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The Taliban and the 2014 Presidential Elections in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The Taliban's attitude towards the Afghan Presidential elections of 2014 differed in a very substantial way from their attitude towards previous elections. Already during 2013 there were discussions within the Taliban, about whether it would not be opportune to support a candidate, in order to get a president elected, who would be more amenable to reconciliation talks with the Taliban. However the Taliban were unable to reach a consensus on the matter, leading to differing responses to the electoral campaign of 2014, with some Taliban networks violently opposed to it, while others decided to support specific candidates. During the second round, the large majority of the Taliban decided to support Ashraf Ghani's election, but not without serious friction with the movement's hardliners. The majority of the Taliban's leaders hoped that once elected Ghani would start negotiations with them on favourable terms, whereas they believed that an Abdullah presidency would make any negotiated settlement impossible in the future. The new approach seriously alienated the Taliban's hardliners, laying the ground for a new wave of recriminations among the Taliban, contributing to further internal divisions.

Biography: Dr. Antonio Giustozzi is Visiting Professor at King's College London. He is the author of several articles and papers on Afghanistan, as well as of four books, including *Koran, Kalashnikov and laptop: the Neo-Taliban insurgency, 2002-7* (Columbia University Press). He also edited a volume on the Taliban, *Decoding the New Taliban* (Columbia University Press, 2009), featuring contributions by specialists from different backgrounds.

Introduction

The attitude of the Taliban towards the 2014 was important for multiple reasons. It might have made the elections difficult to carry out, or it might have influenced the outcome in favour of one or the other candidate. Ex post, the Taliban's attitude towards those elections turned out to be important for another reason as well, that is the prospects for reconciliation in Afghanistan. For the first time the Taliban

started discussing of elections in Afghanistan as if it was something potentially permissible. As we shall see, this was a major development as far as the Taliban's 'political philosophy' was concerned. An additional reason for looking at the Taliban in relation to the 2014 presidential elections is as a test of the Taliban's ability to formulate policy and implement it. The fact that the Taliban appear to have attributed quite a considerable significance to the elections makes the 'test' all the more valuable. If the Taliban are an organisation able to formulate policy and implement it effectively, they should have been able to display coherent behaviour during the 2014 electoral campaign.

This article specifically looks at the formulation of the Taliban's policy towards the 2014 presidential elections and its implementation. That insurgent movements might formulate policies towards elections other than mere sabotage is not something new, even if the topic is poorly studied. Although the Pakistani TTP, ideologically close to the Afghan Taliban, has never gone beyond trying to disrupt elections,¹ a wide variety of other groups and organisations have done so in many different contexts. We know for example that the Colombian FARC tried to influence the 2000 local and provincial elections, not so much in order to get sympathetic individuals elected, but with the apparent aim of advertising the group's commitment to an alternative type of democracy, cleansed of the influence of the old parties.² We also know that in India, the Naxalites favoured specific candidates whom they believed would then facilitate the operations of the insurgents in the area.³ Were the Taliban able to develop a coherent policy, and to implement it effectively and cohesively? The answer to this question has implications for the understanding of the Taliban as an organisation, which go beyond the electoral campaign itself.

The article draws from material gathered during two projects carried out by the author for USIP (United States Institute for Peace, Washington) in 2013-14.⁴ A total of 68 national level leaders and cadres and Taliban provincial and district cadres (a mix of military commissioners, members of the Taliban's election commission, network representatives) and group commanders, 14 Taliban fighters and 50 community elders were interviewed face to face mostly by the Afghan research team and in seven cases by the author himself between in spring 2013 and spring 2014. The interviews were distributed across Afghanistan, although mostly in the south, east and Kabul's region, that is areas of greater Taliban activity. In order to cross check what Taliban interviewees were answering, the strategy adopted for this study

¹ Ayesha Jalal, *The Struggle for Pakistan: A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics*, Harvard University Press, 2014, pp. 373-4

² Fernando Giraldo García et al, *Colombia, elecciones 2000*, Bogotá : Centro Editorial Javeriano, 2001, pp. 29-30. The FARC deployed similar policies repeatedly in the past, at least according to hostile accounts based on intelligence reports such as Luis Alberto Villamarín Pulido, *La selva roja*, Ediciones LAVP, Bogotá, 1997

³ P. V. Ramana, *The Naxal Challenge: Causes, Linkages, and Policy Options*, Pearson Education India, 2008, pp. 73-76.

⁴ This article is based on the two reports which were published as a result of that effort: 'The Taliban and the 2014 elections in Afghanistan', Washington : USIP, 2014 and 'Violence, the Taliban and Afghanistan's 2014 elections', Washington ; USIP, 2015.

has been to interview all of the Taliban separately, contact them through different channels and ensure a balance between different Taliban networks among the interviewees. This methodology cannot, however, guarantee that what is described in this report is representative of all the different components of the Taliban in a completely balanced way, given the difficulty of fully triangulating and confirming information.⁵

This article includes a short background section to illustrate the way the Taliban are organised internally, as understanding this is necessary for following their complex internal debates. Three main sections follow, with the first one being dedicated to illustrating the Taliban's internal debates over the elections, the second one looking at the way the Taliban implemented their decisions and the third one discussing the long-term implications of the Taliban's experience with the 2014 elections.

Background: The Taliban's aims and organisation

The Taliban initially re-organised as an insurgency in 2002-3, but have known dramatic organizational changes from then onwards. The re-emergence of the Taliban as an insurgency was mainly due to harassment by the new elites in power.⁶ In this context the introduction of an electoral system designed in principle according to western standards was in the Taliban's eyes just one aspect of western dominance. In practice the Taliban mobilized two main types of constituencies: marginalized communities inside Afghanistan (usually referred to as the 'local Taliban' in the Afghan villagers' jargon) and madrasa recruits who are deployed from Pakistani territory in mobile units during the fighting season (and are usually referred to as the out-of-area Taliban).

