

The Taliban at war: inside the Helmand insurgency, 2004–2012

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Ten years ago the Taliban appeared to have been defeated. In retaliation for the 9/11 attacks, the United States had invaded Afghanistan and, in a matter of months, had overthrown the Taliban regime.¹ In December 2001 Hamid Karzai had been appointed the interim Afghan president by a loya jirga (grand council), and in January 2002 the international community had agreed to provide extensive assistance to stabilize and rebuild the Afghan state. By mid-2002, US and British task forces were chasing the last remnants of the Taliban out of the country and hunting down Al-Qaeda terrorists.² A decade later, Karzai is still in power and Afghanistan has received massive international developmental and security assistance.³ But the Afghan state is also battling a Taliban insurgency that shows little sign of abating.

How did the Taliban return to Afghanistan, and why have they not been defeated? We answer these questions by looking inside the Afghan insurgency, using Helmand province as a case-study. We draw on a large number of original interviews with Taliban field commanders and fighters to produce a uniquely detailed picture of the Taliban at war. The picture that emerges is of a resilient insurgency that has adapted under immense military pressure to become more centralized and more professional. The Taliban have suffered very heavy attrition in Helmand, but they are far from defeated.

Up to now, assessments of the war have been primarily based on analysis of western and Afghan government efforts.⁴ In this article, we examine how the

* For feedback on earlier drafts of this article, we wish to thank Mark Beauteament, Ryan Evans, Carter Malkasian, Mike Martin and the two anonymous reviewers, as well as audiences at presentations in 2012–13 in the ‘Changing character of war’ programme at Oxford University, the Afghan Studies Group at King’s College London, and the Centre for War Studies at the University of Southern Denmark. We gratefully acknowledge funding of our field research by the UK Research Council’s Global Uncertainties Programme (RES-071–27–0069), and thank Claudio Franco for co-managing of our field researchers.

¹ Key works on the rise of the Taliban regime are Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: the story of the Afghan warlords* (London: Pan, 2001); Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My life with the Taliban*, ed. and trans. Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn (London: Hurst, 2010); Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An enemy we created: the myth of the Taliban/Al Qaeda merger in Afghanistan, 1970–2010* (London: Hurst, 2012).

² For analysis of the 2001–02 war, see Donald P. Wright and the Contemporary Operations Study Team, *A different kind of war: the United States Army in Operation Enduring Freedom, October 2001–September 2005* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2010).

³ Amounting to £30 billion in development assistance, and £243 billion in security assistance, since 2001. House of Commons International Development Committee, *Afghanistan: progress and prospects after 2014*, Sixth Report of Session 2012–13, HC 403 (London: TSO, 25 Oct. 2012), p. 5.

⁴ See e.g. Seth Jones, *In the graveyard of empires: America’s war in Afghanistan* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009); Tim Bird and Alex Marshall, *Afghanistan: how the West lost its way* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press,

war looks from the perspective of the insurgency. This is no easy task; insurgent movements have good reason to be secretive about most aspects of their organization and operations, in order to avoid exposure to superior state-based security forces. Accordingly, most existing studies on the conduct of the Taliban insurgency look at it with external eyes.⁵ Here, we look at it from the inside.

This article is based on a series of 53 interviews with Taliban commanders and fighters in Helmand from autumn 2011 to spring 2012, supplemented by 49 interviews carried out with Taliban members in other parts of Afghanistan over the same period, as well as by 58 interviews with local elders in Helmand and elsewhere who are not members of the Taliban. Some of the interviews in Helmand with Taliban cadres and elders were free-flowing, but most were based on standard questionnaires (designed by the present authors), which were slightly adapted depending on the particular district where the interviews were carried out.⁶

Interviewing members of the Taliban involves a number of challenges, ranging from the difficulty of identifying and contacting them to the difficulty of verifying the information provided. Most of the interviews were carried out by Afghan researchers, typically journalists by trade, who were organized in three different teams, without contact with each other. This was done to minimize the risk of collusion among researchers and to enable the interviews to be cross-checked. The interview teams were recruited and managed by Antonio Giustozzi and Claudio Franco. In addition to vetting the interviews ourselves, we asked two experts on the Afghan insurgency, both with years of field experience in Helmand, to independently assess the reliability of interview transcripts.⁷ Throughout this article we rely on triangulation from multiple interviews to increase the reliability of our research findings. At no point do we rely on a single interview in making a definitive statement about the Taliban.⁸

We have selected Helmand province in southern Afghanistan as the location for our research as this has been one of the main battlegrounds between the resurgent

2011); Bing West, *The wrong war: grit, strategy and the way out of Afghanistan* (New York: Random House, 2011); Rudra Chaudhuri and Theo Farrell, 'Campaign disconnect: operational progress and strategic obstacles in Afghanistan, 2009–2011', *International Affairs* 87: 2, March 2011, pp. 271–96.

⁵ Two recent exceptions which do draw on extensive interviews with Taliban are Peter Bergen, ed., *Talibanistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), and Carter Malkasian, *War comes to Garmser: thirty years of conflict on the Afghan frontier* (London: Hurst, 2013). Previous studies that examine the insurgency in Helmand but with limited access to Taliban perspectives are Antonio Giustozzi, ed., *Decoding the new Taliban: insights from the Afghan field* (London: Hurst, 2009); Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and laptop: the neo-Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007); Rob Johnson, *The Afghan way of war. Culture and pragmatism: a critical history* (London: Hurst, 2011), pp. 249–98.

⁶ Interviews are number-coded to protect the identities of our interviewees, identified by only the district and the type of interviewee (Taliban or non-Taliban elder). For example, 'T5 KJI' is Taliban interviewee 5 from Kajaki district, and 'E2 NZD' is elder interviewee 2 from Nawzad district. 'GoE' indicates that the interviewees are a group of non-Taliban elders; 'GoT' indicates a group of Taliban. The full list of district codes is as follows: Musa Qala, MSQ; Nawzad, NZD; Kajaki, KJI; Sangin, SGN; Nahr-e Seraj, NES; Nad-e Ali, NDA; Marjah, MJH; Garmser, GMR.

⁷ The first series of interviews were used to calibrate the standard questionnaire. Following internal and external review, we also rejected in total 21 interviews with Taliban and elders from this trial series, and did not again use the two Afghan researchers responsible for these interviews.

⁸ We seek to produce a detailed and authentic picture by quoting extensively from interviews. One limitation on authenticity is that we are reporting Taliban words as translated into English, in some cases from interview notes.

Taliban and increasingly capable western and Afghan forces. In the next section of the article we explore how the Taliban 'returned' to Helmand between 2004 and 2006. Of course, some Taliban members had simply gone to ground in the province, but many others (including most commanders) had fled to other areas of Afghanistan and across the border into Pakistan. These came back, bringing with them large numbers of 'foreign' fighters. We also show how the British made the situation far worse when they deployed forces to Helmand in 2006. In the following section we examine the evolution of the Taliban insurgency in Helmand since 2006. We show how the Taliban has adapted by introducing a more centralized organizational structure and a militarized shadow government, and increasing the professionalism of field units. It is important to point out that the failure of western armies to subdue the Taliban does not mean that such efforts did not have an impact. What we reveal in this article is a particular course of evolution by the Taliban, which was to a great extent determined by the military pressure exerted on them.

The return of the Taliban, 2004–2006

Following the fall of the Taliban emirate in Afghanistan in late 2001, Helmandi Taliban hid or disposed of their weapons and most returned to their homes. Taliban commanders and other high-profile figures fled to Pakistan. For the first six months after the Taliban went to ground, communities organized themselves and took responsibility for their own districts: 'In every district there were different local councils.'⁹ For example, in Nad-e Ali district 'the local people from different tribes came together and made a local council ... with two elders from each tribe'.¹⁰ The former head of the council notes: 'I was the district chief and the police chief, and we patrolled and we had guards at night to keep security.'¹¹

After six months, the major warlords who had been pushed out of Helmand under the Taliban emirate returned to power in a new guise, as allies of Karzai and therefore in government office. Sher Mohammed Akhundzada (commonly called 'SMA' by the British), the Alizai warlord from Musa Qala, was appointed provincial governor. Malem Mir Wali, a Barakzai warlord from Gereshk, took his militia into the new Afghan military forces. Dad Mohammad Khan, an Alokzai warlord from Sangin, became the provincial chief of the National Directorate of Security (NDS). Finally, Abdul Rahman Jan (commonly called 'ARJ' by the British), a rising Noorzai warlord from Nad-e Ali, was appointed the provincial chief of police. Once back in power, these warlords returned to their bad old ways. Initially their militias clashed: first SMA versus ARJ, then ARJ with SMA against Mir Wali. Each attempted to fool US special forces into targeting the others' militias as 'Taliban', with some success.¹² Increasingly, they turned their attention

⁹ E3 NES; also E8 NDA.

¹⁰ GoE3 NDA.

¹¹ GoE11 NDA.

¹² Mike Martin, *A brief history of Helmand* (Warminster, Wiltshire: British Army Afghan COIN Centre, Aug. 2011), pp. 48–9.

to violently exploiting communities not in their patronage networks. One former member of the original provisional district council of Nad-e Ali recounted:

In the first six months when we had the council, everything was going well. Everything was done by advising and in contact with the local villagers. When the official police chief and district chief arrived ... day by day the situation got worse. There was lots of extortion and stealing, and people were killed, and someone was even burned in their car by these government people, and day by day people got fed up with this Afghan government and welcomed the Taliban back into their districts.¹³

The Helmandi police, under ARJ and his appointees in the districts, were particularly notorious for robbing and abusing the local populace and carrying out extrajudicial murders.¹⁴ There is widespread consensus among the elders interviewed that abusive governance was a major factor driving villagers towards the Taliban.¹⁵ It also meant that, on their return to Helmand, the Taliban were able to present themselves as the shari'a (that is, 'law and order') party.¹⁶ Pro-government warlords and their militias also harassed and targeted former Taliban commanders in Helmand who were trying to stay away from trouble in their villages after the demoralizing defeat of 2001. Interviewees from several districts report that, as a result, many former Taliban returned to the insurgency in self-defence.¹⁷ Interviews with Taliban reveal a similar dynamic in neighbouring Uruzgan and Kandahar provinces of harassment driving former Taliban back to armed resistance.¹⁸

Lines of conflict between, on the one hand, warlord patronage networks that benefited from government largess and, on the other, disfranchised and downtrodden tribal communities, formed and hardened. The most noted example concerns the Ishaqzai communities south of Sangin. For generations, the Alizais and Alokozais to the north of Sangin had been in competition with the Ishaqzai. During the Taliban emirate, Ishaqzais held a number of key Taliban government posts in Helmand, including the provincial governorship. The tables were turned under the new Alizai provincial governor (SMA) and Alokozai head of NDS (Dad Mohammad), 'who used the cover of their government positions to tax, harass and steal from the Ishaqzai'.¹⁹ As one Alokozai elder admitted in 2007: 'The Ishaqzai had no choice but to fight [back]'.²⁰ Divisions between pro- and anti-government elements also occurred at the subtribal level. For example, among the Alokozais, the Khotezai subtribe was excluded from power and provided many recruits to the Taliban, while their traditional rivals of the Bostanzai subtribe were well

¹³ E7 NDA.

