

ened to pose an even greater challenge to the government in Kabul and regional stability in 2008. Drawing together these strands of inquiry, this closing chapter traces structural continuities in the nature of Afghanistan's crisis from the Taliban collapse through the present period marked by American-backed reconstruction and Taliban-led insurgencies.

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**CHAPTER ONE**

## **Explaining the Taliban's Ability to Mobilize the Pashtuns**

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If history is any guide, whoever mobilizes the Pashtuns rules Afghanistan, and Afghanistan cannot be ruled without their consent. Two rulers with little support among the Pashtuns—the Tajiks Habibullah Kalakani and the savvy Ahmad Shah Masud—tried and failed. Great powers, including the British and the Soviets, and their client regimes also faltered in similar ways. The United States has so far postponed a wider insurgency only by avoiding the disarmament of local leaders and the disruption of poppy production. Neither the United States nor its client Hamid Karzai rule Afghanistan, and they are far from having a monopoly on the use of violence within its borders. Since 1978 only the Taliban have managed to mobilize the Pashtuns. Moreover, they have done so with fewer resources, less expertise in institution building, and in a shorter period of time than others who tried and failed. Why did the Taliban then enjoy this unique success in mobilizing Pashtuns?

The Taliban grew from a small group of idealistic students with little military training into a sprawling organization that dominated some 90 percent of Afghanistan in less than five years. They swept away all the warlords who partitioned and terrorized the country—petty and mighty alike—with the single exception of Masud's organization, to impose a nearly unified political order for the first time since 1979.

The rise of the Taliban represents one of those events that social scientists have accepted rather more than analyzed. Most existing interpretations of the rise of the Taliban are either politically or ideologically motivated, or they simply lack rigor. These explanations point to causes (for example, why the Taliban grew) but fail to explain the processes that led to their emergence and nearly successful unification of Afghanistan when all other attempts had failed. Compelling interpretations are scarce because of a shortage of reliable information about what really happened during the first critical months of the Taliban's quest. Afghanistan was ignored because of its insignificance and seeming irrelevance to the West, and because feuding local leaders made it one of the least hospitable places in the world for academics and journalists alike.

Yet the rise of the Taliban constitutes an important social scientific puzzle that warrants more attention. Any successful analysis must explain how they mobilized the Pashtuns, and must meet a crucial test: It must account for the failure of other Pashtuns—including the Afghan communists, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and even Hamid Karzai—to do the same.

Existing explanations remain inadequate. Many highlight foreign factors, particularly Pakistani military support and Saudi financing. Others focus on developments within Afghanistan, pointing especially to a political "vacuum," ethnic strife, and the general state of exhaustion of a war-torn Afghan society.

The answer lies instead in the fact that the Taliban were able to as-

similate or sideline many entrenched and hardened local Pashtun leaders by (1) undercutting the leaders' support and directly appealing to their supporters, (2) capitalizing on their own momentum to increase their appeal to local leaders and their followers alike, and (3) making effective use of expert knowledge of the Pashtun power tapestry and devising sophisticated strategies that sidelined opposition at little cost. Solving the puzzle of the rise of the Taliban highlights the tribulations of the American-backed state-building project and helps us assess the odds of a further reemergence of the Taliban. At the same time, it sheds light on the underlying processes involved in the production of prior social upheavals—such as the tribal revolts in Afghanistan and elsewhere, the Mongol conquests, and perhaps even the early stages of the great venture of Islam—that have channeled, focused, and amplified energies in similar societies.

In 1979 the brutal Soviet invasion produced a loosely structured Afghan resistance that was mostly brought together by the flow of money from sponsors and the clarity of the mujahedin's cause. In 1989 the Soviets left a devastated and disordered Afghanistan. The withdrawal of the Soviets generated euphoria among the mujahedin and their supporters. Virtually all observers and participants predicted that the regime of Najibullah, the communist leader left in place by the Soviets, would collapse within a year. The United States and Pakistan attempted to give the mujahedin the trappings of an alternative government by encouraging them to form the Afghan Interim Government and by supplying them with better weapons. This government was a facade, however, and the Pakistanis increased their support for their traditional favorite among the mujahedin, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and his faction, the Hizb-e Islami (Islamic Party), in hopes of imposing a unified organizational structure under the influence of Islamabad.

In 1992 the Soviet-crafted regime in Kabul collapsed when its

constituent factions realized that the flow of resources from Moscow was about to dry up. As the government fell apart, Pashtun officials went over to Hekmatyar. Shia figures sided with the main Shia resistance party, the Hizb-e Wahdat-e Islami-ye Afghanistan (Party of Islamic Unity of Afghanistan); and a faction of the Afghan communist party, the Parchamis, joined Ahmad Shah Masud's resistance group, the well-organized Supervisory Council (Shura-ye Nazar). The communist regime's strongest militia under Abdul Rashid Dostum defected and entered the conflict as the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan (Junbesh-e Melli-ye Islami-ye Afghanistan).

Aided by foreign sponsors such as Russia, India, Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian republics, as well as various Arab states and militants, these competing factions battled for Kabul and other regions, prolonging the damage and suffering caused by the Soviet occupation. In western Afghanistan, the mujahedin commander Ismail Khan consolidated his control over the area around Herat but did not attempt to project his power on a national level. This state of anarchy and shifting alliances persisted until the rise of the Taliban, who forced these rivals into a discordant alliance.

The major factions led by Dostum, Hekmatyar, Masud, Ismail Khan, and Abdul Ali Mazari generally recruited members of specific ethnic groups. But in the fragmented Afghanistan of 1994, they were not alone. They competed with smaller clans and loosely structured councils, with whom they shared their ethnic territories. Once held together by ties of patronage, many of the mujahedin parties splintered when foreign aid ceased to reach their leadership in Peshawar, Pakistan. The more centralized Hizb-e Islami and Jamiat-e Islami-ye Afghanistan, led by Burhanuddin Rabbani, managed to keep the loyalty of some clients intact by maintaining access to foreign aid, which they disbursed among followers as well as centralized fighting units. In lieu of the resources once distributed by the now-defunct Peshawar parties, their former clients sought out new local

sources of income, including taxation, road tolls, poppy cultivation, and banditry. Of the large ethnic organizations, Hekmatyar's Hizb-e Islami was the least able to dominate its ethnic space—the Pashtun belt.

