhabited mostly by Eshaqzai, the majority of them originally from Helmand. This is the same tribe from which many Taleban leaders are drawn, including the powerful late leader Akhtar Mansur.

Taleban commanders and fighters from the southern, south-western and western provinces use this route for normal movement, between their homes in Pakistan and the battlefield, or if they live in Afghanistan, to visit leaders in Quetta and enjoy some R&R. One south-based Taleban cadre told AAN that some in the ranks move between Gerdi Jangal and Helmand on an almost regular basis, commuting weekly. They ride non-stop in groups of five to 15 on motorbikes from the southern districts of Helmand to Balochistan.

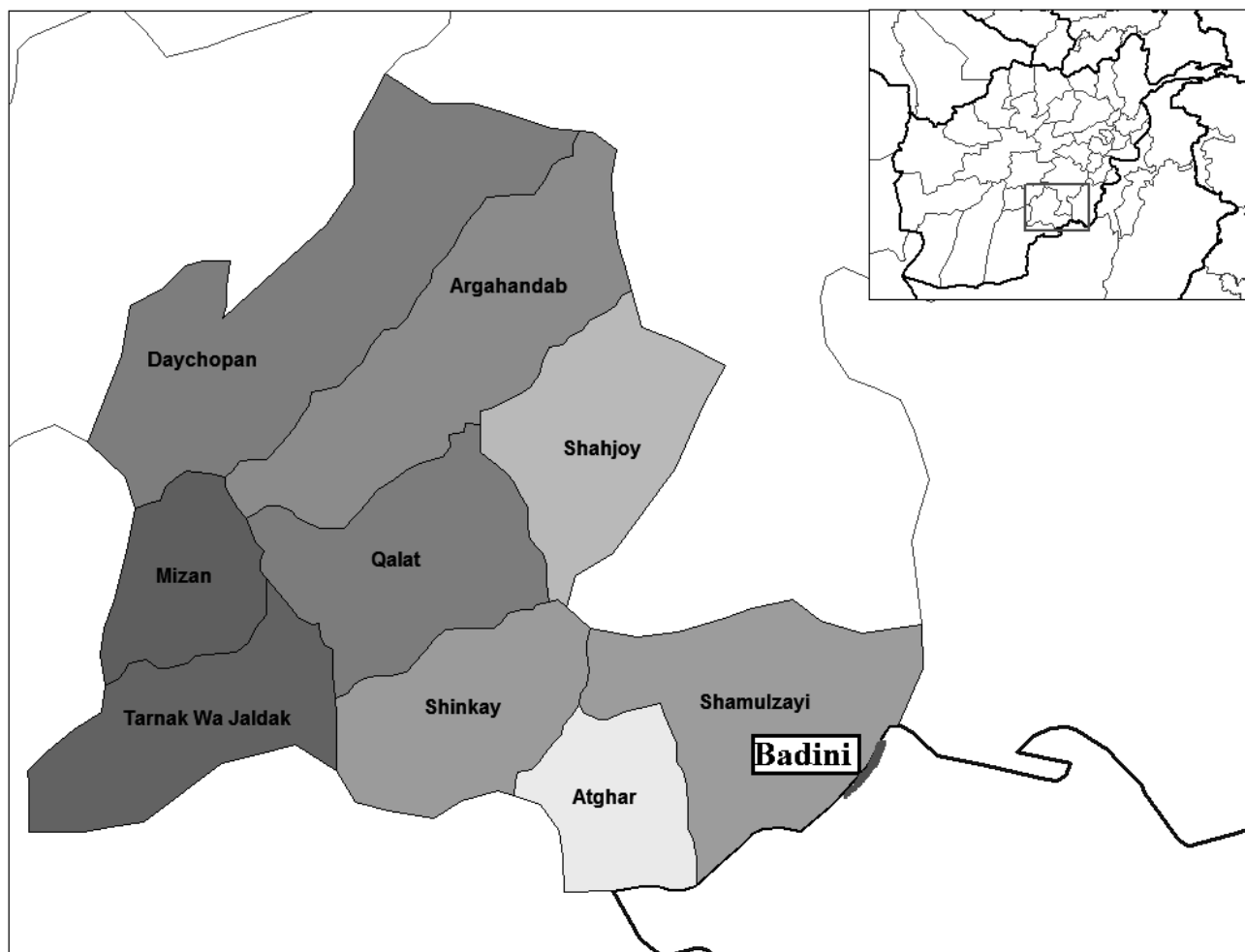
The same route is also the most preferred for high-level Taleban. According to senior Taleban sources, Akhtar Mansur was as familiar with the terrain and people on both sides of the border as any normal local trader. He would frequently move around the areas in and around Bahramcha and had an extensive network of contacts with the local population in the border areas from Bahramcha up to Nimroz, befriending influential figures along the border in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. According to sources familiar with his movements, Bahramcha and surrounding areas were also Mansur's favourite retreat when he wanted to hide from the Pakistani authorities, when, for example, he came under pressure. Current Taleban leaders, such as key commanders, military chiefs and governors, also use the same route to travel from their homes in Pakistan 'on mission' to oversee operations on the ground. Several Taleban sources told AAN that at least six of the most senior military and civilian Taleban leaders have crossed into Helmand province using Bahramcha this year, alone.

