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The Afghanistan Conflict in its Historical Context

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Introduction

In April 2013 the Defence Select Committee of the British Parliament published a report on *Securing the Future of Afghanistan* which concluded that civil war in Afghanistan is likely when the international forces there leave in 2014. One wonders what the Committee thought had been going on in Afghanistan over the past 35 years. The war between the Western forces and the Taliban is part and parcel of the Afghan civil war which began in 1979 between the Communists and their enemies and, after the collapse of the Communist regime in 1992, developed into a conflict between different factions of Mujahedin. Since 2001 the war has expanded to include conflict with the Western forces. What happened in 1979, and again 2001, was that foreign superpowers intervened on one side of a civil war, violently tipping the balance in favour of that side – for a while. The question, therefore, is: Will this protracted civil war continue after the planned departure of American and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in 2014 or are alternative scenarios possible or likely?

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According to an assessment of the transition towards a post-2014 Afghanistan by the International Crisis Group (ICG), Afghanistan is hurtling towards a devastating political crisis as its government prepares to take full control of security by the end of 2014. The ICG assessment concludes that there is a real risk that the regime in Kabul could collapse upon withdrawal of American and NATO forces. This may lead to a weakened state breaking up into mini ethnic- and tribal-fiefdoms controlled by warlords and supported by armed militias who would exercise political sway over their respective areas and jostle for greater power and influence, leading in turn to a series of mini civil wars. Many of these militias have in fact been set up in the countryside by American/NATO forces in a desperate attempt to shore up the weak Karzai regime in Kabul. Thus the civil war that started over 30 years ago will continue. But in order to know and predict the future shape of Afghanistan, it is imperative to understand the history of the Afghan conflict and the protagonists who are driving it.

Afghanistan Conflict: A Brief Historical Background

During the course of its 300-year history as a state, Afghanistan has gone through numerous episodes of political rupture. The principal cause of these ruptures has remained largely the same: An under-developed economy and the inability of the rulers to shift from a person-centred, tribal-political culture to a broader and more inclusive system of national politics based on modern institutions and rules of governance. As a result, the rulers of Afghanistan have largely depended on foreign and tribal patrons and not on the human and material resources of the country. This political milieu has led to numerous fratricidal wars of succession and pacification with devastating consequences, resulting in extended periods of political and social unrest and lawlessness. These bloody conflicts have facilitated and even invited foreign interventions. One such intervention was by the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) in a civil war between the then Communist rulers of Afghanistan and their Afghan enemies, ultimately leading in turn to America's intervention.

The current conflict in Afghanistan is a continuation of Afghanistan–USSR war of 1979–89. That conflict became a proxy war between the then two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. The latter had occupied Afghanistan ostensibly at the request of the Communist regime that it had helped to install in 1979. The occupation of Afghanistan made the country a battleground between the Soviet Union and its allies, the Afghan government armies and the Islamic Mujahedin ('warriors of the faith'). The Mujahedin were an Islamic, largely Afghan militia, supported by the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, the United Kingdom and a host of other US allies. This support was instrumental in mobilising international Islamic solidarity in what has come to be known as the Afghan Jihad (Saikal 2004; Maley 2002).

The United States and Saudi Arabia were the main financial underwriters of the conflict against the USSR. Without American support in the form of CIA-funded Project Cyclone, which gave billions of dollars to fund the Afghan Jihad, the outcome would have been very different. The US support package included organisational, logistical, military, technological and ideological backing and assistance in order to sustain and encourage Afghan resistance. The US and Saudi Arabian money gave impetus to the establishment of thousands of *madrasas* (Islamic religious schools) in Pakistan, which ensured a continuous supply of Mujahedin. As an ally of – and therefore under pressure from – the United States, Pakistan also provided its northern Pashtun areas, bordering Afghanistan, as a safe haven for Mujahedin. The war between the Mujahedin and the Soviet Union lasted almost a decade until 1989 when the Soviet Union, facing huge military losses, was forced to withdraw its forces under a negotiated accord signed in Geneva in 1988 (Saikal 2004; Rais 1999).