The Taliban made their first significant appearance on the Afghan scene when the larger organizations were occupied with fighting each other for control of Kabul.<sup>1</sup> In a well-organized assault in September 1994, the Taliban took control of Spin Boldak, a run-down town that functioned as a border-crossing point for smugglers and that contained an enormous weapons and ammunition depot under the control of Hekmatyar's Hizb-e Islami.<sup>2</sup> A shocked Hekmatyar attributed the success of the Taliban assault on Spin Boldak and their seizure of his weapons cache to support from Pakistani artillery. Indeed, it was with such aid that he himself had been able to take control of the town six years earlier. But where had the Taliban come from?

As students in the religious schools (madrasas) that dot the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier, talibs frequently participated in the anti-Soviet and anti-Najibullah jihads as members of the mujahedin parties based in Peshawar. Once the jihad ended and the surviving organizations turned their guns against each other, many disgruntled former mujahedin crossed the border to take advantage of the free religious education and room and board provided by the madrasas. Most madrasas belonged to sprawling networks set up and managed by two Pakistani religious parties, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (Association of the Ulama of Islam) led by Mawlana Fazlur Rehman and the Islamist Jama'at-e-Islami (Islamic Party). Because these talibs could no longer look to the Peshawar parties, and because they did not share the modernist anti-tribal Islamism of Hekmatyar, they did not have an organization to push their agenda throughout Afghanistan. The original members of the Taliban came from this pool of talibs that studied in the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam schools.

One of the Taliban's chief supporters was Nasirullah Khan Babar,

Benazir Bhutto's interior minister and advisor on Afghan affairs. Babar is said to have been the chief advocate of shifting support from Hekmatyar to the Taliban after Hekmatyar failed to break the stalemate around Kabul and the Taliban proved their worth by freeing a Pakistani convoy held captive by militiamen in Kandahar. The liberation of the convoy was particularly significant because Bhutto and Babar were personally involved in making the preparations for the symbolic trip, which they hoped would herald a historic resumption of trade with newly independent Central Asia.

After freeing the Pakistani convoy in November 1994, the Taliban swept through Kandahar, occupied its strategic points, and dismantled its most vicious criminal bands of former government militiamen.<sup>3</sup> They earned much popular approval by disarming all other groups and imposing strict discipline in what had become an extremely lawless and hazardous area. They tore down the numerous checkpoints that extorted money from traders and travelers and imposed a traditional tribal code of social behavior that provided reassurance to a society traumatized by nearly fifteen years of violence. Rumors that they burned poppy fields endeared them to the United States and Pakistan. The Western press was generally positive in its coverage of the emerging movement, comparing the Taliban favorably to the discredited parties that led the jihad, and downplaying their religious zeal.<sup>4</sup>

The Taliban did not rest on their laurels after taking control of Kandahar. In December they promptly moved to occupy the adjacent provinces of Zabul and Uruzgan and faced little resistance. In January they invaded Helmand, a breadbasket province and poppy-growing center. They then expanded through other Pashtun areas, where some commanders joined them and others were disarmed. Along the way, the Taliban eliminated the ubiquitous roadblocks, imposed sharia-based civic order, closed girls' schools, and provided a rare unifying moment in the region's history.

By early 1995 they had reached Hekmatyar's strongholds south and southwest of Kabul and handily routed his forces. Hekmatyar, the ambitious mujahedin leader who had dominated Afghan politics and organized one of the country's most potent organizations, had to flee his base in Chaharasyab, leaving immense resources behind for the victorious Taliban. He would later become the token Pashtun in Rabbani's government before disappearing for a few years from Afghan political life in comfortable exile in Tehran. With little effort, the Taliban also swept through Paktya and Paktika provinces, which had been hotbeds of mujahedin resistance to Soviet and Afghan communists and were home to the Ghilzai Pashtuns.

Masud was initially delighted by the defeat of his old enemy Hekmatyar. He took advantage of Hekmatyar's predicament by attacking his Shia allies in March 1995, finally terminating efforts by the main Shiite party (Hizb-e Wahdat) to maintain a presence in Kabul.<sup>5</sup> The collapse of Hekmatyar's party and the Masud attack left the weakened Shia with no choice but to accept Taliban mediation and surrender their posts and heavy weapons to the Taliban. In the confusion that ensued, both Masud's troops and some of the Shiite troops attacked the Taliban forces instead of giving up their weapons. The Taliban, in turn, killed the head of the Shiite party, Abdul Ali Mazari, who was in their custody. Masud took advantage of the chaos by launching an all-out attack on both the Taliban and the remaining Shiite forces. He outmaneuvered both and pushed the Taliban out of Chaharasyab, Hekmatyar's old base, thereby putting Kabul out of the range of Taliban rockets. Masud finally controlled all of Kabul.

The setback at the gates of Kabul shifted the Taliban's attention to Ismail Khan's Herat-based fiefdom in the west of the country. They aggressively moved from Kandahar toward Herat and the strategic airbase at Shindand in March 1995, prompting Masud to airlift hundreds of fighters to assist Ismail Khan. Masud also contributed his air



force to the effort to defend Shindand, subjecting the attackers to some ten to fifteen sorties a day. The Uzbek commander Dostum joined the fray by wresting a part of Badghis Province from a distracted Ismail Khan. The Taliban eventually halted their attacks after suffering hundreds of casualties.

Perhaps heartened by his troops' performance a few months earlier, Ismail Khan attacked the Taliban in August. He captured Girishk in what appears to have been a momentous thrust toward Kandahar, but the Taliban counterattacked his overstretched forces with astounding mobility. This attack forced Ismail Khan's fighters into a disorganized retreat that culminated in the fall of Herat on September 5 and the flight of Ismail Khan to Iran. The mobility of the Taliban troops and their tactical aptitude had taken the seasoned Ismail Khan by surprise and marked a new phase in the conflict. Not only were the Taliban now in control of more than half of the country, including some non-Pashtun areas; they also had acquired expertise in the tactics necessary to challenge their established rivals to the north.

