



THE QUETTA SHURA: A TRIBAL ANALYSIS

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According to well-established studies, the Taliban's senior leadership, the Quetta Shura,¹ which has significant control over the Taliban's insurgent operations in southern Afghanistan, seems to have evolved from a Ghilzai Pashtun-led organization during its early years to one that is currently dominated by Durrani Pashtuns. The Ghilzai remnants are slim and include Mullah Mohammad Omar,² a Hotak Ghilzai, and Mullah Muttaqi, reportedly a Taraki Ghilzai, and with the exception of Mullah Mohammad Hassan, probably a Babar, the remaining key Taliban leaders of the insurgency in southern Afghanistan have evolved into a Durrani leadership.

This is a very significant change within the early Taliban structure. In a careful review of 20 Taliban political figures who served as either a minister or deputy-minister, over half were non-Durrani. More significantly, when the Panjpai Durrani are separated from the group, the Zirak Durrani comprise less than 25 percent of the total. An equally significant number of Taliban military officials were also analyzed to show that approximately 33 percent were Durrani, but this group has only one Zirak Durrani.³ Using this as a baseline study, the tribal composition of the current Taliban leadership is even more significant, if not astonishing.

Like all things among the fractious Pashtuns, the two groups of Durrani are frequently antagonistic, the Zirak and the Panjpai. The Zirak tribes are larger, stronger, possess better land, and have access to government positions from which political connections bring both patronage and services to these larger tribes. The Panjpai are smaller, weaker, generally dispersed instead of having well defined tribal boundaries, and few of their leaders are in positions in the current Afghan government that would allow some government largesse to arrive for these tribes. As a result, the Panjpai tribes – primarily the Noorzai, Alizai, and Ishaqzai – are often better represented in the Taliban leadership than they are in Afghanistan's national and provincial governments. There is an indication that the Taliban leadership is aware of the consequences for the government of appearing to favor one Durrani group over the other and most of the Quetta Shura leadership positions are divided more or less equally between Zirak and Panjpai Durrani factions.

Senior leadership positions are also divided well in what appears to be a careful, possibly intentional balance. Mullah Omar is Hotak Ghilzai, Mullah Berader is Popalzai Zirak Durrani, and Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour is Ishaqzai Panjpai Durrani. While this may be coincidence, it appears that tribal politics may be responsible for ensuring that the major tribal factions in order to attract and hold these large groupings of Pashtuns to the Taliban Movement.

But the Taliban's efforts at a careful balancing of Pashtun tribes in a multi-tribal hierarchy under the control of both Shari'a and Pashtunwali may be the insurgent movement's greatest flaw. The two forms of governance, intensely top-down and powerfully bottom-up, respectively, will be

1. Composition of Quetta Shura is shown at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/13075023/Insurgency-and-Terrorism-in-Afghanistan>; http://www.afghanemb-canada.net/en/news_bulletin/2006/september/09/index.php; Johnson, Thomas H. and M. Chris Mason, "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan", Orbis, 2006.

2. For brief biographical sketches of the Taliban's leaders, see Ahmad Rashid's appendices from The Taliban at <http://www.khyber.org/articles/2003/ProfileofTalebanLeaders-Chart.shtml>.

3. In this tribal analysis, members of Taliban political and military organizations were selected from sanction lists and their tribal affiliation was established from a review of a wide variety of reports, both classified and unclassified.

nearly impossible to reconcile with one another unless Pashtunwali's cultural controls are generally abandoned. Attempting to meld members from historically quarrelsome tribes into a multi-tribal organization will probably fail. In adopting this approach, the Taliban leadership may have followed the equally flawed Pan-Arabism found in al-Qa'ida where Osama bin Laden's multinational organizational table has created great tension between national groups that their drive to form a millennial ummah (community of believers) and the rule of shari'a (Islamic law) couldn't overcome the ancient animosities found among feuding Muslim nationalities. The passage of time will reveal whether these organizational approaches will be fatal for either – or both – insurgent organizations.

In the case of the Taliban leadership, there must be severe personal differences between members whose tribes are traditional enemies. For example, the leadership has two Achakzai tribesmen, Abdul Razaq and Mohammad Hassan Rahmani, and one Noorzai, Hafiz Majid, and these two tribes are very antagonistic toward one another. A large battle fought in southern Afghanistan during the Soviet and communist period occurred at Spin Boldak where communist Achakzais fought mujahedin militia fighters. Afghanistan scholars Barnett Rubin and Robert Kaplan provide good examples of Noorzai animosity toward the Achakzais:

From Barnett Rubin:

“Ismatullah Muslim was a Soviet-trained army major at the time of the 1978 coup. He was ... of the Achakzai tribe from the area between Qandahar and the Pakistani border. This tribe was known for its raiding and smuggling activities ... and Ismat Muslim was no exception. He had engaged in smuggling at least since the days where he had the distinction of being the first Afghan military officer to be imprisoned there. As early as 1979 he led his tribe into the resistance and was conducting both military and smuggling operations (including the heroin trade) in the area between Qandahar and Quetta.... In 1984, following a dispute with the ISI over his smuggling activities and his refusal to join any of the Islamic parties, Ismat Muslim defected to the regime, which made him a general. His principal role was control of transit points and roads between Pakistan's Baluchistan and Qandahar.... Ismat Muslim suffered a bloody defeat at Spin Boldak after the Soviet withdrawal.”⁴

But the situation at Spin Boldak was far more complex and involved the long-running tension between Noorzai and Achakzai tribes. Robert Kaplan was traveling in the area during the fighting following the Soviet withdrawal and wrote:

“Spin Boldak ... battle had little to do with the struggle against the Communists ... it was the best case study of Pathan tribalism that the war produced.