¹⁴ E1 NDA; E6 NDA.

¹⁵ E2 GMR; E1 NES; E2 NES; E1 NDA; E6 NDA; E7 NDA; GoE9 NDA; GoE10 NDA; GoE11 NDA; E2 MSQ; E4 MSQ.

¹⁶ E2 MSQ.

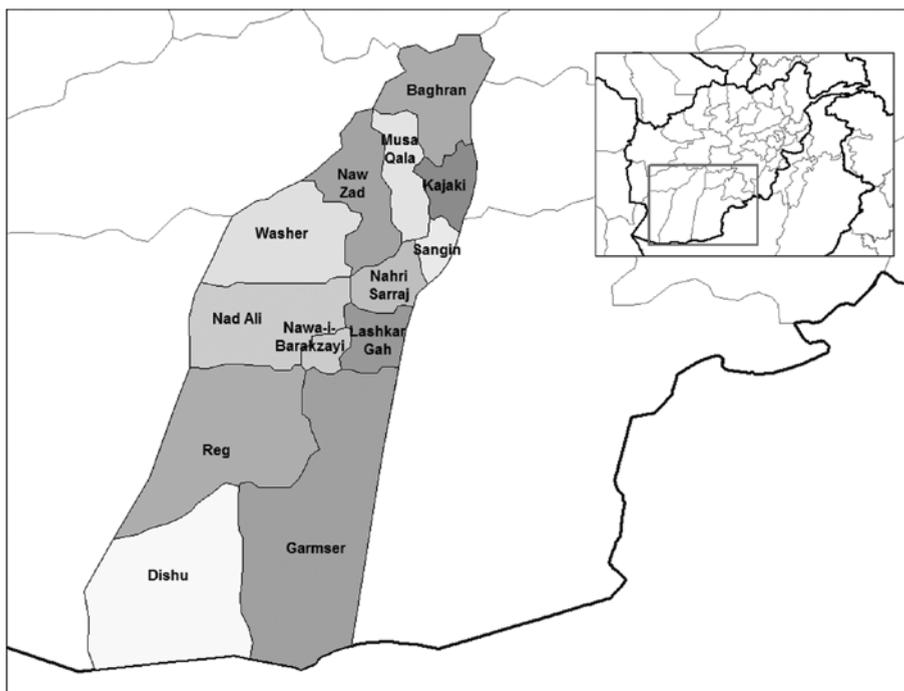
¹⁷ T2 NDA; T3 SGN; E5 NES; E2 MSQ; E1 SGN.

¹⁸ Anand Gopal, 'The Taliban in Kandahar', p. 13, and Martine van Bijlert, 'The Taliban in Zabul and Uruzgan', p. 106, both in Bergen, ed., *Talibanistan*.

¹⁹ Martin, *Brief history*, p. 49.

²⁰ Cited in Tom Coghlan, 'The Taliban in Helmand: an oral history', in Giustozzi, ed., *Decoding*, p. 136.

Map 1: Districts in Helmand province



Source: Wikipedia Commons, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Helmand_districts.png, accessed 30 May 2013.

Note: This map does not show the district of Marjah, which was created in 2010 from an area in southern Nad-e Ali district.

placed within the government.²¹ As late as 2012 the tribal sections favoured by the government continued to feel entitled to control all government posts, excluding their local rivals, and pushing government and foreign troops for a more aggressive posture against those communities that were portrayed as ‘pro-Taliban’.²² Thus the Taliban ‘resurgence’ in Helmand over 2004–2006 was greatly aided by intertribal rivalry and local resistance to predatory rule.

Our interviews show that the return of the Taliban to Helmand conforms to the pattern previously identified by Giustozzi, in his earlier study of the rise of the ‘neo-Taliban’ across Afghanistan from 2002 to 2006. The Taliban first sent in small infiltration teams from Pakistan. As Giustozzi observed in 2007, ‘the strategic task of these “vanguard” teams was to prepare the ground for a latter escalation of the insurgency’.²³ The interviews enable us to reconstruct how this happened district by district in Helmand.

In Musa Qala, Sangin and Nahr-e Seraj, the vanguard teams arrived in 2004, followed by Taliban assaults on these northern districts in 2005. In Musa Qala,

²¹ E1 SGN.

²² E1 SGN; E2 MSQ.

²³ Giustozzi, *Koran*, p. 101; see also Johnson, *The Afghan way of war*, p. 272.

the Taliban 'secretly entered the district and talked to some villagers and elders ... they told the people that they were coming back to the district to fight against the government'.²⁴ In 2005 they returned in force and 'within two to three months they had captured all the villages, although not the district centre'.²⁵ Similarly, in Sangin, the Taliban 'reappeared' in 2004—'there were one, two, three, four Taliban'—and tried to use the 'problems between the tribes' (that is, Alokozai–Ishaqzai tensions) to stir up resistance to the government.²⁶ In contrast to Musa Qala, where most of the Taliban fighters came from neighbouring Baghran and Kajaki, in Sangin most of the Taliban fighters were local (while most of the commanders were Afghan Taliban returning from Pakistan).²⁷ Likewise, in Nahr-e Seraj, Taliban from outside the district began arriving 'in groups of two or three'.²⁸ In two separate interviews, elders say this occurred on the border with Sangin: 'Taliban first appeared during the night, they came to Hyderabad village and killed those people who were working for the government. Day by day they started appearing during the day also and then they became more powerful.'²⁹

We see a similar pattern of gradual encroachment in Nad-e Ali district in central Helmand. Between 2004 and 2006, the Taliban slowly built up local support in the district and became increasingly bold in their military activities: 'In the beginning, [the Taliban] were afraid of the villagers, that is why they covered their faces not to be recognized. But when the villages began supporting the Taliban, they became more confident and powerful, and started to attack the district centre.'³⁰ By 2006 the Taliban were in control of most of Nad-e Ali.³¹

In both the northern district of Nawzad and the southern district of Garmser, large Taliban forces swept in and rapidly seized control. In Nawzad they arrived in force from Baghran in 2005, and within six months had taken control of almost the entire district, though the government held onto the district centre.³² A similar pattern was evident in Garmser. The former Taliban district governor, Mullah Naim, had fled in 2001 to a refugee camp in Baluchistan, just two hours away across the Pakistan border. In 2005 'he started to send some of his men back in twos and threes',³³ and in June 2006 he led a force of 500 Taliban into Garmser. Within three months, all but the district centre had fallen into Taliban hands.³⁴

The arrival of the British in the summer of 2006, as part of the expansion of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to southern Afghanistan, proved to be a boon for the Taliban. The British sent a force too small to stop the Taliban advance, but just large enough to antagonize the local population and

²⁴ E₃ MSQ.

²⁵ E₄ MSQ.

²⁶ GoE₃ SGN.

²⁷ E₁ SGN; E₂ MSQ.

²⁸ E₂ NES.

²⁹ E₅ NES; also E₄ NES.

³⁰ GoE₉ NDA.

³¹ E₂ NDA; E₇ NDA; E₈ NDA; GoE₉ NDA.

³² E₁ NZD; E₂ NZD.

³³ E₁ GMR.

³⁴ Malkasian, *War comes to Garmser*, p. 94.

drive them further into the arms of the insurgency. The British deployed into Helmand unaware that the insurgency was gathering pace and blindly ignorant of the local politics underpinning it.

The British did, however, know enough to realize that SMA's highly corrupt and predatory rule was a source of instability. Under British pressure, he was removed and replaced with a new provincial governor, Mohammed Daud. In response, SMA's Alizai militia aligned with the Taliban in attacking government outposts in the northern districts. Daud, in turn, put immense pressure on the British to deploy forces to protect the district centres in Nawzad, Sangin and Musa Qala. The northern deployment of small British detachments into 'platoon houses' in these district centres proved disastrous.³⁵ British forces became fixed in these northern outposts, and had to rely on heavy use of automatic weapons, artillery and air strikes to repulse ground assaults by large numbers of Taliban. The situation in southern Helmand was just as bad. With Garmser district centre about to fall to the Taliban, in September 2006 a small team of British advisers led the hurried deployment of a 200-strong relief force of Afghan army and police. The Taliban ringed the government-held positions with trench lines and traded intense fire with the British and Afghan security forces. Heavy use of air power was required to prevent the Taliban from completely overrunning the district centre.³⁶ As one local elder recalled: 'For weeks at the front lines ... [there] was very intense fighting with many bombardments and rockets.'³⁷

Indiscriminate use of fire by British forces alienated locals who were driven from their homes or lost family members. Indeed, by 2007 Nawzad district centre had become a ghost town, the entire population having fled. Increasingly, the local people became fed up with the fighting, with ISAF air strikes and with British troops invading the privacy of their homes. In late 2007 the British adopted a more population-centric approach to their counter-insurgency (COIN) operations. Increasing emphasis was placed on military restraint and building long-term relationships with communities, and in closer partnering with Afghan security forces. However, the pressure on what remained an undermanned force meant that the British lacked the presence and tactical patience to develop ties in most communities, and still had to rely on artillery and air power to get out of trouble.³⁸ It also took the British a few years to realize how partisan the various units of the Afghan police in Helmand were. Thus the Kharoti fought against the British in Nad-e Ali because the British were allied with their Noorzai enemies, who happen to be the police. Closer British partnership with the police in Nad-e Ali simply reinforced this perception.³⁹

³⁵ For a critical discussion, see Michael Clarke and Valentina Soria, 'Charging up the valley: British decisions in Afghanistan', *RUSI Journal* 156: 4, 2011, pp. 80–89.