Almost formally the Taliban have until very recently asserted that their aim was overthrowing an illegitimate regime and re-establish the Emirate of 1996-2001, in practice it is clear that the Taliban have been thinking about a political settlement of the conflict for years. The internal debates over reconciliation with Kabul have become more and more intense in recent years, contributing decisively to internal tussles especially within the Quetta *Shura*. Even the recent struggle over the succession to Mullah Omar was in part prompted by different views about reconciliation and saw critics of the reconciliation process ally with hardliners against

⁵ The researchers were all experienced Afghan journalists involved in previous research projects who understand the local context, and therefore were in a position to use the contacts already developed to reach potential interviewees within the Taliban. Existing contacts were also used as introductions to new contacts to lay the ground for more comprehensive interviews. The interviewees had to be kept anonymous for their own security and the security of the interviewers. The questionnaires used were structured, but follow-up questions were allowed and encouraged.

⁶ Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn. *An enemy we created: The Myth of the Taliban-Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan*. London: Hurst & Co (Publishers) Ltd., 2011; T. Farrell and A. Giustozzi, 'The Taliban at War: Inside the Helmand Insurgency, 2004-2012', *International Affairs*, July 2013; Carter, Malkasian, *War comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier*. London: Hurst, 2013; M Martin, *An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict*, London : Hurst, 2014.

the pragmatists led by Akhtar Mohammad Mansur.⁷

The disparate groups of insurgents gradually came together, initially under two command and logistics centres: the so-called Quetta *Shura* and Miran Shah *Shura*. From 2005 onwards a third command and logistics centre developed in the east and became known as the Peshawar *Shura*. As more funding gradually became available, the Taliban also developed a wide array of commissions and offices in Pakistan, which managed everything from recruitment, to finance, to governance activities. These offices were staffed by cadres selected for their past experience and skills, becoming a kind of shadow government. The military organization of the Taliban also became increasingly sophisticated, with various attempts to improve their command system and internal discipline among else.⁸

There were therefore three Taliban centres of power as of late 2013 and early 2014:

- The Quetta *shura* is the original home of the post-2001 Taliban and still claims a leadership role, though less and less accepted by the other Taliban *shuras*; its men operate in southern, western, and some parts of northern, central, and southeastern Afghanistan.
- The Miran Shah *shura* (also known as Haqqani network) declared its autonomy from Quetta around 2008 and operates mainly in southeastern Afghanistan and in parts of the central region.
- The Peshawar *shura* declared its autonomy from Quetta in 2009, is mostly composed of new Taliban (individuals who were not Taliban before 2001), and operates in eastern, central, northeastern, and parts of northern Afghanistan.⁹

In the absence of an accepted overall Taliban leadership, the current structure of the Taliban could be described loosely federative. Quetta does not officially accept its loss of leadership, but can do little about the situation and implicitly accepts that it can only coordinate with the other *shuras*. This 'federal' aspect of the Taliban has to be kept in mind in that as it will be discussed below the Taliban's attitude toward the elections varied greatly from *shura* to *shura*. In addition, these three *shuras* were not necessarily internally homogenous. Only the Miran Shah *Shura* was more or less unified. In Quetta two main alliances of political and military leaders had been jostling for control since 2010 and continued to do so with regard to the elections. In Peshawar, a minority of hardliners, known as the Tore Pagri network, broke ranks with the *Shura* and carried out their own 'campaign' during the presidential

⁷ Borhan Osman, 'The Murree Process: Divisive peace talks further complicated by Mullah Omar's death', Berlin : AAN, 5 August 2015; Barnett Rubin, 'What Could Mullah Mohammad Omar's Death Mean for the Taliban Talks?', *The New Yorker*, 29 July 2015; A. Giustozzi and Silab Mangal, 'The Taliban in Pieces: The Internal Struggle Behind the Announcement of Mullah Omar's Death', *Foreign Affairs Snapshot*, 3 August 2015.

⁸ See A. Giustozzi, 'Military adaptation by the Taliban, 2001-2011', in T. Farrell et al. (eds.), *Military adaptation in Afghanistan*, Stanford : Stanford University Press, 2013, pp. 242-261; T. Farrell and A. Giustozzi, 'The Taliban at War: Inside the Helmand Insurgency, 2004-2012', *International Affairs*, July 2013.

⁹ C. Franco and A., Giustozzi, 'Revolution in the counter-revolution', *Central Asian Affairs*, vol. 3, 2016.

process.¹⁰

The debate about the elections among the Taliban

Before 2014

No elections were held during the Taliban Emirate (1994-2001), nor was there ever any real debate on the possibility of holding elections during this time or on the need for them. Although a few interviewees put this down to the difficult environment (the Taliban was never able to gain full control of the country) the majority indicated that there was no need for elections within the Emirate system of governance, built as it was around processes of consensual selection of leaders by a small group of men who considered themselves to be uniquely competent to act in accordance with what the Koran demanded. Others cited the lack of strong electoral traditions in Afghanistan, and the deep rural and religious conservatism of the Taliban, as structural factors that made elections a non-issue during this time.¹¹

So, when the post-2001 electoral cycle started in 2004, if the elections were of great importance to the international community, the Taliban's interest in them was largely a negative reflection of this foreign importance. Because Washington and other western capitals had identified elections as important benchmarks of progress and success in Afghanistan, the Taliban saw them as necessary and convenient targets: very visible and vulnerable, but soft at the same time. Even when the Taliban lacked the operational capacity to significantly disrupt the elections (particularly during the 2004 Presidential and 2005 Parliamentary elections) they regularly issued hostile statements to the press and threatened candidates and voters alike with death for the act of participating. Interviews with elders suggest that the Taliban lacked coercive capacity at this point, and thus propaganda and intimidation rather than direct violence were deployed.¹² By 2009/10, the Taliban were on the whole better funded and organized and were able to openly attack polling sites, candidate, voters, and elections officials, although still unable to achieve the desired level of disruption nationwide. A high level Taliban source in the Peshawar *Shura* claimed that in 2009 and 2010 Peshawar was mostly in favour of allowing the elections to take place, with the exception of a key hardline military leader, Dost Mohammed, who insisted he would in any case carry out a campaign against the elections in Kunar and Nuristan. In reality outside Kunar and Nuristan (Dost Mohammed's strongholds), the Peshawar *Shura's* military position was rather weak, and a full-fledged campaign against the elections would have exposed this weakness. Hence the Peshawar *Shura* mostly limited itself to perfunctory violence (such as stand-off attacks), in order to intimidate voters. As UNAMA commented, 'the vast majority of incidents were of relatively low intensity and apparently did not

¹⁰ This picture of the Taliban's internal alignments was drawn from the interviews with 68 Taliban leaders and cadres in 2013-14.

