

## The Rise of the Afghan Taliban

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### Abstract

*This is a descriptive analysis of the Afghan Taliban's movement re-emergence after 9/11. The rise of the Taliban's phenomenon in Afghanistan is significantly important for the regional balance of power between Pakistan and India, which could unleash a new period of proxy war between two neighbouring states armed with nuclear weapons. Therefore, it is essential to highlight the key features of the Taliban's movement in Afghanistan and present a rigorous analysis of their progress since 9/11. This paper consists of eight sections. The first section of the paper discusses short history of the Taliban's occupation of Afghanistan before 9/11. The second part of the paper discusses the re-émergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The third one discusses the strategic importance of Kandahar and Helmand to the Taliban movement. The fourth one of the paper is about the establishment of shadow governance system of the Taliban. The fifth section analyses the Taliban's strategy of killing high profile leaders in Afghanistan. The sixth section is about the external support to the Taliban in Afghanistan. The seventh section discusses the Taliban's relationship with Al-Qaeda and the last part is conclusion of the paper.*

*This paper is primarily based on archival data, interviews with policy-makers, law enforcement officers and tribal elders of Quetta. It also extensively engaged the literature published on the subject. It uses neo-realist theoretical framework to analyse the issue that how the Taliban's control over Afghanistan could threaten the regional peace.*

**Key Words:** Quetta Shura of the Taliban (QST), Shadow Governance, High Profile killing, Mujahideen, Al-Qaeda. The Afghan Taliban

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## **1.1 Introduction**

This paper discusses the rise of the Afghan Taliban after 9/11. It is immensely important to understand the Taliban's insurgency in the present context, because it does not only have strong ramifications for the peace in Afghanistan, but also has the potential to affect balance of power in the region. If the United States of American and the international community do not succeed to defeat the Taliban's movement in Afghanistan and fail to establish a standing army and a governance structure, it will raise serious questions on the credibility of them to accomplish a nation building project, which could jeopardise the United Nations' legitimacy to overthrow a repressive and brutal regimes in future. Secondly, the success of the Taliban's movement in Afghanistan could further encourage the waves of Islamic terrorism and extremism in Middle-East to challenge the writ of states. The rise of the Taliban's phenomenon in Afghanistan is also significantly important for the regional balance of power between Pakistan and India, it could unleash a new period of proxy war between two neighbouring states armed with nuclear weapons. Therefore, it is essential to highlight the key features of the Taliban's movement in Afghanistan and present a rigorous analysis of their progress since 9/11.

This paper consists of eight other sections. The second section of the paper discusses short history of the Taliban's occupation of Afghanistan before 9/11. The third part of the paper discusses the re-emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The fourth section discusses the strategic importance of Kandahar and Helmand to the Taliban movement. The fifth section of the paper is about the establishment of shadow governance system of the Taliban. The sixth section analyses the Taliban's strategy of killing high profile leaders in Afghanistan. The seventh section is about the external support to the Taliban in Afghanistan. The eighth section discusses the Taliban's relationship with Al-Qaeda and the last part is conclusion of the paper.

## **1.2 Taliban's Occupation of Kabul before 9/11**

Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, Afghanistan deteriorated into a brutal civil war between rival Mujahideen groups and warlords. Different groups and warlords occupied several regions, but no organisation succeeded in occupying large part of the country. The Taliban – emerged from the Pakistani madrassas, Afghan civil war and refugee camps in Pakistan – captured Kandahar by exploiting differences between rival groups, co-