³⁶ Malkasian, *War comes to Garmser*, pp. 104, 108–109.

³⁷ E2 GMR.

³⁸ Theo Farrell, 'Improving in war: military adaptation and the British in Helmand province, Afghanistan, 2006–09', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33: 5, 2010, pp. 574–82; Anthony King, 'Understanding the Helmand campaign: British military operations in Afghanistan', *International Affairs* 86: 2, March 2010, pp. 311–23.

³⁹ Mike Martin, *An intimate war: an oral history of the Helmand conflict* (London: Hurst, forthcoming 2014), ch. 6.

A final cause of local resistance was the attempt by the British to eradicate opium production. It would appear that this triggered a popular revolt against the British in Nad-e Ali in 2007:

In fact the fighting started because of opium. They started destroying the opium fields of the people, that's why they became angry ... The rich people had land and they grew opium, so it was good for them. For the poor farmers without land who worked the land, it was good, because they got 20 or 30 or some percentage of the opium, so for the poor workers it was also a very good job. When they started destroying the opium fields, the people—landowners, farmers, poor people—everyone became angry. And they started fighting.⁴⁰

The British did offer compensation for the destruction of the poppy crop, but this scheme was administered by the local government and as a result the farmers got nothing.⁴¹ In 2008 the British attempted to target the poppy fields of warlords, such as ARJ, who had been removed as district chief of police. This made matters even worse. Through his patronage network, ARJ still controlled most of the police in central Helmand. He retaliated by allowing the Taliban to enter and take control of Marjah.⁴² The Taliban were able to take advantage of this situation by promising to protect landowners and farmers from poppy eradication programmes, and thereby win local support. The drugs industry in southern Afghanistan became a major source of income for individual Taliban commanders and for the movement as a whole, both through the taxation of the poppy crop and through opium production and trafficking.⁴³

Thus, far from helping to secure Helmand, the arrival of the British triggered a violent intensification of the insurgency. The northern deployment of British forces into Nawzad, Sangin and Musa Qala became a magnet, drawing Taliban in from surrounding districts and provinces. Similarly, the deployment of British forces down south into Garmser drew in ever more Taliban across the border from Pakistan. Indeed, the Taliban leadership in Quetta had decided to launch a major assault against the NATO forces deploying south into Helmand and Kandahar. The main Taliban defensive line was just south of Kandahar, but large numbers of fighters were also dispatched into Helmand to take on the British.⁴⁴

It was in this climate of gathering jihad that young Helmandi men flocked to the Taliban. Certainly, as we have noted above, Taliban recruitment started before the British arrived, in 2004–2005 when they began to reorganize in Helmand. But the British presence made it far easier to recruit local fighters.⁴⁵ Where local villages welcomed Taliban, the insurgents encouraged the young men to join up in order to 'free their villages'.⁴⁶ As one Taliban commander recalled: 'When the

⁴⁰ T1 NDA; also T7 NDA; T2 MJH.

⁴¹ E3 NES.

⁴² Martin reconstructs this story through multiple interviews with Helmandi elders and former officials. Martin, *An intimate war*, ch. 5.

⁴³ Gretchen S. Peters, 'The Taliban and the opium trade', in Giustozzi, ed., *Decoding*, pp. 7–22.

⁴⁴ Giustozzi, *Koran*, pp. 123–5; van Linschoten and Kuehn, *An enemy*, pp. 273–5.

⁴⁵ Here too, we see a pattern that is consistent with that identified by Giustozzi in his earlier study. Against the view that most Taliban were mere mercenaries (the so-called 'ten-dollar-a-day Taliban'), or forcibly recruited, Giustozzi argued that most Taliban are volunteers who join for a variety of reasons. See Giustozzi, *Koran*, p. 42.

⁴⁶ T3 NES.

Taliban came new to our district, they were not enough fighters, they told us to make groups of 10 to 15 and come to them, and they would give us weapons and supplies to fight against the local government and foreign fighters.⁴⁷ A number of other Taliban interviewees similarly described forming what we might call ‘pals platoons’.⁴⁸ Forced recruitment is mentioned by a small minority of interviewees, mostly elders unsympathetic to the Taliban and a single Talib who alleges that the Taliban in Sangin ‘punished strongly’ local men who refused to join in ‘the holy war against the occupational forces’.⁴⁹ However, most interviewees suggested that the Taliban relied on persuasion and social pressure. Five elders, from three different districts, stated emphatically that the Taliban did not recruit locals by force.⁵⁰ As one recounted: ‘The Taliban come and ask each house for their sons. Not forcing them, but telling them, asking them, “How Muslim are you? Why are you not doing jihad?”’⁵¹ In some cases Taliban recruiters made multiple visits to people’s homes to pile on the pressure.⁵²

Interviewees confirmed a range of motives for volunteering to join the Taliban. When asked why they were fighting, most Taliban interviewees presented the conflict primarily in terms of resistance to foreign occupation. A number expressed it in terms of an ‘Islamic duty to fight against the *kafirs* [infidels]’.⁵³ A number spoke of being appalled by the ‘cruelty of the Americans and British’.⁵⁴ Interviewees objected to night raids by US special forces, resulting in innocent villagers being killed or hauled off, and searching of domestic dwellings by British forces, as a grave affront to their religion and culture.⁵⁵ A couple of interviewees invoked history, saying that the British whom ‘our grandfathers fought’ had returned ‘to take revenge for their relatives who were killed in Afghanistan in the time of the Afghan people’s jihad against the British soldiers’.⁵⁶ Reinforcing ideology and history were more immediate and personal motives: six men had joined the Taliban following the loss of close family as a result of ISAF military action, one in memory of a friend killed by the British, and one to get revenge for ‘being beaten up badly’ by British troops.⁵⁷ Overall, waging jihad on occupying foreigners is clearly a powerful strategic narrative for the Taliban, providing a crucial social resource for the purposes of motivating fighters and mobilizing resources.⁵⁸

⁴⁷ T7 GMR.

⁴⁸ T5 MJH; T2 NZD; T7 SGN.

⁴⁹ E2 NDA; T4 SGN.

⁵⁰ E2 GMR; E2 MSQ; E3 MSQ; E4 MSQ; E4 NES. Conscription had been one of the most unpopular policies of the Taliban emirate. Carter Malkasian argues that on returning to Helmand, the Taliban chose not to reinstate conscription in order to avoid alienating local communities: Malkasian, *War comes to Garmser*, p. 105.

⁵¹ E2 MSQ.

⁵² T6 MSQ.

⁵³ T3 SGN; T4 KJI; T5 MJH; T1 NES.

⁵⁴ T4 GMR; T8 GMR; T3 NZD.

⁵⁵ T4 MJH; T4 MJH; T1 KJI.

⁵⁶ T1 MSQ; also T2 NES.

⁵⁷ T2 KJI; T4 MSQ; T3 NDA; T5 NDA; T6 NDA; T3 NES; T1 SGN; T5 KJI.

⁵⁸ Citing John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, Lawrence Freedman notes, ‘[strategic] narratives go beyond rhetoric “scripted for manipulative ends”, but instead “provide a grounded expression of people’s experiences, interests and values”’. Arquilla and Ronfeldt, eds, *Networks and netwars* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001), cited in Freedman, *The transformation of strategic affairs*, Adelphi Paper no. 379 (London: Routledge for IISS, 2006), p. 22.

This strategic narrative was especially strong in those communities where local mullahs supported Taliban recruitment.⁵⁹ Indeed, recognizing the importance of mullahs in shaping local opinion, the Taliban systematically targeted, through intimidation and assassination, those mullahs in the southern provinces who spoke out against them.⁶⁰ They also imported new mullahs, young zealots from Quetta and Peshawar indoctrinated in Taliban ideology.⁶¹ In pro-Taliban areas, where a family had more than one adult son, there was almost an expectation that one would join the Taliban.⁶² Of course, more mundane and material motives were also at play. For some young men, the Taliban offered a way out of unemployment and the boredom of rural life. As one elder observed: 'They were jobless, the young. They didn't talk to the mullahs, they went straight to the Taliban. They saw it as work.'⁶³

For their part, community elders used the Taliban to enhance their bargaining power *vis-à-vis* the national government in Kabul. In a sense the Taliban, once they re-emerged in 2005 as a reasonably viable organization with a skeleton structure of committed cadres, functioned as a catalyst for many grievances that existed among the population. A variety of groups started flocking to the Taliban as the only channel through which to express opposition. A significant example is the mobilization of Hizb-i Islami groups into the Taliban following the badly handled demobilization of the 93rd Division of the old Afghan army in Nahr-e Seraj in 2005. When former Hizb fighters were not integrated into the local security forces as promised, they joined the Taliban.⁶⁴ More generally, in addition to abuse by reinstated government warlords, the perceived failure to distribute government funds fairly also prompted disfranchised villages to support the Taliban.⁶⁵

The cost of aligning themselves with the Taliban turned out to be very high for many communities in terms of destruction and loss of human life, and accordingly from 2007 onwards many elders withdrew or reduced their support. By 2011–2012 sources who were neutral or had no particular sympathy for the Taliban were emphasizing that local people had supported the Taliban through either expediency or fear, emphasizing that the majority of the population had no choice but to support whoever controlled their village, and had no active preference beyond the choice of whoever could lay definitive claim to their area and provide basic security.⁶⁶ There were signs that, disillusioned as people were with the government, they had progressively grown equally tired of the Taliban.⁶⁷ As we explore below, the Taliban have gradually adapted their force composition, structure and tactics in ways that are increasingly sensitive to local concerns.

⁵⁹ E4 MSQ.

⁶⁰ Carter Malkasian, Jerry Meyerle and Megan Katt, 'The war in southern Afghanistan, 2001–2008', unclassified report (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, July 2009), pp. 11, 14.

⁶¹ Malkasian, *War comes to Garmser*, p. 86.

⁶² T1 SGN.

⁶³ E8 NDA; also E1 MSQ; E2 MSQ. It would appear that Taliban pay is irregular. According to one Taliban commander: 'We don't have a fixed salary. When we have money, we give out 20,000 or 10,000 [₹250–125] Afghani at times' (T1 MJH).

⁶⁴ E1 NES. See also Martin, *An intimate war*.

⁶⁵ E4 NES.

⁶⁶ E4 NES; E4 MSQ.

⁶⁷ E4 NDA; E8 NDA; E5 NES.