¹¹ All the 82 Taliban interviewees were asked about their views concerning elections; see also *Longer terms consequences* below.

¹² 50 community elders were interviewed in 2013 and 2014 and asked about previous experiences of Taliban behaviour during the various electoral campaigns.

intend to cause deaths.’ In total, according to UNAMA, 382 insurgent attacks took place (Table 1), resulting in 11 officials of the Electoral Commission, 20 other civilians, 18 policemen and eight soldiers were killed on election day, a total of 57 killed.¹³ This corresponds to a ratio of 6.7 attacks per fatality, compared to a ratio of 2.5 attack per fatality for all of 2014, which confirm an apparent intent to make more noise than harm.¹⁴ The Quetta *Shura*, in 2009 at the peak of its influence and territorial control in the south, was by contrast unanimously in favour of disrupting the elections, even if it might have turned a blind eye when some leaders cut secret deals.¹⁵ A source in the Quetta *Shura* claimed that the Taliban leaders authorised local Taliban to tolerate the electoral process in some cases in 2010; but this was not a Taliban policy and no coherent statements, either publicly or privately to front commanders and shadow governors, were made in this regard. Instead it appears to have been the result of high level dealings between individual Taliban leaders and particular political elites in Afghanistan with family members running for office or some other personal/economic stake in the elections taking place.¹⁶

Early planning for 2014

As of the spring and early summer of 2013, there were few signs that the Taliban were about to change their policy with regard to elections. In an August 2013 Eid message, a statement under the name of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar attacks the elections not because they are un-Islamic or fraudulent but essentially because they are not Afghan enough: ‘Our pious and Mujahid people know that selection, de facto, takes place in Washington.’¹⁷ All Taliban interviewed in spring 2013 were in principle committed to a violent campaign to prevent or disrupt the 2014 elections.¹⁸ Military leaders in Quetta, Miran Shah and Peshawar were united in their rejection of the electoral process. Preparations started to enhance Taliban capabilities in disrupting the electoral campaign and orders were issued in this regard to Taliban cadres in the field. The military leaders concurred that both peace negotiations and peaceful elections were a non-starter so long as ‘foreigners’ were in Afghanistan. The line was that a successful electoral process would be seen as an American victory, and that elections could be assumed to deliver only what “the Americans want.” Those who wanted to negotiate over the elections were dismissed as ‘not real Taliban’.¹⁹

This uncompromising stance on the elections and on negotiations was driven by self-confidence. As an individual close to the Peshawar *Shura* stated that ‘We want to

¹³ AIHRC-UNAMA Joint Monitoring of Political Rights, Presidential and Provincial Council Elections, Third Report, 1 Aug – Oct 21 2009.

¹⁴ This estimate is based on UNDSS violence statistics and estimates of fatalities inflicted by the Taliban (UNAMA, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defence).

¹⁵ Interview with senior member of the Peshawar Shura, spring 2013.

¹⁶ Interview with senior member of the Quetta Shura, spring 2013.

¹⁷ “Message of Felicitation of Amir-ul-Momineen (May Allah protect him) on the Occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr. August 5, 2013.” Unofficial translation <http://justpaste.it/3bmi> (accessed September 5, 2013).

¹⁸ A total of 37 Taliban leaders, cadres and commanders were interviewed in locations spread around Afghanistan.

¹⁹ Interviews with 13 cadres and commanders in spring 2013.

take power by force. We are succeeding in our strategies. Americans and their forces are escaping and they are afraid.²⁰

A cadre from Wardak argued that allowing the elections would make sense if political negotiations had been in the cards, but that could only happen after a complete withdrawal of foreign troops (then the official Taliban position). But if a withdrawal happened, he continued, the Taliban would easily win the war, making negotiations redundant.²¹ The most extreme view was expressed by a cadre in a front under the command of Zakir, who said he would oppose peace even if Mullah Omar was declaring it, and that he would oppose the elections under the current system even if Mullah Omar was a candidate.²²

Plans were made to rotate Taliban cadres around as much as possible in the run-up to the 2014 election, so that the elders would not be able to influence the local Taliban in favour of allowing the elections as the Taliban leaders believed they had before.²³ Most importantly, according to the Peshawar *Shura* interviewee, an “Electoral Office” of the Peshawar *Shura* was established in mid-February 2013, with branches being rolled out in the provinces and avowedly tasked to coordinate efforts to disrupt the elections.²⁴ The presence on the ground of Taliban ‘electoral officers’ was confirmed by independent sources.²⁵ The intent of these measure seemed to be enforcing a stricter discipline among Taliban commanders. By June 2013 there were already some concrete examples of Taliban being punished for unwarranted contacts and agreements.²⁶

The Taliban election commissioners said that their instructions involved talking to elders and convincing them not to participate in the elections and to burn their cards. They mentioned a plan to inject 10,000 additional fighters in 2014, tasked to disrupt the elections.²⁷ A Taliban logistician in Ghazni stated that he was ordered to stockpile weapons and ammunition for the elections of 2014, with an eye to a major Taliban offensive then.²⁸ An elder confirmed that elders were clearly told by the Taliban in their areas that the elections would be banned, warning them not to work for the IEC or campaign for any candidate.²⁹

Debates within the leadership – ‘Round One’

²⁰ Interview with senior member of the Peshawar Shura, spring 2013.

²¹ Interview with Taliban cadre in Nerkh, spring 2013.

²² Interview with Taliban cadre in Imam Sahib, Kundun, spring 2013; interview with Taliban cadre in Nangarhar, spring 2013.

²³ Interview with senior member of the Quetta Shura, spring 2013.

²⁴ Interview with senior member of the Peshawar Shura, spring 2013; Interview with Taliban cadre in Dand-i Ghori, spring 2013.

²⁵ Interview with elder in Mohammad Agha district, Logar, spring 2013.

²⁶ Interviews with five cadres of the Peshawar Shura in the provinces, spring 2013.

²⁷ Interviews with five cadres of the Peshawar Shura in the provinces, spring 2013.

²⁸ Interview with Taliban commander in Zabul, spring 2013.

²⁹ Interview with elder in Sayed Abad, Wardak, spring 2013; interview with elder in Ajristan district, Ghazni, spring 2013.

