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UNDERSTANDING AFGHAN INSURGENTS: MOTIVATIONS, GOALS, AND THE RECONCILIATION AND REINTEGRATION PROCESS

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Andrew Garfield is Senior Fellow of the Foreign Policy Research Institute and President of Glevum Associates, LLC, a firm that has been conducting sociocultural field research in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2006. Alicia Boyd is Director of Research for Glevum Associates. An important contribution was also made by former Glevum analyst Pascale Siegel. Glevum has undertaken more than 300 major Afghan related research projects, covering a wide range of topics from Rule of Law to Quality of Life and interviewed over 300,000 eminent and ordinary Afghans, using a variety of techniques including polling, depth interviews and focus groups. Glevum's Afghan research partners have visited more than 5,000 Afghan towns and villages. In the winter of 2010-2011 and the two succeeding winters, Glevum and its research partners undertook a total of 78 in-depth interviews with active insurgents, living and operating in many of Afghanistan's most restive provinces. These interviews were analyzed and written up in an E-Book to be released jointly by FPRI and Glevum Associates LLC. In advance of publication, we print below the Executive Summary.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

78 in-depth interviews were conducted with self-identified Afghan insurgents in Baghlan, Ghazni, Helmand, Kandahar, Khost, Kunar, Kunduz, Nangarhar, Nimruz, Nuristan, Paktia, Parwan, Uruzgan, Wardak, and Zabul. Interviewees were between the ages of 16 and 53 and varied considerably in educational and professional backgrounds. These interviewees were predominantly ethnically Pashtun; however, one identified himself as Tajik and another as an Arab.

In each interview, interviewees were asked to provide personal information including their place of birth, current residence, level of education, tribal affiliation, and marital status. Interviewees were then asked to detail their experiences within their respective insurgent group and to describe factors that influenced their decision to join and actively participate in insurgent operations against the Afghan Government and ISAF. Next, interviewees discussed their goals, hopes for the future, and how they believed the conflict in Afghanistan might be brought to an end. Finally, interviewees commented on the efficacy of—and prospects for—the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP). They even offered suggestions for what could be done to improve its effectiveness, or commented on the impending withdrawal of ISAF forces and the Afghan presidential elections, both scheduled for 2014.

The in-depth interview method was chosen because it is designed to explore topics in considerable depth in a semi-structured discussion, enabling sensitive and thoughtful responses. However it is not intended to produce results that are statistically representative. Thus, the general conclusions and findings of this report cannot be guaranteed to carry over to the wider district, provincial, or national populations. At interviewees' request, audio from the interviews was not captured. Moderators recorded interviewees' responses by hand; these responses were then translated into English for analysis. This method has been used extensively and successfully by Glevum in Afghanistan and has proven to be a reliable way of conducting this type of field research. Significantly, Afghans have an oral tradition, which typically means they are able to listen, hear and memorize what they are told, far more

reliably than researchers from other communities and ethnicities. Interviewers were also provided with training to improve their interview and recording skills. Interviewers were also debriefed and questioned each other to further illuminate their interaction with the insurgents.

The interviews were conducted in Pashtu by ethnic Pashtun interviewers and the original transcripts were written in Pashtu. Subsequent translation has been quality checked to ensure accuracy and reliability. Our primary findings are below.

Ordinary Men

When one studies the demographics and words of the 78 Taliban fighters interviewed for this project, one is struck by just how ordinary they really are. While these insurgents represent different backgrounds, experiences and allegiances, they are all similar in one key respect. They are average ordinary men, similar in almost every respect to the majority of Pashtun Afghans. They are not exceptional men by any measure but they are highly motivated and committed to the cause and seem likely to have the endurance needed to fight for years and even decades. They are not a small cadre of indoctrinated fanatics whose elimination will undermine the fighting ability of the Taliban. Rather, they are ordinary men motivated to fight against those who they feel are destroying their way of life and attacking their values, community and faith. Some are motivated by need, fear and a desire for revenge but most— if not all—are motivated by a complex range of goals, beliefs and emotions that are not going to be easily changed nor undermined. In many respects, this is a far more dangerous and enduring adversary than the radicalized zealots in groups like al Qaeda.

A Sense of Impunity

Perhaps the most significant finding of this project is simply the fact that not one of the Taliban fighters interviewed voiced any concerns, fears or objections about participating in this project. All 78 interviewees agreed to participate in a lengthy and intensive in-depth interview, with an Afghan interviewer from outside of their group, extended family and even district. They freely admitted that they were active members of an illegal insurgent group. They offered detailed insights into their insurgent activities and motivations. And they offered all this sensitive information to a relative stranger, albeit to an ethnically similar Afghan researcher.

