

Origins and endurance of the taliban



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The subject of the Taliban frequently appears in contemporary international news headlines. This year, several reports indicated the Taliban continued to gain pockets of control in Afghanistan. The Taliban resurgence is not only significant for Afghan citizens, but also for many countries like the U. S. who either have troops stationed in Afghanistan or some vested interest in the affairs of the country. The Taliban emerged in the aftermath of the Soviet occupation and chaos of the Afghanistan Civil War, as many displaced Afghans saw an opportunity to implement some semblance of order through strict Islamic law. The group exists today as a powerful Islamic fundamentalist organization because of the actions, or inactions, of the U. S., Pakistan, and other foreign powers involved in the country. Many U. S. citizens, and westerners in general, hold stereotypes of Afghanistan as a place unable to sustain order or misunderstand the Taliban and Islamic fundamentalism as a primitive way of life. Knowledge of the Taliban is beneficial to students studying several historical topics because it opens a window into Afghanistan's storied past and erases misconceptions.

According to 2018 news reports, the Afghan Taliban fully control fourteen districts in the country, which equates to around four percent of the population (Adamou & Sharifi, par. 6). This number appears minuscule in comparison to the ninety percent of Afghanistan the Islamic fundamentalist controlled before the U. S. led an overthrow of the regime in November of 2001, but the Taliban presence significantly expanded after foreign combat troops left the country in 2014. Based on district attacks, the Taliban have an active physical presence in an additional 263 Afghan districts, far beyond their traditional southern stronghold (Adamou & Sharifi, par. 6). Violence

soared in Afghanistan within the past few years as United Nations data reported that more than 8, 500 civilians died or suffered injuries from insurgent and military combat in just the first three quarters of 2017 (Adamou & Sharifi, par. 30). The Karzai government maintains full control of only thirty percent of the country.

The Taliban holds current significance for the Afghan people, as many fear for their safety every day. In areas under Taliban control, Afghan citizens must follow a strict Islamic code which most do not support. International support against the Taliban also brings danger to Afghanistan with drone strikes and cross-fire unintentionally harming those they meant to protect. The Taliban serve as a dangerous role model for Islamic extremism and the spread of global jihad. The Taliban will continue to exist as a relevant danger until the international community addresses the outstanding problems in Afghanistan, like lack of education, poverty, and inadequate infrastructure.

In the context of Afghan history, the Taliban originated out of the war and chaos, which began with the 1979 Soviet invasion. The invasion occurred in part to support the ruling communist People's Democratic Republic of Afghanistan whom the Afghan people had begun to revolt against in the face of drastic and unwanted reforms (Tanner, 233). If the PDPA fell, all the work and investment the Soviet Union put into Afghanistan since 1919 would be irreparably lost. The loss of Soviet influence in Afghanistan was at an elevated risk amid the Cold War, where U. S. aid and expertise might easily replace that of the Soviet Union. Very quickly the invasion provoked a declaration of jihad from thousands of Afghan mullahs. The call to jihad elicited an incredible response from the population, not surprising where, in

a country of seventeen million people, eighty-five percent subsisted in the countryside and put more faith in local tribal chiefs than the central government in Kabul (Tanner, 238). In a country characterized by internal divisions, the Soviet invasion made it necessary for Afghans to unify for a political purpose that cut across ethnic, tribal, economic, and geographic lines, with Islam as a common ideology. The Afghan resistance called themselves *mujahideen*, a word derived from jihad for “soldiers of God” (Tanner, 244).

The *mujahideen* had three main goals: To deny the legitimacy of the Soviet puppet regime in Kabul and preserve opposition to it among the Afghan population, create guerilla infrastructures, and fight a war of attrition to make the Soviet effort too costly to remain in Afghanistan. The resistance required international aid and weapons to achieve their goals. In 1980, U. S. aid reached a mere thirty million dollars, but President Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan compensated for lack of initial American support in several ways (Tanner, 250). Through Pakistan’s intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan provided arms and expertise to the Afghan resistance. Zia held a vested interest in an Afghanistan free of Soviet influence. With a hostile India to the east and a Soviet-occupied Afghanistan to the west, Pakistan feared isolation, or worse, that they might become the Soviet Union’s next target. China soon backed Pakistan’s efforts, followed by Egypt and Saudi Arabia. In 1981, as the main line of defense against the Soviet Union, Pakistan secured an aid package of 3.2 billion dollars from U. S. President Ronald Reagan.

By 1985, 3.5 million Afghans had fled to Pakistan, a million more to Iran, and hundreds of thousands more became internally displaced refugees (Tanner,

255). The flagship of the regime in Kabul was its liberation of women, a rejection of the rural population's traditional Islamic beliefs. Over the last one hundred years of Afghanistan history, drastic reforms from the central government always met resistance from the countryside, and the same occurred with the Soviet-backed Karmal regime. In 1984, Zia insisted the leaders of the seven Afghan resistance parties in Peshawar form an alliance, four of which were Muslim fundamentalists. (Tanner, 253).

