Revolution in the Counter-Revolution: Efforts to Centralize the Taliban's Military Leadership

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Abstract

Interviews with Taliban cadres and commanders challenge conventional views about the inherently fragmented character of the Taliban insurgency and about the role of the Quetta Taliban leadership in running the military organization of the Taliban. The so-called Haqqani network operated as a largely autonomous force from 2007 until 2015, as did the Peshawar Shura from 2009 onward. However, both the Haqqanis and the Peshawar Shura were able to impose a much greater degree of coherence and discipline among its ranks than the Quetta Shura was able to, at least until 2015.

Keywords

Afghanistan – insurgency – Taliban – Quetta Shura – Peshawar Shura – Haqqani network

The Taliban insurgency is often characterized as a highly fragmented and divided movement—a "franchise" encompassing disparate groups and factions holding diverse motivations and aims and lacking a genuinely unified leadership or coherent organizational structure. Writing in 2007, former interior minister (2003–2005) Ali A. Jalali described the Taliban as "an assortment of ideologically motivated Afghan and foreign militants, disillusioned tribal communities, foreign intelligence operatives, drug traffickers,

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opportunist militia commanders, disenchanted and unemployed youth, and self-interested spoilers … more of a political alliance of convenience than an ideological movement."[1] While this description was probably fairly accurate at that time, nearly a decade later it still captures well the general view. The Taliban 2015 offensive, however, surprised many observers for its coordination and ability to mass forces against government positions.[2]

The standard view is that the Taliban leadership is centered in Quetta, Paki- stan, with a Leadership Council (*Rahbari Shura*) acting as a coordinating body, presided over (symbolically at least) by Mullah Omar until his death in 2013. In the field, the Taliban's politico-military governance structure is understood to be based on a network of provincial governors, each coordinating a variable number of district chiefs. The result is a shadow government loosely reflecting the structure of the Afghan state and partly aimed at giving the impression of the insurgents as a "government-in-waiting." The latter's influence over individual military commanders and officials is, however, often limited and localized, varying widely from area to area in line with local power dynamics.

Perhaps more importantly, the Taliban themselves have projected an image of a movement opposed to state centralization, which in Afghanistan has a strong Kemalist characterization—it is the state that brings a Western-inspired "modernity" to Afghanistan and enforces it. The Taliban originally rejected even the version of "modernity" propounded by the various strands of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Afghanistan (and particularly the more radical Hizb-i Islami). The Taliban deliberately organized themselves according to a model derived from Sunni clerical networks, which are very decentralized.

After 2005 the Taliban belatedly realized that this model of organization was not very effective for conducting a full-scale insurgency. This article describes the growing awareness of this situation and the subsequent organizational de- bates within the Taliban. It is based on tens of in-depth interviews with Taliban cadres, carried out by the authors in a three-year process that allowed for the development of a degree of rapport with a number of the interviewees, a factor that proved crucial in tracing changes over time. In addition, many more inter- views were carried out by the wider research team with junior or mid-ranking Taliban field commanders across many provinces between 2011 and 2013. In total, the research team interviewed 99 Taliban cadres, commanders, and fighters in Nuristan, Zabul, Uruzgan, Wardak, Paktia, Badakhshan, Baghlan, Takhar, Kunduz, Nangarhar, Helmand, Ghazni, Faryab, Sar-i Pul, Balkh, Samangan,

1 Ali A. Jalali, "Afghanistan: Regaining Momentum," *Parameters*, (Winter 2007–2008), 12.

2 See Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Blood and Hope in Afghanistan: A June 2015 Update," Brookings Institution, May 26, 2015, http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/05/26-isis-taliban-afghanistan-felbabbrown.

Jowzjan, and Kandahar. In addition, the team also used a series of 53 interviews with Taliban and 27 interviews with village elders in Helmand in 2012, collected for a concurrent project on the Taliban.3 Finally, the authors drew from an on- going project about the history of the Taliban after 2001 that features about 230 interviews with Taliban leaders, cadres, commanders, and community elders.4 The authors were also able to draw on a number of contacts with high-level Taliban cadres linked to senior leadership circles in Quetta and Peshawar. At times confusing and dense with overlapping narratives, the research phase was a process of discovery for the authors, who could not have foreseen what they were to discover. Most interviews were carried out by Afghan researchers, due to the difficulty of arranging meetings between Western researchers and Taliban, but the authors were able to carry out eight interviews with Taliban cadres themselves, in the presence of an Afghan member of the research team. In all cases, it was not possible to record the interviews and only notes could be taken.

The article begins with an account of the loose and largely ad hoc structures in place during the Taliban's resurgence as a guerrilla movement following the Islamic Emirate's collapse, followed by a description of the Quetta Shura's own efforts to increase coordination and cooperation among its commanders. The third section is dedicated to the establishment, by 2007, of the Peshawar Shura as an alternative center of power and as the proponent of a different command and control model, which it first implemented in the east and then tried to export to the south as well. The perceived success of the Peshawar Shura's model led to debates over reform within the Quetta Shura as well, as described in thethird and last section.

The Early Military Organization of the Taliban Insurgency (2002–2006)

Immediately following the fall of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) in late 2001, the defeated Taliban's assets consisted of demoralized and disorganized fighters who had hidden their weapons and gone to ground, hiding either at home or, particularly in the case of the senior commanders and

3 The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK and man- aged by Theo Farrell of King's College London. Some of its findings are discussed in Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi, "The Taliban at War: Inside the Helmand Insurgency, 2004–2012," *International Affairs*, 89, no. 4 (July 2013): 845–871.

4 This project is being implemented by King's College London with funding from the Economic and Social Sciences Research Council (ESRC).

leadership figures, in exile across the Durand Line. Starting from 2002 and continuing throughout 2003, disparate groups of Taliban started re-organizing at the local level and initiated military activities. During 2003 these groups start- ed coalescing around some former senior figures of the Emirate, who by mid- 2003 announced the formation of a Leadership Council (*Rahbari Shura)*, soon to be universally known as the Quetta Shura.5 Another center of aggregation, which emerged at about the same time, was the so-called Haqqani network, whose headquarters were in Mirin Shah, Waziristan.

The creation of a Taliban leadership of the insurgency encouraged more senior Taliban cadres to get involved. A number of charismatic Taliban commanders started reactivating their followers, mainly in southern and southeastern Afghanistan, by personally travelling to the provinces of Afghanistan and to the refugee camps and cities of Pakistan or by sending trusted emissaries. These leaders began gathering old and new Taliban recruits, largely relying on former brothers-in-arms, personal contacts, or kinship relations.6

The years 2002 and 2003 were a time of incubation and preparation, while the Taliban tried to adapt to a new reality as an insurgent guerrilla movement fighting an asymmetric war, rather than a light cavalry army mounted on pick- up trucks and relying on frontal assault. By mid-2003 the Taliban resurgence amounted to a few disparate, localized attacks, which was all that the Taliban could manage, given its assets and reach at the time. Gradually, operations expanded through much of the south and southeast, more often than not along the Durand Line. By 2005 the Taliban were reaching deeper into the south and southeast and, by 2006–2008, into the north.7

In these early years there was no formal military chain of command linking field units and field commanders from the middle ranks to the senior leader- ship in Quetta; instead, the Quetta leadership's military power derived from the allegiance of the leaders of the armed groups. It is important to clarify the traditional Taliban affiliation mechanism in order to understand the movement's evolution. During the early years of the post-2001 insurgency, an individual wanting to fight *jihad* would not join the Taliban as an organization, but would rather seek personal allegiance to a commander. This relationship was often defined by personal, familial, or tribal ties, as expressed by the term *andiwal*

5 "Afghan Taliban Leader Reported as Setting up Resistance Council," *The News*, June 24, 2003.

6 See Farrell and Giustozzi, "The Taliban at War"; Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban-Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst & Co., 2011).

7 Antonio Giustozzi, *Kuran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop* (London: Hurst, 2008); Antonio Giustozzi and Christoph Reuter, "The Insurgents of the Afghan North," Afghan Analyst Network, May 2011; Antonio Giustozzi (ed.), *Decoding the New Taliban* (London: Hurst, 2009).

("friend," also variously translated as "comrade" or "brother-in-arms"), used to describe this relationship of men personally linked to their commander.8 The approach of the early days was informal and ad hoc, as described by one commander: "Anyone who could find ten fighters could set up a unit; he would collect *zakat* (Islamic charity) from the local area, and buy weapons locally."9

From 2004 onward provincial and district-level leaders were introduced by the Rahbari Shura, who had complete authority over all groups operating in their area of responsibility. The political leaders gathered in the Rahbari Shura wanted to increase their control over the fragmented combat forces of the Tal- ban. Sirajuddin Haqqani explained the situation in a 2004 interview with the *Asia Times*:

> At present, the Taliban are powerful, but there is a problem in that we have lost our central command. We have many successful commanders, but as the central command does not exist to give day-to-day decisions and policies, we have not been able to proceed very well so far with our strategies. Also, in the absence of such a central command, it is difficult to discuss all these proposals coming to us from the commanders.10

By appointing the governors, the Rahbari Shura hoped to introduce a degree of order on the ground, although this proved difficult to do—the governors only gradually managed to accrue most finance and logistics in their hands. Without those assets, their command role was purely theoretical. Certainly the governorships turned out to be inadequate tools for improving discipline within the ranks. In the words of one commander:

> [In the early post-2001 years] Taliban killed Taliban or killed their commanders. There were spies who tipped the government. … The old system wasn't good. … The fighters didn't listen. … They [the commanders] couldn't say "give me your mobile phones."11 There was no authority with- in the movement.12

8 Personal communication with several field commanders between 2011 and 2013; Tom Coghlan, "The Taliban in Helmand," in Giustozzi (ed.), *Decoding the New Taliban*, 119–154.