Hekmatyar continued to squabble with Rabbani and Masud from his remaining base in Sarobi, thirty miles east of Kabul, but he finally joined the government as prime minister in June 1996. His situation was desperate: his support from Pakistan was vanishing, and his troops were ready to defect to the Taliban upon contact. Taliban troops indeed advanced with ease in areas inhabited by Ghilzai Pashtuns, taking Jalalabad and Hekmatyar's remaining stronghold in Sarobi. They then attacked Kabul in September 1996, entering the city on September 27 and dispatching their rivals back to their northern strongholds. The front line moved to the Shamali plains north of the capital, an area that would suffer immensely from fighting in the following two years.

The loss of Kabul, however, was not fatal for Masud. The master strategist managed an organized retreat under attack that allowed

him to save much of his troops and weapons to fight another day. He also improved his odds for survival by retreating to more favorable terrain and destroying the southern entrance to the Salang tunnel, impeding a Taliban push toward the north. The Taliban occupied the area just south of the Salang and Panjsher in February 1997, including the provincial capital of Chaharikar, but veered toward the Hazarajat to pressure the Shia instead of pushing north.

With the capture of the capital, the Taliban controlled four of Afghanistan's major cities. They made their first attempt to seize the fifth, Mazar-e Sharif, in May 1997. Abdul Malik Pahlawan, the largely autonomous Dostum lieutenant whose area of control west of Mazar lay on the front line, defected to the Taliban on May 19, blaming his patron for the death of his brother. In the process he handed them Ismail Khan, who had taken refuge in the north via Iran after his rout from Herat. Dostum fled to Turkey after fighting broke out in Mazar. On May 25, Islamabad recognized the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates did the same in the next two days.

Some Taliban forces were flown to Mazar while others were allowed free passage through the Hindu Kush mountains by Bashir Salangi, a Masud commander who shifted his loyalty to them. Some jubilant Taliban attempted to disarm Abdul Malik's troops and those of the Shiite militias in Mazar, but they faced stiff resistance. A hesitant convert to the Taliban cause, Salangi blocked their retreat and prevented reinforcements from reaching the Taliban in Mazar. Hundreds of Taliban perished in battle. Their foes imprisoned thousands of them, together with key leaders, and later had them murdered. Some three thousand surviving Taliban in the north withdrew to Konduz, where they occupied the airport and received reinforcements. The Mazar debacle embarrassed those states that had extended diplomatic recognition to the Taliban in anticipation of an ul-

timate victory, and it provided an opening for Masud to make a push for Kabul.

In spite of the Taliban's bold move of changing the country's name to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and Mullah Omar's assumption of the title *Commander of the Faithful*—a title that claims authority beyond state borders—the Taliban seemed unsteady for the remainder of 1997. Masud advanced to within artillery range of Kabul. A Taliban push from Konduz toward Mazar faced fierce resistance. In September, Dostum returned from exile to replace his former betrayer Abdul Malik, whom he sent to exile in Iran. In the meantime, the Shia Wahdat pushed the Taliban to the western edge of Kabul.

The Taliban rivals who made up the Northern Alliance proved to be odd bedfellows, however. In Mazar, the forces of Abdul Malik, Masud, Dostum, and the Wahdat turned on one another. Their wild battles, looting of the offices of charities, and wanton murder of many civilians drove United Nations agencies and NGOs out of the city, depleted it of necessary staples, and made the once-irrelevant trade-off the Taliban offered—security in exchange for the acceptance of a strict social code—particularly appealing for the city's residents. In another indication of the fragmentation of the Northern Alliance, Hekmatyar's forces in the north of the country disarmed the Ismaili force of Mansur Nadiri that was allied with Dostum.<sup>6</sup>

In 1998, several meetings of high-level representatives of Afghanistan's six neighbors, plus America and Russia, did little to reduce conflict in the country, and the Taliban regained the initiative. They embargoed the impoverished Hazarajat, aggravating the effects of an already debilitating drought, and initiated a final assault on Mazar with approximately eight thousand troops. In August they vanquished Dostum and occupied Mazar. In September they moved on Bamyan. The Taliban exacted revenge for the massacre of their comrades in Mazar by killing large numbers of Hazaras and murdering Iranian

diplomats in their Mazar consulate. These acts prompted Iranian mobilization of some two hundred thousand troops and skirmishes on the border. Now isolated and under military pressure, Masud retreated on several fronts toward the Panjsher and adjacent valleys. In 2000, Pervez Musharraf openly declared Pakistan's support for the Taliban and their summer campaign that wrested Taloqan from Masud, pushing him from his headquarters and cutting off his main supply lines from Tajikistan.

The Taliban now occupied more than 90 percent of the country. They faced only scattered guerilla resistance in the Hazarajat and the Uzbek regions. Masud, "the Lion of the Panjsher," resisted in his stronghold and executed some brilliant, but ultimately inconsequential, operations to expand his zone before he was assassinated by two al-Qaeda Arabs posing as journalists on September 9, 2001.

Many observers have attributed Taliban success to foreign actors. In this view, the movement was, in effect, Pakistan's creature—created, equipped, trained, and directed by the ISI (the powerful branch of Pakistani military intelligence) and funded by the Arab Gulf. Indian writers are particularly fond of such explanations, but some of the more savvy observers of Afghan affairs make similar arguments.<sup>7</sup> Anthony Davis provides a more potent version of this argument:

It has become fashionable to portray the meteoric rise of the Taliban as stemming from the complex interplay of social and political conditions prevailing in southern Afghanistan . . . But the Taliban were pre-eminently a military organisation rather than a political movement. In the short space of two years, their numbers multiplied rapidly from a force of less than 100 men, to one of several thousand and finally to one estimated in late 1996 to number at least 30,000–35,000

troops with a functioning brigade and divisional structure. It was equipped with armour, a notably effective artillery arm, a small air force, an impressive communications network and an intelligence system. The organizational skills and logistical wherewithal required to assemble from scratch, expand, and maintain such an integrated fighting machine during a period of continuous hostilities are simply not to be found in Pakistani madrassas or Afghan villages. Covert Pakistani support for the Taliban can thus be inferred to have been fundamental if not to the movement's political inception then at least to its expansion as a regional and then national force.<sup>8</sup>