Beneath the surface of unrepentant rejection of the electoral process, however, things were already changing, though unbeknownst to the Taliban in the field. A Taliban source in Khost (controlled by the Peshawar *Shura*) mentioned in late 2012 that a debate was going on within the Peshawar *Shura* leadership, on whether to support a candidate in the 2014 elections.³⁰ At that time a decision had not been made, but the information suggests that the Peshawar *Shura*'s hard-line opposition to the elections as of June 2013 had not been the only option discussed within the *Shura*. Some hints that the door was being kept open to alternative policies emerged from the 2013 interviews. The procedure adopted for buying and registering voters' cards in 2013, who left the elders in possession of the card, suggests that the Taliban were considering other options aside from just destroying cards in order to prevent people from voting. The fact that the Taliban election commissioners in the districts had a budget to buy voters' cards from the elders, usually at around \$10 each, also point in the same direction. One interviewee insisted that his orders were to prevent the elections, not to favour any particular candidate, but he admitted that if he were ordered to tell the elders to vote for somebody, he would do so.³¹ Some Taliban cadres admitted that if they were directed to allow the elections to take place and support a particular candidate, they would follow these orders.³² A cadre in Ghazni also expressed his readiness to do whatever his leaders ordered him to.³³

Linked to these intra-Taliban discussions over the possibility of allowing the elections to happen appears to have been a meeting that representatives of one of the top leaders of the Quetta *Shura*, Akhtar Mohammad Mansur, had with President Karzai in Qatar at the end of March 2013, to discuss the elections, as well as peace, national unity and how to resolve the existing problems. Karzai according to him stated that there must be elections in all the Pashtun areas and that is why he needed the support of Mansur's alliance. Mansur's alliance considered on this basis that their best strategy was to talk to Kabul and reach a political deal. The discussions in Qatar were not conclusive according to the source, but reportedly Mansur's group was ready to support a presidential candidate as long as he was a 'Muslim' and did not have any relationship with western forces.³⁴

By 2014 Taliban cadres were more open than in the previous year about discussing the issue of Taliban possible supporting a candidate in 2014. Some Taliban cadres were saying in 2014 that the intent, as least as far as the Peshawar *shura* was concerned, was to support Hamid Karzai's then chief of staff Omar Daudzai, who at that time seemed likely to be a candidate and to receive outgoing President Karzai's endorsement. Supported by some of the regional powers as well, Daudzai could then have become the "candidate of peace." The 'electoral commission' discussed above

³⁰ Communication with Taliban cadre in Khost, November 2012.

³¹ Interview with Taliban cadre in Nerkh, spring 2013.

³² Interview with Taliban cadre in Sayed Abad, Wardak, spring 2013.

³³ Interview with Taliban cadre in Logar, spring 2013.

³⁴ Interview with senior member of the Quetta *Shura*, spring 2013.

could have served the purpose of managing the Taliban campaign in such a way as to favour Daudzai.³⁵

The failure to establish political negotiations between the Taliban, members of the Kabul government, and their respective international sponsors made reaching an agreement over the elections impossible. Daudzai, in the end, did not register as a candidate and the Taliban started selling back the cards they had bought. Nonetheless, discussions among the Taliban over an electoral strategy continued. With the political talks stalled before they had even really begun, the appeal of a campaign of unmitigated violence was on the rise among the Taliban in early 2014. Not only the hard-liners wanted it, even those still inclined toward a negotiated solution with Washington or Kabul started feeling that showing the military power of the Taliban would provide leverage at the negotiating table.³⁶ As of early March, the Taliban were ready for a massive campaign of disruption against the electoral process and announced their intention through a bellicose statement released on March 10.³⁷

Soon, however, other factors came into play that prevented the Taliban from aligning behind an anti-elections military campaign. In particular, a number of foreign sponsors of the Taliban started weighing in from mid-March onward and exercising pressure on the Taliban to selectively influence the elections in favor of specific candidates. According to interviews, the strongest pressure came from the Saudi government, which saw Abdullah as too close to Iran for comfort and feared that a large-scale campaign against the elections would keep mostly Pashtun voters away from the polls and favor Abdullah, whose constituencies were widely recognized to be mostly among Tajiks and Hazaras. Promises were also made for rewards if the Taliban complied with Saudi demands, including facilitation in future negotiations with the new president.³⁸ At the time, the Saudis were observing Iranian successes in Syria (where Assad's regime was regaining ground on the battlefield) and in Iraq (where al-Maliki seemed likely to be reconfirmed as prime minister after the April parliamentary elections).³⁹

Tribal pressure also weighed on the Taliban. A leader of the Peshawar *shura* admitted that several tribal delegations visited Peshawar to lobby the Taliban to allow the elections to happen: Shinwari, Khogyani, Safi, Jabarkhel, Dawlatzai, and

³⁵ Interview with Taliban cadre in Ghazni, May 2014; interview with Taliban cadre in Nangarhar, spring 2014. Daudzai served has been a close collaborator of President Karzai for several years, serving as his chief of staff and minister of interior, as well as ambassador to Iran and Pakistan. He was previously linked to Hizb-i Islami and hails from Kabul Province.

³⁶ Source within the Peshawar Shura, contacted in March 2014.

³⁷ Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, "Notification of Islamic Emirate Regarding the Upcoming Elections," March 10, 2014, <http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamoona/42887-notification-of-islamic-emirate-regarding-the-upcoming-elections>.

³⁸ 22 of the Taliban cadres and leaders interviewed in spring 2014 confirmed this circumstance.