The evolution of the Taliban, 2006–2011

Under growing military pressure, the Taliban insurgency has evolved in three key ways. First, at the strategic level the Taliban have attempted to strengthen centralized command and control of field units. Second, the re-establishment of a Taliban shadow government has been stunted by the intensity of the conflict in Helmand, resulting in a gradual militarization of Taliban administration. Third, at the tactical level, the Taliban has improved the professionalism of its field units in order to facilitate a shift in tactics. These changes have occurred in the context of growing Taliban appreciation of the need to wage a guerrilla war against the foreign forces. Before we go on to explore these developments, it is necessary to outline briefly how the Taliban are organized.

At the strategic level, since 2007 the Taliban's military structure has been centred on two military commissions, both based in Pakistan: one in Quetta and the other in Peshawar. In principle, these two commissions have divided territorial responsibility between themselves, with Quetta being in charge of the west, south and north and Peshawar of the south-east, east, north-east and the Kabul region. From 2010 onwards, the Peshawar military commission has controlled a growing share of the military budget, passing part of it on to Quetta but also using the newly acquired leverage to exercise influence over the Quetta military commission.⁶⁸

At the tactical level, the Taliban operate in field units of anywhere between 20 and 50 men, divided into two to four combat teams. Taliban field units will be attached to a larger patronage network, called a *mahaz*.⁶⁹ Taliban *mahaz* vary in size and can stretch across several districts and provinces. Each large *mahaz* is led by a high-profile Taliban leader, for example in the south Mullah Baradar, Mullah Zakir, Mullah Mansur and others.

As we describe below, over time this *mahaz* system has been overlaid with a more centralized command structure first introduced by the eastern military commission, subsequently adopted by the southern military commission in Quetta, and represented on the ground by provincial and district-level *nizami masul* (military commissioners). In Helmand, there was some overlap between the southern military commission and the *mahaz* networks, as Mullah (Abdul Qayum) Zakir led one of the largest *mahaz* networks and at the same time presided over the southern military commission (until his promotion to national military commissioner in early 2013).

We do not suggest that the Taliban is a unified organization. Rather, it is a collection of *mahaz* networks with a tendency towards fragmentation.⁷⁰ We reveal

⁶⁸ See Claudio Franco and Antonio Giustozzi, *The evolution of Taliban command and control* (Berlin: Afghan Analysts Network, forthcoming 2013).

⁶⁹ In the latest Taliban terminology, a field unit that is under the direct command of the military commission in Quetta or Peshawar is called a *delgai*. A field unit that is under the direct command of a *mahaz* leader is called a *grup*. Confusing matters is the fact that field units often take direction from both the regional military commission and their parent *mahaz*. Communication with Taliban cadre working for the Peshawar military commission, March 2013.

⁷⁰ Warring groups in Afghanistan have exhibited different degrees of centralization. In the late 1990s, for example, the emirate of Ismail Khan in Herat was far more centralized than the Junbesh party in Faryab under Abdul Rashid Dostum. See Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of mud: wars and warlords in Afghanistan* (London:

below a number of reforms introduced to address this tendency—with, at best, mixed success.

Strategic adaptation: centralizing the insurgency

In the early days of the insurgency in 2004, the Taliban were organized in a series of underground groups, each linked to a particular *mahaz* network established, sometimes quite haphazardly, on the basis of personal relations. These networks were organized around a number of prominent Taliban leaders who tended to act independently of one another. As one Taliban commander noted many years later: ‘At that time, all the network commanders misused their positions, they thought they were kings.’⁷¹ In some cases, cooperation between networks was precluded by rivalry between *mahaz* leaders. The most famous falling-out in the southern Taliban was between the southern *mahaz* leaders Mullah Baradar and Mullah Dadullah. ‘Dadullah was killed [in May 2007] because of a spy giving reports to the Americans, called Nawab, who belonged to Baradar’s group, and was even personally involved in killing Dadullah. Then the whole Kakar tribe knew that Dadullah was dead, and they passed reports on to the Pakistanis about Baradar, who was arrested.’⁷²

This episode exposed another vulnerability of the *mahaz* system, namely the serious disruption caused by the loss of network leaders, with commanders moving on to other networks of their choice, or withdrawing to Pakistan to wait for the succession to be decided. In the particular case outlined above, ‘many of [Baradar’s] commanders went to Pakistan and left the movement’.⁷³

The limited capacity of the *mahaz*-based system to foster cooperation between Taliban field units inhibited Taliban tactical effectiveness and strategic flexibility. The Taliban leadership did try to foster more cooperation between *mahaz* networks through a system of incentives, offering financial and career rewards for those who moved in the right direction, for example shifting the recruitment effort towards new regions, intensifying military operations or focusing on particular types of targets. This system of incentives was not altogether ineffective; it did allow the Taliban to expand geographically very considerably.⁷⁴ However, it was slow and therefore unsuitable in pursuit of any objective that had to be attained in a matter of months rather than years, let alone weeks or days. Typically the Taliban’s seasonal offensive, proclaimed nearly every spring or summer, achieved little in terms of major tactical operations, as the incentives were not sufficient to offset the great risks involved.⁷⁵

Hurst, 2009). On organizational variation in the Afghan *mujahideen* during the Soviet war, see Abdulkader H. Sinno, *Organizations at war in Afghanistan and beyond* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

⁷¹ T1 NDA.

⁷² T2 NDA. This interviewee does not appear to have been tied to either Baradar or Dadullah. We are unable to confirm the accuracy of this account.

⁷³ T2 NDA.

⁷⁴ See e.g. Antonio Giustozzi and Christopher Reuter, *The northern front: the Afghan insurgency spreading beyond the Pashtuns* (Berlin: Afghan Analysts Network, 2010).

⁷⁵ For critical views on the Taliban spring offensives in the early years of the insurgency, see Christopher N. Kooztz, ed., *Enduring voices: oral histories of the US Army experience in Afghanistan 2003–5* (Fort McNair, DC: US

In response to the limited strategic flexibility of the *mahaz*-based system, the Taliban first resorted to dispatching large numbers of foreign fighters (largely Pakistanis) where needed. In parts of Helmand, elders still remember the predominance of Punjabi-speakers in the early years of the insurgency.⁷⁶ One elder told us that when Taliban came knocking on the door for food, they could not speak Pashto.⁷⁷ Another elder in Garmser even noted that ‘because there were loads of Punjabis, the locals didn’t fight’.⁷⁸ A third elder recalled: ‘I was a doctor in Nawzad at that time, and the Taliban brought their wounded to me for treatment. I saw wounded fighters who couldn’t speak any Pashto or English or Urdu ... most of the foreign Taliban were from Pakistan, Iran and Arabs.’⁷⁹ This system proved of limited effectiveness except in the presence of a weak adversary that could be overwhelmed by waves of fighters, as in the case of some districts held by the Afghan police in 2006–2007; no ISAF position was ever taken by the Taliban. The problem was that these foreign fighters were not suited to guerrilla warfare. They were not able to blend easily into the local population, and they fought without care for local concerns. As one Taliban commander noted: ‘In the time of [Mullah] Baradar, there were more Pakistani fighters in the front line ... But now we don’t let them come because they disturb the [local] people a lot.’⁸⁰

Accordingly, the Taliban shifted emphasis from sending waves of fighters into Afghanistan from *madrassas* in Pakistan to recruiting local fighters. Thus, between 2006 and 2012, we see a drastic reduction in the number of foreign Taliban, and those who were used being increasingly confined to more specialized roles, most acting as technical and military advisers. This picture is confirmed by our interviews. In Sangin, some *delgai* had ‘Pakistani Taliban’ making improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and acting as trainers.⁸¹ Taliban commanders reported no foreign fighters in Kajaki.⁸² The shadow governor in Marjah claimed a very large number of foreign fighters: 60 Arabs and 120 Pakistanis.⁸³ However, this is contradicted by two Taliban commanders, who said that although there had been very large numbers of foreign Taliban in Marjah, these were all driven out by the ISAF offensive in 2010.⁸⁴ A third commander clarified: ‘We don’t have foreign fighters in [our group in] Marjah district, and I am completely sure that there are not foreign fighters in other groups also. Sometimes some Pakistani Taliban are coming to Marjah district for one week or 10 days for giving training but there is not any foreign fighters to be with us permanently.’⁸⁵

Army Center of Military History, 2009), p. 417; ‘Afghanistan: hearing before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, 110th Congress, first session’, Washington DC, US Congress, 1 March 2007, p. 10.

⁷⁶ E2 NDZ.

⁷⁷ E2 NDA.

⁷⁸ E1 GMR.

⁷⁹ N1 NZD.

⁸⁰ This commander goes on to note that ‘there are some foreigners’ in his district, ‘but not in the frontline fighting’ (T2 NDA).

⁸¹ T3 SGN reports having Pakistani Taliban in this role. T1 SGN and T2 SGN report the presence of Pakistanis in Sangin, but say that there are no foreign Taliban in their respective *delgai*.

⁸² T1 KJI; T3 KJI; T4 KJI; T5 KJI.

⁸³ T8 MJH.

⁸⁴ T3 MJH; T5 MJH.

⁸⁵ T4 MJH.

The picture is strikingly similar in Musa Qala, Nahr-e Seraj, Nawzad and Garmser: where foreign Taliban used to be plentiful and engaged in actual fighting, now they are few in number, mostly from Pakistan, not based permanently in the district, and acting as bomb-makers and military trainers.⁸⁶ One Taliban commander further noted that ‘it has become difficult for the foreign fighters to come in to Nawzad district because most roads are under control of the government’.⁸⁷

Between 2005 and 2008, the Taliban sought to improve their ability to concentrate force without challenging the entrenched networks of the old system. Experienced fighting groups started being moved across provinces, usually still within the same network. For example, a commander affiliated with Mullah Baradar would move to another area where Baradar had people and take over the leadership, or even create new combat units affiliated to that network.⁸⁸ This development may have facilitated the large-scale penetration of Helmand by the Taliban in 2005–2006, with groups of fighters originally mobilized or concentrated in Baghran (in the extreme north of the province) and in Garmser (in the south) being moved into the more central and heavily populated districts.⁸⁹ However, the success of this reform remains difficult to assess. On at least one major occasion (the battle of Pashmul around Kandahar in September–October 2006), the Taliban managed to bring together a couple of thousand fighters in a single location. But it is not clear whether that was the work of a single network—specifically, that of Mullah Dadullah, who reportedly planned the operation—or the result of deployment of centrally managed units by the Quetta *shura*, the main Taliban political council, or again the result of complex negotiations among different networks.⁹⁰

By 2008 the Taliban leadership was coming to realize that this attempt to reform the *mahaz* system was not working. Anecdotal evidence from Helmand illustrates the problem. In Kajaki, for example, an Afghan interpreter hired by the British to listen to Taliban communications in 2008 ‘described almost comical attempts by different commanders to shirk combat and foist the responsibility on other commanders’.⁹¹ In Peshawar, a small group of Taliban cadres tried to create a centralized command and control system, with the support of the foreign advisers, envisaging this as including the centralization of revenue collection. However, this new system, despite benefiting from the redirection of external funding away from Quetta to Peshawar, did not really take off until a new set of circumstances appeared.⁹²

⁸⁶ T1 MSQ; T2 MSQ; T3 MSQ; T1 NES; T2 NES; T1 NZD; T2 NZD; T4 NZD; T5 NZD; T4 GMR; T7 GMR; T8 GMR.