“On paper, the mujahedin of the fundamentalist parties, led by Khalis' Hezb-i Islami, fought the forces of General Ismatullah Muslim of the Afghan regime's militia. In reality, it was a battle between the Achakzais and the Nurzais, two hostile clans within the Abdali [Durrani] tribal family....

“Ismatullah was a warlord in 1984, unhappy with the amount of weaponry the mujahedin was giving him, promptly switched to the side of the Afghan Communists, who made Ismatullah a general and paid him and his Achakzais handsomely.

4. Rubin, Barnett, Fragmentation of Afghanistan, p. 159.

*“One of Ismatullah’s first moves was to fortify Spin Boldak, a sheer rock mountain rising from the flat desert. This afforded the Nurzais, who claimed it as their territory and held a pistol to the head of Yunus Khalis. Khalis’ teenage bride was one of the twin daughters of Nadir Khan Nurzai [sic], the head of the clan. Nadir Khan had reportedly blackmailed Khalis the day before the wedding, saying, in effect, “I’ll give you my daughter only if you give me and my men weapons to fight Ismatullah.”*⁵

Because of this apparently ancient antagonism, tensions can be expected to run relatively high at any location where Noorzais and Achakzais are in close proximity to one another. This will probably be worsened if a Noorzai or Achakzai is placed into a position of responsibility above the other and this may be the case within the Quetta Shura. Because of this history of recent animosity, open warfare, and the Pashtun cultural requirement for eventual revenge because of casualties taken on either side, Noorzai Hafiz Majid and Achakzais Abdul Razaq and Mohammad Hassan Rahmani cannot be allied within the Taliban leadership during Shura sessions. In reality, they will probably gravitate into opposing factions within the leadership.

Due to the close connections between the Noorzai tribe and the Yunus Khalis mujahedin organization, Hezb-e Islami (Khalis), during the Jihad period, Hafiz Majid will probably be supported by Mullah Mohammad Hassan. While Hassan is reportedly a Babar Pashtun, he was probably affiliated with Yunus Khalis during the fighting with the communists and these two men are likely to support one another during any bureaucratic infighting that occurs within the Taliban’s senior leadership. The two Achakzais will probably oppose – and be opposed by – the single Noorzai and Babar members of the Quetta Shura.

Another source of potential tension within the leadership shura may arise as the result of membership in competing jihadi parties. Their shared combat experiences in battles against the Soviet and Afghan communist troops, like experience in any combat situation, produces powerful, lasting personal bonds that probably endure within the Taliban leadership. Significantly, other than the pair of outsiders, Hafiz Majid and Mohammad Hassan, who were in Hekmatyar’s Hezb-e Islami (Gulbuddin) and Khalis’ Hezb-e Islami (Khalis), respectively, the remaining leadership members are generally believed to have been affiliated with Mohammaad Nabi Mohammedi’s Harakat. While this seems to an insignificant difference, Khalis and Hekmatyar were once allied closely in the same group, Hezb-e Islami, until they separated over irreconcilable personality differences. Because of this split, some residual tension may exist between Hafiz Majid and Hassan, but this is probably overshadowed by the greater differences between HIG and Harakat.

During the civil war period that followed the Soviet withdrawal, Hekmatyar’s HIG in Helmand Province fought a small war with Sher Mohammad Akhundzada’s father and two uncles, all members of Harakat, over control over the increasingly profitable opium industry located there. The two uncles were assassinated, one near Peshawar and the other in Quetta, presumably by Hekmatyar’s operatives, but Harakat forces soon defeated HIG at their base area in Gereshk.⁶ This ended the small war between HIG and the Alizai tribe’s subtribe, the Hassanzai, and their allies in Helmand Province, but some residual tension and lack of trust probably remains between HIG member Hafiz Majid and the Harakat Taliban, particularly Alizai tribesmen like Mullah Abdul Jalil, the Taliban Movement’s former deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs.