9 Interview with Taliban commander active in Jagatoo district, Wardak, September 2011. He was referring to his early days in the movement; he joined the insurgency around 2005.

10 Syed Saleem Shahzad, "Revolution in the Mountains, Part 3: Through the Eyes of the Taliban," *Asia Times Online*, May 5, 2004.

11 That is, in order to secure communications.

12 Interview with Taliban commander based in Babaji, Helmand, March 2012.

The ability of the governors to function derived from their own personal power; the established practice was to choose high-profile Taliban as provincial governors, and the most powerful local commander as district governor. The main Talban military leaders were, however, ill at ease with the system. To alleviate their concerns, by 2005 the Rahbari Shura decided to introduce a new type of military organization, the "big fronts" (*loy mahaz*).13 These loy mahaz had no ceiling on how many men they could mobilize, nor on their geographical spread, and this suited well the most prominent military leaders of the Taliban; it also allowed the Taliban armed forces to bypass the limited mobility of the governor's system. They had their own complex internal chains of command, connecting the loy mahaz leader to the fighting units, in an arrangement else- where described as a "network of networks."14 Although some mahaz leaders enjoyed good working relationships, others did not, and some mahaz leaders actively disliked each other.15 Charisma aside, the loy mahaz leaders who were re-organizing the military effort included cadres and commanders who had survived the Emirate; in particular, those who could rely on solid funding channels. Funds gathered abroad among Afghan and non-Afghan donors were sometimes gathered by the leadership and redistributed, or distributed directly to the main loy mahaz leaders on the basis of loyalty, recruitment, military potential, or tribal following. Such direct funding further strengthened the loy mahaz leaders vis-à-vis the political leadership.16 Until 2007, only four loy mahaz were established, each named for their leader: Dadullah mahaz, the largest by far; Baradar mahaz; Faruq mahaz; and Ibrahim Mahaz; they all formed in 2005–2006. By 2005 the majority of the fighters of the Quetta Shura were assigned to one of these four loy mahaz, whereas only 30–40 percent directlyreported to the provincial shadow governor.17

Around 2005, infighting became so rife that a "Council of Front Leaders" (*Mahaz Shura*), as mentioned in the Code of Conduct (*Layeha*) of 2006, was established to solve disputes among insurgents. Interestingly, this Mahaz Shura

13 The term *mahaz* literally means "front"; the Taliban use it to describe both the large multi-province networks and the smaller sub-networks that comprise them. In this article, the term loy mahaz is used to refer to the large networks maintaining fighting units across multiple provinces.

14 See Thomas Ruttig, "How Tribal Are the Taliban?" Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2010.

15 Mentioned in interviews by two Helmand-based Taliban commanders, December 2011.

16 On cross-border support networks for the Afghan Taliban immediately after the Emirate's collapse, see C. Franco, "The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan," in Giustozzi (ed.), *Decoding the New Taliban*, 269–289.

17 Interviews with three current and former Quetta Shura commanders, October–November 2014; interview with member of the Quetta Military Commission, June 2015.

appears never to have intended to function as a unified command center itself, but rather as a body created almost to "contain" the loy mahaz commanders. The emphasis was on limiting their excesses, not on controlling their military assets. The *Layeha* of 2006, produced in Quetta, reflected an attempt to amend flaws in the system, without subverting it. It was nevertheless a mild attempt at reform that, in practice, achieved very little. As one of the interviewees dismissively described the situation: "At that time, all the mahaz commanders misused their positions—they behaved like kings. So they were brought under control and brought together as the Quetta Shura."18

Despite its dysfunctional aspects, this organizational structure had not just developed by chance. It reflected important aspects of the Taliban's worldview, a kind of anti-Leninism. It was (and is) based on clerical patterns of organization in Sunni Islam and particularly in the subcontinent, where the state has had relatively little impact in co-opting the clergy.19 As a result, debates over organizations within the Taliban, which will be described below, have been highly controversial and contentious.

First Reform Efforts (2006–2008)

The governors could not fully deliver because they had only limited control over supplies and finances and lacked a sufficient number of trusted cadres to monitor their subordinates. But until 2006 the insurgency was sufficiently low-scale for the debate about the need for an improved command structure to be overshadowed by the need to simply re-establish a strong presence inside Afghanistan. The loy mahaz allowed some concentration of force across provinces. For example, during the battle of Pashmul (September–October 2006), near Kandahar, Mullah Dadullah managed to gather about 2,000 men and concentrate them in a relatively small area, in an attempt to take on foreign forces in a conventional, set-piece battle. Most, if not all, of this force appears to have been provided by Dadullah's loy mahaz. In any case, the battle was a heavy tactical defeat for the Taliban, although Pashmul could be regarded as a propaganda victory, as it conveyed the message that the insurgency was able—or, at the very least, willing—to take on the world's most powerful militaries in the open field, casualties notwithstanding. However, as well as driving home the point that the Taliban could not expect to take on international forces in conventional engagements, Pashmul revealed the limitations of the loy

18 Interview with veteran Taliban field commander in Helmand, September 2011.

19 See Ruttig, "How Tribal Are the Taliban?"

mahaz-based system when it came to concentrating and coordinating military assets.20 Despite being better able than the governors to pull together large numbers of fighters, the loy mahaz were not good at working together because of the lack of a solid command-and-control system above them. Their internal chain of command and control was relatively strong, but it was based on personal loyalties not merit. In the absence of a kind of "professional officer corps" in Pashmul, even Dadullah's loy mahaz was forced to adopt a static defense posture that could only lead to defeat against the firepower of Western armies. The loy mahaz were appointing cronies of their leaders as cadres, making them poor maneuver units.

The "charismatic leadership model," of which the governorships and the loy mahaz were two different but related versions, had additional problems. To begin with, it relied on a small number of widely respected commanders and invited the targeting of those same figures by the Coalition, which from 2007 was more and more focused on eliminating the Taliban command structure. Less than a year after Pashmul, Dadullah was dead, and his death caused considerable disruption within the Taliban in the south. However, because of the rivalries among the various fronts, the charismatic leaders were never accept- able to all Taliban, even within a single district. Significantly, when Dadullah was killed, his brother Mansur accused a number of high-ranking Taliban leaders of having conspired with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to target him. Among others, he accused Baradar himself, whose difficult relationship with Dadullah has often been noted by Taliban sources. Later, rumors circulated that Dadullah's men had contributed to Baradar's arrest.21 Similarly when Baradar was arrested in 2010, many of his men quit the battlefield. The same happened when Ibrahim and Faruq were killed in 2007.22

Moreover, it was difficult for these charismatic individuals to exercise control when their forces intermingled, as the governors, theoretically in charge, had little real authority over loy mahaz forces, especially Dadullah's. In such a situation, a larger Taliban operation could feature a number of commanders linked to different loy mahaz, often imparting conflicting orders. The loy mahaz's own chain of command duplicated that of the governors, creating two (weak) rival chains of command.

20 Bernd Horn, *No Lack of Courage* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2010), 31, 39; Rusty Bradley and Kevin Maurer, *Lions of Kandahar* (New York: Bantam, 2011); interviews with two former commanders of Dadullah mahaz in Zabul and Kandahar, summer 2011.

21 Interview with Taliban field commander based in Babaji, Helmand, December 2011.

22 Interview with former commander of Ibrahim mahaz in Kandahar province, November 2014; interview with two former commanders of Faruq mahaz in Kandahar province, October and November 2014.

Discussions about how to resolve these problems solidified into two main strands: the first was based on refining the existing system, adding an element of coordination and using incentives to rein-in the loy mahaz. To some extent, such incentives had to do with promotions and status, and as the Quetta leadership had more liquid funds to spend, its ability to provide incentives increased. Coordination would be achieved through a set of institutions, typically named "shuras," bringing together representatives of the main loy mahaz to discuss and resolve issues and take decisions by consensus. This line of action was advocated most prominently by Mullah Baradar and isdiscussed below.

The other main strand of reform advocated a more radical centralization; the Taliban would develop a unified system of command with the authority to issue orders and discipline recalcitrant field commanders, as opposed to debating and offering incentives. This radical, centralizing tendency is also discussed in detail below.

Moderate Reforms under Baradar: Centralization in the Hands of One Man

Mullah Baradar doubled up as deputy of Mullah Omar and as leader of his own loy mahaz. In his first role, because of his personal charisma and the wide respect he enjoyed, Baradar was the main resource of the Taliban in bringing some coordination to bear on the otherwise disjointed loy mahaz. The description of the Taliban as a "network of networks" reached its full meaning in this period, as the central leadership in Quetta developed structures to enable a limited degree of strategic cooperation and coordination.

Under great pressure from the international coalition in the south, by 2006– 2007, the Taliban was making efforts, with some success, to transfer military and political cadres to areas where the insurgency was not developing well or at all yet, typically trying to re-establish old connections with people who had worked with the Taliban in the 1990s. The loy mahaz led this effort. Successful cadres would be rewarded with promotions, often becoming the local Taliban leaders in the provinces and districts newly acquired by the insurgency. For the loy mahaz, the reward consisted of new territory. In this way Baradar's own loy mahaz, for example, appeared strong in the north (mainly Faryab), while Dadullah's loy mahaz appeared in provinces near Kabul like Ghazni andWardak.23

Overall, however, Baradar's reforms had little impact in the military field. The Mahaz Shura was meant to limit friction and improve organizational

23 Interview with Taliban Nizami massul, Wardak province, October 2013; un source, Kabul, contacted in April 2010.

aspects, but in practice the rivalries among the loy mahaz were so deeply entrenched that mere coordination among peers did not achieve much. The shadow governors were given the role of coordinating Taliban commanders, but with only limited authority, and they had similarly limited results. Reportedly, Baradar himself had to intervene to resolve disputes and mediate among commanders and loy mahaz.