⁸⁷ T1 NZD. Note that the term ‘foreign fighters’ is still applied to those foreign Taliban who act exclusively as IED makers and military trainers.

⁸⁸ From 2006, for example, Baradar was actively involved with his network in fostering the expansion of the Taliban to northern Afghanistan. See Franco and Giustozzi, *The evolution of Taliban command and control*, based on communication with Taliban cadres in Pakistan, 2010; Giustozzi interview with UN official, Kabul, 2009.

⁸⁹ E1 NZD; E2 NZD; T1 NDA.

⁹⁰ Giustozzi, *Koran*, pp. 123–5; van Linschoten and Kuehn, *An enemy*, pp. 273–5.

⁹¹ Coghlan, ‘The Taliban in Helmand’, p. 145.

⁹² Franco and Giustozzi, *The evolution of Taliban command and control*; T2 NDA; T1 MJH; GoT2 MJH.

First, after facing strong resistance to the new system even in the east, the ‘reformers’ within the Peshawar military commission negotiated deals with a number of key Taliban players in the south-east and east. This enabled the creation of a more formalized system of *nizami* (military) commissions at provincial and district level across Afghanistan from around 2009 onwards. These were led by *nizami masul* (military commissioners) and were answerable to the military commissions in Peshawar and Quetta.⁹³ The actual result was a somewhat cumbersome double chain of command, where Taliban units belonging to a particular *mahaz* would respond to both its parent network and the Peshawar and Quetta military commissions (which had in principle equal powers). ‘When I get orders from the *nizami* Commission, I have to check the orders with my *mahaz* commander, who will contact the *nizami* people and discuss it with them in order to confirm.’⁹⁴

As part of the compromise agreement, the two military commissions were also allowed to recruit combat groups directly, bypassing existing *mahaz* networks. This new development was much more pronounced in the east than in the south, as space and population in the latter were already ‘taken’ by the various networks and there was limited room for the military commission to establish its direct influence. In Helmand, as of 2012, the Quetta military commission had established a major presence only in Nawzad and Kajaki, with smaller positions in Nahr-e Saraj, Sangin, Musa Qala and Marjah. The strength of the old network system was so great that even the field units belonging to the military commission were often described as ‘Qari Baryal’s *delgais*’ (from the name of the head of the Peshawar military commission); this was because the new system was seen in the south as an imposition from Peshawar, rather than an endogenous initiative of the Quetta military commission.⁹⁵ One Taliban interviewee in Marjah outlined the command structure for such units:

[Interviewer] *Is there also a district nizami commission?*

Yes, there is one representative.

[Interviewer] *The district nizami masul is the same as the [Taliban] police chief?*

There is one police chief. Besides him, there is a council to solve people’s problems. The *nizami* guy is separate. He is just concerned with fighting ...

[Interviewer] *If the nizami commission is secret, how do they communicate with the commanders?*

Well, for example, if I want permission to carry out a certain operation, first I’ll contact Haji Mullah, my commander. He will contact the provincial *nizami* commission. But if I can’t reach Haji Mullah, in the district we have a telephone operator who is in touch with everyone in the province. Through him we can pass a message to the *nizami* commission.⁹⁶

Over time, one may expect direct recruitment of field units by the two military commissions to gradually strengthen their hand *vis-à-vis* the old networks.

⁹³ Franco and Giustozzi, *The evolution of Taliban command and control*, based on communication with Taliban high-level cadres in Peshawar, 2011–12.

⁹⁴ T2 NDA. This procedure is confirmed in interviews with Taliban commanders from other provinces (Baghlan, Kunduz, Wardak) conducted in 2011–12 as part of a project run by one of the authors.

⁹⁵ T3 MJH; T5 MJH; T2 SGN; T3 SGN; T7 SGN; T4 NZD; T1 NES; T2 NES; T2 MSQ; T4 MSQ; T6 MSQ; T1 KJI; T2 KJI.

⁹⁶ T1 MJH.

Another intended innovation, which was supposed over time to strengthen the hand of the two military commissions, was the rotation of Taliban field commanders and officials. This should have professionalized what had been until then charismatic leaders of small groups of personal followers (*andiwal*). It was also intended to reduce corruption by local Taliban commanders. One commander told us that the Quetta military commission ‘don’t want Taliban fighters to become too powerful in one area and to start abusing the people’.⁹⁷ This experiment in rotation was probably also meant to prepare the ground for greater centralization, by separating commanders from the rank-and-file and dissolving bonds of personal loyalty. When first introduced around 2009–2010, the rotation system does appear to have worked. One Taliban interviewee told us: ‘Before there were lots of rotations in the Taliban system. A commander of Taliban rotated every four or five months but now they rotate every almost two years.’⁹⁸ However, as this interview suggests, the system appears to have broken down over 2010–2011. Indeed, Taliban interviewees from across Helmand report this to be so.⁹⁹ As one Taliban commander observed:

It is the policy of the war that one person cannot stay in one place for a long time, that is why we change our places and it is the *nizami masul* who brings such changes and makes decisions. But these days due to a very hard situation, we cannot move a lot and rotation has also decreased or somehow stopped.¹⁰⁰

More intense targeting of Taliban commanders by ISAF contributed to this failure. As another Taliban interviewee noted: ‘In fact over the last year, many Taliban commanders with their soldiers were targeted by American drone attacks while they were moving from one district to another district. That’s why the rotation has been decreased, because moving became difficult for Taliban commanders.’¹⁰¹ In addition, field commanders were always hostile to the idea of being rotated and, in particular, to the idea of doing so without their *andiwal*. By 2011 the rotation system was already being relaxed, first with commanders increasingly allowed to take their men with them, and then being suspended altogether:

All the Taliban who rotated before like a year ago, they are stuck in their areas and somehow the rotation is blocked temporarily until Taliban make their plan. Now there is no rotation among the Taliban in Nahr-e Seraj district and all the Taliban commanders who are active in here have been around for a while and we don’t have any new face among the Taliban commanders in Nahr-e Seraj district.¹⁰²

In contrast to the failed rotation system, a more centralized command system did take root. In the new edition of the Taliban code of conduct (the *Layeha*), inspired by the Peshawar *shura* and issued in 2009, the creation of new *mahaz* networks was banned and emphasis was placed instead on provincial and district-

⁹⁷ T₂ NDA.

⁹⁸ T₇ SGN.

⁹⁹ T₄ GMR; T₅ NDA; T₄ NZD; T₅ NES; T₁ MSQ; T₆ MSQ.

¹⁰⁰ T₄ GMR.

¹⁰¹ T₁ NES.

¹⁰² T₃ NES; also confirmed by T₁ MSQ.

level military commissions.¹⁰³ *Nizami masuls* were dispatched to the provinces and district *nizami masuls* were appointed from among the field commanders seen as loyal to the central leadership. The new command system evolved into a balance between local autonomy and central control: 'If we see an ISAF convoy or police or army, we have orders to attack them. But if we make a plan to attack some place, I ask haji mullah. Sometimes we get orders from the *nizami* commission as well.'¹⁰⁴ The individual *delgai* commanders maintained their exclusive territorial responsibility, but under the authority of the Quetta military commission (in Helmand's case), which was able to intervene in the event of disputes and could regulate redeployment:

Before Taliban commanders had no place to get orders, everyone did their own operations for themselves when they felt like and had an idea ... Before, if anyone but my network commander had told me to move to another area, I wouldn't have listened. But now we have this *nizami* commission for my area, and whatever they tell me, I have to do it ...

[Interviewer] *In the last three or four years after introduction of the nizami system, has the amount of in-fighting decreased?*

Yes. If someone tries to come into my area or attack my area, I will inform the *nizami* commission, and they'll take care of the problem very quickly.¹⁰⁵

Other Taliban interviewees confirm that the two military commissions with their local branches took over the task of resolving problems among commanders: 'When some small problems come between two Taliban commanders, they are solved by the *nizami* commission in a very short time.'¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, even with the enhanced authority of the Quetta military commission and of its cadres in the provinces and districts, imposing discipline from above did not always work. Some Taliban interviewees report that a 'mediator' figure ('a Pakistani mullah' sent from Quetta) would be dispatched to Helmand to sort out problems among commanders when the district military commission was unable to cope.¹⁰⁷

By mid-2012 efforts were still under way to impose the new command system more fully in the south, where the old networks had the strongest roots. Those networks that accepted greater tactical direction from the two military commissions were rewarded with funding, supplies and advice, while the others were starved. In 2011 and 2012, major southern network leaders, including among others Mullahs Zakir, Sattar, Janan and temporarily even Akhtar Mansur, reached accommodations with the commission and accepted its supremacy.¹⁰⁸ It should be kept in mind (when judging the impact of these innovations) that the purpose of this centralization effort was never to establish a wholly centralized system, but to replace fragmentation with a more organized form of decentralization. Predictably,

¹⁰³ Martin, *An intimate war*, ch. 6.

¹⁰⁴ T1 MJH.

¹⁰⁵ T2 NDA.

¹⁰⁶ T1 NZD; also confirmed by T4 GMR; T4 MJH; T1 NZD; T2 NZD; T4 KJI.

¹⁰⁷ T5 SGN. Although no Taliban judge was interviewed as part of this project, a forthcoming study shows that the Taliban have been increasingly relying on their judges and on a kind of military court to maintain discipline within their own ranks. See Antonio Giustozzi, Adam Baczko and Claudio Franco, *The politics of justice: the Taliban's shadow judiciary* (Berlin: Afghan Analysts Network, forthcoming 2013).