³⁹ See Simon Henderson, "The Battle for Iraq Is a Saudi War on Iran," *Foreign Policy*, June 12, 2014; Benedetta Berti and Yoel Guzansky, "The Syrian Crisis and the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry," *FPRI E-notes*, October 2012; Curtis Ryan, "The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria," *Merip* 262 (Spring 2012).

others. Although the leadership of the Peshawar *shura* claims to have rejected such approaches, one of its members admitted that in practice the pressure had an impact.⁴⁰ In Quetta, too, local communities and tribal councils of the Barakzai, Ishaqzai, Hotak, Achakzai, Noorzai, Alokozai, Tokhi, Popolzai, and Alizai tribes, as well as figures from notable families of southern Afghanistan, such as Sher Mohammed Akhundzada and Hamid Karzai, approached the Taliban to allow voting. Most Quetta Taliban interviewed for this project insisted that the elders' lobbying had little impact. Some senior field cadres, however, admitted that the pressure of the communities was a factor.⁴¹ The Miran Shah *shura* was also approached by tribal elders. One senior source in that *shura* acknowledged that meetings with the tribal *shuras* of the Zazai, Mangal, Sabari, Tani, Mandozai, Ismail Khel, Totakhel, Zadran, and Ahmadzai tribes (Loya Paktia) took place, but failed to get the elders to agree with the Miran Shah *shura*, which was the faction within the Taliban most opposed to allowing the election to happen. According to Taliban sources, the elders even threatened to actively oppose the Taliban if their desire to get the people to vote was not met.⁴²

As a result mainly of external pressure and perhaps also of tribal lobbying, the divisions within the Taliban, which were just beginning to heal, opened wide again just before the first round. Not only were the three top *shuras* split over which approach to adopt, but there were divisions within them, except for the Miran Shah *Shura*, which remained resolutely opposed to the elections. The *Miran Shah Shura* was unified around the Haqqani family and in favor of a military campaign against the elections, which included targeting voters. The Haqqanis have so far shown little interest in negotiating with anybody, except on matters such as prisoner exchanges.⁴³

The *Quetta Shura* was divided in two main groups, one willing to give way to Saudi pressure to facilitate Zalmay Rassul's campaign, as well as inclined to use the electoral process as a bargaining tool to extract concessions from Kabul (the group led by Akhtar Mansur), and the other set on waging jihad against the elections as had been the Taliban policy previously (the group led by military commander Abdul Qayum Zakir). Among field commanders and cadres there was widespread sympathy for Ashraf Ghani; one source aligned with Mansur placed the share at 30 percent.⁴⁴

The *Peshawar Shura* came under Pakistani pressure to allow the vote in areas where Ashraf Ghani was believed to have widespread support. It decided to opt for a mild campaign of disruption, trying to avoid violence against voters and not disrupt voter turnout too much (such as it would have been the case if polls had been forced to shut down), at least in areas expected to support Ashraf Ghani. The real concern of

⁴⁰ Interview with senior member of the Peshawar Shura, spring 2014.

⁴¹ Interviews with Taliban cadre in Kandahar and Taliban cadre in Quetta Shura, spring 2014.

⁴² Interviews with Taliban cadre in Paktia, spring 2014, and with senior member of the Miran Shah Shura, spring 2014.

⁴³ Interviews with senior member of Miran Shah Shura, spring 2014 and with Taliban cadre in Paktia, spring 2014.

⁴⁴ Interviews with Taliban cadre in Kandahar, spring 2014 and three Taliban cadres in Quetta Shura, spring 2014.

the majority of the Peshawar Shura’s membership, was not to favor Abdullah, whom they regarded as fundamentally hostile, as well as Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, who was also regarded as hostile. However, a minority of the Peshawar Shura were in favor of a full-fledged campaign of violence, in line with the thinking of Zakir and the Haqqanis, who were not concerned with a possible Abdullah victory because they believed that it would increase support for the Taliban among Pashtuns. They also argued that softening the approach against the elections was doing no good to the Taliban, allowing their enemies to portray them as militarily weak. The campaign of the minority was also supported by Pakistani jihadist organization, present in force particularly in Nangarhar, a fact that probably was behind the fact that Nangarhar witnessed the single highest number of attacks on election day (Graph 1).⁴⁵ Table 1 shows how on balance the Taliban effort in 2014 failed to stand out even in terms of number of attacks compared to 2010, although it was still more intense than 2009.

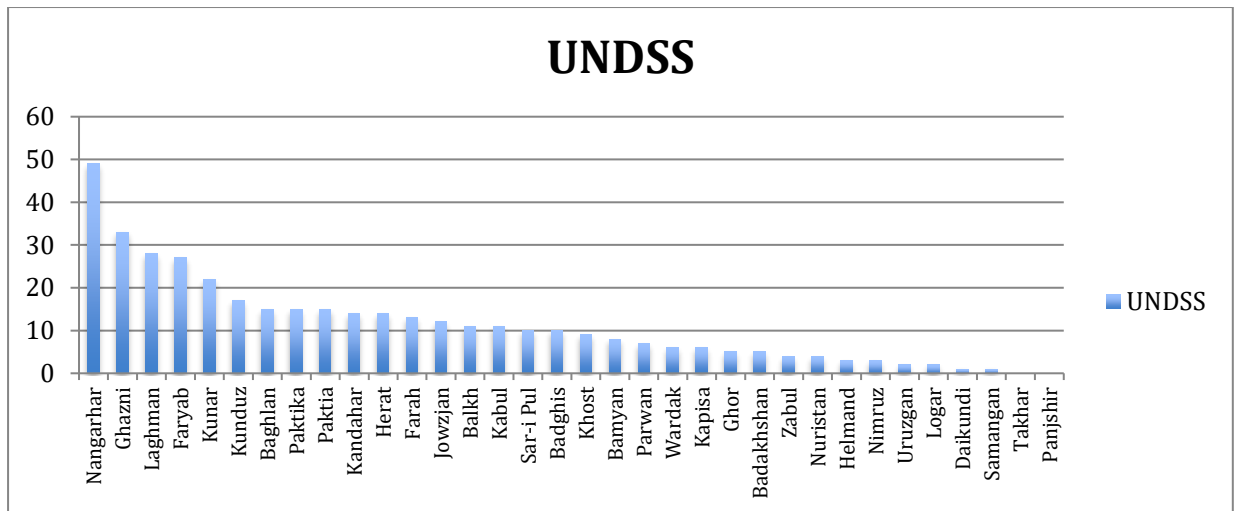
Table 1: extent of violence on election day, 2009-2014, according to different sources

	NATO	UNAMA
Security incidents of election day 2014	390	382
Security incidents of election day 2010		488
Security incidents of election day 2009	435	299

Note: the data was provided by NATO and UNAMA officials to the author in 2014.