> Baradar operates like an old-fashioned Pashtun tribal head. He sits and talks not only with his senior military men and political officers, but also with low-ranking commanders and tribal elders. When he meets with civilians, whether they're local sheiks or members of the Taliban's political elite, the Quetta Shura, he exudes a relaxed, traditional, even deferential manner. Baradar even frequently takes notes at meetings, and he constantly refers to Mullah Omar and his pronouncements, Akhund says. The Helmand subcommander and other Taliban sources say Baradar adopts a sterner, more martial air with his military council, but even in those strategy sessions he tries to elicit opinions and bring everyone together in some kind of consensus.24

Baradar's charismatic and respected leadership was essential to make the system work, and he often succeeded, but his soft reform had reached its limits by 2008–2009. Also the lack of leaders of a similar caliber made the model excessively reliant on a single man.25 The limitations of this system were obvious, even when Baradar successfully managed to handle local crises. A disproportionate amount of time had to be spent in micromanagement, and local tussles were often solved at the central level:

> Earlier this year, the Zabul province commander says, he mustered the nerve to seek Baradar's help. Three of his fellow Taliban commanders in the province had become more intent on feuding with each other than on killing Americans. They were quarreling about where each one's territory ended; about who could set up roadside checkpoints to extort money from travelers on which stretch of highway; and about women who had been so bold as to marry outside their tribes. Two of the rivals were even plotting to unseat the Taliban's provincial governor. The Zabul commander had never met Baradar before and hardly dared to hope hiscall would be taken seriously.

24 Ron Moreau, "America's New Nightmare: If You Thought the Longtime Head of the Taliban Was Bad, You Should Meet His No. 2," *Newsweek*, August 3, 2009.

25 Communications with Taliban members and observers/sympathizers, October 2011.

> But within three weeks he was summoned for a face-to-face meeting with Baradar in Quetta. He and Baradar talked for two hours. "He listened attentively to my complaints and suggestions, asked some questions, and said he'd see what he could do." The results were apparent within two weeks. Rather than keep the sitting governor or replace him with one of the competing commanders, Baradar brought in a tough new governor, Mawlavi Ishmael, from neighboring Ghazni province. Baradar then clearly delineated which parts of the main highway would be under the control of which commander, and ordered them to share their income from roadside checkpoints more equitably. Finally, he flatly ordered the guerrillas to drop the dispute over the women.26

Most importantly, when Mullah Baradar was arrested in Pakistan in 2010, operations were negatively affected as succession issues and reciprocal accusations split the Taliban. Soon, his loy mahaz began to disintegrate, with groups splitting, joining other mahaz, or simply giving up the fight.27

The Emergence of a New Organizational Model in Peshawar: Centralization under the Military Commission

The Original Nucleus

While Baradar attempted to institute moderate reforms in Quetta, some groups and personalities within the Taliban argued for more radical change. In particular, in 2005, a small group of eastern Taliban cadres launched a new center of Taliban coordination in Peshawar, known as the *Ijraya Shura* (Executive Council). According to a mid-ranking Taliban leader interviewed in Nangarhar, a body known as the Ijraya Shura had existed during the Islamic Emirate regime, although there appears to be no direct continuity with the later incarnation ofthe identically named body.28

Formally "inaugurated" on April 5, 2005, and placed under the leadership of Qari Khalid, a former mid-ranking Emirate official from Nangarhar's Khogyani, the Ijraya Shura was established as a military coordination center for

26 Moreau, "America's New Nightmare."

27 Communications with Taliban sources in Quetta and Peshawar in spring 2012; interview with Taliban commander in Babaji, Helmand, December 2011.

28 Communication with Taliban cadre in Jalalabad, July 2012. Immediately before the Emirate's collapse, sources reported the existence of a council of ulema from various madrassas, based in Peshawar, known as the Ijraya Shura; this council apparently exist- ed to mediate disputes among mahaz commanders operating under the Emirate, and it appears to have enjoyed some prestige as an impartial and effective body. Following the Emirate's collapse, this entity provided a focus for some of the exiled Taliban leaders and cadres who had converged in Peshawar.

eastern Afghanistan and allocated a limited amount of funds, deploying a small number of fighters in Kunar and elsewhere in the country's east. At first limited to parts of Nangarhar and Kunar, this initial incarnation of the Shura brought together a group of leaders who had been active in the country's east- ern provinces since 2003, encouraged by foreign supporters who favored both the emergence of an eastern insurgency and the overall modernization of the movement. These were either junior officers in the 1990s Emirate's loose hierarchy, or advisers to senior Taliban leaders at the time.29

Initially of minor military importance, the true significance of the Ijraya Shura was as an experiment in the establishment of a military command structure aimed at exercising direct control over field units, an alternative to both the governors' system and, in principle, to the loy mahaz (which were not active in the east yet) and any other type of autonomous front.

The Peshawar Shura Takes Shape

The east was an ideal launching pad for such an ambitious project: the historical leadership of the Taliban being mostly southern, there were few Taliban leaders in the east who could command a sizeable personal following com- parable to that of the southern loy mahaz. The closest matches were the *Tora Bora mahaz*, led by Anwar ul Haq and active in Nangarhar, which was not registered with the Quetta Shura (and hence did not deserve the title of loy mahaz) and the front of Dost Mohammed, also separate from the Quetta Shura and active in Kunar and Nuristan. These two autonomous fronts grew out of local coalitions of armed groups formed in 2003–2005, according to a pattern similar to that discussed for the south. Neither of these eastern fronts was as big as the southern loy mahaz.30

Indeed, Quetta made several attempts to establish a foothold in the east, first by dispatching Mullah Kabir, a senior Taliban commander. Kabir achieved little.31 Understandably, notwithstanding the centralized character of the Ijraya Shura, initially it was perceived by the majority of lower ranks as just another network, differently organized perhaps, but nothing more than an eastern mahaz.32 In 2005–2006 the Ijraya Shura was basically not being taken

29 Communications with high-ranking Peshawar Shura cadres, July–August 2012; personal communication with tribal elder associated with the Ijraya Shura, Nangarhar, September–October 2011; interview, senior field commander, Wardak, October 2011.

30 Interview with former member of the Tora Bora mahaz, April 2015; interview with Dost Mohammed, January 2013.

31 Interviews with Taliban cadres and commanders in Nangarhar, April 2015.

32 Mid-level cadres in Kunar reported that at the time the existence of a military structure in Peshawar was known to a limited numbers of leaders, who appeared keen to keep it as low-profile as possible (interviews, Kunar, September 2012).

too seriously by the other Taliban. Although the original Ijraya Shura by itself did not have the leadership and the constituency required to drive a major insurgency in the east, it did form the kernel of what was later to develop into the Peshawar Shura.

The second crucial step on this path came with a successful effort to co- opt elements of Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin faction), which had been for years historically predominant in the east, into the Taliban. Faced with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's inability to raise funds or perhaps due to political calculations, the bulk of Hekmatyar's so-called Shamsatoo Shura, based in the Shamsatoo refugee camp near Peshawar, joined this embryonic centralized military system. The Shamsatoo Shura, accustomed to Hizb-i Islami's strongly centralized style of operation, in 2006 formally joined the Ijraya Shura to establish what became known as the new Peshawar Shura. By 2009, once the Peshawar Shura had taken its present form, several of the key players within the Shura's higher ranks had a Hizbi background. Sources in Peshawar describe two of the most important personalities as Qari Baryal, who was to become the chief Nizami massul of the Peshawar Shura's Military Commission, and Qari Habibullah, who sat on the Peshawar Shura representing Shamsatoo and then rose to be- come vice-head and a critically important actor.33

The system the Ijraya shura advocated now took a more decisive turn toward the one operated by Hizb-i Islami in the 1980s anti-Soviet jihad, which they believed to be the most effective way to run an insurgency. Hizb-i-Islami, among the many Mujahedin factions active against the Soviets, was certainly the most regimented and disciplined party. The eastern reformers appear to have drawn on that model to reform the insurgency's profile: from a loose conglomerate of competing armed groups to a hierarchical model based on a capillary presence in the field of cadres deployed, and funded, by the central leadership.34

It is not clear whether the Shamsatoo Shura was ordered by Hekmatyar to join the new Peshawar hub or if senior commanders opted to join the Taliban as a matter of personal choice, but, given subsequent infighting between Peshawar Shura and Hizb-i Islami in the east, the latter interpretation is more likely to be correct. Since 2006, in any case, the Shamsatoo Shura has remained an integral part of the Peshawar Shura, contributing a considerable recruitment base and acquiring a growing constituency.35

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33 Communications with Taliban cadres in Peshawar, summer 2012.

34 Communications with Taliban cadres in Peshawar, summer 2012; interviews with commanders in Helmand, December 2011, and Wardak, October 2011. On Pakistan and Hizb-i Islami see Peter Tomsen, *Wars of Afghanistan* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011); Olivier Roy, *Islam and resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

35 Interviews with two senior members of the Shamsatoo Shura, April and July 2015.

Another faction, the *Toor Pagri* (Black Turbans), joined the Peshawar Shura in 2007. The Toor Pagri (referring to the black turbans worn by the original Taliban) represented a network of Pakistani madrassas scattered across Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (fata). These religious seminaries were (and are) key to Taliban recruitment, and many provide basic military training to their students. This faction was represented by Mawlavi Abdul Saleh, a director of the vast *Amir ul-Momineen* madrassa in Hangu, near Kohat, which is central in this network.36

By 2007 the Peshawar Shura had already developed into something well be- yond the original Ijraya Shura, not least because of the establishment of the Peshawar Military Commission (*Nizami Komisiun*) had gone a step further in terms of controlling ground operations. The Military Commission was to take charge of managing the combat units of the Taliban through the Nizami massuleen, local officials appointed by the center. The Military Commissions, then, were intended to become the core of the Taliban's new centralized command- and-control structure.37 Their functions are described by one commander:

> The duties of the Military Commission consists of making plans, strategies, developing new techniques, solving some complicated disputes, controlling the fighting; in the provinces all the commanders are under control of Military Commissions.38

Whatever the merits of the new centralized system, it clearly went against the Taliban's ethos as described above. It was not by chance that it was introduced by groups that joined the Taliban late and came from a different political, ideological, and cultural tradition—an Islamist party of Muslim Brotherhood origins such as Hizb-i Islami. Efforts to export the new system to the original Taliban of the Quetta Shura were going to prove highly controversial. The composition of the Peshawar Shura differed substantially from that of the Quetta Shura; there were no high-profile Taliban leaders in the east, who could set up large networks of followers. The only option for mobilizing support on a large scale was developing institutions that could do it. For this reason, a model resembling that of Hizb-i Islami was more acceptable in the east even to former members of the pre-2002 Taliban.