¹⁰⁸ Communication with Taliban high-level cadres in Peshawar, 2011–12.

the centralizing effort of the military commissions created frictions within the Taliban and contributed to a major split within the Quetta *shura* in September 2012, between two rival factions respectively led by Zakir and Mansur. The split had important consequences in Helmand, where the Quetta military commission lost much influence because Mansur's men refused to recognize its authority.¹⁰⁹

Militarization of the shadow government

As the Taliban started acquiring control over increasing portions of territory in Helmand, they also had to work out a way to administer them. Upon seizing control of a sizeable area in a district, the Taliban would set up a local *mulki* (political) commission comprising district shadow governors and judges, and this would be charged with dealing with the complaints of the villagers. As noted above, this was followed from 2009 onwards by the formation of *nizami* (military) commissions in charge of managing the fighters.¹¹⁰ The appearance of Taliban shadow governors seems to have had little impact on how the Taliban were perceived: neither the elders nor the Taliban interviewed seemed to view them as a major component of the Taliban's effort.¹¹¹

The contrary is true of the Taliban's courts. The Taliban's system of justice always privileged speed over accuracy, in part because of the impracticalities of exercising a thorough judicial process in the middle of an insurgency, but also to cope with the demand for justice among the population.¹¹² In 2009, growing pressure from the ISAF and government military campaign forced the Taliban to switch from standing courts in fixed locations to mobile courts. As one elder noted: 'Now it is different. Judges are hiding; sometimes they meet in people's houses, sometimes in the mountains, sometimes in the mosques. They are more mobile than they used to be.'¹¹³ Nonetheless, multiple interviews with elders confirm the widely held view among western experts that the one area in which Taliban shadow government is effective is in the administration of efficient, if often harsh, justice.¹¹⁴ An elder commented on the advantage of the Taliban courts: 'in two or three hours, [the Taliban] could solve disputes between people. Now in Lashkar Gah, if you have a dispute with someone over one jerib of land, you have to sell 20 jeribs to pay to the courts.'¹¹⁵ Disputes over land and water are a significant problem for rural communities in Helmand.¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁹ Communication with Taliban high-level cadres in Peshawar, March 2013. The split appeared to be partially healing by April 2013.

¹¹⁰ E2 NZD.

¹¹¹ E3 NES; T2 NDA; T1 MJH.

¹¹² See Giustozzi et al., *The politics of justice*.

¹¹³ E5 NES. Also confirmed by E1 NZD; E6 NDA; E2 GMR.

¹¹⁴ For example, Johnson and DuPee argue that 'the Taliban shadow justice system is easily one of the most popular and respected elements of the Taliban insurgency by local communities especially in southern Afghanistan': Thomas H. Johnson and Matthew C. DuPee, 'Analysing the new Taliban code of conduct (Layeha): an assessment of changing perspectives and strategies of the Afghan Taliban', *Central Asian Survey* 31: 1, 2012, p. 84. See also Coghlan, 'The Taliban in Helmand', pp. 148–9.

¹¹⁵ E7 NDA; similar view offered by E3 NES.

¹¹⁶ E2 MSQ.

The importance attributed by the Taliban to their judicial system was in part related to their effort to cast themselves as the shari'a (law and order) party, but was also intended to 'hook' sections of the local population by resolving disputes—thereby giving the beneficiaries a vested interest in supporting the Taliban.¹¹⁷

The shadow governors, by contrast, were never the beneficiaries of serious investment by the Taliban leadership. The 2010 edition of the *Layeha* specifies the structure of Taliban shadow government at provincial and district levels. It also provides for the appointment of non-Taliban, with appropriate skills and ideological commitment, to positions within shadow government.¹¹⁸ However, in reality most district chiefs and deputy chiefs have been selected from among Taliban commanders according to their seniority. Some governors were more proactive and effective than others, but in general they were as busy fighting as they were dealing with the local population. The gradual intensification of ISAF's targeting of Taliban commanders caused heavy casualties among the governors in 2010–2011 and forced them to spend more time in hiding, or across the border in Pakistan. This effectively contributed to further marginalizing the local *mulki* commissions and conversely to strengthening by default the role of the *nizami* commissions.¹¹⁹ The declining influence of the Taliban district governors was noted in Helmand. One elder observed: 'There was a district chief, but he didn't have much influence. Most of the power was with commanders who had lots of fighters in the district.'¹²⁰ Local commanders also appear to have had more influence by virtue of their presence on the ground: 'When people have an issue, they will approach the local [Taliban] commander. They don't know who the district chief is.'¹²¹ In addition, under the new 'centralized' system first introduced by the Peshawar military commission, some of the competences pertaining to the *mulki* commission were transferred to the *nizami* commission, in particular the management of the judicial system.¹²²

The convergence of these two developments resulted in the growing importance of the Peshawar and Quetta military commissions and of their subordinate bodies in the provinces and in the districts, to an extent that the process could be described as a remilitarization of the Taliban, albeit under different conditions than had applied in 2003–2005. The shift was clearly perceived by elders in the field:

Those Taliban commanders who were clever and wanted to maintain good relationships with the elders, most of them have been killed. Now young Taliban who don't know how to fight have become commanders, and they get orders from the Quetta *shura* and follow them blindly, they don't want to stray from their orders by even one metre. Whatever the Quetta *shura* tells them, they do.¹²³

¹¹⁷ Giustozzi et al., *The politics of justice*.

¹¹⁸ Johnson and DuPee, 'Analysing the new Taliban code', pp. 85–6. For a translation, see Niaz Shah, 'The Islamic emirate of Afghanistan: a layeha [rules and regulations] for mujahidin', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 35: 6, 2012, pp. 456–70.

¹¹⁹ E4 NES, E3 MQA.

¹²⁰ E3 MSQ.

¹²¹ E4 NES.

¹²² Antonio Giustozzi, Claudio Franco and Adam Bazko, *Shadow justice: how the Taliban run their judiciary* (Kabul: Integrity Watch Afghanistan, 2012).

¹²³ E1 NZD.

The attempt by the Peshawar and Quetta military commissions to rotate local commanders was a reflection of this militarization of the Taliban; moving local Taliban was clearly going to make it harder to maintain good relations with the local population, even if it allowed for greater control from the centre.¹²⁴

The ‘militarization’ did not mean that the Taliban stopped attempting to advance political initiatives, just that the incipient development of a non-military structure of governance was rolled back. The leadership, under the signature of Mullah Omar, took steps such as tightening the rules regulating authorization of attacks on education and health officials, and banning arbitrary executions. However, in the absence of a proto-civilian structure to counterbalance the military chain of command, the implementation of these important political steps was rather erratic. Attacks on schools declined in 2010–2011, but did not disappear altogether; civilian casualties could not be contained; and arbitrary killings, while perhaps less frequent, also continued.¹²⁵ The long-term consequences of this trend remain to be assessed, but early indications suggest that it might be damaging support for the Taliban among some communities.¹²⁶

Tactical adaptation: professionalizing the insurgency

The speed in the growth of the central leadership might have fallen short of its own expectations, but nonetheless allowed for more systematic training and tactical professionalization of the combat groups. This occurred against the background of a shift towards greater use of asymmetric tactics by the Taliban: ‘It’s clear for everyone that we have changed our tactics in our fighting; we are not fighting face-to-face a lot ... We are now using a lot of IED attacks, fedayi [martyrdom seeker] attacks and other guerrilla fighting.’¹²⁷ Twenty-three interviewees across all nine districts surveyed reported this change in tactics.¹²⁸ There is some disagreement as to when it occurred. According to one interviewee from Nad-e Ali, it was in 2007–2008.¹²⁹ This is consistent with reports at the time from western military sources.¹³⁰ However, two other interviewees, from Marjah and Sangin respectively, claimed that the shift in tactics occurred in 2010–2011.¹³¹

As noted above, the Taliban made wide use of fairly conventional infantry assaults in 2006–2007, in an attempt to overrun British outposts. The exact number of Taliban killed in action over this period is unknown, but British defence intel-

¹²⁴ For the impact of rotation in the views of elders and other local actors in neighbouring Kandahar province, see Ashley Jackson and Antonio Giustozzi, *Afghanistan: talking to the other side* (London: ODI, 2012).

¹²⁵ See Antonio Giustozzi and Claudio Franco, *The battle for the schools: the Taliban and state education* (Berlin: Afghan Analysts Network, 2011); *Afghanistan: protection of civilians in armed conflict*, half-yearly reports (Kabul: United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, 2008).

¹²⁶ See Antonio Giustozzi and Claudio Franco, *The Taliban and the schools: a follow up* (Berlin: Afghan Analysts Network, 2013).

¹²⁷ T3 MJH.

¹²⁸ Only two interviewees responded that there was ‘not a big change’ in tactics. However, both went on to confirm the decrease in face-to-face fighting and greater emphasis on asymmetric tactics (T2 SGN; T2 MSQ).

¹²⁹ T5 NDA.

¹³⁰ See Farrell, ‘Improving in war’, p. 586.

¹³¹ T4 MJH; T7 SGN.

ligence estimated it to be in the thousands.¹³² It seems very likely that in the face of such attrition, Taliban field units adapted by moving towards greater use of asymmetric tactics. However, the Taliban still engaged in some large-scale attacks. These included, most spectacularly, an assault on the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah, by a 300-strong force, with the objective of decapitating provincial government and discrediting the British mission. This assault was repulsed through extensive use of air power, leaving around 150 Taliban dead.¹³³ It would appear that in 2010 the Quetta military commission issued a general order instructing field units to avoid direct combat and make greater use of IEDs, sniper fire and proper guerrilla tactics: 'This big change came from Quetta to all Taliban commanders in Afghanistan.'¹³⁴

Multiple interviewees confirmed that the shift in tactics was driven by the imperative to reduce Taliban battlefield casualties.¹³⁵ Four interviewees further reported that casualties were significantly lower in their units since adoption of the new tactics.¹³⁶ One group of interviewees claimed that the new tactics were introduced to 'save civilian lives' as well as to reduce Taliban losses.¹³⁷ This makes sense in that it would reduce the adverse impact of Taliban operations on local support for the insurgency.¹³⁸ Supporting this claim, another interviewee noted that his unit would warn local people of where IEDs had been planted. Overall, however, Taliban tactics have become far more lethal for civilians, not less. The proportion of civilians killed by Taliban action, as opposed to Afghan government or ISAF action, increased dramatically from 58 per cent in 2009 to 75 per cent in 2010, and continued to rise steadily to 77 per cent in 2011 and 2012. Taliban-inflicted civilian deaths also rose in absolute numbers between 2009 and 2011, from well under to well over 2,000 a year.¹³⁹

With a shift in tactics came a new military training regime, reinforced by directives from the Quetta military commission compelling the tactical commanders to undergo training and receive regular advice on guerrilla and asymmetric tactics: 'It's almost one year that our training system has also changed and now we are all focused a lot on getting training of IEDs, making of fedayi vests, getting ready of fedayi bombers and guerrilla fighting.'¹⁴⁰ According to one commander, Taliban

¹³² Farrell interview with staff officer, Defence Intelligence, Ministry of Defence (MOD), London, Nov. 2008. Tom Coghlan reports that 'British commanders estimated that approximately 1,000 Taliban died during 2006.' He places less credence in newspaper reports of many thousands of Taliban dead (Coghlan, 'The Taliban in Helmand', p. 130).