When it comes to the experiences of insurgent networks with this border crossing, it was not the Taleban who discovered this route. In the 1980s, the Afghan mujahedin also used Bahramcha in a similar way, to get training and supplies from Pakistan and then move into Afghanistan to fight the Soviet occupation forces and the PDPA regime. Most of the mujahiden fighters who were active in the southern provinces, particularly in Helmand, used it for moving weapons, recruits and injured people. Beside the mujahiden, most Afghans from southern, south-western and western provinces seeking refuge in Pakistan also used this route. When the fight against the Soviets was over and civil war broke out between mujahedin factions, some mujahedin commanders smuggled the Russian military equipment they 'inherited' from the Soviets and the Kabul government into Pakistan for sale, using this same crossing point.

2. The Badini crossing point



Named after the area on the Pakistani side of the border, the Badini crossing point is located in the Shamulzai district of Zabul province. It borders Zhob district of Balochistan province on the Pakistani side and is located about 75 kilometres south of Qalat, the provincial capital of Zabul. According to a former Taleban official who was in charge of customs in Badini during the Taleban regime, this crossing point used to have all the usual border controls. During the Taleban era, he said, it was manned by security posts and goods were checked for customs.



After the fall of the Taleban in 2001, it seems the Afghan government has since tried to maintain active checkpoints here, manned by the Afghan National Border Police (ANBP). However, the number of the forces deployed is limited and does not cover all the motorable trails which travellers could take to cross the de facto border. This crossing serves as the most accessible and favourite entryway for the Taleban of Zabul and Ghazni and parts of Uruzgan, Wardak and Paktika provinces. It connects these provinces directly to a town known for being home to many Taleban in Pakistan, Kuchlak, 25 kilometres north of Quetta. There is a significant overlap in the tribal makeup of the local population on both sides of the line, with Kakar Pashtuns in the majority.



The Taliban have used the Badini crossing point since the insurgency kicked off in nearby provinces, from around 2005. One Taliban fighter, who travelled to Pakistan using this crossing point in 2010, said he did not see the Afghan National Border Police or any other security force at the crossing point. When he got to the Pakistani side, he said there were Pakistani border police, who let him and his comrades continue their trip unhindered. "The Pakistani border police did not stop us," he said. "They just waved to us as a sign of welcome. We moved on with our motorbikes to reach Quetta. No one stopped us along the way."

Taliban fighters usually pass the Badini crossing point in convoys of cars or motorbikes. For the wounded, if they can not be treated in local or regional hospitals inside Afghanistan, such as the major hospital hub in the Nawa district of Ghazni province, they are taken to Pakistan using Badini.

