4. Civil War and Advent of the Taliban

While many expected the departure of the Soviet army in February 1989 to mark the end of the war, it did not. The Najibullah regime—aided by Soviet security assistance—was clever and built alliances around the country. With a 65,000-man army, an air force of nearly 200 planes and helicopters, and many well-paid militia units, Afghan government forces were able to hold off the mujahideen. This fact became clear in May 1989, when a number of mujahideen groups attacked, but failed to seize, the city of Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan. The army was simply a better and more cohesive force than the fractious insurgents were. The disparate mujahideen groups—dubbed the Peshawar Seven—failed to cooperate and often fought viciously among themselves. Najibullah was well supported by the Soviet Union and fought effectively for 3 years. In March 1992, lacking foreign supporters after the demise of the Soviet Union, Najibullah stopped fighting, but he was unable to leave the country and took refuge in the UN Compound where he remained until seized by the Taliban in 1996.[1]

Civil Wars: 1992–1996

In 1992, with UN help, a provisional government was formed to rule the country. It failed because of infighting among the mujahideen. The conflict was particularly bitter between the eastern Pashtun, Hezb-i-Islami followers of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who were supported by Pakistan, and the Tajik fighters of Ahmed Shah Massoud's Jamiat-i-Islami, who came to control Kabul. Burhanuddin Rabbani, a Tajik and the political head of the Jamiat-i-Islami group, was ultimately named president; Gulbuddin Hekmatyar was designated prime minister of the interim government; and Ahmed Shah Massoud was selected as defense

minister. Sadly, the government never met at the conference table, only on the urban battlefield.

The civil war featured fierce fighting over Kabul—occupied by Massoud but desired by Hekmatyar, his archrival—and in some other major cities, which to that point had escaped most active combat. From April 1992 to April 1993, much of Kabul was destroyed and 30,000 inhabitants were killed, with another 100,000 wounded.[2] In other cities, things were often more peaceful under the control of local warlords, such as Ismail Khan in Herat and Abdul Rashid Dostum in Mazar-i-Sharif. In many other places, however, law and order disintegrated. Local or regional warlords were dominant and men with guns made the rules. In Kandahar and other locations, rape, armed robbery, kidnapping young boys, and other crimes of violence were all too common.

Fearing the instability growing in Afghanistan, and disenchanted with the mujahideen groups it had assisted since 1980, the Pakistani government began to slowly withdraw its support from them in 1994 in favor of Afghan and Pakistani madrassa graduates called the Taliban, a group focused on sharia-based law and order. The leaders of these students were radical Islamists, many of whom were self-educated holy men. While zealous and often devout, there were no great Koranic scholars or religious thinkers among them, nor were there many engineers, physicians, or experienced government bureaucrats. Taliban leaders often supplanted Pashtun tribal leaders. They were led by Mullah Mohammad Omar Akhund (also known as Mullah Mohammad Omar Mujahid, or simply Mullah Omar), a country cleric from Kandahar and a former anti-Soviet resistance commander who had lost an eye in battle. His deputies included many wounded veterans of the war with the Soviet Union.

After a few small-scale local successes in the Kandahar region, a Taliban field force with modern weaponry emerged from Pakistan, first operating around Kandahar and then nationwide. They drew on recruits from extremist madaris—Islamic schools—in Pakistan, and those located from Ghazni to Kandahar in southern Afghanistan. Ahmed Rashid's and Anthony Davis's research confirm that in Spin Boldak (adjacent to the Pakistani province of Baluchistan), the Taliban seized "some 18,000 Kalashnikovs, dozens of artillery pieces, large quantities of ammunition, and many vehicles" that belonged to Pakistan's ISI and were being guarded by fighters from the Hezb-i-Islami group.[3] Martin Ewans, a former British diplomat, reported:

> *The Taliban forces that proceeded to advance through Afghanistan in the winter of 1994–95 were equipped with tanks, APCs, artillery, and even aircraft, but however much equipment they may have acquired in Spin Boldak, Kandahar or elsewhere, they could not despite energetic denials, have operated without training, ammunition, fuel, and maintenance facilities provided by Pakistan. . . . Within no more than six months, they had mobilized possibly as many as 20,000 fighting men . . . many* [of whom] *were Pakistanis.*[4]

With Pakistani advice and armaments, the unified Taliban sliced through the outlaw gunmen and contending mujahideen groups with great alacrity. In 1994, they took Kandahar and then other major cities. In 1996, the disintegrating Rabbani regime lost Kabul to the Taliban, aided by the defections of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani, who ended up allied with the Taliban. In September 1996, the Taliban took

Najibullah and his brother from the UN Compound, tortured and killed them, dragged their bodies behind vehicles, and then hung the pair on a lamppost near the Presidential Palace.[5] Commander Massoud made an orderly retreat to the north, where he was later joined by Hazara fighters and Uzbeks under Commander Dostum.