¹³³ Farrell interview with senior staff officer, 3 Commando Brigade, MOD, London, 1 July 2010. For a dramatic account of the Taliban attack, see Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *3 Commando Brigade: Helmand assault* (London: Ebury, 2010), pp. 55–66.

¹³⁴ T3 SGN. This is confirmed by 12 interviewees, with a number referring specifically to a 'general order' from the Quetta *shura*. This order almost certainly originated with the military commission in Peshawar and was signed off and transmitted through the Quetta *shura*.

¹³⁵ T8 GMR; T3 KJI; T3 MJH.

¹³⁶ T7 GMR; T5 MSQ; T6 MSQ; T2 NZD.

¹³⁷ GoT4 NDA.

¹³⁸ Taliban sensitivity to this issue is noted in Johnson, *The Afghan way of war*, p. 274.

¹³⁹ Data from Ian S. Livingston and Michael O'Hanlon, 'Brookings Afghanistan Index', 30 Sept. 2012, figs 1.23 and 1.24, pp. 15–16.

¹⁴⁰ T3 MJH. One interviewee claims that the military commission published a military manual ('a book about war techniques') in 2012 (T6 GMR). This is entirely possible, though it was not confirmed by any other interview.

units undertake '15 or 20' days' training every four months.¹⁴¹ One interviewee from Sangin claimed that the Taliban 'decided to open new training centres for *mujahideen*'.¹⁴² However, another offered a contradictory and altogether more convincing view: 'We don't have a secure place for our training. One day we get training in one area and the other day we get training in another area. Due to security problem, we don't have a training centre.'¹⁴³ As noted above, many interviewees reported foreign Taliban entering their districts for a week or two to provide military training. These appear to be mobile training teams dispatched by the Quetta military commission and going from village to village providing training to field units.¹⁴⁴

The Taliban in Helmand seem to have wholeheartedly accepted that training is essential to improve their military proficiency *vis-à-vis* a superior enemy. Two-thirds of those to whom the question was asked (26 out of 39) said that training is indeed important; some even stated that without such training the Taliban would not have survived as a military organization. Only a small handful of respondents dismissed the importance of training.¹⁴⁵ The more common view by far was that training was necessary to improve combat fieldcraft, especially for new recruits:

There has been a lot of changes in tactics, the Taliban are now like regular government military forces, we get good training to all new comers who join Taliban, specially the youth should have training, also there are many changes in tactics, like before we were moving from one place to another place in large numbers of fighters but now we move with very small groups, martial arts and other body fitness are very necessary for the fighters.¹⁴⁶

Moreover, several interviewees recognized the need for training in the light of the new tactics: 'We need to get training in making IEDs, in guerrilla warfare, ambushes and making suicide vests.'¹⁴⁷

Up to 2011 the Taliban's tactical proficiency was mainly displayed in the east and south-east, as well as Kabul city, where occasionally Taliban units even outsmarted or outmanoeuvred NATO forces. The tactical superiority of the Taliban in these areas, as opposed to the south, was attributable to a number of factors. One was geography: the flat terrain of the south is less suitable for guerrilla warfare than the mountainous east and south-east. Another is organizational: the Haqqanis have long been renowned for their comparative tactical proficiency within the Taliban and for that reason their units have been selected to carry out most complex attacks in Kabul. Indeed, the Haqqanis claim they are more 'meritocratic' than the southern networks in selecting their tactical commanders.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴¹ T4 GMR.

¹⁴² T6 SGN.

¹⁴³ T5 MJH.

¹⁴⁴ T3 SGN.

¹⁴⁵ The rejection of training is justified on the assumption that Pashtun are natural warriors who 'grow up with gun and fighting' (T3 NDA).

¹⁴⁶ T5 NES.

¹⁴⁷ T3 SGN.

¹⁴⁸ Jeffrey Dressler, *The Haqqani network* (Washington DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2010); personal communication with Taliban high-level cadres in Peshawar, 2010–12.

With the new policy of professionalization being pushed by the Peshawar military commission, however, 'meritocrats' willing to learn lessons from the Haqqanis gained more influence in the south. A key figure in this respect is Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir, head of the Quetta military commission and a leading champion of professionalization. Reports also emerged that older leaders as well started buying into the idea. In 2011, for example, Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Mansur was reported to have established good relations with the Haqqanis and to have introduced Mullah Naim, head of his own network and also shadow governor of Helmand, to the Haqqanis for the purpose of sending his fighters and commanders to Waziristan for training.¹⁴⁹

Professionalization of Taliban units appears to be paying off in terms of tactical competence. In 2012 the Taliban staged their most daring attack ever against Camp Bastion in Helmand, succeeding in penetrating the defences, reaching the landing strip, destroying six combat aircraft and killing two defenders before being overwhelmed.¹⁵⁰ However, in organizational, logistical and operational terms, the outlook for the Taliban in Helmand remains uncertain.

Conclusion

Our interviews give us an unparalleled inside perspective on the Taliban insurgency in Helmand. What we find is an insurgency that is driven both by a strong unifying strategic narrative and purpose—jihad against foreign invaders—and by local conflict dynamics: rivalry between kinship groups and competition over land, water and drugs. The recruitment pattern (mostly voluntary) and membership profile (increasingly local) of the Taliban underline the key source of resilience for the insurgency, namely a strong social base. Against this, local support for the insurgency has been worn down by the human cost of the war in Helmand, and the ability of the insurgency to extract sufficient material support from local sources has been undermined by the success of the ISAF campaign and the increasing presence of Afghan national security forces.

The manner of the Taliban return to Helmand shows clear intent to retake the province. We have shown how the Taliban crept back into Helmand, with small vanguards secretly preparing the way from 2004–2005 for large groups to follow. This strongly suggests that the ISAF expansion to the south was necessary. However, by arriving with insufficient force, aligning themselves with local corrupt power-holders, relying on firepower to keep insurgents at bay and targeting the poppy crop, the British made matters worse. Far from securing Helmand, British forces alienated the population, mobilized local armed resistance, and drew in foreign fighters seeking jihad.

However hard it was for the British, the war in the south has proved to be even harder for the Taliban. The nature of this largely decentralized insurgency,

¹⁴⁹ Personal communication with Taliban high-level cadres in Peshawar, 2012.

¹⁵⁰ Bill Ardolino and Bill Roggio, 'Taliban release video of planning for Camp Bastion assault', *The Long War Journal*, 24 Sept. 2012.

comprising fighting groups attached to various (often rival) *mahaz*, has retarded the tactical effectiveness and strategic flexibility of the Taliban. The Taliban leadership has responded to growing military pressure with increasing centralization, the militarization of its shadow government and the professionalization of field units. Not all Taliban reforms have worked. Early efforts to modify the existing *mahaz*-based structure proved insufficient, hence necessitating the introduction of greater centralization. The introduction of a system of rotation of field commanders also failed. But key adaptations do appear to have taken root. We found evidence of the growing power of the Quetta military commission, and its ability to exert influence in the field through its district military commissioners. It is also clear that the military commission directed the shift in insurgent tactics, which it is successfully supporting through a new training regime. The Taliban shadow government appears to have lost influence in the face of the rising authority of the military commission on the one hand and, on the other, the increasing Afghan government presence in Helmand.

Academic studies uniformly recognize battlefield setbacks and the prospect of strategic defeat as key drivers of adaptation by state militaries.¹⁵¹ So it has been with the Taliban insurgency. The need for strategic and tactical adaptation was already apparent to the Taliban following the battlefield setbacks of 2006–2007. The imperative grew ever stronger from 2009 to 2010 with the arrival of a US Marine expeditionary brigade to join the existing British task force. By 2010, this had doubled the number of ISAF troops to around 20,000 in Helmand. In late 2009 General McChrystal designated the south as the locus of ISAF's 'main effort'.¹⁵² His objective was to inflict a devastating 'strategic defeat' on the Taliban, in order to accelerate progress in the ISAF campaign. Debate within ISAF headquarters over whether to concentrate on Helmand or Kandahar first was settled in favour of Helmand, on account of the already massive US Marine Corps (USMC) and British military presence in the province.¹⁵³

This dramatically changed the Taliban's operating environment. In late 2009 the USMC launched Operation Khanjar, a major assault against Taliban strongholds in southern districts of Nawa, and in Garmser.¹⁵⁴ This released British forces to concentrate in central Helmand. In February 2010 ISAF, in partnership with the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), launched a massive offensive to push the Taliban out of central Helmand. Operation Moshtarak involved simultaneous heliborne assaults by British and Afghan forces into Nad-e Ali and by USMC and Afghan forces into Marjah.¹⁵⁵ Taliban leadership in Helmand

¹⁵¹ Theo Farrell, Frans Osinga and James A. Russell, eds, *Military adaptation in Afghanistan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Williamson Murray, *Military adaptation in war* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁵² ISAF Operational Plan, Oct. 2009 (classified).

¹⁵³ Farrell interviews with senior ISAF officers, ISAF HQ, Kabul, 8–10 Jan. 2010.