Barnett Rubin adds a political economy framework to this explanation of the rise of Taliban, arguing that "overcoming predation poses a collective action problem: each predatory actor benefits, while a larger but diffuse constituency would benefit from suppressing predation . . . Both social capital that strengthens networks of solidarity and investments or side-payments from groups benefiting from the suppression of predation can help overcome the obstacles to collective action. The Taliban both mobilized social capital created in madrasas to create a homogeneous leadership group linked to political networks in Pakistan and used assistance from Pakistan and Saudi governments and traders to build up a military force and buy off opponents."<sup>9</sup> There is little doubt that the Taliban benefited from substantial Pakistani support and Arab Gulf largesse. Yet such an explanation is too expedient, if only because the ISI and Arab donors fully backed another Pashtun organization—the Hizb-e Islami—for the three years that preceded the rise of Taliban, but with paltry results.

Pakistani support to the Taliban might have been substantial, but it could not possibly compare in scale with Soviet support for the Afghan communists or even the resources poured in by Western and

other donors in support of the Karzai regime. And while Pakistan supported the Taliban, their rivals were vigorously backed by Iran, Russia, and India. The situation was hardly lopsided.<sup>10</sup> Gulf Arabs simultaneously supported a number of highly conservative Salafi figures with support among the Pashtuns, including Abdul Rabb al-Rasul Sayyaf, head of the Islamic Union (Ettihad-e Islami) and later a member of the Northern Alliance, and Mawlawi Jamil al-Rahman "Kunari" who headed his own Salafi "emirate" until defeated by Hekmatyar. None of them enjoyed the Taliban's success.

Another piece of evidence that undermines the "Saudi money" argument is that Saudi financial support to the Taliban became substantial only after July 1996, when the Taliban had already swept through most Pashtun areas.<sup>11</sup> Saudi aid dried up by September 1998 over the Taliban's refusal to give up Osama bin Laden. The Saudis also gave Masud and Rabbani \$150 million in 1993–1994 after they distanced themselves from Iran, money that could have been used for purchasing the loyalty of many commanders if this were indeed the way to extend power in Pashtun areas, as the Taliban's rivals and some scholars have alleged.<sup>12</sup> The scale of donations given to the Taliban was also far from enough to dwarf aid given to their combined rivals. While Masud, Dostum, and Ismail Khan received massive support from Iran, Russia and India, the well-connected Ahmed Rashid estimates Pakistani support to the Taliban in 1997–1998 at a fairly modest \$30 million.<sup>13</sup> It is hard to argue that the Taliban bought their way to power on \$30 million a year when the Soviet-backed Najibullah regime barely managed to hang on by spending ten times this amount every month.

All else being equal, both sides would have been able to buy the loyalty of regional leaders. But such leaders do not make decisions based solely on money. At least early on in the conflict, "Saudi money" seems more likely to have been a rhetorical tool used by the

Taliban's rivals in attempts to discredit them and to explain their own failures. Moreover, accusations of association with "Wahhabis" has long been a tactic used to taint rivals in Afghanistan. At the same time, the political economy explanation does not explain why Hekmatyar, who also had exclusive access to young Afghan men in refugee camps and madrasas, strong connections, and comparable financing, was not able to maintain a stable constituency. Of course, before the rise of the Taliban, Afghans had suffered for years from the rapacious behavior of many local leaders.

Pakistani and Arab backing at a crucial juncture of Taliban organizational development probably assisted their rise. Yet it is impossible to prove that the Taliban would not have achieved similar results without outside intervention in Afghan affairs at this juncture. After all, in the past, Pashtun and other Afghan areas had experienced a large number of tribal upheavals and movements that were not encouraged or financed by outsiders, including various anti-British uprisings and the early mujahedin resistance to the Afghan communists and Soviets. It is too facile to explain the rise of the Taliban through outside assistance alone. At least part of the explanation of Taliban success must be found in what the Taliban *did*. Even Ahmed Rashid's powerful thesis, which almost reverses the agency relationship between the Taliban and Pakistan (the Taliban had a lock on Pakistani support because of their strong ties to many powerful Pakistani constituencies), does not spare us from having to look at intra-Pashtun dynamics to explain the rise of the Taliban.<sup>14</sup>

Another analysis of the movement focused on a purported power vacuum. Davis argues that "the speed with which the Taliban burst onto the Afghan scene stemmed from several factors, none of them military. Primarily, the Taliban expanded—faster than they themselves believed possible—to fill what was, in effect, a political vacuum in southern Afghanistan."<sup>15</sup> His use of the vacuum metaphor and the

feelings he ascribes to the Taliban imply that Afghanistan was bereft of political organizations ready to immediately fill the void or willing to grow fast enough to do so. But Hekmatyar would have been perfectly happy to fill any void in the Pashtun areas long before the Taliban emerged. The reason he did not expand his area of influence is that there was no void to be filled.

Afghanistan was like the efficient world of Chicago economists: every area where poppy could be grown, traffic could be taxed, goods could be smuggled, and villagers could be exploited or mobilized was already controlled by local self-financed leaders who sometimes were even part of loose regional councils (*shuras*). And if those many local leaders and their armed followers do not seem substantial enough, it is worth recalling that they are in many ways similar to those who bedeviled the Soviets; and they currently are providing an intractable challenge to the United States. The vacuum explanation also fails to explain why Hekmatyar's forces crumbled upon the Taliban's approach—Hekmatyar's organization was highly centralized and articulated, with almost all the trappings of a government.

Other explanations do not explain *how* the Taliban rose to power. Larry Goodson identifies five factors he believes explain the rise of the Taliban:

First and most telling has been the shared Pashtun ethnicity of the Taliban and the majority of the noncombatant population in most of the area they have come to control . . . The next two factors in explaining the rise of the Taliban are inter-related. These are their emphasis on religious piety and the war-weariness of the Afghan civilian population . . . A fourth factor that explains the rise of the Taliban is money. Numerous knowledgeable observers of modern Afghanistan report that the Taliban used money to induce opposing commanders

to switch sides or surrender . . . Finally, the fifth factor that explains the success of the Taliban is Pakistani support. Support for the Taliban within Pakistan's government, army, and society is deep and multifaceted. Indeed, it is not incorrect to say that the Taliban are Pakistan's proxy army in Afghanistan, even though the Taliban leadership has not always followed Pakistan's preferences.<sup>16</sup>

Even if sufficient, necessary, and true, Goodson's list points merely to empowering and facilitating elements, elements that helped the Taliban execute the processes that were essential to their success. Facilitating factors do not an explanation make, but they provide the backdrop for the description of unfolding processes.