The Taliban pursued and took Mazar-i-Sharif, lost it, and seized it again. On the Taliban's second capture in 1998, seeking revenge for past massacres against its own cadres, its forces massacred Hazara defenders and also killed Iranian diplomats, causing an international crisis that drove a deep divide between the Sunni Taliban and the Shia regime in Tehran. In all, the new Northern Alliance of Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara fighters never occupied more than 15–20 percent of the countryside.[6] The Taliban, aided by al Qaeda–trained Afghan and foreign cadres, kept up pressure on the Northern Alliance until 2001.

The Taliban set up its capital in Kabul and appointed ministers, but the command element remained in Kandahar with Mullah Omar. It often contradicted Kabul's repressive and at times ludicrous government. Clever with religious symbols, Mullah Omar literally put on the cloak of the Prophet Mohammad, which was kept in a Kandahar shrine, and proclaimed himself *Amir-ul-Mominin*, Commander of the Faithful, raising his status among even the most radical extremists. Al Qaeda seniors and the Pakistani Taliban have always accorded Mullah Omar great respect and acknowledge him with his self-awarded title. The Taliban regime was recognized as legitimate by only three nations: Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, though the latter two maintained only a limited diplomatic presence in Kabul. The United States and United Nations continued to give aid to the people, but Afghanistan's seat at the United Nations and most embassies abroad remained occupied by representatives of the previous regime led by Rabbani.

The Rule of the Taliban

Having taken control of the country and implemented sharia-based law and order, the Taliban appeared to be puzzled by how to run the government or manage the economy, which went from bad to worse, especially when UN sanctions for narcotics trafficking and droughts were added to the mix. Public health, in part because of Taliban-imposed restrictions on the mobility of female midwives, declined markedly. These failures were intimately connected to the Taliban itself and what they practiced. They generally opposed progress and modernity. French scholar Olivier Roy noted:

> *The men who formed the original core of the Taliban had learned and imparted a version of Islam that differed significantly from other fundamentalists. . . .* [The] *Madrassa education instilled in Pakistan focused on returning Afghan society to an imagined pre-modern period in which a purer form of Islam was practiced by a more righteous Muslim society. This made the Taliban approach to governance somewhat utopian in its attempt to battle the enemies of modernity and non-orthodoxy.*[7]

In light of these leanings, the Taliban victory decrees were understandable and even predictable. On taking Kabul, the Taliban's decrees were among the most repressive public policy decrees ever issued. Here are their cardinal elements:

- prohibition against female exposure [or being outside without burka and male relative]
- prohibition against music

- prohibition against shaving
- mandatory prayer
- prohibition against the rearing of pigeons and bird fighting
- eradication of narcotics and the users thereof
- prohibition against kite flying
- prohibition against the reproduction of pictures
- prohibition against gambling
- prohibition against British and American hairstyles
- prohibition on interest on loans, exchange charges, and charges on transactions
- prohibition against [women] washing clothes by the river embankments
- prohibition against music and dancing at weddings
- prohibition against playing drums
- prohibition against [male] tailors sewing women's clothes or taking measurements of women
- prohibition against witchcraft.[8]

The Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Extermination of Sin was quite active. Women who disobeyed the directives could be beaten by the religious police. Public executions for serious criminals or adulterers were well publicized. The Taliban forced women to wear the *burka*, or as it is more commonly called in Afghanistan, the *chadari*, a one-piece body covering where women looked out at the world through a slit or a four-by-six-inch piece of mesh sewn into the headpiece. The Taliban's measures annoyed many Afghans,

especially in the urban areas where life had been traditionally less restrictive.