36 Confirmed by multiple sources within the Taliban and by sympathizers within Pakistani Deobandi circles, contacted in 2011–2012.

37 Tens of interviews with Taliban cadres in eastern and central Afghanistan in 2013–2015have all confirmed the role of the Military Commission and of its local Massuleen.

38 Interview with Taliban field commander based in Khakriz district, Kandahar, September 2011.

The March Forward of the Military Commission (2008–2012)

The Military Commission Rolls out its System in Eastern Afghanistan

The New Cadres Deploy

The Nizami massuleen were first dispatched en masse to the districts and provinces in 2007. In June 2007, in one of the first waves of Nizami Komis- un operatives to be deployed, 250 trained mid-ranking nizami officials were sent across the border to Afghanistan and were distributed among more than 200 districts. Initially, these Nizami massuleen remained relatively powerless representatives of the Military Commission, reporting back about what they could observe—and readying the administrative infrastructure for the new system. In other words, these officials initially engaged in preparing to con- vert the existing Taliban structures into provincial and district-level Military Commissions—but at this stage not yet issuing orders.

> Their ultimate mission was to rein in the small fighting units in their areas of operation, and to establish themselves as the main supervising entity for all the armed groups active in the field. They would essentially act as "commissars" directly empowered by—and in turn, directly empowering—the senior leadership in Peshawar's Military Commission. As such, they would be able to bypass local hierarchies determined by military, tribal and political dynamics between local commanders. In or- der to do this, they were entrusted with generous amounts of funds originating from the central leadership, funds that would serve to establish the district and province level Military Commissions as the masters of the tactical fighting groups.39

From 2008–2009 onward, the Nizami massuleen were systematically empowered throughout eastern Afghanistan and around Kabul, where the influence of the Quetta Shura was very weak and, later, in the northeast and parts of the north as well. It is worth noting the extent to which the Nizami massul's profile resembled that of a political commissar, an official whose authority cuts across departments and hierarchies for the sake of military efficiency and centralization. In addition to the Nizami massuleen, occasionally the Pakistan-based central leadership would send delegations of cadres to inspect the Taliban in the field and report back.40

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39 Such aspect was mentioned in an in-depth conversation with a high-ranking PeshawarShura official. The meeting took place in Abu Dhabi in May 2013.

40 Mentioned in multiple interviews with Taliban cadres in various provinces throughout2012 and 2013.

Many of these new provincial nizami operatives consisted of Afghans who had spent significant time in Pakistan, often studying at a madrassa, and most often with their families living across the border. They were trained in Pakistan, not only in basic military skills such as weapon handling and small-unit tactics, but at times even in basic information technology, management, and English. Peshawar's Taliban cadres were trained to become more than just field commanders, in charge of a combat unit; a new breed of official was also being trained to organize and run military operations at the district or province level, or as members of an underground structure active far and wide throughout Afghan civil society. More likely to be recognized by other Taliban by their voice, call-sign, or code name rather than their face, these operatives are the Military Commission's eyes and ears, particularly in the urban areas and district centers that remain Kabul's strongholds, and they report back either in person, bycourier, or by email.41

Even at district level, the Nizami massuleen were trained to operate undercover. One such operative, with his neat clothes and clipped moustache, appeared as far from the stereotype of a Taliban commander as possible: "Look, this is my driving license, and this is my Afghan id. I don't need to hide. We are not like the commanders in the south who need a Kalashnikov to be respected."42

With the advent of operatives of this kind, the Taliban insurgency finally began to turn into a professional guerrilla force. Often holding both Afghan and Pakistani id cards, they could travel freely across the border—an added benefit that made liaising with leaders based across the border easier and more reliable.43

Initially, insurgents believed that the Nizami system should be kept as secret as possible, a strategy often repeated by Taliban interviewees.44 The initial secrecy was probably due to the system being rolled out in the midst of the ISAF "kill and capture" campaign against cadres of the insurgency. It was only later on, in mid-2012, that the centralized structure became a matter of open debate, as a result of the conflict between Mullah Zakir and Akhtar Mohammed Mansur.

Still, the Nizami massul was no autocratic leader. He was supposed to act in accordance to Taliban rules, and he, too, could be reported to his superiors

41 For more detail, see AAN Dispatch, Claudio Franco, "The Evolving Taliban: Changes in the insurgency's DNA," May 19, 2013, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-evolving-Taliban-changes-in-the-insurgency-dna/.

42 Interview with district Nizami massul, Maidan Wardak, July 2013.

43 See Franco: "The Evolving Taliban."

44 Interview with senior Taliban field commander, Wardak, October 2011.

if seen as misbehaving. The Massul was not legitimized by his proximity to a senior leader, thus making him untouchable, but must act in accordance with the Taliban Code of Conduct and with the policy decisions dictated by the central Military Commission in Peshawar. "The nizami chief is not superior to the other commanders. His decisions must conform to the laws of Holy Sharia and he must obey the orders of the central leadership."45

The authority of the centralized system of command and control was inextricably linked to the rise of a new concept of affiliation to the Taliban movement: personal allegiance to charismatic mullahs was now being de-emphasized, to the advantage of the entire membership. Leadership dynamics—whether tussles or newly forged alliances—were now expected not to interfere with the functioning of the insurgents' military machine. To a great extent, the "commissarization" of the Peshawar-based Taliban in the field appears to have succeeded in imposing a new military chain of command. Leveraging funds and logistics, progressively these officials enforced the new command system on the insurgency. A cadre in Wardak recounts:

> Interviewer: How did the Military Commission manage to exert its will over the commanders, since they had been used to doing as they wanted?
>
> Answer: They got all the commanders together and told them; "We are in control now, you shouldn't work autonomously." They also spoke to all the local elders, explaining that the system had changed and that they were now the Taliban officials to deal with. They also told the commanders: "If you disturb anyone or if you do anything wrong, we'll have you hanged or we'll cut your hands off."
>
> The commanders all went along with it, there were no examples of conflicts.46

While this cadre might have understated the problems faced by the Military Commission in implementing the new system, by 2010 it was clear that the new system had consolidated in the quasi totality of the east and of the central region surrounding Kabul and was beginning to expand to northeastern Afghanistan. Taliban sources are adamant that Peshawar's hand was obviously strengthened by the international donors and sponsors of the insurgency, making it difficult for Quetta to object. In the east and in Kabul's region, most

45 Interviews with two commanders in Helmand, March 2012.

46 Interview with Taliban field commander, Jagatoo district, Wardak, September 2011.

district were virgin lands for the Taliban when the Peshawar Shura started expanding its influence. The Shamasatoo Shura, in particular, had extensive networks there, but had not had the resources to activate them until it joined the Peshawar Shura. In some areas, such as Kunar and Kunduz/Baghlan, for some time the two systems of the Quetta and Peshawar Shuras coexisted and competed with each other. Gradually, however, in 2011–2013 the better- funded Peshawar Shura took control over all supply lines and co-opted all Taliban commanders.47

The Peshawar Shura Co-opts the Loy Mahaz

The Rahbari Shura in Quetta never openly recognized Peshawar's supremacy in the northeast, east, and around Kabul, continuing instead to appoint governors there and supply a number of armed groups at their orders. However, particularly as Quetta struggled financially in 2011–2012, the loy mahaz all ended up bowing to the superiority of the Peshawar Shura in all these areas, accepting the authority of the Nizami massul and therefore ignored orders from the governors. In eastern, central, and northeastern Afghanistan, the loy mahaz continued to operate alongside the units directly affiliated to the Peshawar Military Commission, which would issue orders through the loy mahaz network's chain of command. Typically, as of 2013, around 10–25 percent of the Taliban's forces in these provinces belonged to the loy mahaz.48

The actual functioning of this hybrid system on the ground is explained by a commander operating in Wardak's Komisiun—under the Peshawar Shura— but belonging to one of Quetta's loy mahaz:

> For example, I am a commander of a group of 160 fighters. I divided these fighters into seven or eight groups. Some of my units are active in Andar district of Ghazni province, some in Sayedabad of Wardak province, in the area of [….] village, and some others are in Jagatoo or other districts of Wardak province. These groups, of 15 men each, are led by my commanders.
>
> Now, for example, in a district like Sayedabad, we have a local [Taliban] government, with a district chief, police chief, and other officials. Besides this, we have a Military Commission. The commission is responsible for

47 105 interviews conducted for a project mapping Taliban networks in 2012–2014 in areas under the control of the Peshawar Shura with both its cadres and loy mahaz commanders confirmed the monopoly of the Peshawar Shura over the supply system.

48 This is the result of an in-depth study carried out by the authors between early 2012 and December 2013, an attempt to map the Loy Mahaz's presence country-wide.

controlling the fighting and all military activities in the district, and to equip all soldiers with weapons. The members of the [district] Military Commission include the district chief, the [district] Taliban police chief, a representative from the provincial Military Commission, and two or three other key commanders. I am also a member of the commission in the district.