Hekmatyar's Hizb failed to overcome the same opponents the Taliban trounced, even though it enjoyed the exact same advantages. The Hizb touted itself as a Pashtun party after 1992 while still emphasizing its Islamist pedigree, forcing women to be veiled and limiting "un-Islamic" entertainment. The Hizb had access to more resources than it could reasonably use, as its many overstuffed weapons depots clearly demonstrated. The Hizb also enjoyed generous Pakistani support through thick and thin for more than fifteen years. Although both the Hizb and the Taliban had the potential to take advantage of the same facilitating factors, the Taliban were much more successful. It is hard to argue that the Taliban expanded by buying off commanders with Arab and Pakistani money when, a few years earlier, Kandahari commanders expelled Hekmatyar from their area in spite of a very generous ISI offer to buy their support for a campaign to liberate the city under his leadership.<sup>17</sup> In this story, money is overrated.

Other observers ascribe the rise of the Taliban in Pashtun areas to the appeal of their aura of religious purity and law-and-order agenda

in a land ravaged by bandits, smugglers, and other miscreants. "The Taliban have won support from a people sick of war. The three [*sic*] years since the Soviet army left have been three years of fighting between rival Islamic groups. Traditionally, religious students are held in high esteem. Other Islamic militias find it hard to bring themselves to shoot at them; the people find it easy to follow them. And the Taliban's advertised aim of establishing a government of national consensus, true to Islamic teachings, seems unchallengeable."<sup>18</sup> There is no doubt that the Taliban's appearance of piety and their law-and-order agenda were very appealing to the "people" in Pashtun areas. But how did this popularity translate into the ability to either defeat or co-opt the entrenched local leaders, who were benefiting from insecurity and exploitation? Afghanistan was not a liberal democracy for the will of the "people" to automatically translate into the emergence of a new regime.

The process through which the appeal of the Taliban's agenda translated into victories on the ground must be analyzed further. Antonio Giustozzi provides us with a hint that moves us along this line of reasoning: "In the end these young fundamentalists found it easier to root themselves in the Afghan countryside than the Islamists with their urban background, who continued to make up the thin upper crust of these parties. As the advent of the Taliban has shown, notwithstanding their military ineptitude, they could easily sweep away the Islamists from the Pashtun belt, thanks to their influence over the rank and file of the Islamist parties themselves."<sup>19</sup> Giustozzi's process-based argument—that the identity and creed of the Taliban undermined their rivals by causing defections among their followers—is compelling because it explains how different factors affect the preferences and behavior of specific actors.

Some argue that it is the Pashtun identity of the Taliban that mattered. Others suggest that the identity in question is Durrani as op-



posed to Ghilzai, but even this should probably be nuanced further because several Taliban leaders, including Mullah Omar, are of Ghilzai extraction.<sup>20</sup> David Edwards, who spent considerable time among the Pashtuns, probably best isolated the specific flavor of agenda-linked identity that made the Taliban acceptable to most rural Pashtuns. The Taliban, he notes, “consistently downplayed tribal or regional identities in favor of what might be called ‘village identity’ . . . In identifying purist culture and tradition with the Islam of the village, the Taliban were indirectly condemning the Islam of the parties since most of the party leaders were products of Kabul University or had worked for state-sponsored institutions. They were also putting themselves on a par with the people whose support they had to enlist if their movement was going to be successful.”<sup>21</sup> While there should be room for some of the factors discussed above in an explanation of the Taliban’s feat of mobilizing the Pashtuns on their way to control much of Afghanistan, their roles must be integrated into a dynamic process-based account. Pakistani and Arab Gulf support was helpful for the Taliban but not for others because the former used their support effectively to achieve their goals.

It therefore makes sense to explain the rise of the Taliban by comparing the perceptions, preferences, and strategies of the Taliban and their rivals. One deterrent to the adoption of such an approach is the dearth of accurate and useful information from the critical 1994–1996 period. The contested territory was not particularly hospitable for the very few scholars and journalists who cared enough about events in Afghanistan. Yet this is the only intellectually rigorous way to proceed.

The Taliban were able to co-opt or marginalize many established Pashtun elites by promoting defections among their local followers and by deploying their unique knowledge of Pashtun politics to dif-

fuse opposition. These processes worked sometimes simultaneously and at other times independently. They were also *facilitated* by some of the factors identified above—exclusive access to a pool of madrasa students, a widespread desire for law and order, a desire for a Pashtun political comeback, support from various Pakistani agencies and constituencies, and financing from the Arabian Peninsula.

The Taliban’s beginnings were not wholly unprecedented in Afghanistan. Several ephemeral Salafi-based movements, such as Jamil al-Rahman’s emirate in Kunar, Mawlawi Afzal’s state (*dawlat*) in Nuristan, and Mawlawi Shariqi’s followers’ tiny emirate in Badakhshan, had appeared before them. But they were all defeated by stronger rivals, including Hekmatyar’s Hizb.

The Taliban’s hundreds of small rivals in the Pashtun belt were not all organized along the same lines. Some consisted of independent self-financing bands that thrived on a combination of banditry, taxing traffic, smuggling, and small-scale production of poppy. Some commanders managed to develop networks of patronage and economies of scale in the same sectors. Such commanders maintained the loyalty of lesser commanders by providing them with resources they were well positioned to tap, including revenues from smuggling or rents from the faraway Rabbani regime or the closer Hekmatyar. Some commanders developed loose coordination and consultation councils where they conferred as equals, as in the Jalalabad shura. The only large centralized organization in the Pashtun belt was Hekmatyar’s Hizb, with its Army of Sacrifice, some twelve thousand strong. Some local leaders tended to dominate their regions; others lived in a precarious rivalry with their neighbors. Many leaders maintained their followings through their ability to organize resource-generating activities, while others mustered support through a combination of kinship ties, religious authority, and a history of heroism during the jihad. Some were particularly aggressive and hated, others



were not. This was a very complex landscape that provided the Taliban with various types of rivals in different configurations of power in each region they approached.