5. Kaplan, Robert D., *Soldiers of God*, p. 203.

6. Hafvenstein, Joel, *Opium Season: A Year on the Afghan Frontier*, p. 129.

As the tribal composition of the Taliban leadership began to shift from Ghilzai to Durrani, an additional source of tension and animosity began to enter the analysis. This recent source of tension has an impact with any dealings the Taliban leadership may have with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, ISI, an intelligence agency that is widely believed to have created the Taliban Movement and maintains a hand in controlling its operations. During the anti-Soviet Jihad period, ISI and Pakistan's military went to extreme lengths to support the non-Durrani leaders opposing the communists as they provided Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a Kharoti Ghilzai, with the bulk of supplies and funds delivered by the United States and Saudi Arabia.⁷ A careful review of Hekmatyar's operations within Afghanistan will reveal that he spent as much time fighting other mujahedin organizations as he did against the communists. The same review will show that ISI and the Pakistani government allowed Sayyaf, another Kharoti Ghilzai, to operate from Pakistan's national territory – as they did with Mohammad Nabi Mohammedi, an Ahmadzai Ghilzai.⁸ Yunus Khalis was a Khugiani Pashtun from Nangarhar Province, another non-Durrani. Two other large mujahedin parties were led by Sayed Ahmad Gailani and Hazrat Sibghatullah Mojededdi, both descendents of Arab religious migrants leading large Sufi-based organizations. Finally, the Tajiks were represented in Pakistan by Burhanuddin Rabbani.⁹ None of these organizations were led by Durrani Pashtuns representing southern Afghanistan and the Popalzai tribe (and the Karzai family) was affiliated with Gailani's National Islamic Front of Afghanistan, NIFA,¹⁰ while their Durrani competitors, the Barakzai, were affiliated with Mojededdi's Afghan National Liberation Front, the ANLF.¹¹ None of the large Durrani Pashtun tribes, the previous rulers of Afghanistan, were permitted by ISI and the Pakistani government to form anti-Soviet mujahedin groups.

Pakistan's long-term bias against the Durrani tribes was – and is – grounded in the repeated Durrani governments pressing their territorial claims and support for the concept of the creation of a Pashtun homeland, Pashtunistan. The last Afghan monarch, Zahir Shah, and his successor, Mohammad Daud, were serious Pashtunistan advocates and claimed Waziristan and Bajaur as part of Afghanistan's national territory, even invading Bajaur at one time.¹² For this reason, ISI and the Pakistani government were not prone to allow the Durranis to return to power in Kabul, if they could prevent it.

This unstated Pakistan policy toward the Durranis was carried over by General Babar, obviously a Babar Pashtun tribesman, who created the Taliban during Benazir Bhutto's second term as Prime Minister.¹³ Facilitated by Bhutto's most powerful political coalition partner, Fazl-ur Rahman, the original Taliban Movement was heavily weighted in favor of the Ghilzai Pashtuns at the expense of the Durranis and this accounts for Ghilzai "forming the backbone" of the early Taliban as accurately reported by Thomas Johnson at the Naval Postgraduate School.¹⁴

If the current indications that the senior levels of the Quetta Shura are now occupied by Durranis are correct, this reflects a major loss of ISI control over the Taliban Movement that conducts most of the insurgency in southern Afghanistan. A second potential conclusion that might be drawn:

7. Coll, Steve, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, p. 119.

8. Rubin, Barnett R., *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, p. 211.

9. *Ibid*, pp. 208-9.

10. Emadi, Hafizullah, *Repression, Resistance, and Women in Afghanistan*, p. 131.

11. Rubin, *Fragmentation*, p. 211.

12. Kakar, Mohammad, *Afghanistan, The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982*, p. 9.

13. For a relatively accurate account of Babar, Fazl-ur Rahman, and their support for the creation of the original Taliban, see Nojumi, Neamatollah, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan*, p. 118.

14. <http://www.nps.edu/Programs/CCS/Logar.html>.

ISI realized that the Ghilzai leaders around Mullah Mohammad Omar were incapable of defeating the Afghan government and its Coalition supporters. As a result, ISI has shifted its support and influence to the Taliban's Durrani in a final bid for victory. Either analysis is possible. A third, and wildcard, explanation is also possible with the Karzai-affiliated Durrani quietly negotiating with Taliban Durrani in a covert reconciliation program the participants are sharing with no one else among the other actors in this "Third Act" of the current Afghanistan drama. Pashtun wars generally end in some form of reconciliation as weaker parties view the process as some form of truce that allows them time to regroup to continue later toward their goals. Given this tendency and the increasing political and military power becoming available to the Karzai administration, combined with the likelihood of the Pakistani army entering the fray against their own Taliban insurgents, this third scenario is becoming increasingly possible as an explanation of the gradual shift from Ghilzai to Durrani dominance within the Quetta Shura.

Because of being shut out of leadership positions during the anti-Soviet period in the 1980's and ISI's traditional animosity toward the Durrani, the Durrani leaders in Quetta will not be closely connected or formally support those other insurgent parties that had traditional support – and control – from ISI. Relations between the other insurgent leaders, such as Jalaluddin Haqqani, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and the late Khalis' son Anwar Mullah, and Mullah Kabir will probably be based on a pragmatic review of parallel interests in the face of a common, powerful enemy. Their connections will be loose knit and competition for resources will occur among them. In some ways, their lack of affinity for one another makes it easier for ISI to manipulate and control them, rather than face the possibility that they could unite and claim the region of Pakistan they occupy as their own "Pashtunistan." But resentment between the groups will be present, especially toward Hekmatyar – who was closely supported by ISI – whose HIG is suspected of assassinating Popalzai leader Abdul Ahad Karzai (Hamid Karzai's father), Barakzai leader Haji Abdul Latif (Gul Agha Shirzai's father), and the two uncles of Alizai leader Sher Mohammad Akhundzada. The mistrust between the Durrani within the Quetta Shura and ISI will be quite large.