A turning point of the war occurred in 1986 when increased U. S. financial and weapons support reached the resistance fighters. Over half a billion dollars went directly to the *mujahideen*, and many armed themselves with heat-seeking, shoulder-fired Stinger missiles. Facing a more formidable enemy, the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, made it clear he wanted out of Afghanistan. In February of 1989, the Soviet withdrawal occurred on schedule. Official statistics report that the Soviet 40th Army lost almost fourteen thousand during the war, but Afghanistan suffered far more (Tanner, 269). The country experienced utter ruin, while Najibullah and his PDPA party remained in power. Both the U. S. and Pakistan felt uneasy with the provision of weapons to Islamic fundamentalists during the Soviet occupation, and the events that transpired in the years following the Soviet withdrawal confirmed those fears.

The *mujahideen* prepared for the Soviet withdrawal with the formation of an Interim Afghan Government. The government consisted of leaders from the seven Sunni Islamic parties based in Peshawar. Their goal consisted of defeating Najibullah's DRA Army. In 1991 the powerful Uzbek warlord, Dostum, turned against the Afghanistan government and joined his forces

<https://assignbuster.com/origins-and-endurance-of-the-taliban/>

with Massoud's (Tanner, 276). As their forces surrounded Kabul, the United Nations intervened to insert the *mujahideen* in a bloodless transfer of power. With the DRA out, an internal civil war erupted, not because Kabul fell, but because Tajik and Uzbek forces took the capital rather than the ethnically dominant Pashtuns. During this period of government and economic collapse, the country became the center for the world's opium trade, providing over seventy percent of the world's heroin (Tanner, 278). The money from opium replaced a loss in foreign aid after Soviet withdrawal and became the only means for most rural Afghan communities to survive.

Within the chaos emerged the Taliban. In the summer of 1994, a local strongman in southern Afghanistan raped several girls. The enraged citizens went to a local mullah, Mohammed Omar, to avenge the girls' violation. Omar turned to his religious students, who executed the strongman and intimidated his followers. Soon after, other people victimized by the lawless hordes roaming the countryside asked for Omar's assistance. This group did not consider themselves as *mujahideen*, but rather, as their name suggested, as students or seekers. The Taliban ranks quickly grew in response to the Afghan people's desperate desire for some semblance of order. As Ahmed Rashid described them, Taliban members "were literally the orphans of the war, the rootless and the restless, the jobless and the economically deprived with little self-knowledge. They admired war because it was the only occupation they could possibly adapt to" (Rashid, 32). Pakistan clearly played a vital role in the expansion of the Taliban. The ISI allowed Afghan refugees and native Pashtuns who filtered through Pakistani religious schools to swell Taliban numbers in exchange for the Taliban

clearing the road to Central Asia through Kandahar and Herat. Often the ISI armed and trained the Taliban recruits (Tanner, 282). By the end of 1994, the Taliban had surprisingly conquered the southern tribal warlords and headed north towards Kabul (Tanner, 279).

Ethnic leaders like Dostum and Massoud united against the Taliban as a common enemy. Even their combined efforts failed to keep the Taliban from taking Kabul, which fell uncontested in September of 1996 after Massoud's retreat. The Islamist group killed the former communist leader Najibullah the following day and hung up his castrated body for display in the city (Tanner 283). While in power, the Taliban implemented strict policies based on a form of Islamic law. The laws banned women from jobs and education, made burqas required clothing, and made all citizens black out their windows. The Taliban allowed forms of medieval justice such as chopping off people's ears, hands, and heads (Tanner, 284). The international community, who refused to recognize Omar's rule, started to pay more attention to the Taliban in the spring of 2001 when members destroyed the enormous fourth century Buddha statues carved into the Bamiyan cliffs (Schultheis, pars 16-17).

As Omar continued consolidating his rule, he began to work closely with Osama bin Laden, the leader of the international terrorist organization al Qaeda. The terrorist group recruited the most serious pupils from Afghanistan's religious schools for terrorist missions. The Taliban's relationship with bin Laden and al Qaeda proved fateful after the September 11th terrorist attacks on the United States. After Omar's refusal to surrender bin Laden to the United States, the Bush administration launched "Operation Enduring Freedom," a small CIA and Special Forces campaign in

<https://assignbuster.com/origins-and-endurance-of-the-taliban/>

Afghanistan to disrupt al Qaeda and overthrow the Taliban. The U. S. efforts proved extremely effective, and by December 2001, Omar fled to the desert and Bin Laden into Pakistan (Rashid, 220).

Just three years later, the Taliban returned to the Afghanistan political scene. The resurgence of the Taliban and its continued presence in the country lies in a multitude of factors. The U. S., after the successful election of Hamid Karzai as Afghanistan's president, failed to provide much-needed resources to the new government of a country destroyed by war. The Bush administration refused to engage in "nation-building," so no U. S. money went into infrastructure, the creation of jobs, the agricultural sector, or industry (Rashid, 222). The ISI played an essential role in the revival of the Taliban, continuing to train new members and provide weapons. Pakistan wanted to hold the Taliban as a proxy force, fueled by the lack of trust between the Pakistani military and the U. S. government.