The Taliban calibrated their image and their message to successive Pashtun neighbors in a way that undermined the loyalty of a commander's following, thus simultaneously increasing his motivation to join the Taliban venture and reducing his ability to resist it. As Taliban forces approached the domain of a field commander or an area shared by rival field commanders, their presence automatically reordered the preferences of field commanders and their followers. The commanders' followers suddenly had an alternative to being part of a local group engaged in a precarious and brutish rivalry with others and that might have kept itself afloat through predatory behavior.

The Taliban occupation and management of Kandahar provided the Taliban with the base and credibility to launch their dramatic expansion. Their proposition to their Pashtun rivals' followers after they proved their mettle in Kandahar was particularly forceful. It consisted of a mix of the following: the Taliban provided moral clarity, a promise of a just and safe society stemming from a potent vision of Pashtun authenticity, and the satisfaction of being part of a momentous movement that could accomplish what became the stated goal of the jihad started in 1979—a just Islamic state that would incidentally also terminate non-Pashtun control of the capital. The Taliban alternative made the followers of commanders in their vicinity question the wisdom of resisting the Taliban when they seemed to be the credible providers of a better order. Followers whose loyalty to their commander was based on kinship or deep respect for his martial prowess or religious scholarship might have stuck by him longer or tried to pressure him not to resist the Taliban advance more than members of bands brought together by banditry or economic interests.

The limited options available to Pashtun commanders when the Taliban approached their region varied depending on their place in the local configuration of power, their size, their own Islamic credentials, and the cohesion of their own rudimentary organizations. Although not all field commanders and local leaders could realistically hope for the entire possible range of outcomes to their interaction with the Taliban, it is reasonable to assume that each leader would have ranked his theoretically possible outcomes in the following order of preference (higher first):

1. Maintaining local autonomy and control over local resources by successfully resisting the Taliban
2. Joining the Taliban as a client with a degree of autonomy while maintaining his organization's integrity
3. Being rewarded for surrendering local autonomy—money or joining the Taliban as an individual
4. Disbanding or disappearing from public view
5. Being defeated in battle
6. Being defeated by losing the support of his own troops and clients

Those who led tiny bands could not reasonably hope to resist the post-Kandahar Taliban; these generally disappeared from view. They would later be taken care of in the consolidation phase when the Taliban developed their polycentric system of shuras, morality police, and courts that enforced their order.

Established and independently financed commanders who controlled networks of patronage had the option to resist the Taliban but had to assess whether their client commanders (if any) and their troops would support them. Those who led patronage-based organizations that were kept together by more than money flows could opt

to resist, while those who maintained loyalty solely through economic means probably could not rely on their clients to support them. Commanders who generated their revenues by lending their support to the Hizb, the Jamiat, or Ismail Khan, as opposed to the exploitation of local resources, might have perceived the Taliban as an alternative source of patronage. Leaders with Islamic and jihad credentials, including figures such as Jalaluddin Haqqani, were able to join the Taliban without losing face or might even have had a dominant strategy of joining them because of their ideological affinity. Weaker commanders in a regional power configuration or ambitious clients of stronger regional leaders could have found in the advance of the Taliban an opportunity to improve their local standing or to survive a precarious situation.

The mere proximity of the advancing Taliban was often enough to strain the elementary organizations and patronage networks of the local leaders the Taliban approached, forcing them to evaluate their options and attempt to preempt some of the worse outcomes by making gestures of goodwill, like Abdul Wahid of Helmand did. The Taliban astutely used their sophisticated knowledge of Pashtun politics to approach different local leaders in ways that convinced them that successful resistance (outcome 1) was impossible and to prompt them to either disband (outcome 4) or join them while sacrificing autonomy (outcome 3). The Taliban shaped the preferences of local leaders by (1) approaching the most vulnerable ones in a regional power configuration first, (2) approaching key clients before approaching their regional patrons, (3) carefully deciding which commanders to appoint or discard, and/or (4) calibrating their message to appeal to the majority of the local leaders' rank and file.

It made sense for the Taliban initially to approach the weaker and more vulnerable commander in the context of a regional competi-

tion and to prevent the creation of a coalition of former rivals from coalescing against their advance. A vulnerable commander at risk of elimination by his stronger local rivals was more likely to be willing to join the Taliban. In return, he offered them a foothold in his area and specialized local knowledge. The previously dominant commander then found himself as the weaker of two parties locally and had to face the difficult choices above, knowing that he was alone against the Taliban. The pressures in such dynamics often drove the weaker side to plead with the Taliban to support him, presumably in return for his loyalty. This is in part how Ghazni fell at the end of January 1995 after the Hizb attacked in an attempt to preempt Taliban advances. To resist this attack, Governor Qari Baba allied himself with the Taliban while Masud's bombers also attacked Hizb positions.<sup>22</sup>

The largest and most aggressive organization in Pashtun areas, Hekmatyar's Hizb, pushed more commanders toward the Taliban than any other organization. Davis reports that this pattern of defections also prevailed in Maidanshahr, which fell to the Taliban on February 10, 1995. Similarly, the Taliban defeated an established group led by Ghaffar Akhundzadah in Helmand by leveraging his local rivals in early 1995.<sup>23</sup>

Approaching key clients before confronting their patrons was another strategy that served the Taliban well in Pashtun-majority areas as well as with Pashtun clients of non-Pashtun patrons. An ambitious client could be tempted to switch allegiance in the hope of making up for an unsatisfactory relationship of patronage, to transplant his previous patron, or out of ideological affinity with the newcomers. Clients were also not immune to the Taliban's pull on their followers. Such defections often were damaging, not only because they caused a blow to morale, but also because commanders on the periphery of the

patron's domain were generally entrusted with securing strategic areas that blocked the highly mobile Taliban from outmaneuvering their opponents.