In addition to the tension revealed in a careful tribal analysis of the Quetta Shura, there is another significant factor regarding Taliban leadership in the southern region that must not be overlooked. This part of the tribal analysis involves the identification of the Pashtun tribes that are NOT represented and the probable reasons for their absence from Taliban leadership roles – at nearly all levels of the Taliban Movement. The missing tribes are very significant and the reasons for their absence provide important clues about potential Coalition strategies that might be applied to other tribes to draw them away from the insurgency. The Alikozai Durrani tribe provides an excellent case study because this powerful Zirk Durrani tribe is located primarily in Kandahar Province and the Taliban appears to have singled it out for attacks upon its leadership in an attempt to maneuver more pliable men into leadership positions or to intimidate the Alikozai into accepting Taliban dominance.

After having been granted the fertile Arghandab Valley by the Persian king, Nadir Shah, for services provided during his invasion of Afghanistan, Daghestan, and India, the Alikozai have managed to keep most of their population in a single geographic location. Obviously, there are Alikozai villages located outside of the Arghandab Valley, but having well-defined tribal boundaries seems to be an important stability factor from which the Alikozai have benefitted greatly.

The Alikozai have also had the benefit of a strong, capable, and charismatic leader in Mullah Naqib, now unfortunately deceased. In addition to possessing religious credentials his tribal followers expected of a leader, Mullah Naqib led them in a decade of vicious fighting against the Soviets and later against Najibullah's communists. During their history, something – probably a series of "somethings" – set the Alikozai along a generally confrontational path with the other Durrani tribes.

Tribal balance of power was clearly a factor in the intra-tribal strife that was always occurring within these competing tribes. At one time, the Alikozai tribe was a highly respected part of the Abdali tribes, a large group that would later evolve into the Durrani Confederation. Their early primacy is illustrated by the fact that an Alikozai, Abd al-Ghani Khan, led the Abdali warriors that were forced to enter Persian Nadir Shah's service following their defeat at Herat in 1732.¹⁵ As a reward for their service, according to a Pashtun historian who wrote in 1874, "...the valley of the Arghandab falling [sic] to Ghani Khan and his clan the Alikozai for distinguished service by the Abdali tribe to Nadir Shah."¹⁶ This rich valley near Kandahar remains the primary location of the Alikozai tribe.

Following Nadir Shah's death in 1747, Ahmad Khan, a Popalzai, was given the leadership of the Abdalis that he renamed "Durrani," and as he consolidated his power he worked to weaken the other tribes that might later challenge his primacy. For example, the largest of the Abdali/Durrani tribes, the Barakzai, was weakened when Ahmad Khan, by now Ahmad Shah Durrani, ordered the tribe's Achakzai subtribe to be split from the Barakzai as a separate tribe within the Abdali/Durrani Confederacy.¹⁷ It is very likely that the Alikozai received similar weakening efforts during the reign of Ahmad Shah Durrani.

Ahmad Shah's efforts were in vain, however, and the Barakzai were able to replace the Popalzai monarchs that followed him, but the succession crises that followed allowed unrest to develop among the tribes. In early 1800, the Ghilzai tribes rose in rebellion and soon there were large-scale riots in Kabul between Sunni and Shia. Equal unrest developed within the Durrani tribes, but most of this is difficult to document – especially the court intrigue in Kabul in which individual Alikozai tribesmen were involved. One of them was involved in the blinding and subsequent execution of one of the Barakzai leaders in the region, Fateh Khan.¹⁸

In the two decades of unrest that followed, Afghanistan was divided into three independent chieftainships ruled from Kabul, Herat, and Kandahar. This was the situation when the British placed Shah Shuja on the throne at Kabul in 1839. By 1842, Shah Shuja had been murdered and in Herat, Kamran, the region's ruler, was murdered by his Wazir, Yar Mohammad Khan, an Alikozai, who assumed control of Herat.¹⁹

In Kabul, an Alikozai named Nawab Foujdar became the British agent at the Amir's court in 1857. He was described as a being loyal to the British government.²⁰

In 1856, the Alikozai ruler of Herat was ousted by one of the Sadozai leaders. The Sadozai are a leading subtribe of the Polalzai, another leading Durrani tribe. The violent politics continued in the region and as late as 1880, the Alikozai were allied with the Aimaqs and the Ishaqzai in a futile attempt to place Yar Mohammad Khan's grandson on Herat's throne.²¹

15. Noelle, Christine, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth Century Afghanistan*, p. 230.

16. Hyat Khan, Muhammad, *Afghanistan and its Inhabitants*, translated by Henry Priestly, 1981, reprint of 1874 edition, p.63.

17. Noelle, p. 230.

18. *Ibid*, p. 6.