optation, and backing of Pakistan's ISI (Bajoria, 2011). The Taliban's movement run by Mullah Mohammad Omar expanded throughout the country within two years and occupied Kabul in May 1996. One of the major factors in the speedy success of Taliban in Afghanistan was the support from Pakistan's ISI. According to US intelligence report, "U.S. intelligence indicates that the ISI is supplying the Taliban forces with munitions, fuel, and food. The Pakistan Inter service Intelligence Directorate is using a private sector transportation company to funnel supplies into Afghanistan and to the Taliban forces" (Elias-Sanborn, 2012, Doc15). The Taliban-ruled Afghanistan soon became a sanctuary for other terrorist groups. Osama bin Laden was already present in Afghanistan before the Taliban occupied Kabul. According to [The 9/11 Commission Report](#) (pp. 63-65), "When bin Laden first returned to Afghanistan in May 1996 he maintained ties to Gulbadin Hekmetyar as well as other non-Taliban and anti-Taliban political entities. However by September 1996 when Jalalabad and Kabul had both fallen to the Taliban, bin Laden had solidified his ties to the Taliban and was operating in Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan" (Elias-Sanborn, 2012, Doc18). The United States was consistently forcing the Taliban to shut down terrorist camps and oust Osama from Afghanistan. There were also other terrorist camps in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. An unnamed British journalist reported to the U.S. Embassy that her visit to two terrorist training camps in Paktia province, near the Afghan-Pakistan border on November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1996 revealed that both camps appear occupied, and her "Taliban sources" advise that "one of the camps is occupied by Harakat-ul-Ansar (HUA) militants," the Pakistan-based Kashmiri terrorist organization. The other camp is occupied by "assorted foreigners, including Chechens, Bosnian Muslims, as well as Sudanese and other Arabs" (Elias-Sanborn, 2012). The Taliban were finally removed from Afghanistan in October 2001, when they refused to hand over Osama bin Laden to the United States, who was responsible for the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

### **1.3 The Re-emergence of the Taliban movement**

After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, its leadership re-located to Pakistan's side of the Durand line (a border line separating Pakistan's Pashtuns from Afghanistan's). They allegedly regrouped and gathered in the Pakistani town of Quetta (capital of the Pakistani province of Balochistan, sharing a border with southern Afghanistan); and are therefore generally referred to in literature as "The Quetta Shura of Taliban" or Quetta Consultative body. In March 2003, when the United States successfully accomplished its initial mission in Afghanistan (which was to overthrow the Taliban and to restore a democratic dispensation in Kabul) and created an

environment for attacking Iraq, renowned Pakistani journalist Rahimullah Yusufzai received a call from the Afghan Taliban military commander Mullah Dadullah announcing a Jihad against the United States (Peters, August 2009, p18). This period is considered as the beginning of the Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan. Three months later, Mullah Omar appointed a ten-man Shura (Ruling Council) to lead the resistance in Afghanistan. Jalal-uddin Haqqani, known as the Haqqani Network, was named to control the south-eastern region (Khost, Paktika and Paktia), Mullah Dadullah was made commander of the south (Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul and Farah) and Gulbadin Hekmetyar was assigned the eastern flank (Nuristan and Kunar) (Peter, August 2009, p18).

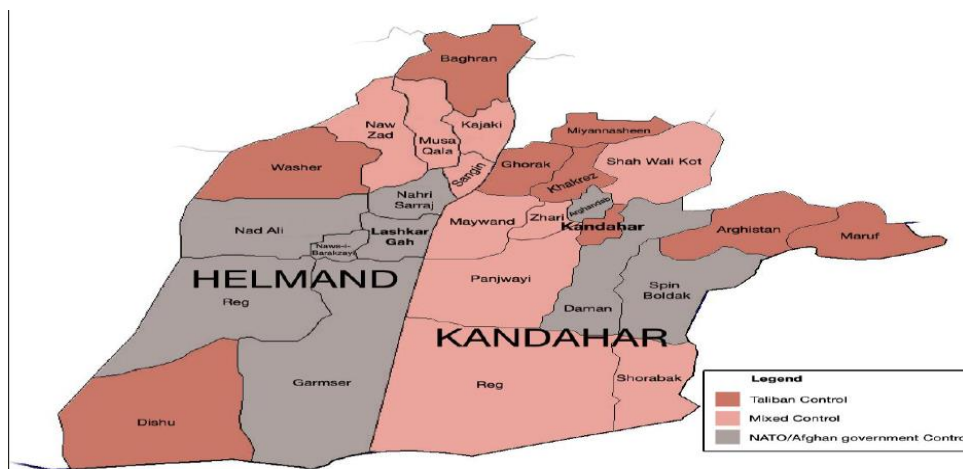
Mullah Mohammad Omar headed the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST), he was considered as the “leader of the faithful”. The QST continues to call itself the legitimate government of Afghanistan in exile and still considers itself being the head of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The Taliban’s war rhetoric is as much based on Afghan nationalism as it is on Jihadism. These two principles are the most valued rhetoric in Afghanistan's resistance against foreign forces throughout history. The Quetta Shura is the ideological and intellectual foundation of Afghanistan's insurgency, providing them with strategic guidance, and also recruits insurgents from a large pool of fighters from Madrassas and refugee camps in Pakistan; they are exclusively focused on the Afghan theatre and are not involved in any kind of sabotage activities inside Pakistan. Although the Taliban are more of a network than a hierarchical organisation, the Quetta Shura Taliban represents the core group of the Taliban, which ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. Almost every other insurgent group has sworn its allegiance to the Quetta Shura Taliban led by Mullah Mohammad Omar. (Katzman, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2011).