When we receive an order or when we plan to attack somewhere, we discuss this operation with the [district] Military Commission. The representative of the provincial commission will take this idea to the province- level commission for discussion and approval. Usually they will agree with us. My junior commanders are under my direct command, and I am a member of the district commission, which operates under the provincial [military] commission; the latter is subordinate to the military commission in Quetta. The members of the provincial Military Commission are secret, although I know who they are.

[…]

Apart from the Military Commission, all the group commanders belong to a mahaz. From the mahaz we receive support, logistics, sometimes also orders. The mahaz commander, in my case Mullah Naeem, can move us from one district to another or one province to another, in which case he will introduce us to the local Military Commission there.

[…]

The duties of the district Nizami massul are to organize the fighting and direct operations in the district, but also to administer education and schools and monitor the judges. The district chief's duties are to liaise with the public.

The provincial Nizami massul receives orders from the Military Commission in Quetta, which receives them from the Military Commission in Peshawar, although sometimes the provincial Nizami massul can also be in direct contact with Peshawar if necessary. Orders from Quetta are given to the Nizami massuleen, and also to the mahaz commanders, but come from Peshawar. The provincial Massul gives the orders to the district Massuleen, who pass them over to the junior field commanders; the latter, however, can also receive the orders directly through their mahaz commanders.

[…]

> Besides Quetta, we have an emergency Military Commission in Chaman. If commanders cannot contact Quetta, they contact the commission in Chaman.49

The convoluted system illustrated in this extended quote saw the loy mahaz still receiving orders through the Quetta Military Commission, but the orders originated from the Peshawar Military Commission. The loy mahaz were supplied and paid through the Nizami massul, contrary to the practice under the Quetta Shura, and this gave the Nizami massul more leverage than the average Quetta Shura governor. Contrary to the local armed groups, however, the loy mahaz in the east, northeast, and Kabul region maintained their autonomy; a double chain of command was established, where the loy mahaz leaders had to confirm the orders issued directly by the military commission or through the Nizami massul. Importantly, the loy mahaz were banned from recruiting in all areas under the Peshawar Shura; they could only deploy their mobile groups there. In about 2010 the Peshawar Shura banned the southern loy mahaz from recruiting in the areas under its control, extending its monopoly to this realm as well. This was indeed a major step, strengthening the sense of belonging to the organization as a whole, as opposed to a particular commander.50 As described by a commander in Baghlan:

> [A new group] cannot join a mahaz. [Today] Someone will make a group and go to the Military Commission and the commission will sup- port them. Even if they go to a mahaz, the mahaz will direct them to the Military Commission. I myself made a group, and I went to the Military Commission and they gave me guns, money, and other necessary items. Whenever a field commander is sent to the area, he is told to obey only the orders of the Nizami massul, not of his mahaz commander.51

Sometimes the loy mahaz circumvented the rules imposed by Peshawar. In Wardak, where several southern loy mahaz had a significant presence, a Taliban source estimated that 10 percent of recruitment still happened through the loy mahaz in 2012, despite Peshawar banning this practice.52

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49 Interview with senior field commander, Wardak, October 2011.

50 This aspect too was confirmed in the 105 interviews carried out in 2012–2014 in areas un- der the control of the Peshawar Shura with both its cadres and loy mahaz commanders (see note 47 above).

51 Interview with Taliban field commander, Baghlan, October 2012.

52 Taliban sources in Quetta and Peshawar, contacted June–July 2012.

Geographic Expansion of the Peshawar Shura

Beyond the east, the Peshawar Shura's Military Commission found fertile ground in the Kabul region and in the northeast, where the southern loy mahaz had established a presence but did not have deep roots (compared to the south), as they were concentrated around Pashtun pockets in a largely Tajik- Uzbek region. In the north, Peshawar focused on recruiting non-Pashtun to the Taliban cause, as these were not significantly linked to any of the loy mahaz. The north was virgin territory in this sense. Gradually the Military Commission became predominant in provinces that had once been under the control of Quetta, such as Faryab and Jowzjan.53

In the north the Taliban suffered from long supply lines and problematic logistics; Peshawar's superior organization and resources, therefore, proved their efficacy more immediately than in the southern provinces, where sources of supply were relatively near, across the porous border with Pakistan. In some cases, the Peshawar Shura offered at least initially looser conditions of affiliation in order to attract Taliban group affiliated with the Quetta Shura. In a place as far from Pakistan as Faryab, for example, such concessions went evenfurther:

> Commanders are chosen by consultation within Faryab. We are not obliged to take orders from Peshawar. The situation in Faryab is different from some other places. Faryab is very independent … we don't need Peshawar or Quetta. We submit reports to Peshawar and consult with them and talk to them by phone.54

Where other centers of Taliban power had deep roots, however, the expansion of the Peshawar Shura's model turned out to be much more problematic. A case in point is that of the Haqqanis. When the influence of the Peshawar Shura began to spread, its geographical expansion soon affected the Miran Shah Shura—effectively the leadership council of the Haqqani network—that operated primarily in Loya Paktya and in Logar. There was a period of friction with the Military Commission, which even started sending armed groups to encroach on Haqqani territory. Negotiations followed, and in 2008 a deal was struck, in which the Miran Shah Shura formally allied with Peshawar and representatives of the Haqqanis were granted seats in the Peshawar Shura.55

53 Interview with commander in Dadullah's loy mahaz, September 2012.

54 Interview with Military Commission cadre for Faryab province, December 2011.

55 Communications with high-level Taliban cadres in Miran Shah and Peshawar, October 2012 and March 2015.

After some experiments with allowing the Peshawar Military Commission to establish itself in Paktia, the Haqqanis eventually decided to do without the new governance system. The Haqqanis, however, did accept the authority of the Nizami massuleen in areas outside Loya Paktia and Logar, where com- bat groups of the Haqqanis also deployed. Within Loya Paktia and Logar, the shadow governors retained their power, as in the old Quetta Shura system. The Haqqanis enjoyed a unique degree of prestige as one of the great Jihadi families, and they had amply proven their military prowess and strategic importance to the world. In exchange for their alliance with Peshawar, the Haqqanis retained de facto complete autonomy and the Miran Shah Shura continued to operate as usual.56

The Debate over Centralization in the Quetta Shura, 2010–2014

The Old System in Crisis

Within the Quetta Shura there was by 2010–2011 an awareness of the limitations of its military organization. The intensifying military pressure on the southern Taliban helped fuel interest in a new organization model. Another factor was the demise of Quetta's most effective military leaders, such as Dadullah (killed in 2007) and Baradar (arrested in 2010). The inability of the Taliban to translate its gains in heavily populated rural areas around Kandahar and Lashkar Gah into taking district centers, even if the insurgents reached the outskirts of Lashkar Gah and Kandahar on several occasions, highlighted how the movement was about to reach a ceiling in terms of its capabilities.57

Another important factor that seems to have contributed to strengthening the attractiveness of the Peshawar-developed system was the Taliban's shifting revenue base, with Peshawar being better funded than Quetta in 2011–2012. This provided leverage to Peshawar and to the central Military Commission, which received the bulk of the Taliban budget. According to a Helmandi commander, as early as 2010:

> When I went to Quetta, I met my commander and asked him for equipment and money. He said, "We have nothing now, we're waiting for them to send over funds from Peshawar; there are some high-up leaders there who will send it."58

56 Interview with Haqqani commander, Sayedabad district, Wardak, September 2011.

57 Communications with Taliban cadres in Peshawar and Quetta, summer 2012; interviewwith senior field commander in Wardak, October 2011.

58 Interview with Helmandi field commander, September 2011.

The fact that revenue based on opium reportedly benefited the various key actors in the Quetta Shura unevenly distributed the impact of the revenue shift—those with strong connections in the opium growing areas were less than keen on redistributing within the Quetta Shura, leaving the central leadership almost dry.59 Moreover, the loss of some key poppy-growing areas forced the Taliban to rely more and more on external funding, a fact that, in turn, subjected them to the will of their backers in Pakistan:

> Before, as Garmsir district was a transit area for [drug] traffickers, we received a lot of money from the traffickers as tax or zakat. At that time we didn't need our leaders, or the Quetta Shura to support us; we had money for everything, weapons, ammunition, food, etc. Today it's completely different: we have few villages under our control and collecting zakat from those villages is not enough. Most of our supplies today are coming from Pakistan. We get our weapons, ammunition, petrol and whatever else we may need from Pakistan. That is our only source these days.60

Besides the theoretical advantages promised by an improved command and control system, from the point of view of the Taliban and their sponsors, there was another factor that might have contributed to shifting the axis from Quetta to Peshawar, and from the south to the east. The obvious answer to ISAF's escalation in the south was to expand other fronts: the east, in this context, seems to have been a natural option. This strategic decision resulted in the channeling of more funding toward Peshawar. Consequently, support to Quetta from most foreign backers dwindled in 2010, after peaking in 2008–2009.61

While the Haqqanis, in 2008, already had a reputation as the most militarily effective of the Taliban branches and could use that primacy as leverage in internal negotiations, the southern leaders were criticized internally and externally for missing the opportunity to strike at Kandahar and other southern cities in 2006–2009, a result of their fragmented military leadership. Hence the rationale for reform, as advocated by some members of the Quetta Shura. But

59 Communications with Taliban cadres in Quetta, summer 2013. Regarding press reports the Taliban's revenue from opium being affected, see, for example, Jim Michaels, "Afghan poppy crops down 40% since '08 as key towns secured," *USA Today*, June 17, 2012; Guillaume Lavallee, "Taliban changing strategy in Kandahar: governor," AFP, June 7, 2011.

60 Interview with Taliban commander, Garmser district, Helmand, March 2012. In most inter- views in Helmand in 2011–2012, the Taliban interviewees admitted to having been pushed out of the areas of most intensive poppy cultivation, with consequent losses in terms of tax revenue, although the smugglers continued to contribute to the Taliban's coffers.