After the withdrawal of the Soviet Union in 1989, the US and Saudi funds for the Afghan Jihad ceased. When the Soviet Union finally stopped supporting the Afghan Communist regime a year or so later, a wave of rebellion against this government began, led primarily by Uzbek and Tajik militia commanders in northern Afghanistan who joined prominent Mujahedin commander Ahmad Shah Masoud of the Islamic Society (Jamiat-e-Islami). This society was a largely Tajik party headed by Burhannudin Rabbani. The Communist regime duly defeated, Rabbani became President of Afghanistan in 1992, a development which set off a violent and destructive conflict between various Mujahedin factions, including those supporting the nominal Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a Pashtun, thereby bringing more devastation and chaos to Afghanistan. Hekmatyar's radical Islamist Hizb-e-Islami (Islamic Party) had received a large proportion of the US aid during the anti-Soviet war. The four years of civil war that followed (1992–96) created popular support for the Taliban movement that sought to deliver Afghanistan from this factional fighting (Katzman 2008; Saikal 2004).

Rise of the Taliban

In 1993 a group of Islamic clerics and their students, mostly of rural Pashtun origin and many of them former Mujahedin who had become disillusioned with continued conflict among Mujahedin parties and had moved into Pakistan to study in Islamic seminaries, formed the Taliban movement (Taliban is the plural of *talib* meaning student). They practised an orthodox Sunni Islam akin to the Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia. They viewed the Rabbani government as corrupt, anti-Pashtun and responsible for civil war. There was an important ethnic dimension in this conflict. Afghanistan was founded as a Pashtun state and had been ruled by Pashtun dynasties throughout its history. At 45 per cent of the population,

the Pashtun are country's largest and therefore dominant ethnic group and they regard themselves as both founders of the country and people of the state. The promise of the recovery of Kabul from Tajik Burhannudin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Masoud proved more powerful than the traditional rivalries among Pashtun tribes, notably between the Durrani from the south and Ghilzais from the east, bringing about unprecedented unity between the tribes. Even those Pashtun, who hated the Taliban for their extremism and intolerance, gave them passive support. Many Mujahedin commanders defected to the Taliban, and they were actively supported by Pakistan's intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). According to some sources, they also received assistance from America's Central Intelligence Agency and the US State Department. Between 1994 and 1995 (a high-ranking US State Department official confirmed this to me in an interview in 2002), the Taliban had numerous victories against the Northern Alliance commanders and eventually took control of Kabul on 27 September 1996, setting up the Taliban government (Rais 1999, 2010; Hassan 2010; *The Economist* 2008; Saikal 2004).

The emergence of the Taliban accorded with the underlying logic of Pashtun culture. In one of the most remarkable ethnographic accounts of Pashtun culture, the eminent Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth describes the role of lineage in shaping a political alliance that extends across ethnic frontiers. He also explores how the procedure for resolution of conflict depends on the nature of the conflict. Revenge is regarded as a person's right, along with compensation. In social conflicts, the Mians (descendants of saints), or other persons of saintly repute, frequently play a critical role by serving as arbitrators. In group conflict, "where concerted punitive action is called for, groups of religious students (taliban) have proved more readily responsive than the larger community of villagers under the direction of the council" (Barth 1956). Thus the rise of the Taliban movement is an affirmation of Barth's insightful description of the resolution of conflicts in Pashtun tribal society (Rashid 2001).

The Taliban regime was led by reclusive Uruzgan-born cleric Mullah Mohammad Omar, a former Mujahedin commander and leader of the Hizb-e-Islami (the Islamic party of Yunis Khalis). His rise to power closely follows the cultural pattern described above by Barth (Rashid 2001). Mullah Omar forged close bonds with Osama bin Laden and refused US demands to extradite him. The Taliban regime progressively lost international and domestic support as it imposed a harsh Islamic regime on Afghanistan, using physical punishments to enforce strict Islamic practices, such as banning television and prohibiting women from attending schools and from most waged work. Their policies against Afghan women were especially oppressive and evoked international condemnation.

The emergence and triumph of the Taliban movement following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the fratricidal war between the Mujahedin factions conform with the structural patterns and dynamics of the wars of succession that Afghanistan has experienced in the past. But how did a seemingly anarchistic band of religious zealots manage to achieve power and retain a tenacious foothold in the struggle for Afghanistan's future? The commonplace explanation is that the rise of Taliban was mainly a product of assistance from outside the country, primarily from Pakistan. Taliban ideology is seen as a product of the interpretation of the *sharia* based on the Islamic teachings of Pakistani Deobandi seminaries attended by many Taliban leaders and fuelled by vehement opposition to Western culture (Rashid 2001; Roy 2002; Giustozzi 2012).

