

The Taliban's "struggle for survival"

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The Taliban of 2002-3 were by all accounts ineffective insurgents, even if being arrayed against an even more ineffective Afghan government hid somewhat their ineffectiveness. Most of the Taliban had a background in Harakat-e Enqelab-e Islami, a clerical insurgent organisation that had been the largest anti-Soviet jihadist group in the early 1980s. Despite its size, the contribution of Harakat to the jihadist cause was modest. The mullahs who were leading it might have often been courageous and motivated, but were extremely poorly organised, lacked tactical skills, could not manage the logistics and were slow in developing them. Gradually, Harakat was marginalised in the struggle, with many of its commanders and fighters defecting to other, more effective groups such as Jamiat-e Islami, Hizb-e Islami and others.

When the Taliban resumed an insurgency in 2002, their skills and capabilities were in line with those of Harakat in the 1980s. In the 1990s they had not been fighting as an insurgent force, but as a semi-regular militias against comparable forces. What made things worse for them, in 2002 they faced a technologically even more advanced enemy than the Soviet army and were in a position of numerical inferiority, which had not been the case in the 1980s. During 2003 the Taliban started making some inroads in portions of southern Afghanistan, against a weak Afghan government. As a result they started attracting the attention of the American forces, who deployed small number of troops or more often trained militias and police forces to deal with them. Even this modest American commitment turned to be a hurdle for the Taliban insurgents, whose organisation had been developing into an array of autonomous and sometimes even rival networks, centered around a few charismatic warrior mullahs. The networks were patrimonially owned by their leaders, rarely cooperated with each other and were not meritocratic in the selection of the leadership at various levels. Their ability to conduct relatively sophisticated military operations was extremely limited, even if they were developing some political or ideological appeal among sections of the population.

Having recognised their weak military capacities, in 2003 the Taliban embarked in an effort to become a more effective military force, first by developing a more integrated military leadership. The central leadership gradually acquired some capability to mobilise and deploy military force of its own, i.e. independently of the networks. In the early days this took the shape of advisers, trainers and teams of specialists being deployed away from their native provinces. Although the networks remained absolutely predominant, this improved system facilitated geographical expansion and allowed for some increase in the sophistication of tactical operations.

This effort to improve the military effectiveness of the Taliban bore fruit in 2005-6, when they emerged for the first time as a serious military challenge in southern Afghanistan. This relative success brought over retaliation in the shape of an escalating commitment of military force to southern Afghanistan by NATO armies. The modest concessions to centralisation, made from 2003 to 2006, soon turned out to be insufficient in the wake of enemy escalation. The introduction of the 'night raids' in 2007 represented a major shift, even if the commitment of Special Forces was still modest then in comparison to what it had become by 2011.

The evolution of the Taliban's organisation had therefore to continue after 2006. The Taliban started moving with decision towards the adoption of asymmetric tactics, initially primarily IEDs and suicide bombers, but then also ambush tactics and sniping. The massive shift towards using IEDs on a large scale is particularly noteworthy because of its implications: the Taliban had to develop a small industry for the production of explosive devices. This adaptation is well recognised in the literature, but another dimension of the process of adaptation which went mostly undetected has to do with organisational change.

The first signs of a process of centralisation, described above, strengthened indeed after 2006. Some of the smaller networks, more poorly funded, were taken under the direct authority of the central leadership in exchange for better supplies. More individuals were recruited by the centre. Eventually, perhaps in 2010, the Taliban established a system of rotation of military commanders, which weakened the hold of the old patrimonial networks and strengthened decisively the hand of the centre, which in the meanwhile was also claiming the right to all Taliban revenue, for the purpose of redistributing it more rationally according to strategic priorities (as opposed to the richer provinces gathering more and therefore being better equipped and resourced). A parallel system of political commissars was added to the military structure on the ground, in order to consolidate command and control. Military training became compulsory for commanders and fighters alike, with new training camps being set up in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Military manuals were developed in a number of languages, while codes of conduct developed and widely distributed to strengthen the discipline of the force.

In parallel, the Taliban also started developing a civilian dimension to their operations, which had originally been completely absent. After 2003 a system of governance was gradually developed, with shadow provincial and district governors being appointed to an ever growing number of provinces and districts. A judicial system also came into being, to rival the government's. Finally from 2007 onwards the Taliban also started making an effort to provide at least some semblance of services to the population, particularly in terms of education. What was driving the Taliban's effort in the civilian field? The desire for political legitimacy, certainly; but also more in general the awareness that a hostile population would have harmed them in fighting their insurgency. In 2006, as the Taliban for the first time entered densely populated rural areas well connected with the cities, their strict religious mores were found not to be popular among the villagers. In 2007 Mullah Omar had

to issue an edict, which authorised his men to ignore his 1990s social edict banning music and imposing other strictures. The Taliban's violent campaign against the schools in 2006 proved particularly unpopular, prompting the Taliban to seek remedy in 2007: negotiations over the re-opening of schools started, private schools were encouraged, etc.