61 Communication with district-level Nizami massul in Faryab, Summer 2012.

the majority of the loy mahaz leaders in Quetta had no intention of surrendering their power and influence altogether.

The Military Commission Comes to Quetta

By 2009, the Quetta Shura had established its Military Commission, and Mullah Baradar had to accept the appointment of a young, rising star in the Taliban, Abdul Qayyum Zakir, at its helm as overall Nizami massul for the southern and southwestern provinces. With a reputation as an able organizer and a commit- ted jihadist—and only recently released from Guantanamo—his candidacy was hard to reject. The establishment of the Quetta Military Commission in 2009 was immediately followed by the appointment of Nizami massuleen to the districts and provinces under the influence of the Quetta Shura: Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul, Uruzgan, Nimruz, Farah, Ghor, Herat, Ghazni, Faryab, Jowzjan and Sari Pul.62

According to sources, however, Baradar and his allies in Quetta were never too keen to surrender power to the Military Commission. There were still substantial differences in the application of the centralized system: while under Peshawar the Nizami massul was the supreme Taliban power and was even explicitly tasked with reporting on the activities of the shadow governors and had the power to recommend their replacement if the governors were deemed to be inadequate, under Quetta's control the governors remained the highest- ranking Taliban officials.63

Zakir was reportedly arrested by the Pakistanis at about the same time as Baradar, in early 2010, but was released quickly. Perhaps his close relationship with his captors in later years dates back to this episode, although not all sources agree on this. Whatever the case, certainly, he became the main proponent in the south of the new centralized system, almost Peshawar's proxy among the southern Taliban.64

Soon after Baradar's arrest, Zakir split from Baradar's loy mahaz to form his own loy mahaz, taking many of Baradar's men with him.65 From this split derived Zakir's enmity with Baradar's circle. To seal to the collaboration between Zakir and the Peshawar Shura, the former was allowed to appoint some of his

62 Communications with high-ranking cadres in both Peshawar and Quetta, summer 2012.

63 In addition, 79 interviews with Taliban cadres and commanders of the Quetta Shura in 2012–2014 (for a project mapping the Taliban networks) highlighted the differences be- tween the Quetta Shura and the Peshawar Shura systems.

64 Communication with Taliban cadre in Peshawar, July 2012.

65 Interview with Taliban field commander from Kunduz, October 2011.

allies to the Peshawar Shura, such as Mawlavi Mohibullah, as he became one of the deputies of the Shura.66

As described by Taliban sources, between 2010 and 2012, the Peshawar Military Commission dispensed money to the Quetta Military Commission, presided over by Zakir, which in turn redistributed it to the Nizami massuleen in the field or to the various mahaz big and small operating in the south. Emboldened by his control over a major flow of cash, Zakir soon started throwing his weight around, causing major friction with the defenders of the old system, first and foremost Akhtar Mohammad Mansur, the most prominent political figure in Quetta after Baradar's arrest. In late 2011 and during the first half of 2012, a number of Quetta political and loy mahaz leaders objected to Zakir's distribution of resources within the Commission. Zakir argued that he was distributing the resources on the basis of the level of commitment to the jihad and the competence of the various loy mahaz. Reform opponents accused Zakir and his allies of essentially riding the tiger of reform for the purpose of their own aggrandizement. Some loy mahaz—such as what was left of Baradar's—downscaled operations and almost withdrew from the battlefield in protest.67 There is some evidence of Zakir exploiting reform in order to consolidate his personal position. Although in principle the Nizami massuleen should have been appointed from out-of-area, in early 2012, six out of seven known Helmandi district Nizami massuleen were local Taliban. Furthermore, three of seven district Nizami massuleen were relatives of Zakir.68 Northern Helmand is a good example of an overlap between kinship-based networks and the new reformed system as it was applied in the south: in Zakir's case, the centralized command system simply replicated the command structure of Zakir's own mahaz.

Sources in Peshawar, confirmed by a un source, hint that in December 2011, following complaints by the southern fronts, a meeting took place in Pakistan to discuss the issue of the unequal distribution of funds among the loy mahaz by the Quetta Military Commission. The allegations were that the Commission was providing higher levels of funding to the eastern and southeastern Taliban and, within the south, to commanders directly under the Military Commission's orders. Although a working group was established to report on the issue, by the spring 2012 supplies and payments to the southern loy mahaz were reported to have been further reduced or even stopped in some cases. For a few months, support was largely confined to the few loy mahaz believed to then

66 Communication with Taliban cadre in Peshawar, June 2013.

67 Communications with Taliban sources in Quetta and Peshawar, summer 2012.

68 Interviews with Taliban commanders in Helmand, 2011–2012. See Farrell and Giustozzi, "The Taliban at War."

be closely aligned with Zakir, and the units responding to the Quetta Military Commission.69

The Revolt against the Military Commission's System

Despite objective financial and military difficulties, the Quetta Shura offered a very different environment compared with the Peshawar Shura. Quetta abounded with high-profile Taliban leaders, not only those who survived the 2001 us onslaught against the Emirate, but also new ones emerging from the battlefield. With big egos and large personal followings, these leaders had little interest in being replaced by a more institutionalized system, except for those who were "made" by Zakir's patronage, like loy mahaz leaders Ibrahim Alizai and Abdul Sattar, or those who were dependent on his handouts, like Mullah Janan's loy mahaz. Between 2010 and 2013, Zakir drew strength from his alignment with Peshawar, while the recalcitrant southern leaders opposed to reform coalesced around Akhtar Mansur and continued resisting the establishment of Military Commissions in the provinces. Those opposing reform argued that centralization would change the nature of the Taliban as a movement, as well as that the redundant and convoluted command system of governors plus loy mahaz was good at absorbing hits from the Western militaries and their "kill and capture" tactics. Those favoring reforms were tired to be at the receiving end and wanted to strike back at their enemies; that would require a more effective command-and-control system, able to coordinate the Taliban's resources and seize the initiative. These two strands, supposedly representing the expression of the political and military arms of the Taliban, were actually profoundly dissociated, and in practice behaved as self-standing entities replicating all the functions of a central shura. Mansur naturally did not dislike forays into military issues, had his own military force (i.e., his own loy mahaz), and appointed the governors from among high-level Taliban cadres sympa- thetic to him, while similarly Zakir's massuleen tried to replace the district and provincial governors as sources of military and political authority whenever possible.70 Eventually, the enmity between Zakir and Mansur evolved into a confrontation between two distinct and parallel governance systems, the former based on the authority of the Nizami massuleen and styled after the Peshawar model, and the latter still following the old personality-based system.71

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69 Communications with Taliban sources in Quetta and Peshawar, summer 2012; communication with un official, Kabul, contacted autumn 2012.

70 This is noted by several southern Taliban sources in interviews carried out in Helmand inthe summer of 2012.

71 Communications with Taliban cadres in Peshawar and Quetta, summer 2012. For some-what different but partly complementary accounts see Anand Gopal, "Serious Leader-

Attempts were made on and off to reconcile the two Quetta factions; during such attempts Zakir had the opportunity to roll out his system more widely. In early 2011 an agreement appeared to have been worked out that established a diarchy at the top of the Quetta Taliban: Zakir and Mansur would both be- come deputies of the Quetta Shura in place of Baradar. Zakir would therefore be promoted, but the condition imposed by Mansur was that Zakir would have to resign the leadership of Quetta's Military Commission, where he would be replaced by Mullah Ismail, who was apparently considered easier for Mansur to manage. On this point, the deal collapsed: Zakir appears to have refused to leave the Quetta Military Commission, probably because he knew that he would hold more power there, rather than as one of two deputies at the helmof the Quetta Shura.72

In the summer of 2012, another attempted rapprochement occurred between Mansur and the majority of the southern Taliban leaders on one side, and Zakir and his allies on the other. It was agreed, again, that Zakir's Nizami system would be accepted in exchange for reassurances that he would share power with Mansur. This fragile agreement was embodied by the long-delayed implementation of the decision originally made in late 2010 or early 2011 to appoint both Zakir and Mansur as deputies to the Quetta Shura. This truce between the two leaders, however, was short-lived, as in September 2012 the two sides again started arguing over Zakir's efforts to impose new directives, as well as over Zakir's alleged personal thirst for power. While the loy mahaz of Zakir and Sattar were pushing for full authority for the Quetta Military Com- mission (led by Zakir himself), Mansur's, Dadullah's, Naeem's and what was left of Baradar's loy mahaz refused to submit. Although Nizami massuleen continued to exist in a number of southern districts and provinces, in much of the south and west the structure disintegrated as the coalition led by Mansur refused to recognize their authority.73

In Helmand, for example, Mansur's, Dadullah's, Naeem's, and Baradar's loy mahaz organized themselves along a separate chain of command from Zakir's faction, which had the support of Sattar's, Janan's, and Ibrahim's loy mahaz. The tension between the two coalitions even resulted in open

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ship Rifts Emerge in Afghan Taliban," *ctc Sentinel*, November 28, 2012; Sami Yousufzai, "Afghanistan: Will the Taliban Destroy Itself?," *The Daily Beast*, December 17, 2012; Anand Gopal, "Qayyum Zakir: The Afghanistan Taliban's Rising Mastermind," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 30, 2010; Farzad Lameh, "Taliban Leadership Disagreements, In-fighting Grow," *Central Asia Online*, June 16, 2010.

72 Ron Moreau, "New Leaders for the Taliban," *Newsweek*, January 16, 2011; communications with Taliban cadres in Peshawar and Quetta, summer 2012.