However, careful analysis shows that the reason behind the rise and success of the Taliban was *what they did*. They provided a moral clarity and a promise of a just and safe society stemming from a potent vision of Pashtun authenticity. After the ravages of the war against the Soviet occupation, followed by the bloody conflicts between Mujahedin factions, the Taliban promised to preserve the Pashtun customary code – *Pashtunwali*. The protection of this cultural asset reduced resistance to Taliban expansion. Their success also hinged on their mastery of the tribal milieu, and was enhanced by the Islamist agendas of Afghanistan's neighbours. During their short rule, the Taliban exploited their Islamist agenda in novel ways, most notably by dramatically privatising women whilst making religion, power and morality public. This policy was not unique to the Taliban: it reflected the shades of gender policies of other countries with Islamist agendas (Crews and Tarzi 2008).

Internationally, the Taliban regime became isolated due to its lack of recognition by the United Nations and all countries except Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE (United Arab Emirates). The Clinton Administration was incensed by the Taliban support of Al Qaeda's leadership, which had moved to Afghanistan, and subsequently launched missile attacks on 20 August 1998 at the alleged Al Qaeda training camps in eastern Afghanistan (Saikal 2004).

The Taliban government's domestic policies and its international isolation caused different Afghan factions to ally with the ousted President Rabbani and Masoud, uniting mainly a Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek anti-Taliban opposition into a broader Northern Alliance. It was joined later by the Pashtun Mujahedin faction, led by Abd-I-Rab Rasul Sayyaf. However, although the Northern Alliance received military and financial support from Iran, Russia and India, it continued to lose ground to the Taliban. By the time of the September 11, 2001 attacks, the Taliban controlled most of the country. To compound

the situation, the Alliance received a major setback when, two days before the September 11 attacks, Ahmed Shah Masoud was assassinated by alleged Al Qaeda suicide bombers.

Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the Bush Administration in the US was determined to overthrow the Taliban militarily when it refused to extradite Osama bin Laden. Operation Enduring Freedom was launched on 7 October 2001. As a result of the US- and UK-led aerial bombing campaign and the ground campaign of the land forces of the Northern Alliance and the Pashtun anti-Taliban group, by early December the Taliban regime was overthrown. The city of Qandahar was the last to surrender, and most of the Taliban leadership, including Mullah Omar, fled into the countryside and went into hiding. A few months later, the US and Northern Alliance forces conducted Operation Anaconda against Al Qaeda and elements of the Taliban forces. On 1 May 2002, the United States announced an end to “major combat operations” (Katzman 2008).

Post-Taliban Political Developments

The war paved the way for the formation of a broad-based Afghan government under the aegis of the United Nations. In December 2001, the United Nations-brokered Bonn Agreement was signed by all Afghan factions with the exception of the Taliban. It authorised the formation of an interim administration headed by Hamid Karzai and the establishment of an international peace-keeping force to maintain security in Kabul. In June 2002 a *loya jirga* (*grand council or assembly*) was convened to approve these measures. A constitutional commission drafted a permanent constitution which was subsequently approved by a constitutional *loya jirga* in December 2003–January 2004. However, there was a widespread perception among the Pashtun that the interim government was dominated by the Panjshiri Tajik armed faction and that the *loya jirga*, which was expected to install a more broadly representative, and hence more legitimate, government, had ended up reinforcing the Panjshiri monopoly over the control of the government’s key institutions, especially those dealing with national security (International Crisis Group (ICG) 2003).

Hamid Karzai was elected as first President in September 2004 by 55.4 per cent of the popular vote, and non-party-based parliamentary elections were subsequently held in September 2005. However, soon after the parliament was convened, it elected with the support of the Northern Alliance bloc a major political opponent of Karzai as parliamentary speaker. The same Alliance, together with ex-communists and members of the royal family, now formed a party called the National Front, which sought greater parliamentary power and direct election of provincial governors. In 2009, the second

presidential election was held but a runoff was required because no candidate won over 50 per cent of the popular vote. But no second round was held because the second candidate, Dr Abdullah Abdullah, pulled out of the runoff and Hamid Karzai was elected as President in controversial circumstances for a second five-year term. Parliamentary elections followed a year later, in 2010, and saw a record number of women being elected to the parliament. This time, Mr Abdul Raouf Ibrahim, an ethnic Uzbek, was elected as the parliamentary speaker. These elections were also mired in controversy but were eventually ratified by the electoral commission as legitimate. In spite of many contentious issues, Afghanistan now has a functioning parliamentary government in which the executive and the legislature are working together.