Almost all interviewees were living in, or close to, their homes when interviewed and did not seem unduly concerned that they were putting themselves, their friends and family at risk. Although most indicated that they did not carry out insurgent activities in their home districts. However, it seems that their summer “occupation” is reasonably well known to neighbors, friends and family, yet they did not fear being “turned in” to the authorities. They were clearly able to hide -- one might even say live -- in plain sight, apparently without fear of compromise, detection, arrest or death.

Their elaborative answers suggest that this sense of relative impunity is real rather than simply an act of collective bravado for the benefit of the interviewer. Given that this impunity was replicated across multiple districts and provinces, it is likely that their individual feeling of relative safety was genuine and shared by all. This is clearly disconcerting, given that the ability to hide in plain sight, within a sympathetic community, is a huge advantage to the Taliban. It provides them with multiple safe havens within Afghanistan, as well as in neighboring Pakistan, which most interviewees also confirmed.

The ability of these fighters to return home safely, during the winter months, and enjoy a period of rest, recuperation and reorganization is also of concern as it reduces the combat fatigue they probably endure during the summer “fighting season,” although most claimed that they suffered no fatigue at all.

These interviewees, drawn from multiple districts and provinces, also indicate that numerous Pashtun dominated areas of Afghanistan are at a minimum, sympathetic to the Taliban, if not altogether under direct Taliban influence.

Pakistan as a Safe Haven

The ability of these fighters to travel to and from Pakistan for both insurgent and personal reasons is also telling. Clearly, Pakistan is not simply a safe haven to which the Taliban retreat at the end of the summer “fighting season.”

Indeed, almost all interviewees have no need to do so, given that they can winter much closer to home. Rather, Pakistan is far more important as a location for key insurgent activities to be conducted in relative safety. This includes such vital activities as resupply, training and to plan future operations. These findings reinforce our understanding of the critical importance of the Pakistan as a safe haven for the Taliban and why it must therefore be denied to the Taliban if they are to be defeated or at a minimum forced to reconcile with the Afghan Government. It is worrisome that these fighters said they could travel to and from Pakistan with relatively impunity, despite the best efforts of ISAF and the Afghan Government to prevent them from doing so.

Key Insurgent Motivations

Implacable opposition to Western presence, values, and influence over the Afghan government, as well as the perceived severe shortcomings of the Afghan Government itself, are clearly the primary factors that motivate the fighters interviewed for this project. While they may have been motivated by diverse factors to join their group, they continue to engage in the insurgency on the side of the Taliban or the Hizb-i-Islami for broadly the same reasons. They are committed to remove foreign forces and influence and to restore a more traditional and strictly Islamic form of governance in Afghanistan. Most interviewees believe that the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan (almost universally identified as Americans) results in the type of political and social ills they do not want. The presence of foreign troops is exclusively framed in negative terms. No interviewee had anything positive to say about NATO or the United States; meanwhile almost all argue that the U.S. presence results in the killing and abuse of Afghans (women in particular); the commensurate subservience of the Afghan government to foreign interests; and in the imposition of extraneous secular, non-Islamic values. Meanwhile, practical issues of good governance and good stewardship of the nation's resources for the common good also motivated some interviewees, although far less so than the impact of foreign forces.

Many interviewees repeated Taliban propaganda themes, most often about egregious U.S. force behaviors, accusing them of killing innocent Afghans, assaulting women, mishandling the Quran (e.g., throwing it into the bathroom at Bagram), sexually assaulting elderly men, torturing Muslims with dogs, brutalizing people, and burning crops. Interviewees from Kandahar were more likely to talk about this type of abuse than interviewees from other provinces. References to U.S. forces' supposed bad behaviors involve mostly the victimization of highly sacred objects (Quran) or of vulnerable populations (women and elderly), probably because it is easier to admit that those who can't defend themselves are the ones being victimized. Given the consistency of views across so many districts and provinces, one cannot attribute such views only to the impact and effectiveness of Taliban indoctrination and propaganda; rather this propaganda successfully reflects, exploits and reinforces widely and long held beliefs and perceptions. Indeed, our interviews of tens of thousands of ordinary Afghans strongly suggest that many of these "Taliban" views and misperceptions are also held by ordinary Pashtu and even Tajiks. Most grievances are sadly founded on actual events. Therefore, disrupting and countering Taliban propaganda will likely not change many Afghan's perspectives about ISAF or the Afghan government.