73 Interviews with various Taliban commanders/cadres of the Quetta Shura, autumn 2012.

fighting. Commanders aligned with Mansur were forced to admit that in the south, due to the rejection of the Military Commission, infighting among commanders was much more common than in areas controlled by the Peshawar Shura.74 According to one commander aligned with Zakir's faction:

> There is no Commission, and here one mahaz cannot give orders to field commanders belonging to a different one; similarly, a field commander doesn't accept the orders of any other mahaz than his own. I told my people that if Zakir's mahaz, Janan's mahaz or Sattar's mahaz gives you orders, you must accept them, but if Dadullah's mahaz, Naeem's mahaz or Baradar's mahaz orders you, you must not accept it.75

The split in Quetta also affected Ghazni badly, as the Military Commission was weak there, and resulted in 2012 in major tension between two of the new loy mahaz that emerged after Dadullah's killing in 2007, Zakir's and Sattar's mahaz, and Dadullah's and another of these new loy mahaz, Naeem's. This was intensified by friction over Zakir's territorial expansionism and by his determination to enforce the power of the Military Commission. According to a commander in Dadullah's mahaz:

> Zakir's mahaz wants to increase the number of their people in districts where we are strong, and they get money from the Peshawar shura to apply the nizami system. His mahaz wants to control the entire district. … In districts where both our mahaz and Zakir's are active there are often problems. We are talking of Gelan, Awband, and Qarabagh; Zakir's people would like to control the entire district and we can't let them do that. This is the reason for the clashes in these areas.76

By autumn 2012 the split in Quetta was becoming widely known among the Taliban rank-and-file. A Nizami massul from Nangarhar, deployed to Baghlan, commented disparagingly about the south:

> There are rules and regulation in Baghlan province. Baghlan is not like Kandahar and Helmand provinces. Such problems never happened here

74 Interviews with two Taliban commanders/cadres linked to Mansur's faction in the Quetta Shura, October 2012.

75 Interview with leader of local Taliban armed group, Helmand, October 2012.

76 Interview with a Dadullah loy mahaz group commander, December 2012.

> in this province. We once had a problem between Sattar's mahaz and the Jandullah mahaz, but we took care of it right away.77

Yet another compromise was reached during a plenary meeting held in in the summer of 2013 in Quetta.78 As a result, a mixed system was accepted by Zakir and Mansur and formally agreed upon. Zakir would get to appoint Nizami massuleen, with the Military Commission becoming a nationwide institution, while Mansur's responsibility would be to appoint provincial and district shadow governors with the same geographical scope. According to a Quetta Shura cadre, in the areas ruled by Zakir and Peshawar, military power would be the exclusive prerogative of the Massuleen and the loy mahaz field commanders deployed there would also comply with Nizami directives. Conversely, in the provinces where Mansur was predominant, the governors remained the expression of the balance of power between the local mahaz networks, and as such better positioned to direct ground operations; the Massuleen deployed their own units and were essentially in exclusive control over them. These two military systems were not integrated, but concurrent and dissenting.79

Zakir was eventually removed from his position of head of the Central Military Commission in April 2014, following a disagreement over the 2014 Afghan presidential elections. Zakir wanted to go ahead with the planned Taliban campaign to disrupt and prevent people from voting, while the political leaderships in both Quetta and Peshawar, and the foreign backers, wanted the Taliban to positively influence the electoral result.80 As a result Zakir also lost his access to the budget of the Military Commission. A Quetta Shura cadre indicated how, with his main rival marginalized, Mansur managed to acquire the loyalty of several loy mahaz commanders who had previously sided with Zakir, such as Mullah Sattar and Mullah Janan, greatly increasing his military reach countrywide. The balance of military power had now been turned on its head: with funding cut off, Zakir could only entrench his forces in Helmand, while Peshawar, although dominant in the east and considerable portions of the north, saw its military reach limited by the loss of their most powerful southern ally and by Mansur's military resurgence countrywide.81

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77 Interview with *Nizami massul* of Nahrin district, Baghlan, September 2012.

78 Communication with tribal elder linked to senior Peshawar Shura figures, autumn 2013, Eastern Afghanistan.

79 Source in the Quetta Shura, contacted in September 2013.

80 See Antonio Giustozzi and Silab Mangal, "Violence, the Taliban, and Afghanistan's 2014 Elections," Washington, DC, us Institute of Peace, 2015.

81 Source in the Quetta Shura, contacted in May 2014.

The View from the Bottom: Taliban Field Commanders and the Military Commission

It is difficult to objectively assess the military effectiveness of the Military Commission's system without access to full Taliban, Afghan government, and Western military records. It is, however, possible to review the opinions expressed by Taliban cadres themselves in this regard.

Under the Peshawar Shura

In the areas under the Peshawar Shura's control, the loy mahaz saw their bowing to the superiority of the Peshawar Military Commission as a temporary concession, necessary as long as they deployed in areas under its control and it enjoyed a financial superiority. One commander in Wardak felt compelled to point out that the primary loyalty of his fighters was still to the loy mahaz, not to the Military Commission, and that the Nizami massul had no direct connection with the fighters of his mahaz:

> My units accept my authority more than the Military Commission's authority because for my fighters, I am the first point of contact and I am their first superior commander in the district. … The Nizami massul doesn't have any contacts with the field commanders. The Military Commission talks with the important [i.e., senior "staff"] commanders, and orders the [field] commanders [through them].82

By and large, the monopoly of the Peshawar Military Commission over issuing orders was effectively implemented; friction occurred but the monopoly of the Military Commission was not seriously threatened:

> Only once there was a little problem between our mahaz and the Military Commission, and it was solved by our [loy] mahaz leader, Mullah Sattar. The problem was the following: we had made clear with them [the Military Commission officials] that when the Nizami massul wants to give an order to our [mahaz field commanders], he should first inform our mahaz leader in that area. On that occasion they didn't inform us [the local loy mahaz leadership]; the Nizami massul only ordered our field commander directly, and the operation resulted in many casualties on our side.83

82 Interview with Taliban field commander in Wardak, September 2012.

83 Interview with Taliban field commander of Sattar's loy mahaz, Baghlan, October 2012.

Sattar solved the issue in this case, avoiding the violent response from his fighters that would perhaps have been expected when the Taliban mahaz networks were in charge. One of Sattar's cadres in Badakhshan similarly compared the loy mahaz and the nizami systems:

> All fighting units are affiliated with a given mahaz and accept the authority of the Military Commission only because they are supported by them. […] I am the provincial representative of Sattar's mahaz but unfortunately I am not more powerful than the district Nizami massul. It is because the Military Commission gives the leaders 10,000 Afs per fighter to fund the local groups … this money is assigned to Sattar's mahaz there in Peshawar […] Therefore we are not strong; there is disunity in the Quetta Shura because it is divided into two groups, and we are obliged to take money from the Peshawar Shura. We spend this money only on Jihad, not on other things.84

Under the Quetta Shura

For the loy mahaz, like for the Quetta Shura in general, the Quetta Military Commission's ambition to introduce the same system of centralized military command and control was much more threatening. Although the Quetta Shu- ra leadership ultimately managed to reject reform, under Zakir's management, the southern Taliban gradually began to experience a more consolidated form of command and control, and for a time it appeared as if the fragmentation, rivalry, and occasional infighting characterizing the south might be improving. The system was designed along the lines of what the Peshawar Military Com- mission was doing with the loy mahaz in its areas.

> Before [the reforms] Taliban commanders had nowhere to get orders, everyone did their own operations for themselves. Then these two commissions met to control Taliban commanders in each area. Before, if anyone but my mahaz commander had told me to move to another area, I wouldn't have listened. But now we have this Military Commission for my area, and whatever they tell me, I have to do it. … When I get orders from the Military Commission, I have to check the orders with my mahaz commander, who will contact the nizami people and discuss it with them in order to confirm.85

84 Interview with Taliban field commander in Badakhshan, September 2012.

85 Interview with field commander in Helmand, December 2012.

The resistance of the loy mahaz, however, made the southern environment more complicated than the Peshawar one even at the best of times. In the south, the Nizami massuleen were often unable to cope with internal friction without help from above. Where in the past Baradar had sorted out internal tussles with his micro-management of the insurgency, from 2010 the figure of a "mediator" appeared, at least in some areas:

> Normally, the Taliban mahaz coordinate and help each other. They have shura systems at the province level and each Friday after prayers they get together, discuss and try to solve problems. If they cannot solve a disagreement within the shura, then someone calls a Pakistani Taleb called Abdullah, who is responsible for resolving problems.86

This appears to be an improvement over the old system of ad hoc negotiations; in this case a mediator who was not local (and not necessarily even Afghan), and presumably neutral, was sent to mediate. The typical statement coming from Taliban commanders was that while friction continued, it had been contained:

> Well, it is clear that in a state of war, misunderstandings occur, but we are trying our best to solve them, and our leaders are also very sensitive in this regard. In general, [now] the Taliban belonging to different mahaz groups cooperate with each other during the fighting. Again, I want to say that when some small problems arise between Taliban commanders, they are solved by the Military Commission in a very short time. The Military Commission will not let a disagreement become a significant problem.87

Despite being forced to accept the Nizami system, loy mahaz commanders assessed it in contrasting ways, sometimes endorsing it as a superior form of organization and sometimes criticizing it as alien to the Taliban's ethos. In Wardak, for example, where the Military Commission was dominant in 2012, but having to deal with a complex array of loy mahaz and local networks, a commander expressed the feeling that the old decentralized system was the original, real Taliban, as if the Military Commission was an external "overlay":

> But if we compare the number of mahaz groups [i.e., fighting units] with the number of groups controlled by the Military Commission, I can tell you that the Military Commission has more groups than the Mahaz

86 Interview with Taliban field commander, Sangin district, Helmand, June 2012.
87 Interview with Taliban field commander, Nawzad district, Helmand, June 2012.

