

Secrets of the Taliban's success

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Kandahar has traditionally been the city of Afghan royalty, warlords and the center of resistance movements against the British and Russia. It was also the spiritual heartland of the student militia, the Taliban, that emerged in the 1990s to combat the vicious civil war that was tearing the country apart.

The Taliban took over Kabul in 1996 and opened the country to al-Qaeda's training camps, while Osama bin Laden settled in Kandahar. After the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States and the US-led invasion of Afghanistan a few months later, the Taliban agreed to lose their government but, in the tradition of the Afghan code of honor of Pashtunwali, they refused to hand over their most wanted guests to the Americans.

Seven years after 9/11, the resurgent Taliban movement is exclusively led by Kandahari clans, which still boast of their sacrifices for the Islamic brotherhood in the name of Pashtunwali, but they maintain that the Taliban have never harbored - and never will - an aggressive agenda towards the world community.

In an interview with Asia Times Online, Mullah Abdul Jalil, a pioneer of the Taliban movement in Kandahar, elaborated. "There is a lot of rhetoric out of anger and frustration against the West because of the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] oppression of the Afghan people, but the Taliban leadership still strictly abides by its code of conduct for the resistance against foreign occupation forces in our country," said Jalil, who served as deputy foreign minister and foreign minister during the Taliban regime (1996-2001).

"Our code of conduct is documented in the Asasi Qanoon [Basic Law of Afghanistan]. Under article 103, it is mentioned that we don't want any disruptions in any country of the world. The Taliban are only a national resistance movement against foreign occupation forces in Afghanistan," said Jalil.

Jalil, 49, hails from Kandahar and attended an Islamic seminary in Quetta, Pakistan, but did not finish his studies because of the emergence of the Afghan resistance to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Jalil is a thin, down-to-earth man, his hair and beard already snow white, which he ascribes to the years of turmoil he has witnessed in his country. He has never been a military commander, but has always been a part of Taliban leader Mullah Omar's closest inner circle and he is still proud to be one of his close confidants.

Along with the Taliban's foreign minister in 2001, Mullah Abdul Wakeel Muttawakil, Jalil was not comfortable with al-Qaeda being in the country, but when questioned on the matter he initially evaded answering with a smile, saying only that "it is unnecessary to open up controversies".

However, he did then elaborate, "Arabs are different from the Taliban. If today they boost attacks on Western targets, they do so independently. We have nothing to do with their claims. We have always limited our battle to that against NATO and although we could work in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Russia, China or Iran, we never had any role in these areas.

"Afghanistan has always been a poor country and has never had the capacity to be aggressive against anybody, nor will it do so in the future. This is exactly what Mullah Omar told the Chinese ambassador during the last days of our government in Afghanistan. Even if we provided a place for the people of Eastern Turkistan [Xinjiang province in China] because they migrated to Afghanistan, we did not fuel their [separatist Uyghur] movement from Afghanistan," Jalil insisted.

Jalil's comments did not ring true. Several Taliban commanders, including the slain Mullah Dadullah and Pakistan Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud, besides scores of al-Qaeda members, have maintained that the only way to win the Afghan war against NATO is to attack Western targets in Europe and America. I cited some of their statements to Jalil and asked, "Are they lying, or are you?"

"Nobody is lying. There are issues here to understand. First, there were people like Mullah Dadullah [a senior military commander killed by NATO in 2007] . He was emotional and often engaged in rhetoric - many times - different from Taliban policies, so much so that on several occasions he was warned by the Taliban leadership about his statements to the media.

"Second, it is necessary to understand that there is a sea of difference between the people who call themselves the Pakistan Tehrik-i-Taliban [led by Mehsud] and the Taliban. We have nothing to do with them. In fact, we oppose the policies they adhere to against the Pakistani security forces.

"We individually speak to all groups, whether they are Pakistanis, Kashmiris, Arabs, Uzbeks or whosoever, telling them not to create violence in Pakistan, especially in the name of the Taliban. But although we don't have any control over them, we don't allow such groups to come into our areas. None of these is involved with us in fighting against NATO troops in Afghanistan," Jalil said. Warming to the subject, Jalil continued, "Nobody has the right to explain any war strategy on our behalf. Our strategy is decided by Mullah Bradar alone. He is the deputy of Mullah Omar and the present chief of military operations. Last year we laid down a policy of a guerrilla war. We cannot afford any mass uprising or face-to-face war, it would only cause a lot of unnecessary casualties."

"But don't you think that in this long process of a guerrilla war, especially as the Taliban don't have the latest weaponry, it would make the Afghan population sick and tired of the Taliban-led resistance?" I asked.