Nevertheless, the writ of the Afghan government is limited largely to the country's cities and therefore to about 30 per cent of the country. Of the remainder, the Taliban controls 10 per cent, whilst tribes and local groups control the rest. The US government and the international community have been trying to bolster the Karzai government through extensive reconstruction and stabilisation programmes and assistance in the belief that stability and effective countering of corruption and narcotics trafficking depend on the expansion of the capacity, proficiency and writ of the central Afghan government.

Table 1. Major security-related indicators as of 2013

STRENGTH OF FORCE	CURRENT LEVEL
Total foreign forces in Afghanistan	About 95,000: 63,000 US and 32,000 partner forces
US casualties in Afghanistan	2,110 killed, of whom 1,748 by hostile action.
Afghan National Army	195,000 of whom 5,300 are US-trained commando forces.
Afghan National Police	About 150,000: includes 21,000 border police, 3,800+ counter narcotics police, and 14,400 Civil Order Police.
ANSF Salaries	About US\$ 6 billion per year, paid by donor countries or via trust funds
Number of Al Qaeda	According to General David Petraeus, as of 2011, less than 100

Number of Taliban fighters	Up to 25,000, including about 3,000 Haqqani network and 100 Al Qaeda fighters
Number of suicide bombings	21 in 2005; 123 in 2006; 228 in 2007; 239 in 2008
Afghan casualties	11,864 (2007-2011)

Source: Katzman, K. Afghanistan: Post-War Governance, Security, and US Policy June 2013. Washington DC: Congressional Research Services

To this end, between 2002 and 2012, Washington provided a massive US\$ 83 billion in reconstruction, including assistance to “train and equip” the Afghan army and police as well as counter-narcotics support. In addition, US combat operations for 2010–2013 are estimated to have cost approximately US\$ 369 billion. When those figures are included, it can be seen that the US has spent about US\$ 557 billion on the Afghanistan effort between 2002 and 2012. And this assistance is in addition to that provided by about 95,000 members of the NATO-led coalition ISAF (International Security Assistance Force), which includes in itself 63,000 US forces personnel. The number of US forces has subsequently declined from their 2011 peak of 100,000 and those forces remaining are deployed around the country in 88 bases. The details of these security-related indicators are given in Table 1.

Resurgence of the Taliban

Levels of violence from 2002 to 2006 were relatively low and this was attributed to the unpopularity of the Taliban around the country. The US and its partner forces were involved in a relatively low number of combat operations against the Taliban in the south and east, including “Operation Mountain Viper” (August 2003), “Operation Avalanche” (December 2003), “Operation Mountain Storm” (2004) and “Operation Lightning Freedom” (2004–05). Towards the end of this period, the US and partner commanders believed that the Taliban insurgency had been defeated, only to see a rapid escalation of violence in predominantly Pashtun areas in 2006. Reasons for this escalation were many and included the following: Popular unrest over the ineffectiveness and corruption in the Afghan government; the absence of effective governance or security forces in many rural areas; safe haven enjoyed by insurgents in Pakistan and the reticence of NATO partners to combat insurgents actively; a popular backlash against the civilian casualties resulting from military operations; and unrealised expectations of economic development. In some areas the absence of the writ of the government has increased lawlessness with the consequence that people welcome any form of justice, even that administered by

the Taliban. This lawlessness has been greatly accentuated by the way in which the US restored warlords to local power and then not only allowed them but actively helped them to eliminate local rivals and their supporters. In many cases these warlords included Taliban leaders who had expressed willingness to reconcile with the Karzai administration (Rubin 2013; Bergen 2013).

The US and NATO commanders tried to rectify some of these problems but without any durable success. The Taliban expanded their operations into provinces where they had not previously been active. They also carried out some high-profile attacks in Kabul in 2008, which included attacks on the Serna Hotel and the Indian Embassy, both of which resulted in many casualties. In June 2008, the Taliban engineered the Sarposa Prison break in Qandahar that freed several hundred Taliban prisoners. The US commanders were surprised and alarmed by the growing violence and even the then Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen was led to say, “I’m not sure we are winning in Afghanistan.”

