

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نپاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپائی

Eurasia Review

How 'Neo' Were The 'Neo-Taliban'?

By Thomas Ruttig
3/8/2010

Since the Taleban's quick resurgence after the fall of their regime in 2001, their insurgency often is described with the term 'Neo-Taleban'. Here it is argued, though, that there was more continuity than change from the pre-9/11 to the post-9/11 Taleban movement. The real 'neo-Taleban' might emerge now – after the arrest of accommodation-inclined Taleban leaders by Pakistan's authorities. The main feature of these 'neo-Taleban' would be that they are tools in the hands of the ISI.

The one who has tried to explain (t)his choice of terminology in the most comprehensive way is Antonio Giustozzi. He argues that the Neo-Taleban differ from 'the old Movement on a number of issues (...). They seem to have absorbed from their foreign jihadist allies a more flexible and less orthodox attitude towards imported technologies and techniques. (...) More important, the Neo-Taliban became much more integrated in the international jihadist movement after 2001 (...) and [undertook] first, shy attempts to court educated constituencies'. He further notes that 'old Taleban' were mainly represented in their top leadership while there old Taleban commanders were reluctant – at least in the first post-2001 years – to rejoin the insurgency and most of the Taleban 'foot soldiers' had newly joined the fight.(1)

I think that the most important issues to look at when it comes to the issue whether today's Taleban are really 'neo' one mainly needs to look at the movement's organisational structure including the composition of its leadership, its ideology, political aims and program. There, it seems to me, they show more continuity than change. The issue of whether and what kind of technology they use seem to be secondary to me.

Most importantly, the movement still adheres to a single leader, Mulla Omar, the amir ul-mo'menin. This is a major constant in the movement. While the Taleban Leadership Council's composition has changed to an extent, this was not the result of political or ideological shifts but of physical losses, by killing or arrest. Although the exact composition of this council still remains unclear (and even more after the current wave of arrests in Pakistan), its core still is mainly Kandahari and stems from the pre-2001 leadership. With Mulla Muhammad Hassan, former information minister Amir Khan Mutaqi, Mawlawi Abdul Kabir and – until recently – Mullas Obaidullah and Baradar, the traditional leaders are strongly present. Non-Kandaharis still have difficulties in getting into the core group.

What regards the role of pre-2001 commanders, this is difficult to judge. But from a variety of reports, it appears that many of them have rejoined the fight – in particular after ISAF finally had rolled out into Southern and South-Eastern Afghanistan by 2006. As a result, arrests of former Taleban commanders increased, including of those who had remained at home with actively participating in the insurgency, and pushed many of them – and their communities - back into the arms of the Taleban. The same went for communities who had former prominent Taleban still sitting in Guantanamo, Bagram or Kandahar. That the 'foot soldiers' come from a new generation, also does not necessarily represent a shift in the character of the Taleban. In contrast: the influx of young madrassa students is another constant in the Taleban's history. They, however, have no say on the Taleban's political direction and are mainly used as 'cannon fodder'. Only few of them have a chance to rise in the Taleban ranks when they can step into the position of elder, more influential relatives who serve as commanders – when those are killed or arrested.

The increasing use of internationalist Jihadist rhetoric in the Taleban's rhetoric – which was interpreted by some as a stronger integration into the internationalist jihadist movement led by al-Qaida - was a rather transitional period. Its major proponent was Mulla Dadullah who had copied az-Zarqawi's tactics from Iraq by training a large number of suicide bombers and, even more significantly, using this as an effective propaganda tool given the West's terrorism fears. After he was killed in 2007, this tendency calmed down significantly, indicating that Dadullah had more or less stood alone with this position in the Taleban Kandahari mainstream. The Haqqani network which is known for its long-standing special Arab connections still follows the same line but it is not representative for the mainstream Taleban.

Dadullah's course even triggered a rather extensive discussion within the Taleban about whether the use of suicide bombers – which, as a rule, cause more casualties amongst Afghan civilians than amongst those seen by the Taleban as 'legitimate targets. i.e. foreign troops and people linked to the Afghan government – was 'Islamic'. This current cited the Quran that killing Muslims is haram (forbidden, i.e. a sin). They were called 'pious Taleban' by some Afghans – in contrast to 'terrorists' like Dadullah.

The anti-Dadullah line also seems to have won the upped hands within the mainstream Kandahari Taleban: When Mansur Dadullah took over his elder brother's place and tried to follow the same line he was reprimanded by Mulla Omar and even expelled from the movement for a period of time. There were also rumours that the killing of Dadullah was supported by information from within the Taleban ranks. Also the Taleban code of conduct for their fighters -

the layha - seems to be a reaction to this discussion, regulating – at least in theory - the use of suicide bombers, ruling to avoid alienating the local population through causing ‘unnecessary’ civilian casualties.