Chart 1: All security incidents by provinces, 5 April 2014, according to the United National Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS)

⁴⁵ Interviews with senior member of Peshawar Shura, spring 2014; Taliban cadre in Nangarhar, spring 2014; Taliban cadre in Wardak, spring 2014; Taliban cadre in Ghazni, spring 2014; Taliban commander in Wardak, spring 2014.



Note: the data was provided by NATO and UNAMA officials to the author in 2014.

Debates within the leadership – ‘Round Two’

The Taliban appear to have been surprised by the high support Abdullah received during the first round, 45 percent according to the official tally. By mid-April, they knew that in the event of a similar pattern in the second round, Abdullah would almost certainly win. So did the regional powers, which had been exerting pressure on the Taliban even before the second round. Taliban sources indicate that the Saudis and the Pakistanis converged on a policy of asking the Taliban to facilitate a second round victory for Ghani, by allowing as many Pashtun voters to participate as possible.⁴⁶ Discussions were also held about what measures could be taken to restrain the Pakistani jihadist groups from carrying out indiscriminate violence along the Pakistan border. Tribal pressure on the Taliban in the east and southeast also mounted to allow the vote. However, some Taliban commanders and cadres saw it differently and insisted that the Taliban now had to demonstrate their military power.⁴⁷

The *Peshawar Shura*, whose members often sympathized with Ghani, was inclined to strengthen efforts to allow as many Pashtun voters as possible to vote, in the expectation that they would now overwhelmingly support Ghani. By contrast, the Peshawar Shura planned an even greater effort than during the first round to blockade areas expected to support Abdullah, such as the Pashai-populated Dara-i Noor in Nangarhar or most of the Tajik-populated northern and northeastern Afghanistan. In these areas, even the ban on attacking voters (implemented during

⁴⁶ Interviews with Taliban cadre in Nangarhar, spring 2014; interview with Taliban cadre in Wardak, spring 2014; interview with Taliban cadre in Ghazni, spring 2014; interview with Taliban cadre in Badakhshan, spring 2014.

⁴⁷ Interview with Taliban commander in Paktia, spring 2014; interview with Taliban cadre in Herat, spring 2014.

the first round) was revoked.⁴⁸

On May 19 through May 21, a big meeting of Peshawar Shura leaders and cadres and foreign donors to the Taliban was held in Pakistan to negotiate a common policy for the second round. The hardliners were now brought in line and forced to support the suspension of any hostility that could damage Ghani's chances during the second round, thanks to string donor support for the majority line. The Saudi government representative at the meeting reportedly indicated that contacts with Ashraf Ghani had taken place and Ghani had agreed to open discussions with the Peshawar Shura after his election, as well as to visit Saudi Arabia shortly after taking over the presidency.⁴⁹ The Peshawar Shura moved into the second round unified at least at the level of the leadership. Interestingly, mainstream Peshawar Shura Taliban described Ghani as someone who was not only uninvolved in the civil war of the 1990s (true), but also not being close to the United States and not engaged on the government side in this conflict (definitely not true). Dostum's role as vice presidential candidate was either ignored or dismissed with the statement that Ghani would be able to control him. The hard-liners, by contrast, rejected Ghani as an acceptable candidate, highlighting the presence of Dostum on the ticket, Ghani's reputation of being close to Washington as well as his stated readiness to sign the BSA, and the fact that Ghani's wife and children are Christian.⁵⁰ Overall, it would appear that among the Peshawar Shura leadership there was some determination to sell Ghani as a viable negotiating partner to the rank-and-file:

it is impossible to negotiate with the president in the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan. If Ashraf Ghani becomes the president, there is a 50 percent possibility that he will accept our conditions. But if Abdullah reaches to presidency there is zero percent chance that we will negotiate with him.⁵¹

The *Quetta Shura* too had its chance of finding a new unity in opposition of the electoral process after Zakir was purged and his supporters marginalised, and Zalmay Rassul, the favorite candidate of Akhtar Mansur and of the Saudis, was left out of the race. Under pressure from the Saudis and the Pakistanis, the Quetta Shura issued orders to its field commanders to stay put for the second round as well, despite internal debates that seemed to be leaning toward a violent boycott. Sources close to Zakir indicate that he and his few remaining allies were committed to renewing the campaign against the elections regardless of what foreign sponsors or the rest of the Quetta Shura might argue. However, Zakir was reportedly in hiding and increasingly isolated.⁵²

The *Miran Shah Shura* was inclined like Zakir toward sabotaging the second round of

⁴⁸ Interviews with Taliban cadre in Nangarhar, spring 2014 and Taliban commander in Hesarak, spring 2014.

⁴⁹ Source within the Peshawar Shura, contacted in June 2014.

⁵⁰ A total of 10 leaders, cadres and commanders of the Peshwar Shura were interviewed in spring 2014 and asked about their views of Ashraf Ghani.

⁵¹ Interview with senior member of the Peshawar Shura, spring 2014.

⁵² A total of 10 commanders, cadres and leaders of the Quetta Shura were interviewed in spring 2014 and asked about the second round of elections.

the elections, potentially harming significantly Ghani's chances of success.⁵³

Implementation

Each of the Taliban's components therefore marched into the elections with a different plan. Because of the overlap between the areas of operations of the different Taliban shuras, however, and because of divisions within the shuras of Quetta and Peshawar, implementing these plans coherently proved impossible. The majority within the Peshawar Shura wanted to deploy a more targeted violent effort against the elections, avoiding the indiscriminate violence of which the Taliban are being increasingly accused. High-profile attacks were to be organized in Kabul to convey the message that the Taliban were still powerful and able to strike at will, lest anyone conclude that the lower level of violence was a result of Taliban weakness.⁵⁴

The other aspect of the plan was to channel votes in a particular direction. Several Taliban cadres in the provinces indicated that at the beginning of 2014, with the help of sympathetic elders and mullahs, the Taliban surveyed the villages to establish the local orientation toward the candidates. Where it was decided to prevent people from voting, the orders imparted to the field commanders were to block roads and intimidate voters, rather than carry out direct violent attacks on voters. Several Taliban sources confirmed that the Peshawar Shura meant to prevent only villages supportive of Abdullah from voting. Most Taliban commanders and cadres in the areas under the responsibility of the Peshawar Shura confirmed having targeted the "bad villages" with their road closures. Elders in Khogyani also confirmed the same pattern of Taliban behavior.⁵⁵

