

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	427
Land:	Afghanistan
Kilde:	Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada
Titel:	The capacity of the Taliban to pursue individuals after they relocate to another region; their capacity to track individuals over the long term.
Udgivet:	30. december 2011
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	13. marts 2012



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30 December 2011

AFG103923.E

Afghanistan: The capacity of the Taliban to pursue individuals after they relocate to another region; their capacity to track individuals over the long term

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Structure of the Taliban

In a telephone interview by the Research Directorate, an assistant professor who works at the Institute for National Security and Counterterrorism at Syracuse University, and who has published material about the Taliban, explained that the capacity of the Taliban to pursue individuals who relocate to other areas of Afghanistan, as well as their ability to track individuals over the long term, would depend, in part, on the level of sophistication of the particular Taliban group (Assistant Professor 13 Dec. 2011). He described the Taliban's structure as "groups within groups within groups," noting that some Taliban groups have developed sophisticated networks that span across Afghanistan, while others have only a local influence (*ibid.*). He also noted that it is sometimes difficult to ascertain whether a group is "truly Taliban" or it has simply taken on the Taliban name (*ibid.*).

Academic sources describe the structure of the Taliban as "decentralized" (Gutiérrez Sanín and Giustozzi 2010, 842; Thruelsen June 2010, 264). In a jointly published article, Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia and Antonio Giustozzi of the London School of Economics explain that the basic Taliban "battle unit[s]" are "fronts," composed of 20 to 300 men who have been mobilized and are directed by front commanders (Gutiérrez Sanín and Giustozzi 2010, 836, 842). They explain that as the size of a front grows, it tends to "split and 'reproduce'" (*ibid.*).

Peter Dahl Thruelsen of the Institute for Strategy at the Royal Danish Defence College, in Copenhagen, divides the Taliban's structure, which he describes as complex and non-linear, into three general tiers (June 2010, 263). The first tier, representing the highest level, consists of the strategic leadership; the Quetta Shura [comprised of the leader Mullah Omar (or Umar) and his top advisors (US 22 Nov. 2011, 14)]; the "province shadow governors"; and the original 1990s fighters (Thruelsen June 2010, 263). The second, mid-level tier includes the local leaders, full-time fighters, and active supporters (*ibid.*). The third tier, the lowest level, consists of part-time fighters and Taliban sympathizers (*ibid.*). Thruelsen maintains that the first tier provides "strategic leadership" to the local commanders, but that the local commanders maintain the day-to-day power over the areas they control (*ibid.*, 265). Specifically, Thruelsen argues that, in the south, the Taliban infrastructure

is based on "local knowledge networks" maintained through the exchange of information between individual commanders (ibid., 270).

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) indicates that group commanders are under the direction of "shadow district governors" who, in turn, report to the shadow provincial governor (27 June 2011, 13). It describes the Taliban's structure as "hierarchical," with Mullah Omar and others in the leadership group based in Quetta, Pakistan, and unified command structures operating within Afghanistan, particularly in the central region around Kabul and in the Taliban-stronghold of Kandahar (International Crisis Group 27 June 2011, 13). Directives are then reportedly issued to the military, religious and provincial councils, which are further divided into regions and districts (ibid.).

Intelligence gathering

In a report commissioned by Norway's Country of Origin Information Centre, Landinfo, Giustozzi says that the Taliban's information-gathering efforts help them carry out their policy of "targeted killing" (9 Sept. 2011, 14, 18). The Crisis Group notes that Afghanistan's network of mosques, mullahs and madrassas, particularly in the central region around Kabul, act as a source of intelligence for the Taliban (International Crisis Group 27 June 2011, 11). Specifically, the Crisis Group reports that the Taliban makes use of mullahs to identify "politically vulnerable local leaders" as targets for either "co-optation or elimination" (ibid., 12).