#### **1.4 The strategic importance of Kandahar and Helmand**

The Quetta Shura Taliban are actively involved in terrorist activities throughout Afghanistan, but their main objective is to secure the Kandahar and Helmand provinces, which are strategically significant and politically important for the Taliban. Kandahar is the spiritual home of the Taliban, as this was the movement’s birthplace; it has been very important in Afghanistan historically as well (Kandahar was the capital of the Taliban movement in 1990s until they occupied Kabul in 1996). The Quetta Shura Taliban is also sometimes called the “Kandahari Taliban”, because most of their leadership is from the Kandahar province. It is a city of more than one million people, overwhelmingly dominated by Pashtuns (the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan) who form most of the Taliban (Forsberg, December 2009). The second profoundly important province is Helmand, which is also

exclusively a Pashtun province and amenable to the Taliban. It produces more than 40% of the opium in the world and is the financial hub of the Taliban's insurgency. The Afghan government and coalition forces are facing a dilemma in Helmand: when they move against the poppy cultivation, it forces farmers and traders in the opium industry to join the Taliban. Not only do the Taliban provide them with protection against the government and coalition forces, but they also facilitate their smuggling to Pakistan; in return, the Taliban are collecting taxes on the poppy cultivation. Drug and criminal syndicates are the major financial sources of the Taliban's insurgency (Dressler, September 2009). Kandahar and Helmand provinces were the main priority of the United States' surge in troops in 2009. The Obama administration's new Afghan policy's key objectives are to reverse the momentum of the Taliban and to secure the main population centres from the insurgents. The surge was a blow to the Taliban in the south, but it was difficult to sustain. According to ISAF report "it is ISAF's assessment that the momentum achieved by the Taliban in Afghanistan since 2005 has been arrested in much of the country and reversed in a number of important areas. However, while the security progress achieved over the past year is significant, it is also fragile and reversible" (Petraeus, 2011).

**(MAP: 1)**



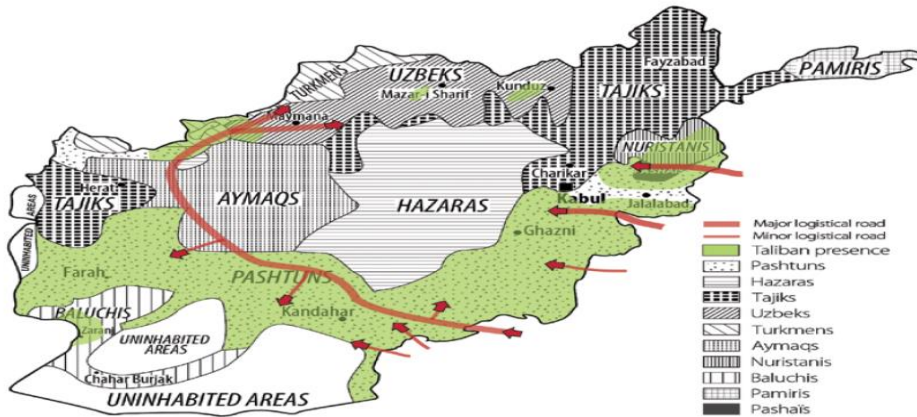
Perceived control of southern Afghanistan, based on interviews with Afghan civilians in local areas in January 2011.