Significantly, internationalist Jihadist rhetoric has not translated into action among the Afghan Taleban. Not in a single case have Afghan Taleban participated in terrorist attacks outside their ‘area of operations’, i.e. Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan. (There also has not been any Afghan amongst the plane hijackers on 9/11.) As of late, Mulla Omar officially stated on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the start of the US-led intervention in Afghanistan on 7 October 2009 that the Taleban do not intend to threaten any country ‘including Europe’ (i.e. also not the US) as long as they let Afghanistan in peace. When the Taleban still use jihadist language, their primary target is fund-raising amongst their major donor groups in Arab Gulf countries.

The Afghan Taleban’s political programme is exclusively Afghan. They want to force the Western ‘occupant forces’ to withdraw and to re-establish their Islamic Emirate. Beyond this, the Taleban never have developed a sophisticated political program, neither during their regime nor currently. This echoes the approach of Islamist movements elsewhere that simply claim that ‘Islam is the way’ and the recourse to Quran, Sunna and Sharia make further explanations superfluous.

Structurally, today’s Taleban increasingly resemble their pre-9/11 incarnation. Today, they have set up a parallel government in large parts of the country, really existing in some places, only temporarily on the ground in others. Moreover, they consider themselves a ‘legitimate’ continuation of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) of 1996 to 2001 which, in their eyes, has been unlawfully removed by a foreign intervention and replaced by a ‘puppet administration’. The Taleban consciously continue to use the IEA insignia - and even more so after the self-delegitimisation of the Karzai government by the faulty 2009 presidential poll. They demand that journalists and aid organisations obtain permits to enter areas controlled by them. They correspond with foreign states and international organisations, send letters to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation - mainly in one direction only, though. The Taleban increasingly present themselves a government in waiting and therefore also use a more all-Afghan national(istic) and Islamist then a narrow Pashtun-nationalist language, as some claim.

The Taleban’s changed attitude to modern (‘Western’) communication technologies as well as their now highly effective propaganda machine using the internet, DCs, DVDs, mobile phone networks and messages etc. seems insufficient to conclude a clear-cut difference between the ‘old’ and the ‘NeoTaleban’. First, it rather seems to be a proof for the fact that the Taleban movement is learning, that it develops some of its positions and shows itself adaptive and responsive to points large parts of the population had held against them during their regime, like their ban for girls’ education, female employment and entertainment, including music, TV, internet etc. (This as mainly a ban for their subjects whom they – as they claimed – wanted to protect from the damaging effects of a Western cultural invasion. The Taleban ban on TV and satellite phones could rather be explained by their attempt to control information and prevent their enemies from organising underground. Taleban leaders, meanwhile, were watching TV and

Foreign Minister Mutawakkil operated a computer in his office(4) and used it to inform Mulla Omar about important international events.)

Currently, local Taleban groups react differently to music played at marriages or audio cassettes, in some areas and sometimes they are banned, sometimes they are tolerated. Secondly – and more importantly – the Taleban just react to the fact that these technologies significantly have progressed and spread since 2001, not only in Afghanistan.

When it comes to the Taleban's increasingly efficient and – in their own ranks – apparently undisputed use of 'Western' – or modern- technology (while they had banned TV and internet during their pre-2001 reign – mainly for their subjects) they actually reflect the position early proponents of 'political Islam' like Seyyed Jamaluddin Afghani, Muhammad Abdu' and also Mahmud Tarzi had. (In contrast to the rather obscurantist Taleban, they all could be considered to be modernists, though.) Facing Western colonialism, they advocated Muslims to shed 'Westernism' (gharbzadegi) and turn back to the 'true' principles of Islam as in the Muslim heydays of Baghdad and Herat – in contrast to the contemporary monarchies in those Muslim countries still free which they deemed decadent and stagnant – while using modern technology, mainly in economy and warfare, to catch up with the West.

The major physical difference between the Taleban in the pre- and post 9/11 periods is that up to late 2001 they were a quasi-government with an open structure, ministries, sub-national administration, a security apparatus etc. After 2001, they changed into an insurgent or guerrilla movement without much of a 'liberated zone', no 'seat' of a central government and a capital. This, however, does not strongly influence their political-ideological outlook. It deepens, however – and the recent arrests in Pakistan have shown that – their dependence on Pakistan.

Pakistan's latest arrests of Taleban leaders who reportedly were involved in or, at least, believed to be supporters of a political solution, might open the way for a real 'neo-Taleban' leadership of the movement, a hawkish one that is against any political accommodation, as long as it does not serve Pakistan's interests - tools in the hands of the ISI.