19. Le Messurier, Augustus, *Kandahar in 1879*; Lumsden, Harry, *The Mission to Kandahar*, pp. 2, 3, 4.

20. Bellew, Henry, *Journal of a Political Mission to Afghanistan in 1857*, pp. 90, 96.

21. Lee, Jonathan, *The Ancient Supremacy*, p. 400.

More recently, Mullah Naqib allied himself and most of the Alikozai mujahedin that fought the Soviets and Afghan communists with Jamiat-i Islami, even though this political party was dominated by Tajiks led by Burhanuddin Rabbani. Larry Goodson wrote that the Jamiat was less rigid ideologically and its commanders enjoyed much greater autonomy than was seen in the other mujahedin groups. Goodson mentioned that several of Jamiat's regional commanders, including Ahmad Shah Masood of the Panjshir Valley and Ismail Khan of Herat, rose to national prominence. Mullah Naqib was able to become very prominent locally as the principal Pashtun member of the Jamiat-i Islami.²²

For some unrecorded reason, probably an event that occurred between the Durrani defeat at Herat by Nadir Shah and his Persians in 1732 and the formation of the Durrani Confederation in 1747, the Alikozai lost their primacy among these tribes. While Abd al-Ghani Khan led these tribes to the Persian victory at Daghestan and had seen that their lost lands were returned, their tribal fortunes seem to have waned considerably since that time.

Weakened, and probably alienated, the Alikozai seem to look toward forces outside the Pashtun tribes for support against their Durrani, if not all Pashtun, antagonists. Previously, they were allied with Nadir Shah's Persians, the British were supported by Nawab Foujden, an Alikozai, the Alikozai joined forces with the Aimaqs and the Ishaqzai in an attempt to regain control of Herat, and they allied themselves with the non-Pashtuns of Rabbani's Jamiat-i Islami against the Soviets and the Afghan communists. More recently, a substantial number of Alikozai tribesmen publicly supported Tajik Yunus Qanuni against fellow Durrani Hamid Karzai in the 2004 Presidential elections.²³

The large, very powerful Barakzai Zirak Durrani tribe is also not represented in the Quetta Shura leadership and probably not in any Taliban position above a local command. Unlike the Alikozai, the Barakzai didn't possess a large region with well-defined tribal boundaries, but the tribe had a very large unifying factor. It provided most of the monarchs that ruled Afghanistan, controlled the national levers of power for approximately two centuries, and used its power to reduce the strength of other tribes and their ability to challenge its primacy within Afghanistan. The Barakzai monarchs in Kabul, from the tribe's Khan Khel, the Mohammadzai subtribe, even managed to eliminate a threat from the other Barakzai subtribes by ordering the entire tribe divided, producing the Achakzai Zirak Durrani tribe while reducing any opportunity for challenges to emerge from within their own Barakzai tribe. Mohammadzai Barakzai Zirak Pashtun power went unchallenged until the communists under Nur Mohammad Taraki, a Ghilzai, seized power in 1978.

As with the Alikozai tribe benefitting from the leadership provided by Mullah Naqib, the Barakzai tribe had a very powerful, charismatic leader in the presence of the Afghan king, Zahir Shah, until he was overthrown by Mohammad Daud in 1973. During the 30 years of unrest that followed Daud's assassination by the Afghan communists, the Barakzai mujahedin were led by Haji Abdul Latif, the "Lion of Kandahar," and his son, Gul Agha Shirzai. As a result of these stability factors, the Barakzai have generally supported the government of Afghanistan and allied themselves with fellow traditionalists within Mojdeddi's Afghan National Liberation Front, the ANLF.²⁴

Currently, it appears that the Barakzai still support their leading elder, Gul Agha Shirzai, even though he is assigned to Nangarhar province where he is governor, in his likely pursuit of an election victory that would make him Afghanistan's president. For the Barakzai, this would simply be return-

22. Goodson, Roy, *Afghanistan's Endless War*, pp. 62-63.

23. Researcher made these direct observations in 2004.

24. Rubin, *Fragmentation*, p. 211.

ing to status quo ante when a Barakzai occupied Kabul's throne.²⁵ For this wide variety of reasons, the Barakzai view its best course of action is to continue to receive Kabul's patronage and this process requires the avoidance of any significant connection to the Taliban Movement.

Like the Alikozai prior to the capture of Mullah Obaidullah, the Popalzai Zirak Durrani Pashtuns are represented within the Quetta Shura only by a single individual, Abdul Ghani, who is commonly called Mullah Berader – a leader who may be feeling increasingly isolated within a group of potential tribal opponents. His Popalzai tribe, like the Alikozai and Barakzai tribes, is not well represented with the leadership of the Taliban and he must view his tribally isolated situation with some degree of anxiety.

The Popalzai, like the Barakzai, is a leading tribe among the Durrani Confederation and it has also provided Afghanistan with its early monarchs. It also benefitted greatly from the charismatic leadership of Abdul Ahad Karzai, the assassinated father of Hamid Karzai. The Popalzai tribe is scattered more than the Alikozai and Barakzai tribes, with its population generally located in Kandahar province and nearby Oruzgan province, the home province of Mullah Berader.

The absence of significant numbers of these Zirak Durrani Pashtun tribes in the Quetta Shura and within leadership positions of the general Taliban Movement helps define the tribal composition of the membership of the actual insurgency. Since the Quetta Shura is generally dominated by Durrani Pashtuns, but not from the Zirak Durrani – the Alikozai, Barakzai, and Popalzai – the Taliban's core leadership must reflect the presence of mostly Panjpai Durrani Pashtuns and an alienated Zirak Durrani Pashtun tribe, the Achakzai tribe whose primary population concentrations are actually located within Pakistan.