In addition to human rights violations, the Taliban declared war on art, no doubt aided by their ascetic brethren in al Qaeda, who had similar puritanical beliefs. Thousands of books were burned. The national museum in Kabul, the repository of many pre-Islamic relics and works of art, was systematically vandalized by Taliban operatives eager to rid Afghanistan of the graven images of its past. The possession of Western-style fashion magazines became a crime. Works of art or history books showing human faces or female forms were destroyed. The animals in the Kabul Zoo were tortured or killed by Taliban rank and file. Only a few specimens, including a blind lion and a bear whose nose had been cut off by a Talib, survived to 2001.[9] At the height of this fervor, against the objections of the UN and many nations, the Taliban destroyed the Bamiyan Buddhas, two pre-Islamic, 6th century A.D. sandstone sculptures carved directly from a cliff—one 150 feet and the other 121 feet in height. The Taliban saw them as idols and not ancient works of art, a point with which their al Qaeda benefactors agreed.[10]

As heinous as their domestic policies were, the worst aspect of Taliban governance was its virtual adoption of the al Qaeda terrorist organization. Osama bin Laden came back to Afghanistan in 1996, shortly before the Taliban took Kabul. He had fought there with the mujahideen for short periods during the Soviet war. His duties had included a little fighting, much fund-raising in Pakistan, and the supervision of construction efforts.[11] After a few years at home, he was ousted first from Saudi Arabia in 1991 for objecting to the introduction of U.S. forces during the Gulf War, and then from Sudan in 1996 because he had become a threat to the regime. Neither country would put up with his revolutionary activities and radical ways.[12]

Osama bin Laden reportedly saw Afghanistan as the first state in a new Islamic caliphate. Although he did not know Mullah Omar beforehand, bin Laden held him in high regard, and intermarriage took place between the inner circles of al Qaeda and the Taliban.[13] In return for his sanctuary and freedom of action, bin Laden provided funds, advice, and, most important, trained cadres, Afghan or otherwise, for the Taliban war machine. Pakistan was also generous in support of its allies in Afghanistan, which it saw as a sure bulwark against Indian influence. In 1998 alone, Pakistan provided $6 million to the Taliban.[14]

In Afghanistan, bin Laden took over or set up training camps for al Qaeda and Taliban recruits. As many as 20,000 Afghan and foreign recruits may have passed through the camps.[15] Many of these trainees received combat experience in fighting the Northern Alliance, raising al Qaeda's value in the eyes of the Taliban leadership. Afghanistan became a prime destination for international terrorists. In February 1998, bin Laden declared war on the United States from his safe haven in Afghanistan. Accusing the Americans of occupying Arabia, plundering its riches, humiliating its leaders, attacking Iraq, and more, bin Laden claimed that de facto the United States had declared war on Islam and its people. In an allegedly binding fatwa, or religious finding, bin Laden and his cosigners declared a defensive jihad that (theoretically) all Muslims were required to participate in:

> *To kill Americans and their allies, both civil and military, is an individual duty of every Muslim who is able, in any country where this is possible, until the* [main mosques in Jerusalem and Mecca] *are freed from their grip, and until their armies, shattered and broken-winged, depart from all the lands of Islam, incapable of threatening any Muslim.*[16]

Further on, the fatwa exhorts "every Muslim . . . to kill the Americans and plunder their possessions wherever he finds them and whenever he can." Muslim leaders and soldiers were also directed to "launch attacks against the armies of the American devils" and their allies.[17]

On August 7, 1998, al Qaeda carried out bombings on the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in East Africa. Both Embassies were severely damaged. The casualties, mostly African, numbered over 220 killed, and nearly 4,200 wounded. Among other measures, U.S. retaliatory cruise missile strikes were aimed at al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan to little effect. The 9/11 Commission concluded that the strikes missed bin Laden by a few hours.[18] Before and after these attacks, a number of plots to capture or kill bin Laden were stillborn due to sensitivities about civilian casualties. In 1999, the 9/11 plotters received screening and initial training inside Afghanistan. Their guidance, funds, concept of the operation, and detailed plans came from al Qaeda central in Afghanistan. Beginning in 1998, the United States and Saudi Arabia both urged Afghanistan to surrender Osama bin Laden for legal proceedings. The Taliban government resisted repeated efforts to extradite him even after he had blown up two U.S. Embassies and, in October 2000, a U.S. warship off the coast of Yemen. To this day (2011), the Taliban leadership has never disavowed al Qaeda or Osama bin Laden.

By 2001, al Qaeda was a terrorist group with its own state. For reasons of money, ignorance, hospitality, ideology, or self-interest, Mullah Omar and the Taliban did not interfere with the activities of "the Arabs." The 9/11 Commission concluded that:

> *Through his relationship with Mullah Omar—and the monetary and other benefits that it brought the Taliban—Bin Ladin was*

able to circumvent restrictions; Mullah Omar would stand by him even when other Taliban leaders raised objections. . . . Al Qaeda members could travel freely within the country, enter or exit it without visas or any immigration procedures, purchase and import vehicles and weapons, and enjoy the use of official Afghan Ministry of Defense license plates. Al Qaeda also used the Afghan state-owned Ariana Airlines to courier money into the country.[19]