The minority of hard-liners within the Peshawar Shura instead tried to encourage field commanders to exceed the orders of the Peshawar Shura leadership. Pakistani jihadist groups like the Pakistani Taliban (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan), Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Lashkar-e Jhangvi, which operate in many areas under Peshawar's responsibility and are closely linked to one of the components of the Peshawar Shura known as Tor Pagri (Black Turbans), also encouraged and paid Taliban commanders to carry out attacks, including against voters, and to blockade villages to prevent people from flocking to the polling stations. Several district-level shadow electoral officers (five in Nangarhar, five in Faryab, two in Ghazni) and at least one provincial officer (Parwan) were removed for failing to comply with the orders of the Peshawar Shura leadership. Several individual commanders in various locations either admitted or were reported to have disobeyed the orders to allow the elections, or vice versa disobeyed orders to carry out attacks when such attacks were planned.⁵⁶ In general the Taliban bungled their message to the voters, by first

⁵³ A total of 4 leaders, cadres and commanders of the Miran Shah Shura were interviewed in spring 2014.

⁵⁴ Interview with Taliban cadre in Nangarhar, spring 2014.

⁵⁵ Interviews with 10 Peshawar Shura commanders, cadres and leaders and two Khogyani elders, in spring 2014.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

threatening massive violence, and then only partially implementing a decision to dramatically downscale their campaign against the elections. The average voter failed to get the message that voting for Ghani was not against the wishes of the Taliban, and voters still felt intimidated.

As a result, although in general the vote for Ghani was not greatly disrupted, violence in the east and around Kabul region was still the highest in all of Afghanistan, although specific pockets of villages believed to support Dr. Abdullah were disproportionately affected, according to the Taliban and some local elders.⁵⁷ In the south, within the Quetta Shura, Zakir and his shrinking alliance tried their best to sabotage the electoral effort, but Mansur and his coalition of networks largely abstained from violence. Zakir's determination to go against the will of influential external powers, as discussed, eventually cost him his job as head of the national Military Commission after the first round of voting in April. A number of his supporters among the Taliban's electoral commissars were sacked (at least four in Herat and six in Kandahar). On the whole, at least two-thirds of the Quetta Shura's available military force was not committed to the campaign against the elections.⁵⁸ Only the Miran Shah Shura campaigned against the electoral process without internal divisions at the leadership level. However, the Shura's presence on the ground in early April was limited because of snow on the mountain passes and of the lack of any effort to better equip its fighters for the winter. Moreover, it appears that in practice even the Miran Shah Shura rarely tried to challenge the will of the tribal leadership to have elections running, despite having formally rejected the approach of the tribal elders. One field commander of the Miran Shah Shura indicated that despite formal orders to push ahead with the campaign against the electoral process, little enthusiasm among the leaders was apparent.⁵⁹

Moreover, Taliban sources in Paktia suggested that a minority of field commanders of the Miran Shah Shura favored Ghani and tried to have as little impact as possible on voter turnout.⁶⁰

The level of Taliban violence during the first round was already below the expectations of international observers. Compared to the first round, the implementation of Taliban leadership decisions during the second round was more coherent and in line with the decision to favour Pashtun voter turnout. The Taliban claimed to have carried out 805 attacks against the electoral process. This was a 26 percent drop on the level of violence claimed during the first round. There were no high-profile attacks at all before the second round and no significant attacks against electoral workers or candidate's campaigners.⁶¹ Ghani managed to come on top of Abdullah in the second round, according to audited results. The Taliban's posture certainly contributed to that result, even if it was not the only factor propelling

⁵⁷ See A. Giustozzi and S. Mangal, 'Violence, the Taliban and Afghanistan's 2014 elections', Washington ; USIP, 2015.

⁵⁸ Interviews with 10 Quetta Shura commanders, cadres and leaders and vive elders, spring 2014.

⁵⁹ Interviews with one leader one cadre and two commanders of the Miran Shah Shura, spring 2014.

⁶⁰ Interview with Taliban commander in Paktia, spring 2014.

⁶¹ See A. Giustozzi and S. Mangal, cit.

Ghani to the top position.

Longer term consequences of the debates

As discussed above, among the Taliban leaders there were pragmatic reasons for considering an approach to the 2014 elections different from the one that Taliban had approved until then. In reality during 2012-14 the internal consultation process about the elections led to the Taliban starting some serious thinking about elections in general. The most important indicator of this process is the decision of the leadership of all the three main shuras (Quetta, Peshawar and Miran Shah) to request the respective Councils of the *Ulema* to give a ruling in regards to elections from the perspective of Islamic jurisprudence. The *Ulema's* views are not binding for the leaders, but do carry substantial weight. Significantly, and presumably in accordance with the expectations of the majority of the Taliban's leaders, the *Ulema* ruled that elections are in principle allowable in Islam.⁶²

These debates were not yet percolating down the ranks: many Taliban interviewees continued to object to elections in principle in 2013-14 ('If elections are good why are there no elections in Saudi Arabia?')⁶³. A typical complaint was about women voting.⁶⁴

But even among the rank-and-file more enlightened views could be heard, arguing that elections could allowable if western interference was avoided, fraud stamped out, 'criminals' being vetted out and money prevented from determining the result.⁶⁵ Even those Taliban not opposed to elections in principle, however, a common argument was that women should never be allowed to participate in the electoral process.⁶⁶ A point also raised was that while parliamentary elections might be allowable, the position of Amir-ul-Momenin [leader of the faithful, Mullah Mohammed Omar], could never be filled through an election.⁶⁷ The model these Taliban seemed to have in mind looked like a limited democracy, Iranian style: 'Maybe we would follow the Iranian system of a leader and president [...] we would have an elected president under control of Mullah Mohammad Omar Akhund'.⁶⁸ Some of the interviewees seemed to view elections as a possible concession to make in the event of peace negotiations, while insisting that in principle in an Islamic government elections are not needed.⁶⁹

By 2015 Taliban views about the electoral process had made evolved further. At the (informal) Pugwash-sponsored meeting in Doha, on 2-3 May 2015, attendees from the Taliban 'diplomatic corps' stated that not only the Taliban in principle accepted

⁶² Interviews with three *ulema* from the *Ulema* councils of the shuras of Quetta, Peshawar and Miran Shah, February 2015.