(MacDonald, February 2011)

### 1.5 The establishment of shadow governance system

The other significant aspect of the Taliban's insurgency is a successful shadow governance structure. It is proliferating very fast, as the Taliban now

have shadow governors in almost every province. The Taliban governors' primary functions include coordinating the efforts of the commanders working in his province and administering and providing oversight of Taliban finances and judicial mechanisms (Nijssen, September 2011). The Taliban are popular in areas under their control, as they provide quick justice and dispute resolution mechanisms – which are traditional and based on Islamic and Pashtun traditions. For example, the Taliban's justice system does not need any formal judicial training or an extensive infrastructure network; neither does it require any prosecution or defence attorneys, judges or juries: a three-man Shura listens to both parties' grievances and examines evidence, quizzes witnesses and renders a decision on the spot. It may seem absurd, but this is a very popular mechanism of resolving disputes between parties in Afghanistan. This millennia-old system, called Jirga, is valued in Afghanistan mostly because people are poor: they cannot afford expensive attorneys or long judicial processes, which may be taking several decades to resolve a civil dispute between parties. "One local farmer reported that the Taliban courts in Maiwand and Zhari 'deal with a number of cases: land disputes, family disputes, loan disputes, robbery, killing, fighting... and the people are happy with them'" (Forsberg J. D., 21<sup>st</sup> December 2009, p8). The Taliban's provision and enforcement of justice has become a key source for building legitimacy in Kandahar. According to Forsberg, "Anecdotal evidence suggests Taliban courts are more efficient and transparent than are government-funded courts, and that many locals prefer them, not only are local courts corrupt, but they are also inadequate for the size of Kandahar's population" (Forsberg J. D., 21<sup>st</sup> December 2009, p8). The ultimate objective of the Taliban's shadow governance is to discredit the Afghan government backed by the international community and provide an effective alternative system to the people of Afghanistan.



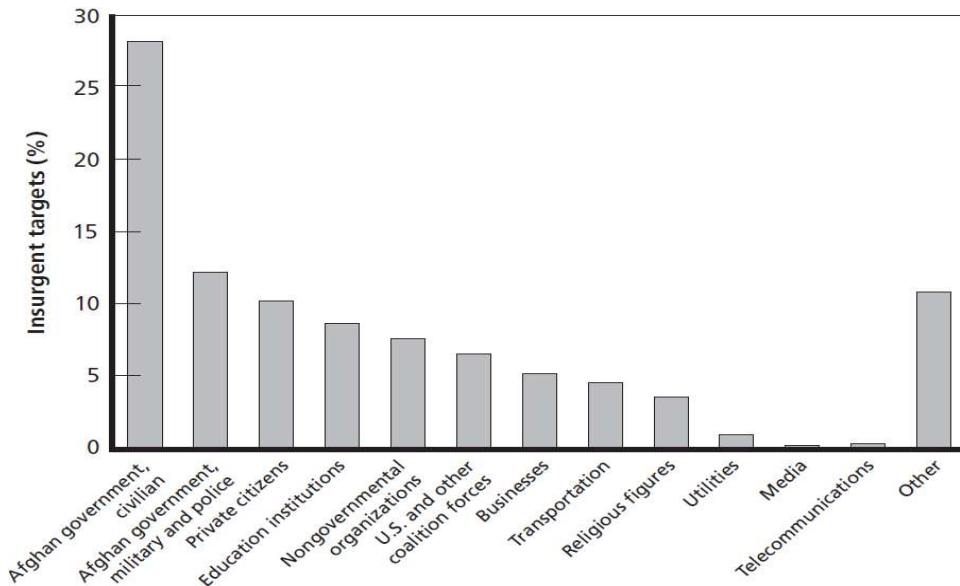
(Dorrnsoro, 2009)