Giustozzi further explains that

[t]he Taliban have been constantly expanding their information gathering operations; some parts of the country, in particular the south but also the south-east, the east and the provinces south and west of Kabul (Wardak, Logar) are thoroughly covered and there is little that the Taliban do not know, not least because they have extensively infiltrated the police and the state administration. In other parts of the country, like most of Kabul, most of the west and most of the north, the Taliban's presence on the ground is more modest, and their ability to collect information is more limited. More importantly, the Taliban's ability to auction off the information collected is more limited in these areas, where they have to rely on a few hit teams in order to carry out their strategy of targeted killing. (Norway 9 Sept. 2011, 18)

He also described the Taliban's ability to share information about targeted individuals across Afghanistan as follows:

The Taliban do not seem to systematically transfer information about targeted individuals from one area to the other; they maintain no databases. What typically happens is that the Taliban operating in a specific area will request information from other Taliban about a suspect individual, whenever needed. The flow of information therefore depends on the intensity of Taliban operations: the greater the presence, the greater the request of information. (ibid., 14-15)

Targeted assassinations

A senior program coordinator for the Afghanistan Regional Project at New York University's Center on International Cooperation indicated, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, that the Taliban has a general capacity to track individuals, which is shown by its success in carrying out targeted assassinations (13 Dec. 2011). Giustozzi similarly notes that the Taliban "has increasingly developed an ability to strike at will almost anywhere" and that it "potentially has the

resources and skills to track down people," particularly if the people are working and not in hiding (Norway 9 Sept. 2011, 14). Giustozzi also contends that the Taliban's "policy of targeted intimidation and killing" can be expected to keep expanding as the Taliban continues to "establish a strong presence in ever newer areas" (ibid., 18).

According to statistics compiled by the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), in 2010, there were 381 targeted assassinations and executions, resulting in the death of 462 civilians, a 105 percent increase over the figures from 2009 (Mar. 2011, 11). In a separate report, the UNAMA indicates that, in the first half of 2011, there were 190 deaths and 43 injuries as a result of targeted assassinations and executions; these figures are comparable to those for the same timeframe in 2010 (UN July 2011, 19). For July and August of 2011, the UN Security Council recorded 126 incidents of targeted assassinations, resulting in 182 deaths (ibid. 21 Sept. 2011, para. 5). In their joint report, the UNAMA and the AIHRC also explain that statistics on targeted killings are underreported because of the difficulty in distinguishing the motive behind some killings (Mar. 2011, 12). They also maintain that the majority of targeted killings occur in the southern, southeastern and central regions of Afghanistan (UNAMA and AIHRC Mar. 2011, 12).

According to the UNAMA and the AIHRC, in 2010 and the first half of 2011, the Taliban successfully targeted and killed high-level government officials, governors, members of provincial councils, tribal elders (UN July 2011, 19; UNAMA and AIHRC Mar. 2011, 12), members of peace councils, former insurgents trying to integrate into Afghan society, off-duty police officers, chiefs of police (UN July 2011, 19), shura members, doctors, teachers, students, construction workers, and people perceived to be supportive of the government and international forces (UNAMA and AIHRC Mar. 2011, 12). Specifically, in 2010, 140 government officials, 42 tribal elders, 25 council (shura) members, and 21 teachers, students and education officials were reportedly killed by insurgents in targeted attacks (ibid.).

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre similarly states that the Taliban "have intimidated and killed tribal elders, government officials, civilians working for international forces, teachers, health care workers, shopkeepers and the staff of Afghan and international NGOs" (IDMC 11 Apr. 2011, 4). In addition, the Taliban's human rights abuses have led to "large numbers of small-scale displacements," especially in the southeast, south and central areas of the country (ibid.).

The Assistant Professor indicated that the Taliban specifically targets police commanders, police chiefs, deputy commissioners, village elders, clerics who work with the government, and high-ranking bureaucrats (13 Dec. 2011). Other targets include translators, interpreters, drivers, teachers (especially those who teach girls), and women who either advocate for their rights or challenge their fathers or other male authorities (Assistant Professor 13 Dec. 2011). The Assistant Professor also explained that the Taliban often resort to extortion and criminal activity to raise funds, and that those who resist such extortion may also be targeted (ibid.).