The recent assignment of Abdullah Ghulam Rasoul, also known as Abdullah Zakir, a man released from confinement at Guantanamo, as the Taliban's general commander for southern Afghanistan, may validate this suspicion. According to the news media, Zakir is from Helmand Province²⁶ and if he is an Alizai tribesman, his new assignment may be a Taliban attempt to court the Alizai tribe's rural population away from their loyalties to three subtribe leaders who are generally loyal to Hamid Karzai, Abdul Wahid Rais al-Baghriani, Sher Mohammad Akhundzada, and Mullah Salam.

Given the animosity toward Kabul's government and the Ishaqzai and Noorzai' tribe's suspicions of ulterior motives toward them that has led to their general weakening, the addition of the many of the Alizai to the Taliban side of the insurgency ledger would be quite an accomplishment that is well within the realm of political possibilities. This would result in the bulk of the Panjpai Durrani Pashtuns breaking from the larger Zirak Durrani Pashtun group that is generally supports the government of Afghanistan.

The final estranged tribe in this assessment, the Achakzai, are also somewhat alienated from the mainstream Zirak Durrani tribes. Separated from the Barakzai tribe by the Iron Amir during his "ulterior motive" period and located primarily in Pakistan, the Achakzai have been subject to significant political manipulation in the past. As evidence, there is the episode of Ismatullah Muslim and his communist brigade that fought the mujahedin

25. Gul Agha Shirzai announced his withdrawal as a presidential candidate in early May 2009 as he shifted his support to Hamid Karzai.

26. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/27/world/asia/27taliban.html?n=Top/News/World/Countries%20and%20Territories/Pakistan>.

Noorzai – and the other mujahedin during the Soviet and communist period. The Achakzai’s leadership, centered around Mehmood Khan Achakzai of Quetta, is also an advocate of the creation of a Pashtun homeland called Pashtunkhwa²⁷ and at least two Achakzai subtribes feud with one another.²⁸

The divided status of the Achakzai’s subtribes, combined with the potential estrangement from the Barakzai and the rest of the Zirak Durrani, the Achakzai within the Taliban senior leadership may be easily manipulated by ISI. Achakzai Mohammad Hassan Rahmani is reportedly an able administrator, but Abdul Razaq is apparently more volatile and has resigned from the Taliban on at least one occasion.²⁹ They were also manipulated by the communists and provided a full brigade of fighters for the communists during the defense of Kandahar. It is entirely possible that ISI has some positive influence, if not actual control, over one or both of the Achakzai members of the Quetta Shura. Depending on the level of influence the two Taliban Achakzai leaders may have over Afghanistan’s Achakzai tribe, there may be a Taliban or ISI effort – possibly both – to remove any Achakzai support for the other Zirak Durrani Pashtuns in small, but crucial, aspect of the latest chapter of the “Great Game.”

The Quetta Shura is passing through a critical period, possibly with waning ISI support, a limit that may have been reached with any backroom support delivered by the Saudis, an Afghan election that is appearing to be more unifying than disruptive, and a new American administration that has made winning in Afghanistan a high priority. Significantly weakened politically and militarily – in spite of media pronouncements of the opposite – the Taliban are reduced to attacking with tactics that indicate a waning capability to engage in combat operations: the use of improvised explosive devices, suicide bombings, and kidnappings. This is hardly the stuff of a robust insurgency, and the Taliban must increase its war-fighting capability or risk losing its remaining external supporters while their credibility is also decreasing within the rural Afghan population.

Their political capabilities, however, remain impressive. They may be working diligently to split the large, powerful Durrani Confederation along its Zirak and Panjpai natural separation. This would be a considerable accomplishment for a possibly terminally damaged insurgent movement. Second, the Taliban’s ability to control the “media war” remains formidable. Reporters have access to Taliban spokesmen through satellite connections and local stringers supplying both material and context to their foreign employers are well positioned to both inform and influence their very willing media organizations as stories are prepared that serve to magnify the Taliban’s actual capabilities at a time when they are essentially engaging in terrorist and criminal organization activities. The lesson of Vietnam and the potential to lose militarily while winning the war politically has not been lost on the Taliban.

And this should not come as a surprise. During the anti-Soviet Jihad, highly skilled, experienced trainers taught Pakistan’s ISI and Special Services Group officers psychological operations skills that were honed during 10 years of actual guerrilla warfare that is not unlike what is occurring in the current insurgency. Creating news stories, controlling the media, recruiting reporters, and developing clandestine radio stations were just small parts of a large, worldwide effort to discredit the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. These lessons were learned well and are being re-applied under new circumstances.

The Quetta Shura also appears to be working to consolidate its control over its far flung field commanders, who are subject to the same tribal tensions that must be present within the Taliban leadership. Assigning Abdul Qayum Zakir, complete with his Guantanamo credentials, as their

27. <http://pakobserver.net/200808/28/news/topstories04.asp>.

28. The Ghaibizai and Hameedzai sub-groups have fought each other for years. It is not known what caused clash. (Reuters, 07/01/92), see <http://horsesandswords.blogspot.com/2006/03/armed-groups-in-baluchistan.html>.