Indeed, many of those commanders were both valued as clients and targeted for recruitment by the Taliban because of their strategic locations. One or more defecting commanders allowed the Taliban to control strategic heights that facilitated their first assault on Kabul.<sup>24</sup> A number of sources report that the decisive Taliban push toward Herat was greatly facilitated by the defections of Ismail Khan's Pashtun clients to the south of his domain.<sup>25</sup> In the north, several Pashtun commanders embedded among Uzbek and Tajik regional majorities (particularly around Konduz) also made the switch at decisive junctures.<sup>26</sup> The Taliban's second push toward Mazar was facilitated by the support of previous Hizb commanders from the area.<sup>27</sup>

The most famous defection by an ambitious client was that of Dostum's retainer Abdul Malik, who feared for his life after suspecting that Dostum had killed his ambitious brother, Rasul Pahlawan. But Abdul Malik's defection was also induced by Taliban promises of a government post and perhaps money, allowing Taliban forces to enter Mazar-e Sharif and rout Dostum's forces. Soon afterward, Malik turned against his Taliban allies as they tried to disarm him and then continued to attempt to seize Mazar. Malik's defection provides us with critical evidence that the Taliban's ability to marginalize or assimilate Pashtun leaders hinged on their ability to influence their followers. While the Taliban were able to draw even the best-organized Pashtun troops away from their leaders, the non-Pashtun Malik was able to switch allegiances at will because he was secure in the loyalty of his supporters. The Taliban forces in Mazar must have forgotten why their strategies worked in the past as they became accustomed to easy acquiescence to their monopoly on violence in Pashtun areas.

The Taliban also astutely used their sophisticated knowledge of

the Pashtun landscape to decide whether to co-opt, discard, or assassinate different commanders. The Taliban co-opted local leaders who would not have tarnished their finely calibrated image as heralds of a better order and who could substantially add to their military potential. Jalaluddin Haqqani, the master guerilla leader and uncompromising learned scholar without independent ambitions, was the epitome of the co-optable commander. Those tarnished by a history of predation or loyalty to the Hizb or Jamiat were better discarded, and their followers recruited on an independent basis or disbanded. Ambitious commanders with a solid and large group of followers who could have put up strong resistance were sometimes targeted for assassination.<sup>28</sup>

The Taliban assassinated the prominent Durrani leader Abdul Ahad Khan Karzai, father of Hamid, in July 1999, and made several attempts on Abdul Haq's life before they ultimately succeeded after the United States entered the fray in Afghanistan. The assassination of Masud, with the help of al-Qaeda, was the ultimate coup. It could very well have led to the collapse of the Panjsheri resistance, absent American intervention. Of course, Taliban choices were not always flawless in this regard. They integrated highly trained former members of the communist Khalqi faction into their troops for their military capabilities, but discarded them by 1998 when they realized the damage the Khalqis caused them and found alternative sources of expertise.

The carefully scripted image and message of the Taliban were essential components of their successful expansion across Pashtun areas, and these were later tweaked, with somewhat lesser success, to win over other constituencies. The Taliban's image and message reduced the ability of rival commanders to rely on their followers' support in case they wanted to resist the Taliban advance. They prevented local leaders from coalescing against the Taliban the way they

would have, had they been the forces of a client regime under the tutelage of a foreign power, such as the Soviets, British, and Americans, or anti-tribal Islamists like Hekmatyar.

The identity of the Taliban leaders and rank and file probably influenced how they were perceived and the credibility accorded to their message, but probably not in the way most observers believe it did. Identity mattered, not because of who the Taliban were, but because of who they were *not*. The Taliban were not hindered in their expansion within the Pashtun areas by being of urban background. They were not modernist Islamists with anti-tribal dispositions. They did not have a long record of ambitious expansion, nor could they be accused of being non-Pashtun. The Taliban's message and image would have been hindered by any such attributes. Kabul urbanites (such as the Afghan communists) would have been perceived as expanding the power of a central government and of being culturally alien to rural Pashtuns. Modernist Islamists like Hekmatyar were perceived as planning to sacrifice local political and cultural autonomy in their effort to create a centralized and modernizing Islamic state. Established organizations that have attempted past expansion (like Hizb, Ismail Khan, and Sayyaf) clashed with many commanders in the past and therefore lost any pretense to neutrality.

If the Taliban's identity mattered because of who they were, as opposed to who they were not, one would not have expected Mullah Omar, a Ghilzai of unremarkable lineage, to have mustered support among the Durranis. Regardless of his ancestry, Mullah Omar was able to woo support across Pashtun areas because of the vision he and his organization articulated and their projected image as credible purveyors of this vision. The credibility of the Taliban's reputation could not be undermined because of who they were, but what really mattered were the message and the image, not the Taliban members' ethnic, tribal, or community (*qawm*) identities.

A critical component of the Taliban's image was that they were perceived as neutral in the context of ongoing Afghan conflicts. They also suggested at an early stage that they were not interested in wielding power themselves. The Taliban's perceived neutrality made them acceptable neighbors, allies, and intermediaries for many commanders who kept their options open. The way the Taliban approached commanders also leveraged the neutral role of religious figures in Pashtun tradition:

Taliban sent religious envoys ahead to demand that local commanders disarm and dismantle roadblocks. Most duly did. Some even offered money, vehicles and weapons to help Taliban eliminate their rivals. But then Taliban pushed aside these collaborators too.<sup>29</sup>

The Taliban's strategies of manipulating regional rivalries and patronage ties would have proved much less successful if they had not been perceived as being neutral and promoting a selfless order. And when they tried to extend this advantage beyond Pashtun areas, they faced more skepticism by the minority groups they faced (for example, in the Wahdat-Masud conflict in Kabul).

The Taliban also leveraged cultural knowledge and affinity to project an aura of invincibility. This reduced the commanders' perception of their own ability to put up a challenge and the willingness of their fighters to go along. The use of cultural norms and symbols also provided assurances for those who would accept surrender or co-optation. There is no stronger evidence of the importance the Taliban gave to the preservation of Pashtun customary legal norms (*Pashtunwali*) than their willingness to shelter Osama bin Laden until the bitter end, the way a good Pashtun is expected to do. As one Taliban leader candidly acknowledged, Taliban leaders would have

lost the respect of their followers, and consequently the organization's cohesion, if they gave up bin Laden.