Just recently, in summer 2017, Taliban fighters in Ghazni and Zabul reported to AAN that the crossing point was blocked from the Afghan side. The rumour was that US forces were deployed to the border, making it impossible for Taliban to cross. Local officials in Zabul, however, rejected the reports of the deployment of foreign forces along the Durand line. In a couple of instances AAN know of, wounded Taliban fighters who could not be transferred to Pakistan due to the closure of Badini died from their wounds. In September 2017, Taliban fighters said the border crossing was opened for motorbikes and foot traffic only. It still closed to general vehicles.

The wider Badini area has also attracted the attention of government officials in the south because of what they say is the existence of Taliban training camps on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line. The police chief of Kandahar, General Abdul Raziq, [said](#) in 2011 that the Taliban had training camps on the Pakistani side of the border near Badini. Raziq said that Taliban fighters were getting training not far from the eyes of the Pakistani police, one near the crossing and another nearby in Qamaruddin Karez and then were being sent to Afghanistan to fight.

Like other crossing points, Badini also has a history of cross-border movement from the 1980s, during the mujahiden insurgency against the Soviets. The mujahiden of the southern front, specifically Zabul, Ghazni, Uruzgan and partly Wardak provinces got their supplies from Pakistan and moved their men across the border using Badini. The border area remained out of the control of the then Soviet-backed government. Civilians from the same set of provinces also used this crossing point to flee to Pakistan.

Why do the Taliban find it easy to move across the border?

There are several reasons for the Taliban's smooth cross-border travels at crossing points such as Bahramcha and Badini. What follows is a closer look at the major reasons, specifically the absence of government, the permissive behaviour of the Pakistani security agencies, the shared communal bonds across the border and the abundance of illegal networks that provide cover for the insurgents.



First, the absence of government security forces along these crossing points means the Taliban can readily travel between the two countries. The de facto border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is long, poorly demarcated and there are a multiplicity of formal and informal border crossings. This means it would need the deployment of a huge force and supporting resources to watch all the crossing points, even just the motorable ones. There has been no serious effort from the Afghan government to deploy troops to all the border points along the Durand Line which are, or could be used, by militants. It has established check points only at a limited number of the crossing points and the Taliban normally avoid these. The problem is that the main entry points used by the Taliban have long been out of the control of the Afghan government, meaning the government cannot deploy a force there.

It has been the Taliban's well-thought out strategy when initiating its insurgency to threaten the government's control around these crossing points. That is true for both Bahramcha and Badini. They were some of the earliest areas to slip out of the government's control as the Taliban started their comeback from 2003 onwards. It seems this was part of the Taliban's strategy when planning their return in those early years. According to a former Taliban official who witnessed the initial discussions of comeback in the early years, many of the first-tier commanders of the first military shura that was formed in late spring 2003 started their operations from the areas near the border with Pakistan, in the provinces of Zabul, Kandahar and Helmand. The plan, he said, was to establish a toehold in areas with easy exit routes to Pakistan. Badini and Bahramcha along with the surrounding areas saw some of the highest concentration of commanders in those early years.

The second reason has been the permissive, friendly response that Taliban fighters receive from Pakistani forces. While the Afghan security apparatus has been unable to control the cross-border movement, or the government has been unwilling to allocate sufficient resources, there is apparently no such problem on the Pakistan side. As evidenced by the Taliban fighter's quote above, the Pakistani forces posted there often greet the Taliban with a welcome, rather than trying to disrupt their movements. The lack of cooperation between Afghan and Pakistani border forces, or to put it more straightforwardly, the Taliban-friendly attitude of the Pakistani forces to the Afghan government's enemies has encouraged Taliban fighters to travel as often as they want to.

Thirdly, the interwoven network of the tribal communities residing on the two sides of the Durand Line facilitate cross-border movement. In most cases, it is the same community with the same tribal structure divided only by a virtual border line. The communal relationship and the need for daily movement within such communities is the main reason why the Durand Line remains porous. This also allows insurgents who strike a chord with these communities to operate freely, using communal bonds. Initially, it is often insurgents with the same tribal affiliation who serve as trailblazers for such a route. Once the 'co-tribalist' Taliban find their way into a community, others follow suit, using the network and sympathy their comrades have made for the movement. Such relationships are enough for the local communities to make it easy and safe for Taliban to navigate the border areas. The Ishaqzais around the Bahramcha crossing point and the Kakars around Badini (but also beyond these areas) have long been key



supporters of the Taliban.