Personal victimization is one of the reasons fighters join the insurgency. Indeed, a majority of interviewees indicate that they or close family members have been victims of coalition operations. The remainder of interviewees expressed that while they or their close family had not been victimized, they knew of villagers or "other Muslims" who had been killed or wounded. A few interviewees also stated that it does not matter whether they or their loved one were victimized as long as fellow Muslims were targeted.

For the interviewees, religious and patriotic motivations are intertwined and mutually reinforce each other, as the overwhelming majority of interviewees used both Islamic and patriotic values to define their rationale for fighting against the Americans and the Afghan government. Many believe that the West intervened in Afghanistan as part of a broader war against Islam and explain that they act patriotically against the Afghan government because it is a "slave government" defending America's interests, not the Afghans. If they had a bumper-sticker slogan, it would read: "In defense of land, religion, and women."

While all interviewees express their desire, to a greater or lesser extent, to secure the Taliban espoused goals of removing foreign forces and the current Afghan government, and imposing a pious Islamic government, it is worth highlighting that many also express commonly held views that are shared by many moderate and nonviolent Afghans. Both the Taliban fighters interviewed for this project and the many thousands of Afghans interviewed by Glevum and others are equally concerned about personal, family and community security, good governance, provision of services, reconstruction, and expansion of economic opportunities. However, such practical issues are clearly more important to ordinary Afghans than to the Taliban. Similarly these insurgents, like a growing segment

of the Afghan population, do not trust the Afghan government. Most of them would like to see a more honest and pious, less corrupt, and far more efficient government in power. This is concerning, as a confluence between a growing percentage of Afghans and the Taliban can only bolster support for its activities at the expense of the Afghan government.

Traditional Values and the Role of Women

Most interviewees espouse a very traditional and conservative set of values. In part their values are based on a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam and Sharia Law and a very strong desire for piety in their own lives and in Afghanistan. However, Pashtu society in particular and to a lesser extent Afghan society overall remains very conservative. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the interviewees' attitudes toward women. Not only do these interviewees wish to preserve the subservient place of women in Afghan society, as it existed under the previous Taliban regime, they also see the more secular nature of Afghan society since 2001 and the limited emancipation of women to be a source of great offense and a key motivator for opposing the Afghan government. Most likely this is a widely held view within the Taliban. Other Glevum research suggests that this is also a strongly held view by many Pashtun males and a significant and surprising number of other Afghans. It is, therefore, likely that a condition of any peace settlement will be a significant diminishing of the rights of women in Afghanistan, and a defeat of the present government would probably return Afghan women to their status under the last Taliban government.

Taliban Commitment

The interviewees in this study appear deeply committed to the fight and most have been engaged in operations for years. The majority clearly believes that they are fighting for compelling and honorable reasons such as patriotism (the defense of their land) and religious values (the defense of Islam). Most feel that their commitment to, and participation in, the fighting reflects positively on their personal character. For it makes them an example, a shahid (martyr), and/or a Ghazi. A few say they hope their example will encourage others, like their children, to follow in their footsteps. This dedication and commitment strongly suggests that a government reconciliation strategy based solely on an amnesty and financial inducements will not persuade many of those interviewed, and perhaps by extension many other fighters, to reject the Taliban cause, and certainly not without their having first achieved some of theirs and the Taliban's political goals.

Taliban Endurance

Not surprisingly, given that interviewees typically describe the fight as a moral and religious obligation, they also tend to deny that they suffer from combat fatigue. Many interviewees also say that they don't fight all the time, although the operational tempo varies enormously on a case-by-case basis. Nonetheless, leaving the personal boasting and ideological "grandstanding" aside, a sizable minority of those interviewed are willing to admit that fighting is variously difficult, bad, tiring, or boring. Acknowledging fatigue during jihad, which is considered an obligation, is inappropriate and/or emotionally difficult, but it is clearly happening, at least for a minority. Interestingly, those interviewees living in Kandahar are more likely to deny any fatigue because "jihad is a requirement," despite the higher level of fighting that has occurred in that province. However, they are also more likely than interviewees in both Kunar and Wardak, for example, to indicate that fighting is difficult and that war is bad. This suggests that they too, on occasion, become fatigued. The relatively light operational tempo under which most indicate that they operate, and the obvious down times, especially during the winter months, may also help to explain in part, the declared absence of combat fatigue.