⁶³ Interview with Taliban cadre in Wardak, spring 2013.

⁶⁴ Interviews with 14 Taliban cadres, spring 2013.

⁶⁵ Interviews with four Taliban cadres, spring 2013.

⁶⁶ Interview with senior member of the Peshawar Shura, spring 2013.

⁶⁷ Interview with Taliban commander in Dand-i Ghor, spring 2013.

⁶⁸ Interview with Taliban cadre in Sayed Abad, spring 2013.

⁶⁹ Interview with senior member of the Quetta Shura, spring 2013.

the in a future political settlement an electoral system might feature, but also that the Taliban no longer opposed the participation of women in the political process, with the only exception of female presidential candidates.⁷⁰

Conclusion

The 2014 elections turned out to be deeply divisive for the Taliban, but also forced them to confront issues that will be essential to any future peace settlement, and that they had always been reluctant to thoroughly discuss internally. Hardliners within the Taliban were often incensed by what they considered their leaders compromising on principles. Some Taliban commanders reportedly resigned because of the perception that their leadership was going soft. Overall, the elections caused an unprecedented degree of polarization between hard-liners and pragmatists.

Initially the internal debate over the elections seemed to weaken the hardliners, or at least to exposed their weakness on this issue. Even Taliban hard-liners admitted that opposition to the elections in principle was not as widespread among the Taliban as it had been in 2009. A commander in Achin observed that

‘in the 2009 and 2010 elections, 90 percent of the Taliban were against election and 10 percent were not against, but this year 70 percent Taliban are not against elections and 30 percent are against election. We can say there is big difference compared to the past.’⁷¹

The desire to maintain good relations with the elders might be one of the key reasons why hardliners remained isolated. Indeed, some elders indicated how their relations with the Taliban improved during the electoral campaign and how they started cooperating with them. By supporting Ghani in communities that were already largely pro-Ghani, or at least whose elders were, the Taliban made new friends or consolidated relations in a way that may have important political implications for the future.⁷²

However, many Taliban cadres and leaders who did not oppose reconciliation per se started wondering whether their pragmatist allies were going too far in the unprincipled approach, based on the divisions of the spoils at the expense of any assertion of Taliban ideology and views. The back door dealing over the elections embodied this approach. The handling of pre-talks by pragmatic leaders such as Mansur in late 2014 and the first half of 2015 strengthened these feelings, until the conflict came out into the open with the struggle to succeed Mullah Omar.

The 2014 elections also highlighted how in the absence of a unified leadership above the level of the three main shuras, the Taliban did not have the ability to take decisions quickly and in a coordinated fashion. Although they had seemed to converge toward a common choice of aggressively disrupting the electoral process

⁷⁰ Personal communication with western diplomat in Kabul, May 2015.

⁷¹ Taliban commander in Achin, interviewed in April 2014.

⁷² Interviews with 13 elders in areas under the control of the Peshawar Shura, spring 2014.

until just after March 10, when their bellicose statement was released, the new situation created by external pressure on them led to a relatively rapid shift in their electoral “campaign”. This damaged their image not only because it highlighted differences among them, but also because the failure to follow up on harsh statements led many observers to assume that the Taliban were weakening. The Taliban rank-and-file were confused by the repeated changes in strategy and felt in many cases that the ideological purity of the movement was being sacrificed on the altar of political compromise. Still, a majority of Taliban field commanders and cadres appears to have been ready to follow the majority of the leadership and manipulate the electoral process as opposed to merely sabotage it. The elections clearly showed that the Taliban had problems of discipline within their ranks, but at the same time they were not a rag-tag group of freelancers with a franchise type relationship with distant leaders, sitting in Quetta, Peshawar or Miran Shah. The debate over the absentee leadership of Mullah Omar nevertheless was revived at this time and intensified already during the summer of 2014.⁷³

The Taliban’s new approach implied a greater capacity than previously demonstrated to exercise their coercive power in a discriminate way, even if their targeting was not as accurate as they claimed later. There is also other evidence that the Taliban were at least aware of the need to target their coercive efforts carefully, lest they would suffer from a backlash. The data available on the violence shows that it was to an extent better targeted than in the past—comparatively few voters were hurt, despite a lot of shooting. Still, it was not carefully targeted to deliver a strong or clear message of Taliban intentions and capabilities, which was the purpose of the campaign. That some Taliban commanders continued to deliberately murder voters prevented the Taliban from making significant gains in terms of image. In sum, although the campaign against the elections was not a complete failure, it was quite messy, and command and control on the Taliban side failed in many cases. The desire to target violence more carefully implies a considerable organizational effort. Although the Taliban devoted major resources to this task, it was insufficient to acquire the full capacity to manage armed men on the ground. The Taliban’s effort to manage and manipulate the 2014 electoral campaign is representative therefore of the wider Taliban effort to improve its organizational capacity.⁷⁴

Despite the muddled campaign, the Taliban were, as of May 2014, reasonably hopeful that something could be gained from their decision to soften their attitude. The relationship with most Pashtun tribal shuras, traditionally not particularly good, was improving in that the Taliban in the end delivered what the shuras wanted—a boost to Ashraf Ghani’s campaign. That Ghani then opted to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) in September 2014 came as a major blow to Taliban aspirations of starting peace talks immediately. Contacts with Ghani’s camp froze for some months, but eventually were resumed in late winter.

Regardless of a diplomatic breakthrough, the Taliban may have entered a path that

⁷³ Contacts with sources in the Quetta and in the Peshawar Shuras, September 2014.

⁷⁴ See A. Sinno, *Organizations at War in Afghanistan & Beyond*, Cornell University Press, 2008, for a study of the organization of insurgent movements.

takes them closer to Afghan mainstream politics, which for the most part is not derived from liberal and democratic principles, but instead a matter of strongmen, manipulation, and corrupt patronage networks (see Byrd; Coburn; Shah and Bose, this volume). Even after more than a decade of internationally backed state-building efforts, in 2014 the local strongmen were actively involved in rigging the vote and intimidating voters for several candidates during the 2014 elections. Seen from this perspective, the Taliban's interference in the election does not appear as extreme. The main question as of mid-2015 was whether a leadership moving towards the mainstream would be able to carry the bulk of its ranks-and-file behind.