## 1.6 The Taliban's Strategy of High Profile Killing

The Taliban's strategies are like other terrorist groups that include assassinating effective Afghan government officers, tribal chiefs, governors, and other high profile figures assisting the government (Jones, 2008, p.53). Their primary objective is to discredit the government's institutions and kill all the people who are effective at either the district or provincial levels. The Taliban are particularly targeting law enforcement agencies' personnel including the police and the National Directorate of Security (NDS). The NDS is a domestic intelligence agency, and a very functional one at that by Afghanistan standards. It seems that the Taliban are more strictly following General Petraeus' counter-insurgency doctrine (which secures major population centres and uses effective propaganda tools) than the Afghani and coalition forces. The Taliban boast a very dynamic propaganda machinery and are busy in successfully establishing the perception that they are winning the war; it has a tremendous effect on the population's attitude toward the insurgents and the government (Ledwidge, 14<sup>th</sup> September 2011). A friendly population plays a critical role in an insurgency. According to Mao Tse-Tung, insurgents are like fish that need a sea in which to swim in (Jones, 2008, p11): "Popular support is a common goal for all actors in an insurgency. Both winning support and preventing insurgents from gaining support are critical components of any counterinsurgency. With popular support comes assistance – money, logistics, recruits, intelligence, and other aid – from the local population" (Jones, 2008, p12). The Taliban are also focused on heavily-populated cities in southern Afghanistan, Kandahar and Helmand. If they succeed in alienating the population from the government and acquiring its active support, then they are more likely to win the war in

Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the Afghan government and the coalition forces have failed to provide security to both key population centres and important tribal and government figures. The key afghan leaders killed by the Taliban include Ahmed Wali Karzai – a brother of Afghanistan's president who was also chairman of the Kandahar Provincial Council – and Barhan-ud-din Rabbani – an ex-president of Afghanistan and head of the Afghan Peace Council; it shows that they are successful in targeting many high profile figures in Afghanistan and gives an impression that the government has failed to provide even simple security to its top officials. The primary target of the surge of the US troops in Afghanistan was to reverse the Taliban's momentum and win the people's confidence in the Afghan and coalition forces.

**(Insurgent Targets, 2002–2006) (Figure:1)**



(Jones, 2008,p.53)

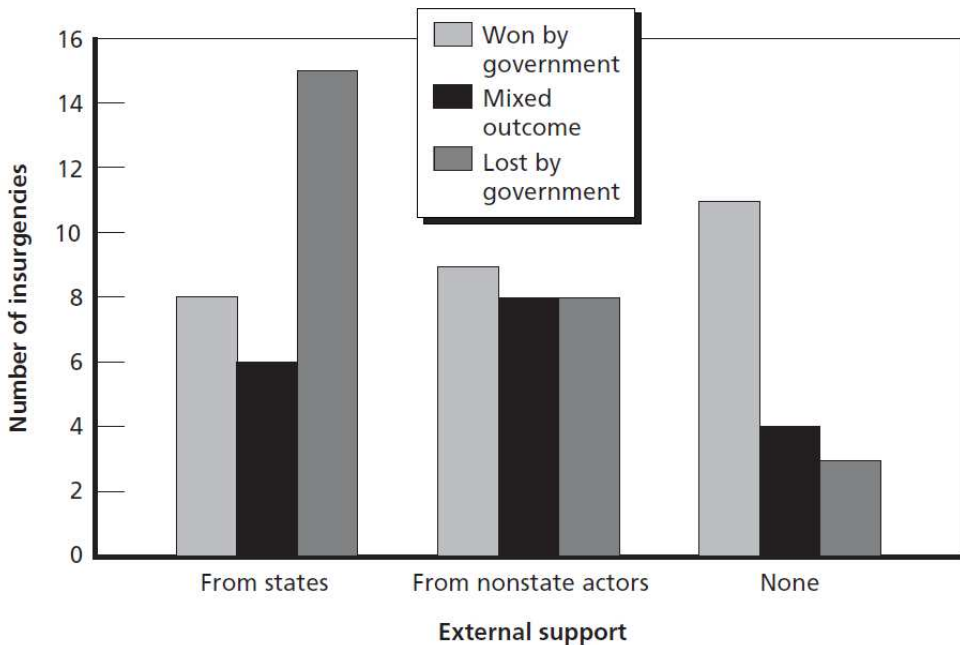
### **1.7 The External Support to the Taliban's insurgency in Afghanistan**

The Afghan Taliban's sanctuaries in Pakistan are considered as the most important factor for the survival of insurgency and the failure of counter-insurgency in Afghanistan (Jones, 20 March 2007). It is argued that one of the first principles of a successful counter-insurgency is a closed border; it is also an established fact that insurgencies with external support are more likely to succeed than the ones without. Theoretically, insurgencies are highly dependent on sanctuaries. According to Rand report, “[t]hose insurgencies



that received support from external states won more than 50 percent of the time, those with support from non-state actors and Diaspora groups won just over 30 percent of the time, and those with no external support won only 17 percent of the time. Support from state actors and non-state actors, such as a diaspora population, criminal network, or terrorist network, clearly makes a difference” (Jones, 2008, p 21).