This evidence also suggests that at a minimum morale remains relatively high, which can offset physical exhaustion. It also suggests that while efforts to focus on kill-or-capture operations are most likely having an immediate negative impact on Taliban operational effectiveness, these tactics will not lead to their defeat. In fact, these efforts may not result in the kind of fatigue that encourages willingness to compromise in peace discussions. The opportunity for periods of rest and recuperation, combined with solid ideological underpinnings and a desire to retain and enhance one's own honor, appears to provide these fighters with a resilience that may well enable them to continue to endure even more effective and destructive kill-or-capture operations. This reinforces and validates the necessity for both the Afghan leadership and ISAF leadership to continue a multifaceted and holistic COIN strategy. This strategy should include but not be dominated by kill-or-capture operations. After, typically five years of fighting, it does not appear that these interviewees and perhaps many of their seasoned colleagues, are sufficiently fearful for themselves or their families to be intimidated by Afghan National Security Forces and ISAF

operations, thereby forcing them to consider unconditional reconciliation simply in return for an amnesty and money or modest concessions from the present government.

Taliban Operations

Interviewees' recollection of a typical operation virtually always includes detail of the attack type, their target, and a post-attack damage assessment. They report attacking U.S. forces more often than Afghan forces and they usually gauge operational success based on the attrition of their enemies. Understandably, they are far less open concerning the specific tactics they use. This reticence to reveal operationally sensitive information is potentially significant in that it indicates that there are topics they are unwilling to discuss in any detail. This suggests that they have been both honest and forthcoming on other topics. When describing the sources of their supplies and support, interviewees point mostly to local sources, with minimal mentions of international donors or providers. Frequently mentioned sources of material and financial support include war spoils, looted items, which interviewees refer to as *ghanimat*, personal and family resources, and *zakat* and *ushr*¹ (claimed to be collected on a voluntary basis). Such sources suggest a significant degree of self-sustainability and may indicate that efforts to interdict supplies and funds emanating from Pakistan, while necessary, may be of limited utility. If correct, this evidence also suggests that the endurance of individual fighters may be indefinite unless local support and supplies are also eliminated as well as continued interdiction of supplies from elsewhere.

Sensitivity to Atrocities

The way many insurgents describe their operations suggests that they take precautions to avoid antagonizing the general public at least in their home districts. In discussing their jihad-related activities, insurgents' responses often indicate that they avoid conducting operations close to their homes. In the first instance, this is clearly to avoid their families being impacted by their activities. However, it may also indicate a desire to avoid a backlash from the community in which they live/hide, given that many of the Taliban's operations target innocent civilians and fellow Muslims. Arguably, if the people in their home community cannot connect the dots between the atrocities committed and the perpetrators, they are more likely to leave the insurgents alone. Also, they tend to report attacking military rather than civilian targets as any acknowledgement of targeting civilians is likely to play badly with the public—particularly in the areas they regard as safe havens.

The Fighting Will Continue After 2014

Support for continuing the fight against the Afghan government after the withdrawal of NATO forces is almost universal. Very few interviewees say they will cease fighting after U.S. and NATO forces leave Afghanistan. In other words, the removal of what interviewees consider to be the primary source of Afghanistan's problem (the presence of foreigners) would still not stop them from engaging in violent operations against the government. In fact, all interviewees, as well as a growing percentage of the population, consider the government illegitimate, corrupt, un-Islamic and ineffective. Interviewees also don't trust the government to honor any promises made during peace negotiations. Less than half believe that negotiations will end the war. And even this group will only countenance a settlement if the government first accepts three key Taliban demands: (1) the departure of foreigners, (2) full implementation of Sharia law, and (3) complete replacement of the current Afghan government leadership.

This staunch opposition to the current government, with or without foreign support, is not surprising as it mirrors that of the Taliban leadership. The interviewees' hardline position, however, is almost certainly not simply a reiteration of the "party line." Not least, because their own significant dissatisfaction is shared by a majority of ordinary Afghans. The overall hostility toward the government suggests that a new President will not change these attitudes, unless he addresses the reasons why these fighters and so many other Afghans are dissatisfied. It is possible, given the ambiguity and/or softness of some answers on this issue, that fundamental reform or the formation of a new Afghan government—one that is perceived as not influenced by the United States—might be sufficient to encourage some Taliban members to seek reconciliation without their return to power. However, based on these interviewees, this outcome seems highly unlikely. Only the replacement of the existing government with one that addresses all of their primary goals and perspectives will likely suffice. Given that many other Afghans

¹ *Zakat* – Part of the Five Pillars of Islam, *zakat* is a religious tax incumbent upon all Muslims who can afford to pay it. Typically estimated at 2.5percent- 3percent of an individual's income, these funds are used to help needy individuals, families, or communities in a variety of ways. The amount of *zakat* collected, method of collection and disbursement, and use of funds varies considerably among Muslim cultures and nations.

would resist a fundamentalist Pashtun-dominated Taliban government, especially the Tajiks and Hazara, this evidence strongly suggests that the conflict will continue after 2014. Indeed a full-scale civil war similar to the early 1990's seems almost inevitable, if international and US support is withdrawn entirely.