29. http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/JI11Df01.html.

commander in southern Afghanistan is probably an effort to unify their separated and possibly feuding commanders under a single command structure. “Unity of Command” applies during an insurgency as much as it does during conventional warfare and leaders like Abdul Ghani, or Mullah Berader, know this instinctively. Ori Brafman’s *Starfish and the Spider*³⁰ accurately describes “the unstoppable power of leaderless organizations” and this factor is very true when applied to intertribal Pashtun warfare, but this leaderless, “unstoppable power” can only serve to prevent a victory by the counterinsurgency forces. Winning in a military sense requires a cohesive command structure that has a single purpose, and the Quetta Shura probably hopes to achieve this with the assignment of a charismatic, experienced combat leader like Zakir to their primary focal point, southern Afghanistan.

A tribal analysis similar to that done with the Quetta Shura can point out some of the hazards involved in making abrupt shifts in the command structure when unruly Pashtuns are involved. Mullah Omar may view himself as the “Amir al-Mu’minin” (Commander of the Faithful),³¹ but Naim Barech³² believes he is the commander in Helmand Province.

The Barech Durrani Pashtuns mainly inhabit Helmand Province’s Dishu District, but their Pashtun status has been questioned and this small tribe is suspected by some authorities of having “adopted” their Pashtun status.³³ The Barech, however, are Pashtuns who once enjoyed considerable prominence among their fellow tribes. A large number of them migrated into the region that is now northern India during the gradual dissolution of the Mughal Empire and one of the Barech leaders, Hafiz Rahmat, was in charge of the region known as Rohilkhand until he was killed, and Rohilkhand was destroyed by the British East India Company and their Shi’a allies from Oudh in 1774.³⁴ These Barech subtribes may have vanished from the historical record and may have assimilated with the Yusufzai Pashtuns to leave the remaining Barech subtribes in southern Afghanistan weakened and isolated. Like some of the other smaller Pashtun tribes, the Barech have a grievance and like the Ishaqzai, they probably resent the apparent denigration they suffer by having their very Pashtun status questioned.

The fact that Naim Barech was selected as a replacement for Abdul Rahim, the former Taliban Shadow Governor – and an Ishaqzai tribesman – who was captured inside Pakistan³⁵ suggests a close relationship between the small Barech tribe and the Durrani Panjpai faction of the Taliban, and with the Ishaqzai at a minimum. The presence of Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, an Ishaqzai, within the Quetta Shura may have ensured that the Barech were represented in the Taliban command structure, and while in the realm of speculation, this would have been a logical step with the goal of holding the small Barech tribe to the Taliban.

Since the northern districts of Helmand Province are generally dominated by the Alizai subtribes, Naim Barech’s primary source of support would be generated from the southern part of the province where relatively new immigrants – with little connection to the traditional tribal structure of the

30. Brafman, Ori and Beckstrom, Rod A., *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*, New York: Penguin, 2006.

31. Loosely translated as the “Commander of the Faithful.”

32. http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/03/coalition_strike_kil_1.php.

33. <http://www.nps.edu/Programs/CCS/Helmand.html>.

34. Hamilton, Charles, *An Historical Relation of the Origin, Progress, and Final Dissolution of the Rohilla Afghans in the Northern Provinces of Hindoostan, 1785*, 298 pages. A copy of this excellent book may be found in the British Library. Hamilton explains the background of the Barech leader, Hafiz Rahmat, and the destruction of the Pashtun states in India.

35. <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/Story?id=5436787&page=1>; <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article4386115.ece>.

region – have settled. These settlers form a hodgepodge of Afghanistan’s tribes and ethnic groups, many of whom reportedly lack proper deeds to the land they occupy. As a result, they will be able to retain their land only if the Taliban emerge as the winner in the current conflict. As a result, these people form a recruitment pool for the Taliban and they may identify with a leader like Naim Barech, who is representing another small and isolated group. Like any other commander needing recruits, Naim Barech has probably used patronage carefully to place loyal men in positions of responsibility, as leaders of small groups of Taliban.

Into this volatile mix of relatively unsophisticated Pashtuns arrived a new commander, Abdul Qayum Zakir, who was recently released from confinement at Guantanamo and is a member of the Alizai tribe. As a Durrani Panjpai Alizai, Zakir will be able to attract generally loyal followers from Helmand’s northern districts where the Alizai subtribes are the dominant populations. His assigned span of control apparently included most of southern Afghanistan, not just Helmand Province, and this is bound to create tension within the Taliban groups within the region.

Naim Barech and the Taliban commanders in adjacent Kandahar Province are obviously temperamental Pashtuns, an ethnic group that views pride, honor, and dignity as special personal attributes that must not go without response if challenged. Under the special tenets found in Pashtunwali, it is highly probable that Naim Barech will view the arrival of Zakir into his command structure as a personal affront. Even if he doesn’t react negatively, the presence of his loyalists in the local command structure may be affected as Zakir begins to replace Naim Barech’s men with his own partisans, many of whom will probably be from his Alizai tribe. Zakir will obviously feel more secure in his new position if he has placed loyal fighters into positions within the Taliban’s shadow government in Helmand and Kandahar provinces and Naim Barech’s loyalists will lose their positions. The unanswered questions are obvious: Will Naim Barech’s followers willingly surrender their posts or will they oppose Zakir and his men? Or will Naim Barech’s men simply drop out of the Taliban Movement and go back to their villages?