With Pashtunwali came cultural assets that reduced the cost of Taliban expansion. As they expanded, the Taliban brought back collective memories of Pashtun uprisings and symbols that were well enshrined in oral culture. Reputation became a valuable asset to risk, thus committing those who declared their loyalty to maintaining it. And even a certain degree of susceptibility to rumors and superstition might have contributed to Taliban victories. Rumors circulated that those who fired on the advancing students were miraculously stricken with fear, incapacitated by unexplained bleeding, or fell into a coma. While there is no evidence that such rumors were decisive, no other force in Afghanistan than the Taliban could have inspired such fear in those who were religious and superstitious.<sup>30</sup>

The momentum of the Taliban amplified their message and increased both the perceived cost and the real cost of resisting them. The farther and faster they expanded, the more credible became their promises to usher in a better order. Their expansion also brought with it new recruits in the guise of co-opted commanders and individual volunteers, which made them an ever more formidable force. And the commander who saw dozens of others fall or surrender to the Taliban before him had a robust example of what would become of him if he tried to resist. By the time the Taliban reached Hekmatyar's base in Chaharasyab, their momentum had increased their ability to undermine rivals' followings to the point that even the Hizb's fairly well-organized and structured force surrendered to them without a fight. The same scenario repeated itself in Sarobi. Even the tenacious Hekmatyar, who had patiently built his organization over some twenty years of struggle, had to see his followers abandon him without even the pretense of a fight.

The Taliban perpetuated their monopoly on the use of violence

in Pashtun areas by carefully disarming the forces of commanders they did not co-opt. They then maintained some control through a polycentric system of ruling shuras, a network of informants and dedicated followers, and a monopoly over the taxation of poppy production and smuggling.<sup>31</sup> The cost became too high for those Pashtuns who wished to organize resistance from scratch to challenge the Taliban.

To expand beyond the Pashtun belt, the Taliban had to tweak their message and adopt different strategies. In minority areas they could not rely on their ability to pull the rug out from under their rivals' feet by appealing to their followers. The Taliban therefore adopted a new mix of strategies: military attacks, assassination of leaders, buying the loyalty of key commanders, and co-opting embedded minorities (not only Pashtuns) within regional majorities. The Taliban also made efforts to appear nonthreatening to minority populations, including, initially, the Hazara. They added minority members to their governing shura, albeit with inconsequential portfolios, and recruited minority fighters in the north. Their results were mixed, however, particularly after they killed Mazari and violently retaliated for the massacres in Mazar.

This explanation of the rise of the Taliban suggests lessons for the current U.S. venture in Afghanistan and provides a basis to speculate on the potential for a greater revival of the Taliban. There is no hope for the state-building venture to succeed if the Karzai regime fails to sideline or overwhelm the now self-financed and entrenched Pashtun militias that reemerged after November 2001. The constitution, elections, institutions, and other trappings of a democratic society that have been absorbing resources and the energy of figures in the Karzai regime and their Western patrons are not key to mobilizing the Pashtuns and consolidating the state—they are illusory symbols of a state



that normally should have developed after the government had become secure by weakening its potential military challengers.

Instead of focusing on creating the image of a state, the United States and its clients should have done what the Taliban did before them: dismantle rival power structures. Of course, the Taliban's knowledge of the complex Pashtun tapestry of power, the preferences of warlords and their followers, and their credible promise to bring back Pashtun greatness, allowed them to fine-tune their image, message, and strategies in a way that is impossible for the alien U.S. military and its minority or émigré clients to do. In fact, this window of opportunity closed a long time ago. The tools left at U.S. disposal are the use of brute force and patronage, both of which have proven to be self-defeating in the past.

Will the Taliban make a broader comeback? Some of the facilitating factors that preceded their rise persist, while others have disappeared. There still is a reservoir of dedicated talibs fueled by resentment at the U.S.-backed reversal they experienced, with intricate knowledge of the area's power structure, access to weapons, and some financial support. On the other hand, Pakistani and Arab state support has almost stopped, even if Pakistani covert backing may very well have resumed. Of course, things could change, and even overt Pakistani aid could resume in earnest, if Musharraf is deposed or the United States leaves the country. The Taliban could very well come back with a vengeance, if the United States decides to undermine militarized Pashtun local leaders by depriving them of their sources of income or decides to leave the Karzai regime to perish. The Taliban have some very good reasons to wait until the United States makes such fateful decisions.

The Taliban are likely to sweep through Pashtun areas again if the United States leaves Afghanistan in the next few years, given their continuing ability to provide the same compelling proposition to

leaders and their followers, even without Pakistani support. However, a resurgent Taliban will most likely need Pakistani support and financing from sympathetic sources, if they are to reconquer non-Pashtun areas. A serious effort by the United States to weaken the many Pashtun local leaders and curb their production of poppy is likely to push them to covertly or overtly support the Taliban and other insurgents.

In this case, the Taliban could become only one of a number of organizations that will ultimately strive for influence in Pashtun areas. But the Taliban are resilient even as an insurgent organization—the group is not vulnerable to decapitation (Mullah Omar is only a first among many equals), and it is structured in a way that shields it from the many counterinsurgency shortcuts. Either way, the Taliban in one form or another will remain a player in Afghan affairs for some time.

Perhaps more important than its policy consequences, this narrative illustrates the kind of dynamics involved in the production of societal outbursts in some analogous contexts. The dramatic rise of the Taliban provides us with a rare opportunity (perhaps never to be observed again, given the gradual disappearance of similar societies) to observe the kind of processes that might have animated much greater ventures in the past. If my understanding of the processes underlying the rise of the Taliban is correct, then the power of great ideas should be coupled with an understanding of strategies and organizational features to explain historical events such as the Mongol outburst and tribal mobilizations in Afghanistan, Algeria, the Arabian Peninsula, and elsewhere. Some of those historical events produced or defeated empires, and it does not suffice to explain their early stages by referring to merely facilitating and empowering factors, as many scholars have done.