(Figure: 2)



(Jones, 2008, p.21)

Insurgencies usually enjoy two kinds of external support. The first one is a direct support, when a state or non-state actor has a declared policy of supporting an insurgency that includes providing training, recruiting insurgents, giving money, weapons and strategic guidance. During the Cold War, Pakistan and the United States were displaying a clear policy of supporting insurgency in Afghanistan against the Soviet-backed regime in

Kabul; the CIA and ISI also collectively provided every possible support and successfully ousted the Soviet Union from Afghanistan in 1989. Similarly, Pakistan openly supported Kashmir's insurgency against India during the 1990s and even risked a nuclear war during the Kargil crisis in 1999. The second kind of support is a passive one, when insurgents have freedom to use the territory of any state as a sanctuary; there could be several reasons for that: either the insurgents may have a tacit approval of the state or the state may be too weak to take effective actions against the insurgents, or both (Jones, 2008), ( Asia report No207, 27 June 2011).

There are different opinions regarding Pakistan's behaviour toward the Afghan Taliban. It is very important to explore the support for the Taliban in Pakistan at various levels. There is a consensus in the literature and among policy makers in Washington, Kabul and New-Delhi that insurgents are using Pakistan's territory as a sanctuary, which has devastating effects on the success of counter-insurgency in Afghanistan; although they cannot agree on whether the Taliban have the support of Pakistan's government, Army and ISI. It is very important to precisely determine the level of support for the insurgents in Pakistan and identify the actors involved in supporting insurgencies. Non-state actors are very strong in weak states such as Pakistan; it is possible that some non-state actors such as religious political parties, religious schools (Madrassas), Afghan refugee camps, criminal syndicates, Afghani Diaspora, rogue elements in Pakistan's institutions (especially in the Army and ISI) and some government officials are involved in supporting insurgencies at various levels. Therefore, the need for a thorough investigation and intelligence cooperation between Pakistan and US is essential, in order to arrest the real culprit and stop the flow of fresh insurgents into Afghanistan.

Pakistan has always been interested in Afghanistan's domestic affairs for various reasons. Pakistan's dictator-cum-president, General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988), once told ISI's then-head General Akhtar Abdur-ur-Rehman that "the water [in Afghanistan] must boil at the right temperature." Pakistan's involvement became more intense after the Soviet's withdrawal from Afghanistan; as it had been supporting its proxies very actively in Afghanistan and eventually opted for the Taliban in 1992 (Jones, 20 March 2007). Pakistan's ISI was the chief administrator of its Afghan policy and had an absolute control over it. There are several reasons for Pakistan's support of a proxy and insurgents in Afghanistan. Some scholars argue that the Army has an institutional interest in Afghanistan; others say that Afghanistan is very important for the regional balance of power between Pakistan, India and Iran: therefore, Islamabad will always support a friendly regime in Kabul

(Grare, July 2007, Tellis, Winter 2004-2005). Another important argument is regarding Pakistan's ethnic fragmentation. A large number of Pashtuns are living on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, and it is very difficult to keep them apart for any lengthy period of time. There is a real possibility that once Afghanistan becomes a stable country, Pakistan will face an existential threat from its second largest minority, Pashtuns; thus Pakistan's security establishment does not compromise on the alienation of the Taliban (Synovitz, 26 September 2012 ). In light of the concerns above, it is not difficult to conclude Pakistan's state apparatus has been supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan. Islamabad cannot afford an Afghan nationalist government which does not recognise the Durand line (Pakistan-Afghanistan border, separating the Pashtuns of Afghanistan from those of Pakistan). Zalmay Khalilzad, an ex-American ambassador to Afghanistan said: "Mullah Omar and other Taliban leaders are in Pakistan. [Mullah Akhtar] Usmani, one of the Taliban leaders, spoke to Pakistan's Geo TV at a time when the Pakistani intelligence services claimed that they did not know where [the Taliban leaders] were. If a TV company could find him, how is it that the intelligence service of a country which has nuclear bombs and a lot of security and military forces cannot find them?" (Khalilzad, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2005). Evidence suggests that Pakistan may or may not support the Quetta Shura of the Taliban; in either case, the Pakistani state does not disrupt the running of the Quetta Shura. The state has complete control over Quetta, which has one of the biggest military complexes and is also home to the Quetta Staff College, a military training academy for high-ranking officers. Factors other than the inability to do so enter in Pakistan's lack of cooperation with the United States against Quetta Shura of the Taliban.