According to the UNAMA, former insurgent fighters who have joined the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program are particularly vulnerable to targeted attacks by the Taliban (UN July 2011, 19). The UNAMA reports that, in May 2011, there were two incidents in which the Taliban targeted and killed eight men who had been reintegrated in the northeast region of Afghanistan (ibid.). Gutiérrez Sanín and Giustozzi similarly note that the Taliban has dedicated "substantial resources"

to finding and targeting front commanders and field leaders who defect to government or international forces (2010, 844).

The UNAMA and the AIHRC report that one of the largest groups of civilians assassinated or executed were those accused of "spying" for the government or international forces; in 2010, there were 84 targeted killings in which the Taliban accused the victim of being a spy, even though 65 of the victims had no known affiliation with a professional or political group (Mar. 2011, 14). In some cases, the accused were publicly executed, beheaded, or hung (UNAMA and AIHRC Mar. 2011, 14). Such incidents reportedly occurred in the provinces of Badghis, Helmand, Ghor, Wardak, and Kunar, as well as in Kandahar and Arghandab (ibid.).

Both the Senior Program Coordinator (13 Dec. 2011) and the Assistant Professor (13 Dec. 2011) expressed the opinion that the profile of the individual would, in part, determine whether the Taliban would track down someone who had fled to another part of Afghanistan. The Assistant Professor explained that high-profile targets face a greater risk of being targeted (13 Dec. 2011). The Senior Program Coordinator stated that

[t]here are a variety of motivations behind the identification of targets. Often the Taliban just seek to remove individuals and families from local areas due to the influence they exert over the population. The relocation of these groups is often sufficient. If the motive is more political in nature or the target is high profile, this may not be sufficient. (13 Dec. 2011)

Similarly, Giustozzi noted that the Taliban target "low level collaborators" in the areas where they have a strong presence, but that "escapees who no longer collaborate for the government are a low priority target to the Taliban" (Norway 9 Sept. 2011, 14, 18). Giustozzi explains that this is because the Taliban usually focuses its "limited" assets in the cities on "high profile targets, ranking from serving government officials upwards" (ibid., 14).

Examples of high-profile assassinations

Sources report that, in 2011, there have been several assassinations of high-profile Afghan government officials (McClatchy Newspapers 21 Sept. 2011; UN 21 Sept. 2011, para. 5; Aljazeera 20 Sept. 2011). One high-profile targeted killing was the 20 September 2011 assassination of Burhanuddin Rabbani, a former president of Afghanistan who was leading the High Peace Council, a group tasked with reaching an agreement with the Taliban (IWPR 22 Sept. 2011; The New York Times 20 Sept. 2011; McClatchy Newspapers 21 Sept. 2011). The assassin, who posed as a Taliban commander, reportedly hid explosives in his turban and detonated them after entering Rabbani's home in Kabul (ibid.; The New York Times 20 Sept. 2011; IWPR 22 Sept. 2011). The attack also wounded two other prominent members of the peace council (McClatchy Newspapers 21 Sept. 2011; The New York Times 20 Sept. 2011). Other high-profile assassinations that occurred in 2011 include the following:

Ghulam Haider Hamidi, mayor of Kandahar (UN 21 Sept. 2011; McClatchy Newspapers 21 Sept. 2011; Aljazeera 20 Sept. 2011);

Jan Mohammad Khan, one of the president's top aides (ibid.; UN 21 Sept. 2011; McClatchy Newspapers 21 Sept. 2011);

Ahmed Wali Karzai, the president's half-brother and provincial council chief (The Economist 14 July 2011; Aljazeera 20 Sept. 2011; UN 21 Sept. 2011);

Mohammed Daud Daud, the police chief of northern Afghanistan (Aljazeera 20 Sept. 2011; BBC 28 May 2011; see also McClatchy Newspapers 21 Sept. 2011); General Khan Mohammed Mujahid, Kandahar police chief (The New York Times 15 Apr. 2011; Reuters 19 Apr. 2011; Aljazeera 20 Sept. 2011); and Abdul Latif Ashna, deputy governor of Kandahar province (ibid.; Reuters 19 Apr. 2011).