Fourthly, there is an abundance of networks of smugglers and drug traffickers who have been using the same border crossings for a long time. The smuggler networks pre-date the current insurgency, and also facilitate it. They provide a cover for the militants, and relations between the two groups are usually cooperative. The Taliban can, therefore, find cover within the trans-border, local communities which are sympathetic to the insurgents and within the networks of illicit traders. In both cases, the Taliban are easily absorbed within the crowds of non-insurgent 'commuters'.

The Taliban's increasingly homeward movement

Since early this year, the Taliban have appeared to be suffering new pressure from their hitherto largely friendly host, Pakistan (possibly because Islamabad is under pressure from the United States to rein in the insurgents). With the caveat that this section is an 'at-first-glance' impression based on limited accounts from local residents and Taliban along the southern border (the same pressure is reported along the south-eastern border as well, according to local sources in Paktika, although AAN has not dug deeper here), rather than the result of in-depth examination, nevertheless, our interlocutors have said the Taliban are experiencing new pressure from Islamabad. They say the Taliban have been increasingly looking for alternatives to Pakistan inside Afghanistan for various 'services'.

The trend had started much earlier, after 2014, of trying to rely less on Pakistan and move training camps and medical services inside Afghanistan. In 2015, many Taliban military leaders also moved into southern Afghanistan, using the Bahramcha crossing point, after some members were detained and others threatened after they failed to show up for talks hosted by Pakistan with the Afghan government (read more [here](#)). The movement into Afghanistan was also encouraged by the drawdown of international forces at the end of 2014, which, along with a change in targeting (with orders to concentrate on al Qaeda and the Islamic State in Khorasan Province or ISKP) meant a substantial decrease in the air power that had been used to target both Taliban leaders and mid-level commanders. The Taliban started to open local health facilities in the different areas of the south and hire local doctors to treat their wounded. One of the largest such centres, which was developed before 2014, is in Nawa district of Ghazni. However, air strikes by both the United States and Afghan airforces have been intensifying, as reported [here](#), making it difficult for the Taliban to pursue their 'Afghanisation'. The insurgents will most likely have to scale back their hopes for coming home.

Restricting the militants' movement is possible, but not stopping it

If border crossing could be made more difficult, the Taliban would likely look for shelter and bases within the civilian population inside Afghanistan. Increased air strikes would discourage them from building training camps, military bases and their own health facilities in ways visible from the air, but the movement would likely try to adapt, possibly by using civilian population centres and public facilities (for example, existing health centres and schools) as cover. The



most important element of the insurgency, aside from the human, weapons, are increasingly available inside Afghanistan. Individual Taliban get arms when they are seized from the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and then split them as 'war bounty'. Or, they buy them directly from members of the ANSF or from the black market. The exceptions are certain bomb-making explosives and chemicals.

Whether the Taliban's cross-border infiltration and exfiltration could be made significantly more difficult is another question. The government would need to take control of the border areas where the most commonly used crossing points are located and introduce border controls. Such a concentrated and sustained effort has yet to be tried. Sealing the Durand Line entirely is, in practice, unfeasible without the commitment of a huge force permanently deployed to the 2,400-kilometre long de facto border and/or the solid support of local populations. It would also be politically undesirable: the Afghan government would not want to appear to be recognising the Durand Line by sealing it and dividing the local communities. This means the government is generally in favour of free, cross-border movement. Kabul wants the border to remain porous and with movement unrestricted for everyone, but for the militants. However, at the moment, they do not have the control to be able to pick and choose who moves.

Opting even for the less resource-intensive task of taking control of the main border crossings frequented by the Taliban could have a significant impact on the Taliban's scale of operations. However, it would be unlikely to be decisive in turning the tide against the insurgents. As long as the insurgency continues to enjoy local support in some areas of Afghanistan, the Taliban could continue to operate within Afghanistan, despite restrictions on their cross-border travel.

Edited by Sari Kouvo and Kate Clark