The Taliban leadership in Quetta may have intended the creation of a more unified command structure in southern Afghanistan as the Obama administration began to order additional combat forces into the region, but there will be unintended consequences to their action. Zakir and his Alizai, or the Pashtun northerners at a maximum, should be able to consolidate their control in their own tribal areas, but it is unlikely that Naim Barech and the tribally unaffiliated Afghans in the southern areas will willingly agree to accept the leadership of Zakir, Guantanamo veteran or not. A north-south split within the Taliban in southern Afghanistan is very likely to begin with the arrival of Zakir in the Taliban command structure. How far this may go is hard to predict, as is its impact on the Taliban’s capability to coordinate combat operations.

These probable intertribal tensions, and even potential conflicts, may be indications of something larger occurring within the political background of the Taliban insurgency, possibly something disruptive within the Taliban senior leadership. Some possibilities that might be considered:

- Is ISI moving to decrease the power of the upper tier of the leadership in the Quetta Shura? Does ISI fear that the Saudi-sponsored reconciliation effort is having an impact on the older Taliban leaders that could lead to a Durrani reconciliation? Could this be producing a growing schism between the senior Taliban who experienced the anti-Soviet Jihad and those new commanders who emerged more recently?
- Is Pakistan’s new government shifting its position toward the Taliban and its safehavens along the Afghan border because of the growing insurgency within Pakistan? Do Pakistan’s leaders fear a potential Coalition incursion into the border region as was suggested by President Obama during the presidential campaign?

- Does Mullah Berader feel isolated and threatened with potential betrayal and arrest? Berader is a member of Hamid Karzai's tribe and may no longer be as trusted as he was previously. Mullah Obaidullah was in a similar position as the sole representative of his tribe and was arrested. Has this contributed to the results seen in the new assignments within Helmand Province?

Infighting and tribal politics must be playing a role in the political maneuvering that may be occurring in southern Afghanistan. More interesting indications may emerge with a similar analysis of tribal affiliations of the subordinate commanders in positions below Naim Barech where any attempts by the Taliban leadership to strike a "tribal balance" will probably result in having antagonistic tribal members within the same chain-of-command. There is no doubt about the presence of tensions.

Finally, there seems to be an effort by the Taliban and their international supporters to drive a wedge between the Durrani sub-groups, the Zirak and the Panjpai. Successive Pakistani governments worked to undercut the Durrani support for the concept of "Pashtunistan" that would deprive Pakistan of territory to the Indus River. For example, none of the "Seven Party Alliance" formed in Peshawar to oppose the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan was led by a Durrani. Splitting the Durranis into two opposing factions would definitely be in the interest of the insurgents.

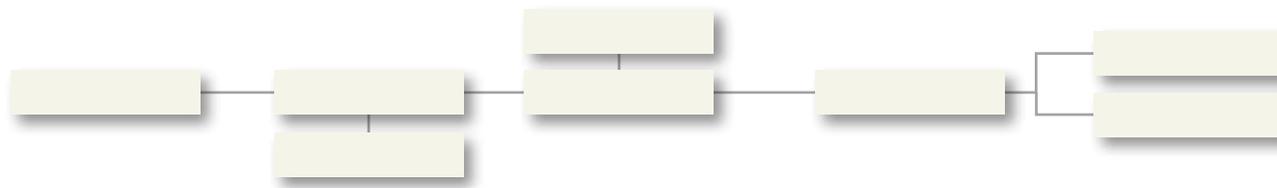
The larger Zirak tribes, the Barakzai, Popalzai, Achakzai, and Alikozai, tend to have the best land and good positions within both national and provincial governments from which patronage and development is steered to their own tribesmen. The Panjpai tribes, the Alizai, Noorzai, and Ishaqzai, are smaller in size, scattered widely across southern Afghanistan, and do not have senior leaders in positions within the national or provincial governments. As a result, they receive an unequal share of patronage and development. Because of this traditional grievance, the Panjpai tend to resent the more powerful Zirak, and it is entirely plausible that the insurgents and their international supporters may be attempting to widen the rift within the Durrani Confederation.

Efforts to create a "Durrani Unity" program to offset the growing rift would be beneficial.

TRIBAL ANALYSIS CENTER

Traditional anthropological research conducted among tribes inhabiting remote areas where insurgents and criminals operate has become increasingly difficult to implement. Studies carried out among people living in small-scale societies now are nearly impossible due to the physical dangers associated with the civil and religious unrest found in those areas. Swat, for example, has become so dangerous that Frederick Barth's studies only could be repeated at the risk of the investigator's life. Similar research is not feasible among Burma's Rohingya tribes located on both sides of the border with Bangladesh, as well as with the Pashtuns in Afghanistan's interior and within Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, where even Pakistan's army enters with reluctance.

Given the difficulties of conducting direct fieldwork in conflictive areas, the Tribal Analysis Center utilizes an indirect approach. Using multidisciplinary research, we seek to collect and analyze data obtained from a wide variety of sources, both current and historical. In the absence of new ethnographic fieldwork to update our base of knowledge, the Tribal Analysis Center compiles and summarizes existing research and documents on tribal societies, combining this material with contemporary press reports and articles. We assume that much can be gleaned from well-informed observers who are not anthropologists, ranging from journalists and travelers to government officials.



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