Jalil responded quickly, "Not at all. The Taliban emerged from Kandahar, which has a special dynamic in Afghanistan, and they have never accepted foreign occupation. The Taliban still draws its military leaders from Kandahar, and look at the history of Kandahar ... when I say Kandahar I don't mean the present divisions, it means the entire regions of Helmand, Urzgan and Zabul ... it has always produced the best military leaders.

"The Taliban are not a stand-alone entity. Ninety percent of the present resistance in Kandahar survives because of the masses. They provide shelter to us in their homes, feed us and provide money for us to go back and fight against the foreign forces, and they never mind if in the course of this they suffer casualties because of aerial bombardments," Jalil said. (At least 540 civilians have been killed in the conflict so far this year, a sharp increase over last year's total of 321.)

"Look, the conviction of the masses is the essential thing. The reason why there is not as strong a

resistance in the north is that the people are not behind it. Certainly, people across Afghanistan are against the foreign occupation, but for a resistance [to succeed] it needs a special temperament, zeal and strength to face all sorts of hardships. Kandaharis have always shown this and that's why they are ahead of everybody in fighting against foreign troops," Jalil said.

NATO has projected divisions within the Taliban and pointed to the emergence of several former mujahideen leaders to rival the authority of Mullah Omar. Prominent among these is Jalaluddin Haqqani, Anwarul Haq Mujahid and commanders loyal to veteran Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, founder of the Hezb-e Islami (HIA).

"Maulana Jalaluddin Haqqani is a very respected personality in Afghanistan, but he cannot command the resistance because of his age [58] and illnesses. He has always been a part of the Taliban shura [council] and has never parted ways with the Taliban. Now his son Sirajuddin Haqqani is a main commander, but he always coordinates his actions with the Taliban and is completely subject to the Taliban's discipline.

"Anwarul Haq Mujahid has now been officially appointed as the governor of Nangarhar province [which is under the Taliban's shadowy emirates banner] so all these [NATO] projections are wrong. As far as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is concerned, we are striving for the same cause, but we don't have any regular contact."

Jalil continued, "However, let me tell you, most of the places which were previously Hezb-e Islami strongholds are completely under the Taliban's command. For instance, the HIA recently claimed the killings of [10] French soldiers in Sarobi [50 kilometers east of Kabul]. Actually, it was done by Taliban commander Qari Baryal, who commands the region of Sarobi, the Tagaab Valley and up to Bagram [near Kabul]. The same goes for Wardak and Kapisa [provinces], where the Taliban have largely replaced the HIA's network in the resistance."

There is widespread speculation that the Taliban might attack Kabul any day soon as they now have strong pockets all around the capital. Jalil differs, "Practically, we are in Kabul. We are in Sarobi, which is part of the Kabul district. We are in Maidan Shehr [Wardak province and just 30 kilometers east of Kabul], we are in Nangarhar, which is not far from Kabul. But at present there is no plan to mobilize any attack on Kabul. The reason is the non-availability of resources."

Given the Taliban's long and tough struggle since being ousted in 2001, I raised the issue of whether they might be tempted to compromise with former rivals, such as ethnic Tajik and former president Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani, who recently claimed to have had talks with the Taliban. Or perhaps the Taliban might even engage with the Americans or British.

"During the last [2005 parliamentary] elections, Rabbani and Professor Abdul Rab Rasool Sayyaf [a member of parliament] did speak to the Taliban through mediators. However, they wanted the Taliban's support in the elections. We rejected that idea and since then we have never communicated. We have never had dialogue with the British or with the Americans. There are individuals who have talked to them and this may have created the misunderstanding that the Taliban communicated with them," Jalil said.

I was taken aback by this response. After the US invasion, some overtures were made between the Taliban and the US Central Intelligence Agency - CIA. (See US turns to the Taliban Asia Times Online, June 14, 2003.)

Similarly, in the wake of moves to revive the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan pipeline project, an

initiative began in Quetta last year (See Taliban, US in new round of peace talks Asia Times Online, August 21, 2007) which led to the idea of regional jirgas (tribal councils) to start peace talks with the Taliban. The scheme was destroyed because of the strong adverse reaction to the government storming the Taliban-sympathetic Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad last year.

"When Mullah Abdul Razzak held talks with the Americans he had left the Taliban. At that time he was completely independent that's why you cannot call it a dialogue between the CIA and the Taliban. It was purely a case of an individual act. Mullah Abdul Razzak only rejoined the Taliban one year ago. The same goes with Mansoor Dadullah or whosoever held the dialogue. They did it against the Taliban's policy." (Dadullah was later expelled from the Taliban.)

The interview was over and I broke the evening's Ramadan fast with Jalil, and suggested a photograph.

"No. This is the secret to our survival. We never allow photographs, and that is why we can move freely in Afghanistan and the tribal areas [of Pakistan] as nobody recognizes us. Especially with my white hair, nobody suspects me of being Taliban," Jalil said with a smile.

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