Finally the Taliban sought to stiffen their ranks through the strengthening of the ideological dimension of the struggle. Their propaganda media stresses the character of jihad against Christian crusaders, while training/indoctrination camps were set up in Pakistan to form a new generation of fighters intensely loyal to the cause. The point about ideology is an important one: insurgent movements, which have to operate in a decentralised way, need to develop an intense sense of belonging among their rank-and-file in order to offset the difficulty of supervising their activities from a remote location. Although the Taliban made an effort to inspect and supervise, forms of indiscipline and even corrupt behaviour persisted throughout the period being discussed. Ideological commitment can be instilled in a number of ways:

- the sharing of intense participatory experiences;
- deliberate indoctrination particularly if occurring at a young age;
- repeated exposure to the ideology, particularly if exercised in conditions of monopoly or near monopoly;
- media domination;
- the development of an intrinsically attractive ideology.

On the latter, it is worth pointing out that the Taliban had from the start ideological material which had the potential to appeal widely among the Afghan population: a particular interpretation of Islam which has relatively wide currency in the Afghan countryside. As a result, the Taliban did not invest major efforts in ideological development and as of 2011 were still left with a rather incoherent set of statements and principles, never fully coalesced into a full ideology. No justification other than a temporary one has ever been developed for clerical rule; there is no Taliban equivalent of Khomeini's legitimisation of the clerics permanently occupying the seat of power.

An analysis of the Taliban's evolution during their struggle for survival would not be complete without a discussion of the role of external influences. Imitation is certainly a major factor in the evolution of polities and political organisations; few of them could be found standing in the world today which have not imitated some of their peers to at least some extent. In the case of the Taliban, the most obvious form of imitation consists in the adoption of technologies which they had originally resisted. So the Taliban, once hostile to photography, are now producing masses of propaganda videos, featuring their fighters. Recently Mullah Omar reportedly ordered each Taliban unit to own at least a laptop. Education in English was once resisted, but again

Mullah Omar has reportedly ordered the units to employ at least an individual able to speak English.

More importantly, the organisational forms gradually adopted by the Taliban after 2003 have been imported from the Islamist parties, which in the 1980s had been the rivals of Harakat-e Engalab (see above). The Islamist organisation counted within their ranks hundreds of university educated cadres, a fact which facilitated their organisational development. The Taliban, by contrast, lacked such cadres initially. After 2003 they seem to have tried to bring into the movement individuals with technical skills such as computing, but also management, languages, etc. Clearly the Taliban's media operations, with their reliance on modern media (including the internet), are not entrusted to exclusively madrasa-educated mullahs.

How has, however, such injection of external 'DNA' taken place? In some cases the process of imitation might have been initiated by the imitator spontaneously and without prompting; however it is clear that the bulk of organisational innovation was both initiated on the advice of foreign sponsors and implemented with their help.

Evolution in conditions of direct external assistance is not uncommon, although this type of evolution is not always successful. The post-colonial states of Asia and Africa have largely followed such an evolutionary path, with varying degrees of success. It could be argued that compared to the assistance provided to the Taliban's enemy (the Kabul government), assistance provided to the Taliban was more effective: the Taliban have been successfully holding their own against vastly superior forces and have received in assistance a fraction of what Kabul has received.

However, even Pakistani assistance to the Taliban has not gone without friction, controversies, negative and even perverse side effects. As the Pakistanis sponsored the centralisation effort within the Taliban, they became also the target of much resentment from commanders who were not so keen to be centralised. Among other things they often acted as 'policemen' of the leadership, incarcerating for varying periods of time Taliban figures who did not play by the rules. More in general, among the Taliban has gradually developed the feeling that the price paid to the Pakistanis for their support was higher and higher, in terms of the autonomy of the organisation.

Regardless of how the Pakistani-Taliban relationship will evolve in the future, it is clear that it will leave behind some 'genetic' heritage. This is likely to take the shape of an improved human capital, as Taliban cadres have absorbed skills that they did not have before and perhaps a few individuals have been brought into the Taliban, whose membership would have been actively sought otherwise. The need for the Pakistanis to have the Afghans to be in the lead all the time and for the Pakistani themselves to remain as remote from the forefront as possible is likely to have favoured capacity building among the Afghans: most of the time they had to implement Pakistani 'advices' on their own, contrary to Afghan government officials who were often in a position to either ignore any advice or to let the advisers de facto replace them.