### **1.8 The Taliban's Relationship with Al-Qaeda**

The Afghan Taliban have relationship with Al-Qaida and other international Jihadist groups. It is important to understand that the Quetta Shura Taliban's relationship with Al-Qaida is less explicit and visible (Waldman, 10 September 2012). Al-Qaida has a strong relationship with the Pakistani Taliban, the Haqqani network and militants in Pakistan (Dressler, October 2010). One of the major reasons was probably due the locations where they operated from. Al-Qaida did not have as high level of freedom in Quetta as they enjoyed in North Waziristan, which was under the *de facto* control of the Haqqani network and the Pakistani Taliban. The Quetta Shura Taliban were living in southern Balochistan before the start of their movement in Afghanistan. It is very difficult to differentiate them from genuine inhabitants, except through intense intelligence cooperation from the local community. On the contrary, Al-Qaida members are usually foreigners that

imply they could be easily recognised and arrested in Quetta. The second reason might be Pakistan's security establishment concerns regarding the presence of Al-Qaeda in a politically volatile province; the state may have signalled to the Quetta Shura that Al-Qaeda will not be tolerated in the province. A third factor could be a change of mind among the Taliban's leadership. The Quetta Shura Taliban is the legitimate face of the Afghan Taliban and there are chances that there will eventually be a political settlement in Afghanistan (Forsberg, 21 December 2009). The Quetta Shura Taliban may want to increase their credentials as a responsible group that is acceptable to international community.

However, this does not mean that the Taliban do not have any relationship with Al-Qaeda. The Taliban are at war with the United States and will not miss any opportunity to inflict massive damage on their opponents. There are intelligence reports that suggest Al-Qaeda has been helping the Afghan Taliban at tactical, operational and strategic levels in Afghanistan's insurgency (Jones, 2008). The Afghan Taliban became more lethal after their intense cooperation with the Al-Qaeda and Iraqi insurgent groups. They are now frequently advocating suicide-bombing; and their use of sophisticated IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices) also show that they are receiving training from Al-Qaeda members in North Waziristan. Al-Qaeda is also financially helping the Afghan Taliban, by collecting money from wealthy individuals in Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Saudi Arabia (Dorrnsoro, 2009). The Afghan Taliban's relationship with Al-Qaeda may not be as strong as that of the Haqqani network and of the Pakistani Taliban, probably because of a physical proximity, but they are sharing a common goal: to defeat international and domestic forces in Afghanistan.

## **1.9 Conclusion**

The situation in Kandahar and Helmand provinces are the parameters to check the status of insurgency in southern Afghanistan. These two provinces are both politically important and strategically significant for the success of the insurgency, as they were the focus of the United States' forces and the Taliban. These provinces are profoundly important for the survival of the Taliban as well, if they are defeated in these two provinces, they would not have any significant presence in any other part of Afghanistan; this is especially true for the Quetta Shura Taliban. There were several reports about the successful ground progress of the Afghan forces in Kandahar and Helmand provinces; the Taliban had therefore changed their tactics (Forsberg, December 2009, MacDonald, February 2011, Petraeus, 2011). The Taliban still are influent in rural areas of Kandahar and Helmand, and also

exert control on portions of some major roads connecting Kandahar and Helmand with the rest of the country and Pakistan.

One of the major challenges for the Afghan forces and international community in southern Afghanistan is weak infrastructure and governance. There are strong suspicions that once the support of the United States and Britain withdraw from Kandahar and Helmand, the Taliban will again occupy major centres in both provinces. The Afghan army and police are not trained enough to resist the Taliban forces in their strongholds such as Kandahar and Helmand. Proper arrangements have to be made to save these two provinces from the Taliban's occupation; otherwise all efforts will go in vain. It is a major test on the capabilities of the Afghan forces and government to stop the Taliban from capturing Kandahar and Helmand again.

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