¹⁵⁴ The Marines could credibly claim to have pushed Taliban field units away from key population areas in these districts: Farrell interviews with USMC officers in 2/8 Battalion HQ, FOB Delhi, Garmser, 30–31 Oct. 2009, and at provincial security *shura*, ANP HQ, Lashkar Gah, 2 Nov. 2009. For a detailed account of the USMC offensive in Garmser, see Malkasian, *War comes to Garmser*, chs 7–10.

¹⁵⁵ For an assessment of these operations based on extensive field research, see Theo Farrell, *Appraising Moshtarak: the campaign in Nad-e-Ali district, Helmand*, briefing note (London: RUSI, June 2010).

was also targeted by US and British special forces in a kill/capture campaign of growing intensity.¹⁵⁶

Consequently, over 2009 and 2010 the Taliban withdrew from the more densely populated, flat areas near the watercourses, but maintained a presence in all of Helmand's districts, basing their combat groups in the outlying sparsely populated areas on the edge of the desert in Marjah, Nad-e Ali, Musa Qala, Garmser and Nahr-e Seraj. The Taliban were also forced out of much of Sangin's Alokzai territory, but their presence in Kajaki and Nawzad was less strongly affected. Taliban judges continued to operate, but in these more limited areas. For a while the Taliban maintained underground operations even in the more populated areas of central Helmand garrisoned by ISAF and ANSF, but gradually their underground network wore out under the weight of the government security operations.¹⁵⁷

It is clear that the Taliban leadership remains keen to maintain a presence throughout Helmand, even if the majority of local Taliban fronts are no longer able to sustain themselves off the civilian population as they were doing up to 2009. Taliban in southern and central Helmand—in Garmser, Marjah, Nad-e Ali and Nahr-e Seraj—now depend on material support from the Quetta *shura*.¹⁵⁸ As one commander from Garmser observed:

Before, Garmser was a bridge for traffickers and we got lots of money from the traffickers as *zakat* [tax]. At that time we didn't need our leaders to support us; we could find the money for everything, weapons, ammunition, food and other necessary stuff. But now it's completely different; we have few villages under our control and collecting *zakat* from those villages is not enough. Most of our supplies are coming from Pakistan ... Only we can get our food here.¹⁵⁹

In northern Helmand—in Sangin, Musa Qala and Kajaki—the Taliban are able to obtain sufficient funds for weapons and supplies from opium *zakat* at harvesting time; at all other times, the *zakat* 'is not worth much' and Taliban are dependent on funds and supplies from Pakistan.¹⁶⁰ Thus, across Helmand, the Taliban leadership has been stepping in to fill the gap created by reduced taxation and in-kind support from the villagers: despite the decrease in the Taliban presence in Helmand as a whole, the numbers remain high by the standards of Afghan population density, and the logistical demands of supporting such a force in a sparsely populated area and under close ISAF watch are considerable. This would suggest that the Taliban leadership still considers Helmand of strategic importance.

That said, violent insurgent activity in Helmand did not recover as previously after the usual winter lull in early 2012; the recovery started only in the second

¹⁵⁶ There are no publicly available figures for Helmand, but Afghan-wide figures suggest the tempo of the kill/capture campaign. In the 90 days up to the end of September 2010, special operations forces killed or captured almost 300 'insurgent leaders'. Even allowing for inaccuracies (individuals misidentified as 'insurgent leaders'), these are impressive figures. Farrell attendance at unclassified briefing by COMISAF, General David Petraeus, ISAF HQ, Kabul, 9 Oct. 2010.

¹⁵⁷ E2 GMR; E7 NDA; E8 NDA; GoE9 NDA; E4 NES; E1 MSQ; E3 MSQ; E4 MSQ.

¹⁵⁸ T4 GMR; T7 GMR; T3 MJH; T5 MJH; T3 NDA; T2 NES; T6 NES.

¹⁵⁹ T7 GMR.

¹⁶⁰ T2 SGN; T3 SGN; T4 SGN; T7 SGN; T1 MSQ; T2 MSQ; T1 KJI; T3 KJI.

quarter of 2012, and even then was much less pronounced than in 2011.¹⁶¹ In part this was the result of an extraordinary level of violence in 2010–2011, as ISAF and ANSF moved into areas of very strong Taliban presence and faced resistance. Notwithstanding the benefits, reported to us by our interviewees, of new tactics and improved training in terms of reducing Taliban casualties, the attrition rate remains remarkably high. Twenty-eight interviewees were prepared to tell us the size of their fighting groups, and the numbers ‘martyred’ in the year 2011–2012. There is considerable variation, as might be expected; for example, between a high of 17 killed in action (KIA) out of one group of 40 in Nad-e Ali, and a low of two KIAs out of a group of 25 in Kajaki.¹⁶² Across Helmand, our survey suggests an overall Taliban attrition rate for 2011–2012 of 20 per cent (242 KIA out of 1,213 fighters).¹⁶³ These fatality figures have not been verified and so must be treated cautiously. But they do suggest a remarkable scale of loss. The fact that the Taliban have shown resilience in the face of such heavy casualties also tells us something about the nature of the movement, the motivation of the cadres and fighters, and the ability of the Taliban to socialize recruits into the organization.

Sources in Peshawar suggest additional reasons for the failure to resume military operations in 2012 of comparable intensity to those of the previous year.¹⁶⁴ One was the curtailing of Peshawar’s support to a number of southern *mahaz* networks, for political reasons. Another reason, related to the first one, is the unwillingness of these *mahaz* networks to invest all their residual resources in the war, while future sources of funding and supply were uncertain. The political friction between Quetta and Peshawar appears to have reduced the Taliban’s ability to maintain a strong presence in Helmand. An outflow of Taliban combatants was reported by various sources in Helmand, suggesting a degree of demoralization, a logistical inability to maintain the same number of men in arms, or a combination of the two.¹⁶⁵

This does not mean the future looks bright for Helmand. ISAF will withdraw its field forces by 2014. The USMC has already started a massive drawdown of its troops from Helmand. ISAF began to transfer primary responsibility for security in Helmand to ANSF in June 2011, starting with Lashkar Gah. Just days before the formal handover, seven Afghan National Police (ANP) officers were killed by Taliban at a checkpoint east of the provincial capital.¹⁶⁶ All the same, residents in Lashkar Gah were reported as having confidence in the Afghan National Army (ANA).¹⁶⁷ Quantitatively, these government forces have grown dramatically since the Taliban first asserted themselves in Helmand in 2006–2007 and in principle

¹⁶¹ Afghan NGO Safety Office (ANSO, Kabul), quarterly data reports for 2011–12.

¹⁶² Overall, Nad-e Ali has the highest rate of attrition and Kajaki has the lowest, as we would expect given the large ISAF–ANSF presence in Nad-e Ali and limited security forces presence in Kajaki.

¹⁶³ Some of these are self-inflicted. Two interviewees reported fighters killed while planting IEDs. (T2 KJI and T4 KJI).

¹⁶⁴ Taliban cadre in Peshawar, contacted in July 2012.

¹⁶⁵ One aid worker reported to Giustozzi a fourfold increase in the number of former Taliban combatants enrolling in the Mercy Corps’ vocational training course (July 2012); one of the team’s researchers travelling to the districts of Helmand also noticed lower numbers of Taliban in the field (May–June 2012).

¹⁶⁶ Nick Hopkins, ‘Lashkar Gah transition should send “powerful signal to insurgents”’, *Guardian*, 19 July 2011.

¹⁶⁷ Lianne Gutchter, ‘Helmand handover: “people are happy the foreigners are leaving”’, *Guardian*, 19 July 2011.

they should significantly outnumber the Taliban in 2014. But problems remain with the quality of Afghan soldiers and police, and with endemic corruption in the Afghan security forces. Corruption has an adverse impact on public confidence in the police, which remains low in Helmand.¹⁶⁸ It is also a major contributing factor in the very high rate of desertion in the ANA (compounding the quality problem).¹⁶⁹ The fact that the Taliban have continued operating in every district of Helmand, even in the flat areas surrounding Lashkar Gah, in 2010–2012 does not bode well for the future. The Taliban may be expected to expand back across districts as ISAF withdraws, especially in the north and south of Helmand.

Significant gaps remain in ANSF capability, especially in logistics, intelligence and special forces. ISAF planners expect the Taliban to mount an increasing challenge to Afghan army and police units in order to erode the confidence and unity of the ANSF. Afghan forces are far more vulnerable than ISAF to insurgent attacks, and this is reflected in the ratio of Afghan to ISAF fatalities.¹⁷⁰ The 2013 fighting season is the first one to see the ANSF properly in the lead, and ISAF command is acutely aware of the imperative for the ANSF to succeed, or at least not to suffer a dramatic reversal.¹⁷¹ ISAF's ability to provide emergency support—especially air and fire support—to Afghan forces during this fighting season will be hindered by three factors. First, and most obvious, the ISAF drawdown means that there are fewer western forces on hand to help out the ANSF. Second, ISAF's awareness of what is happening on the ground is already significantly degrading as it withdraws its own forces from the field. Third, growing tension with President Karzai over deeply unpopular ISAF air strikes and special force operations is resulting in growing restrictions on the use of these two key assets. Indeed, in March 2013 Karzai banned the ANSF completely from calling for ISAF air strikes.¹⁷² In short, the future struggle for Helmand is going to be a straight test between the Afghan organizations that have evolved through the conflict—the ANA, the ANP and the Taliban.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁸ Catherine Norman, 'What do Afghans want from the police? Views from Helmand province', unclassified report (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, Jan. 2012).

¹⁶⁹ Rod Nordland, 'Afghan Army's turnover threatens US strategy', *New York Times*, 15 Oct. 2012.

¹⁷⁰ In 2012 the ANA suffered 1,200 fatalities in the conflict and the ANP 2,200, as against only 310 US fatalities. See Ian S. Livingstone and Michael O'Hanlon, *Afghanistan Index*, 19 March 2013, pp. 11–12, available at <http://www.brookings.edu/about/programs/foreign-policy/afghanistan-index>, accessed 30 May 2013.

¹⁷¹ Farrell discussions with ISAF officers, Headquarters ISAF, Kabul, March 2013.

¹⁷² All three problems were manifest in a major battle in Badakhshan in March 2013, when ISAF scrambled to support an ANA battalion that almost got wiped out by a 400-strong force of insurgents.

¹⁷³ For an assessment of ANA evolution, see Adam Grissom, 'Shoulder-to-shoulder fighting different wars: NATO advisors and military adaptation in the Afghan National Army, 2001–2011', in Farrell et al., eds, *Military adaptation*.