Figure1A. Insurgent attacks by type (2006-2011)

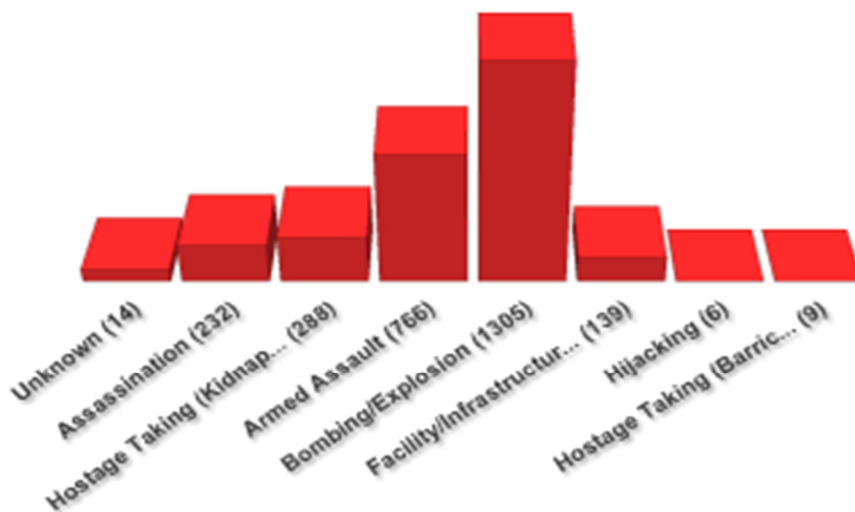
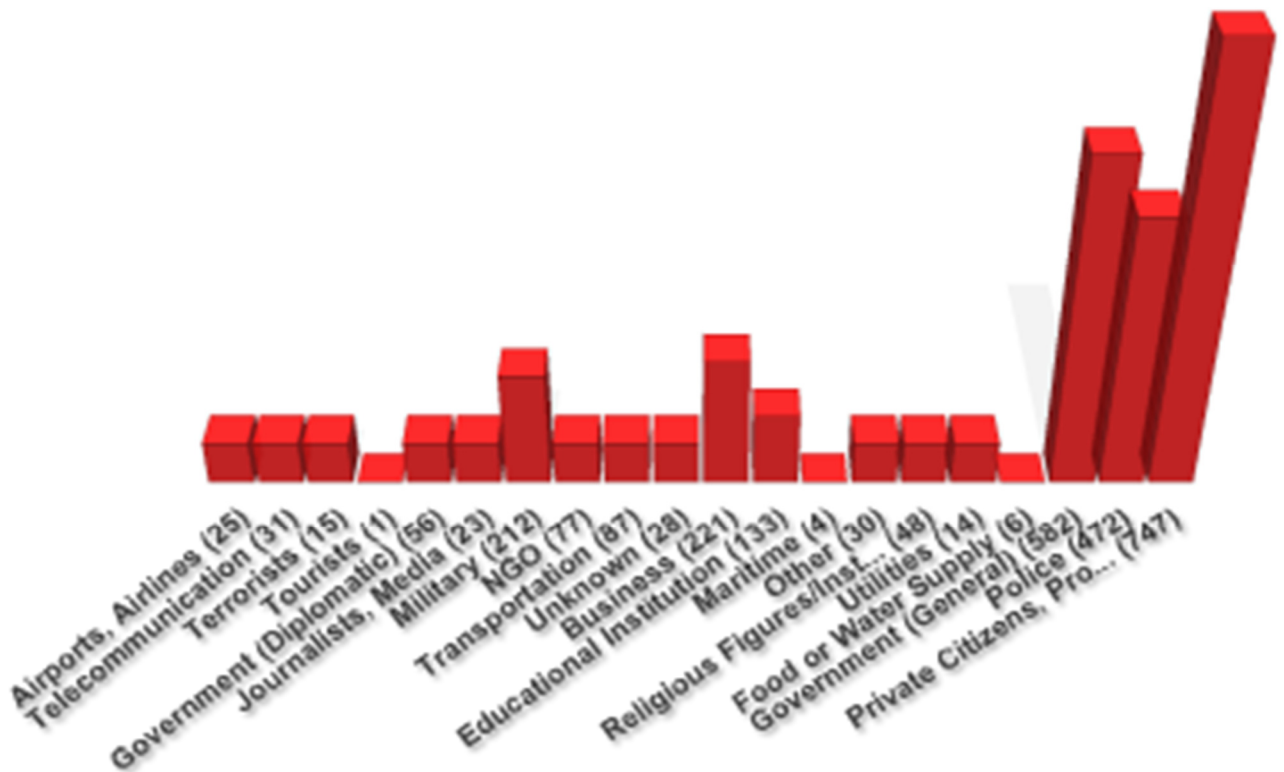