Media sources explain that the increasing number of high-profile assassinations demonstrates the Taliban's capability to penetrate some of the most secure places (IWPR 13 July 2011; The New York Times 20 Sept. 2011). According to the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, "[m]any believe that everyone is now vulnerable, even President Karzai, and that the government is powerless to do anything about it" (22 Sept. 2011).

Area of relocation

According to the Senior Program Coordinator, the area to which the targeted individual relocates is a key factor in the Taliban's ability to find him or her (13 Dec. 2011). He explained that moving within a given district or province will leave the target "more exposed" than moving to a province in a different part of Afghanistan (Senior Program Coordinator 13 Dec. 2011). He indicated that the security level of the destination and the size of the community are also factors affecting the individual's vulnerability (ibid.). He said that relocating to a provincial capital may not offer "sufficient protection," but that there have been several cases in which both individuals and families who were threatened by the Taliban were able to safely relocate to Kabul (ibid.). The Assistant Professor similarly expressed the opinion that the Taliban has "less capacity" to track targets in Kabul (13 Dec. 2011). The reasons for this, he explained, are that the Kabul police and security forces "appear to be better trained" and that individuals in Kabul are "more anonymous" (Assistant Professor 13 Dec. 2011).

However, the Assistant Professor said that the Taliban might be able to track someone down in Kabul (ibid.). He indicated that he was also aware of cases in which mid- and high-level officials in Kabul were being threatened by the Taliban (ibid.). Giustozzi also indicates that the Taliban has harassed and targeted on a "small scale" perceived "collaborators" in Kabul, including police and army colonels and commanding officers in the security forces (Norway 9 Sept. 2011, 14).

The Assistant Professor also noted that it is difficult to move in Afghanistan -- especially to travel between the east and west or between the north and south (13 Dec. 2011). Sources indicate that insurgents have set up checkpoints throughout the country (Assistant Professor 13 Dec. 2011; UNAMA and AIHRC Mar. 2011, 18). The Assistant Professor explained that the roadblocks were established primarily as a way to extract money, but that they are also sometimes used to block civilians from travelling, particularly in the south (13 Dec. 2011). According to the UNAMA and the AIHRC, the insurgents look for government officials and military personnel at the checkpoints, but they have also abducted, killed and wounded civilians (Mar. 2011, 18). The UNAMA and the AIHRC report that on 12 September 2010, the Taliban stopped three private security contractors at a checkpoint in Arghandab, Kandahar; one man was shot and hung from a tree, while the other two went missing (Mar. 2011, 18). The UNAMA and the AIHRC also report that, in 2010, at least 16 civilian abductions occurred at insurgent checkpoints, including the abduction of the head of a district education department in Balkh province (Mar. 2011, 17-18).

Family members

Both the Assistant Professor (13 Dec. 2011) and the Senior Program Coordinator (13 Dec. 2011) noted that another factor in the ability of the Taliban to track the target is whether the targeted individual relocates with family members. The Assistant Professor pointed out that relocating as part of a large or extended family can make it easier for the Taliban to find the target (13 Dec. 2011). However, the Senior Program Coordinator noted that if a targeted individual relocates on his or her own, the Taliban might lure the target back by threatening or attacking family members or relatives left behind (13 Dec. 2011).

The Assistant Professor said that a target's ethnic and tribal background was also a factor influencing the individual's ability to flee to another part of Afghanistan since different ethnicities predominate in different regions of Afghanistan (13 Dec. 2011).

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.

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