Return of Mullah Omar

Interestingly, declared support for the current Taliban leader Mullah Omar, to take over from a Karzai administration is relatively low. Many older interviewees have fond memories of the previous Taliban regime, which they praise for maintaining security and Islamic virtues. A few are willing to accept some "insufficiencies" of the former regime, focusing on its lack of independence, its worldwide isolation, and its lack of good relations with other Islamist groups. However, despite these largely positive memories, many interviewees do not wholeheartedly support the return of the old regime from Pakistan. In total, only about one-third of the insurgents feel that the current Taliban leadership are best suited to run the country, while another third simply state that a "good Muslim" should take charge of the country. The remaining third suggest a variety of groups—including the Afghan public or smaller individual extremist factions like Hizb-i-Islami—or decline to offer an opinion, often claiming that they do not feel qualified to answer. Only one interviewee clamors for the return of Mullah Omar at the helm of Afghanistan.

These divergent views and the softness of support for the current Taliban leadership to run Afghanistan may be simply the result of Taliban propaganda not focusing on the aftermath of the war and local insurgents not yet having a clear direction to follow. Or it may be that there is not a broad appetite for a return of Mullah Omar and his commanders—even among local fighters. This would be a positive development suggesting that reform of the Afghan government and a willingness to compromise on some key issues and demands, might facilitate the reconciliation process at least with certain segments of the Taliban, especially in places such as Wardak.

Conclusions

While it is obviously dangerous to extrapolate the findings from 78 interviews to the rest of the Taliban, the evidence collected from these interviews and from the dozens of other research projects undertaken by Glevum in Afghanistan over the last four years does suggest that the future of Afghanistan is grim. These fighters live in plain sight, within either a supportive or acquiescent population, without fear of being killed or captured. Their ability to take extended breaks from the fighting, usually during the winter, their strong sense of religious duty (jihad), their need to retain individual honor, and their strong sense that they will ultimately prevail, helps most of these fighters to overcome any combat fatigue that they may feel. And they can largely sustain themselves, probably indefinitely, by securing limited funds, weapons and supplies locally.

While the removal of foreigners from Afghanistan is an essential prerequisite for these interviewees to accept any peace and reconciliation process, this outcome alone will probably not end the fighting. Only the return of a fundamentalist pious Islamic government, purged of current government members, and which reverses many of the reforms of the last ten years will satisfy these fighters. It seems unlikely that the next Afghan President will implement such fundamental reforms, which would anyway be opposed by many non-Pashtun Afghans and most international supporters. In the absence of a peace settlement, it is probably inevitable therefore that the Taliban will continue to fight the Afghan government after 2014. If the ANA does not hold together, then the fragmentation of the country will likely reoccur relatively quickly and civil war will almost certainly follow. The collapse of the country would be accelerated by the all but inevitable flight of funds and elites. Such an outcome can only be averted, at least temporarily, if direct US and international community military assistance and financial support continues after 2014, albeit at much reduced levels from today.

Can continued conflict be avoided? It is certainly possible that the United States, the Afghan Government and the Taliban leadership, could negotiate a "face saving" peace settlement that would likely need to include a degree of national power sharing. Such an agreement could even allow the US to withdraw completely relatively soon, if not by the end of 2014 then certainly by 2016. Indeed, the withdrawal of foreign forces is likely to be a condition of such an agreement. And Taliban leaders could probably force through such an agreement over the objections of the rank and file. However, accepting such an agreement could also simply be a strategy designed to ensure the removal of all foreign forces and direct military support for the Afghan National Army.

This presents the United States in particular with a terrible dilemma. Continue to support the Afghan government after 2014 with significant direct military support and financial aid, perhaps indefinitely, and hope that necessary

government reform can be achieved and that a distasteful peace settlement with the Taliban can be secured, thereby allowing for an eventual US withdrawal but perhaps only postponing the collapse of the Afghan government and the civil war that would probably ensue. Or withdraw all support at the end of 2014 and live with the consequences, which would very likely include government collapse and civil war probably within twelve to twenty four months. It would appear that for all of the parties involved, the future looks grim.

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