Figure1B. Afghanistan: Insurgent targets (2006-2011)



Source: START: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, www.start.umd.edu

Evidence showed that the increase in violence was directly related to the resurgence of the Taliban. Moreover, it revealed that the Taliban were adapting weapons used in the Iraq insurgency, which was also raging at that time, such as suicide bombings, armed attacks and assassinations (see Figure 1A). Significantly, the occurrence of suicide attacks has particularly increased in the Taliban-dominated provinces of Urzgan, Helmand, Qandahar and Zabol, where foreign forces assumed responsibility in July 2006. The insurgents targeted anyone they considered to be supporting the occupying foreign forces and Karzai government, and consequently their main targets were Afghan police and public officials as well as the foreign forces themselves (Figure 1B). As mentioned above, the increased violence has been attributed to popular frustration with the pace of reconstruction, rampant corruption within the Karzai government and intimidation by the Taliban. There is also evidence that support for the Taliban has been growing, especially in Pashtun areas. Besides suicide attacks, the insurgents are also using other, more sophisticated, weapons such as surface-to-air missiles against ISAF aircraft.

The Afghan government blames the Pakistan government for permitting the Taliban to have safe havens in its tribal areas. ISAF forces have countered the violence by launching numerous military operations against the Taliban, but they have not had a significant impact, as is made evident by the increasing number of casualties and rise in the number of suicide bombings, including some very high-profile incidents. The insurgents continue to extend their influence to hitherto normally quiet provinces and cities and to conduct high-profile attacks in and around Kabul. In 2011, for example, insurgents stormed the iconic Intercontinental hotel in Kabul and fought a running battle with NATO and Afghan forces for several hours. In the same year, they carried out a rocket-and-gunfire attack on the US Embassy in Kabul and ISAF headquarters, demonstrating that insurgents could strike the very centre of coalition power. And in 2012, there were several more high-profile attacks, including one on another hotel outside Kabul frequented by foreigners and another on the British airbase in Helmand, which destroyed several Marine Harrier jets. There were also high-casualty attacks in Faryab, Wardak and Farah Provinces.

One of the most high-profile recent Taliban attacks was carried out on 17 January 2014 on a well-known Kabul restaurant, the Taverna du Liban, frequented by foreign diplomats and aid workers. It killed 21 people, including the head of the International Monetary Fund's Afghanistan office, the Lebanese restaurant owner and 12 other foreigners. According to a Taliban spokesman, the attack was to avenge a US airstrike in Parwan Province, three days earlier, which killed 30 Afghan women and children. He was quoted in the international media as saying, "These invading forces have launched a brutal bombardment on civilians and they have martyred and wounded 30 civilians. This was a revenge attack and we did it well and will continue to do so". (ABC 2014).

In all these attacks, insurgents suffer heavy casualties but this does not appear to be impeding their ability to continue their insurgency. This contradicts claims by some prominent US commanders that the Taliban were having difficulty with resources and would find it difficult to regroup easily after the US/NATO forces withdraw. Meanwhile, the US/NATO commanders generally blame the Afghan government for poor governance, which is eroding the gains made by foreign forces over the past five years. They also echo the Afghan government's claim that one reason for insurgent resilience is that they enjoy safe haven in Pakistan. No reliable figures are available of the number of insurgents killed and wounded in the Afghan civil war since 2001 but they are likely to be in the thousands and certainly many times more than the US and NATO casualties, which are estimated to be 1,711 killed and 18,101 wounded (Chesser 2012). Yet, as mentioned earlier, since 2006 the insurgency is escalating, not decreasing, in intensity.

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