> networks. However, people respect the Mahaz commanders and fighters more, because the mahaz system dates back to the very beginning of the Taliban movement, and people believe that these are the original Taliban.88

Adherence to the centralized command-and-control system was probably seen as just another passing phase in Taliban internal politics, an unwelcome temporary development, while long-term loyalty was still reserved for the mahaz leader. In Ghazni, on the other hand, where the loy mahaz also had a powerful presence as of 2012, a commander contrasted life with and without the Military Commission in terms favorable to the latter, despite belonging to a loy mahaz himself:

> In districts where there is the Military Commission, the overall leader is always the Nizami massul, but in districts where there is no Military Commission, then the leader is the representative of the most powerful mahaz in the area. Sometimes, a loy mahaz would act without informing the representatives of the other loy mahaz active in the district. We [commanders of field units of the mahaz networks] don't necessarily help each other; when we see that the enemy is conducting an operation against a different mahaz we don't go there to help them. … If in a given district there is a Military Commission, then the orders come from the provincial Military Commission through the district Massul; then the district Nizami massul gives orders to the delgais and groups. When there is no Military Commission, the orders reach the field through the chain of command of each mahaz. Because every mahaz has its own priorities, the field commanders only respond to the mahaz's own leadership.89

Even in the south it was possible to find loy mahaz field commanders who favored centralization. According to a commander from Helmand:

> Before, people only listened to their own commanders. There was a Military Commission but no one listened to them. Now, the Military Commission, the commanders, and us are all part of the same [structure]…
>
> [Interviewer:] You said "improved"—do you mean with more money, more equipment, weapons?

88 Interview with Taliban field commander, Jaghatoo district, Wardak, September 2012.
89 Interview with mid-ranking Taliban commander, Ghazni, June 2012.

> Before, we collected money from people in the local area and bought weapons. Now we get weapons and money from the Military Commission.
>
> [Interviewer:] When did you see this change happening? Around
>
> 1 1/2 years ago [note: interview dated December 2011].
>
> [Interviewer:] Can you see any event that might have started this process of change?
>
> Before this system, Taliban killed Taliban or killed their commanders. There were spies who were in touch with the government. So they [Nizami Commission officials] came in and took everyone's phones. The old system wasn't good.90

Where the Military Commissions controlled all or at least part of the supply chain, it was able to enforce the new arrangements on the small armed groups, which had no choice but to comply, even if they were uneasy about the new system.91 As explained by two Helmandi commanders:

> [Interviewer:] But how did the Military Commission exert its authority?
> Oh of course, through money and resources…
> [Interviewer:] But how did it work? Did they say you do as I say or we don't give you money?
>
> They gathered the commanders and gave them advice and told them how to operate. And they granted a certain amount of logistic support as needed by each commander.

and:

> The Taliban made these commissions and improved their organization to control the Taliban in every province. Before, the Taliban would fight each other over a few rounds of ammunition, they would fight among each other over a captured area, over weapons. Then the Military Commissions were set up. Now when anything is captured in fighting, it should be handed over to the Commission, and they will decide what is best done with it.

90 Interview with Taliban field commander from Babaji, Helmand, December 2011.

91 Interviews with senior field commanders from different loy mahaz, October 2012.

> [Interviewer:] How was the change made? Did you get orders from your mahaz leader, saying now there is a military commission and you must follow its orders?
>
> Yes, correct.
>
> [Interviewer:] And how was this order given? He said: "Obey the Nizami massul always," or, "Listen to the Nizami massul but check with me as well?"
>
> Of course I check with my mahaz commander all the time.
>
> [Interviewer:] So the mahaz commander told you, obey the Military Commission's orders always, but check with me every time?
>
> Yes.92

A commander opposed to the reforms admitted that there was a sense of improved command and control, but also observed how the old system of the loy mahaz was not abolished, just subsumed into the new system. The new system did not eliminate friction within the Taliban altogether, but it appears to have succeeded in reducing dramatically the impact of daily quarrel among minor commanders in the field. This Helmand-based commander said:

> Before, people only listened to their own [mahaz] commanders. There was a Military Commission [probably referring to the 2009 Commission led by Zakir], but no one listened to them. … Now, the Military Com- mission and the commanders are all part of the same [structure or organization].93

By mid-2012, the idea that the Military Commission should be the predominant authority among the Taliban was becoming acceptable to many Quetta Shura field commanders. This seems to suggest that its impact in terms of military effectiveness was positive. By contrast, the greater the proximity to the Quetta Shura political leadership, the stronger the resistance to the new system. Thus the true issue may have been vested interests that would have resisted any system, regardless of its effectiveness.

92 Interviews with two commanders in Helmand, March 2012.

93 Interview with Taliban field commander, Babaji, Helmand, September 2011.

Conclusion

Between 2009 and 2013, the centralization and reform process did indeed partially succeed in resolving the fragmentation of the early days of the insurgency and led to the establishment of a more solid and coherent command system; incidentally it was the "reformed" groups of Taliban who played by far the largest role in the fighting of 2015, the first year after the withdrawal of western combat forces.94 While Quetta's governors and officials fell to us night raids in large numbers, the low-profile Nizami massuleen were far less affected, contributing to the strengthening of the Peshawar-based Taliban vis-à-vis the southern mahaz networks. The Peshawar leadership exploited the situation to expand northward from 2010 onward.

The primary targets of the reform process were at least partially achieved: there has been a reorganization of the Taliban command and control system in areas where the Peshawar Shura is pre-eminent, and the movement's approach to the insurgency has certainly undergone a professionalization compared with early days. Wherever Peshawar holds sway, a new centralized recruitment system was implemented with considerable success, making the emergence of autonomous leaders with a strong personal following much more difficult. The focus of the 2015 summer offensive was in areas where the hold of the Peshawar Military Commission was strongest (the northeast).

That said, the Taliban's original model of an ever-changing, competing "federation" of semi-autonomous armed organizations, which in some ways replicated the 1980s mujahedin's fragmented structures, also proved resilient. This structure may be the inevitable consequence of the social fragmentation along tribal, clan, kin, and family lines that characterizes the country's Pashtun belt. Even at the peak of efforts to export the nizami system to the south, the centralized model was watered down there, often interpreted as an attempted take-over by another mahaz, and merely a replica of the old patronage-based association mechanism.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the south centralization itself became a further driver of internal conflict among the southern loy mahaz. It was only Baradar's arrest in early 2010 that created the space for the Peshawar model to be im- ported south, allowing the ascent of Mullah Zakir.

By 2013, the movement was split between the Military Commission and the governor-centric system. The southern Taliban in particular were split into those supporting Zakir's line of further centralization, which would replicate

94 Communications with Taliban cadres in Quetta and Peshawar, June–July 2015.

the Peshawar model, and those loyal to Akhtar Mansur's and the "traditional" loy mahaz model. The first faction believed—once the Taliban put their military house in order—in a military solution to the conflict; the second was more oriented toward bypassing its military shortcoming through negotiations and political posturing, in theory, at least, progressively drawn toward the possibility of participating in government, perhaps along similar lines as Hizb-i Islami post-2001.95 Nonetheless, both Mansur and Zakir, and their allies, seemed to realize that splitting the movement once and for all would weaken both factions, and avoided going to such an extreme.

Between mid-2012 and 2013, several attempts were made to find a compromise capable of accommodating the needs and ambitions of both factions in Quetta, with the encouragement of foreign backers who were not ready to allow the further fragmentation of a fighting force they were bankrolling. The main bone of contention was what, exactly, the compromise should look like: how much of the old and the new should figure in the new command framework. The core of the problem concerned who would emerge as the Taliban's military leader, and the subordination (or lack thereof) of the military leader-ship to the political.

A military solution to the conflict would likely strengthen the military leadership even politically, while a diplomatic solution would instead favor Mansur as the new head of the Quetta Shura. Quetta's political leadership was ideally positioned to benefit from the opportunities presented by interfacing with involved foreign powers. Mansur and his allies were at this stage reintroduced to the world stage as a "moderate" faction inclined to negotiate. As a result, the Taliban in 2010–2013 increasingly became polarized into two tendencies: a "talkative" Taliban interested in reconciliation, and a "jihadist" Taliban determined to pursue complete military victory. The preservation of the old Taliban social order more and more seemed to imply some form of reconciliation with the West-supported Kabul government, which could have frozen the declining power of the old Taliban elite, while the prosecution of jihad until victory more and more seemed to imply reforms that undermined the very social order that the Taliban claimed to be defending, but at the same time could have empowered a new generation of Taliban military leaders, that had emerged after 2001.

95 Post-2001, Hizb-i Islami split into a military faction, engaged in fighting the Coalition and ANSF, and a legal political faction represented in parliament and that has played a crucial role at the government level. Similarly, Mansur's faction and its Quetta allies would similarly potentially create a political branch without abandoning the fight. In this context, military power would provide leverage to obtain political "credentials."

Table 1 *Key Taliban Networks*

	Quetta Shura	**Peshawar Shura**	**Miran Shah Shura**
Year Founded	2003	2007	
Command system	Personal allegiance	Centralized administration	centralized
Areas of operation	south, west, parts of north, south-east, east and Kabul region	east, north, Kabul region	Loya Paktya, Logar
Main components	Former Taliban commanders	Shamsatoo Shura (former Hizb-i Islami) Hizb-i Islami Toor Pagri	Haqqani network
Military organization	Federation of semi-autonomous armed organizations Governors *Rahbari Shura* (Leadership Council) *Loy Mahaz* (big front) *Mahaz Shura* (Council of Front Leaders	*Nizami Komisiun* (Military Commission) *Nizami massuleen* (local officials appointed by center)	Local groups Commission. Large Group Commission, governors, massuleen
Leaders	Mullah Dadullah Mullah Baradar Abdul Qayyum Zakir Akhtar Mohammed Mansur	Qari Baryal Qari Habibullah Mawlavi Abdul Saleh	