President Karzai proved an ineffective ruler. Afghan citizens placed little trust in him, especially after the rigged 2008 elections. At that point, Karzai met neither the international or Afghan standards of legitimacy, as the Taliban grew in popularity (Barfield, 257). A successful ruler must convince Afghans that he will not be beholden to foreigners, which the reformed Taliban have worked towards establishing. A portion of Afghans see the Taliban as a strong nationalist voice, who have remained steadfast in opposing American backed leaders and occupation. The group implicitly acknowledged that they failed at governing during their short time in control. Through the utilization of technology, they attempt to present the image of competent leaders. The Taliban have presented themselves as an "all Afghanistan solution" not just

benefiting certain tribes or ethnic groups. The Taliban's strong tribal kinship networks have allowed them to mobilize a critical and dynamic rural base of support (Johnson & Mason, 1). In these ways, the mistakes of the U. S. and the international community, the support from Pakistan, and the Taliban's own success at establishing a strong rural Pashtun base contribute to their endurance in Afghanistan.

Prior to this course and my time spent researching the Taliban, I had a relatively insignificant amount of knowledge on the subject. I knew that the U. S was, and still is, fighting a war against the Taliban and other Islamic fundamentalist groups in Afghanistan. The origins of the Taliban were murky for me, but in doing research, I discovered that one must dig deep into Afghanistan's history to understand how and why the Taliban emerged. Starting with the communist PDPA of the 1970s and Soviet invasion, it became clear the Taliban had a connection to the *mujahideen*, or holy warriors, who joined together across ethnic, regional, and economic lines in a common Islamic brotherhood to fight the invaders (Tanner, 244). The Soviet occupation along with the Afghan Civil War that followed, created chaos in the country and millions of refugees who had nowhere else to turn except to a strict form of Islamic Fundamentalism to regain some sense of order (Rashid, 32).

One preconceived notion I held about the Taliban regarded the support of the group by the general Afghan population. I thought most Afghans supported the Taliban's form of Islamic fundamentalism, and that the country had a history of religious rule. In actuality, throughout Afghanistan's history, before the emergence of the Taliban, the country never experienced

rule by clergy or a religious group. Ethnic leaders, dynasties, or military men always held power. Islamic fundamentalism never previously flourished, and Taliban form of Islamic law fit nowhere on the spectrum of ideas and movements that emerged after 1979 (Rashid, 85) The idea that an Islamist group might take power only occurred following the Soviet invasion and only came to fruition with the few short years of Taliban rule.

Teachers and professors should teach about the Taliban in history classes for a variety of reasons. First, the Taliban provides an example of how desperate citizens of war-torn countries turn to any group that might provide them with stability, even if the group supports strict Islamic law and participates in suicide bombings. Second, examining the Taliban necessitates the understanding of the ethnic makeup of Afghanistan, a factor that has shaped its existence for hundreds of years. Finally, teaching students about the Taliban dispels widely held western conceptions that many westerners hold regarding both the Taliban and Afghanistan as a whole.

The Taliban remain an important aspect of more recent Afghanistan history and the center of contemporary political and religious news and debates. The group emerged from the chaos which plagued Afghanistan starting in the late 1970s, with the Soviet invasion and subsequent Afghan Civil War. The Taliban's form of Islamic extremism appealed to some as virtually their only option for political action in a war-torn and economically destroyed country. The persistence of the Taliban in Afghanistan stems from actions of foreign countries like the United States and Pakistan, but also from their image of an "All-Afghanistan" solution in a country whose people always mistrusted outsiders. Learning about the Taliban necessitates an

understanding of a broader overview of Afghan history, primarily shaped by the country's location and ethnic makeup. Many of the contemporary issues in Afghanistan today, including the continued Taliban presence, had mainly occurred over interfering foreign countries' lack of knowledge regarding Afghanistan and its culture.

Works Cited

- Adamou, Louise, and Shoaib Sharifi. "Taliban Threaten 70% of Afghanistan, BBC Finds." *BBC News*, BBC, 31 Jan. 2018, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42863116.
- Barfield, Thomas Jefferson. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton University Press, 2010.
- Johnson, Thomas H., and M. Chris Mason. "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan." *Orbis*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2007, pp. 71-89., doi: 10. 1016/j. orbis. 2006. 10. 006.
- Rashid, Ahmed. *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. 2nd ed., Yale University Press, 2010.
- Schultheis, Rob. "The Enduring Splendors of, Yes, Afghanistan." *Smithsonian. com*, Smithsonian Institution, 1 Feb. 2003, www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/the-enduring-splendors-of-yes-afghanistan-75080170/.
- Tanner, Stephen. *Afghanistan: A Military History: From Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban*. 2nd ed., Da Capo Press, 2003.