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Suicide Bombings in Afghanistan

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Since 2006, the insurgency in Afghanistan has been escalating, not decreasing in intensity. One of the weapons increasingly being used by insurgents is suicide bombing. Afghanistan now is the main site of this terrorist weapon in the world. So what motivates Taliban suicide bombers? The following insights into the motives of the perpetrators of suicide attacks are drawn from my research on one of the lethal weapons used by insurgents – suicide bombing. Between 2001 and 2011, there were 545 such attacks in the country, resulting in 3,604 fatalities and injuring 10 times more. Suicide attacks constitute only four per cent of all insurgent attacks in Afghanistan but account for around 20 per cent of all insurgency-related deaths. Their main targets are the local and foreign forces.

The findings of my research on suicide bombings largely discredit the commonly-held view that the personalities of the insurgent suicide bombers and their religion are the principal causes of their actions. Although religion can play a vital role in recruiting and motivating potential suicide bombers, the driving force is not religion but a cocktail of motivations

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including politics, humiliation, revenge and retaliation, as well as altruism. The meaning and nature of suicide in a suicide bombing are strikingly different from those of an ordinary suicide. Ordinary suicide involves the killing of only oneself, whereas in suicide bombings the killing of the perceived enemy is encoded in the action. Religiously and nationalistically coded attitudes towards an acceptance of death, stemming from a collective sense of humiliation, suffering and powerlessness, enable political organisations to offer suicide bombing as an outlet for feelings of desperation, deprivation and injustice (Hassan 2014).

For the individual, participating in a suicide mission is not simply about dying and killing but has broader significance to do with the achievement of multiple goals – from personal to communal. These include gaining community approval and political success in a number of ways: Liberating Afghanistan from foreign occupation; achieving personal redemption or honour; using martyrdom to affect the survival of the community; refusing to accept subjugation; seeking revenge for personal and collective humiliation; achieving material and religious reward; escaping from the everyday degradation of life under occupation, anxiety and defiance. In short, the cause of suicide bombings Afghanistan, as elsewhere, lies not in individual psychopathology but in broader societal conditions.

Who are Afghanistan's Suicide Bombers?

The best analyses of suicide bombings in Afghanistan, based on primary material, have been conducted by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). The main problem about getting reliable information on Afghan suicide bombers is that very few can be identified after the attacks. According to the UNAMA analysts, suicide bombers are instructed to tuck in their hands and head before detonating, which makes their identification and therefore an assessment of their motivation difficult (UNAMA 2007). Their identification is further compounded by the lack of facilities and services in the country to collect, store and analyse DNA and other forensic evidence. The forensic analysis and autopsies carried out on the suicide bombers are short and inconclusive. One forensic specialist said: "We have limited staff and equipment... The police would like the man's identity. But we have no facilities for DNA testing. We discover very little". (Bearak 2007).

Another problem making identification difficult is that most of the attackers' bodies remain unclaimed by their families, ostensibly because their families were unaware of their involvement in a suicide mission. According to one report, families come to learn of their

sons' deaths only when the Taliban arrive to distribute their "martyrdom payment" (Williams 2007). The Afghan police and intelligence officials from Gardez and Qandahar claim that some drug addicts are being used for suicide missions. Certainly the absence of reliable personal and family backgrounds makes analysis of the ethnic origin, motivation and intention of suicide attackers difficult. In addition, some Afghan officials, including President Hamid Karzai, have claimed that Afghans do not commit suicide attacks because *pashtunwali* forbids them, the implication being that the suicide bombers come from Pakistan. A senior military commander of the Afghan Army was reported as saying: "The explosives come from Pakistan and the drivers come from Pakistan and foreign countries. It is very difficult for an Afghan to persuade himself to commit suicide". (Baldauf 2006).

However, such denials merely downplay Afghan involvement in suicide attacks. In September 2006, the Kabul police arrested four persons belonging to a Kabul-based suicide cell and seized its explosives cache. The leader of the cell was a cleric in one of the city's mosques, which served as storage for the explosives and as a recruitment centre for the operatives of the planned attacks. One of the other men arrested was also a cleric. Under interrogation, one of the detainees admitted to obtaining explosives for suicide attacks and justified his actions on the grounds that Afghanistan was under the occupation of the United States and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). He declared: "I have not committed any kind of crime. I was doing *jihad* for God. They have arrested me as if I were some sort of criminal". (Rahmani 2006 a). In August 2006, police arrested a Taliban commander in charge of suicide attacks in Kabul. He was identified as Qari Hakim Mullah, a 25-year-old Tajik. He admitted to having spent some time in Pakistan. Afghan police have also discovered bomb-making factories in Kabul and Qandahar. These examples attest to the involvement of Afghans in suicide bombing operations. (Rahmani 2006 b).

It is true that many suicide bombers have Pakistani connections, but the reason for that is that Pakistan has had more than two million Afghan refugees, many of whom have attended or still attend *madrasas* and are or were exposed to radical and militant ideologies. The general point is that the environment of the refugee camps seems to be conducive to producing a militant ideology. Pakistani *madrasas* certainly played a role during the anti-Soviet campaigns in the 1980s. According to a senior Taliban commander, interviewed by UNAMA researchers, who had direct knowledge of the attitudes and priorities of the Taliban military Shura based in Quetta (Pakistan), more than half of the suicide bombers used by the Taliban

in Afghanistan are foreigners who come from Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Arab countries. The Taliban go to great lengths to disguise the true identities of these attackers.

Although initially non-Pashtun Pakistanis and other foreigners may have been involved in suicide missions, the perpetrators are now increasingly Pashtun. More than 80 per cent of suicide bombers pass through recruitment, training facilities or safe houses in North and South Waziristan (Pakistan), en route to their targets inside Afghanistan. Around three dozen Taliban groups in and around Quetta are expected to produce one or more suicide attacker, although this requirement is not strictly enforced. The attackers are expected to be volunteers but, in the event, heavy-handed persuasion, misrepresentation of the mission and even coercion are often employed. There are several insurgent networks within Afghanistan that specialise in explosives and suicide attacks, particularly in the southern provinces. The overall coordinator for suicide bombing campaigns in southern Afghanistan – in succession to Mullah Dadullah, who was killed in counter-insurgency operations in 2007 – is Mullah Mansur, the shadow Taliban governor of Qandahar. (In April 2007, I obtained a propaganda video for suicide attacks in which the role of Mullah Dadullah in recruiting suicide bombers was prominent. One of my informants with close ties to some Taliban commanders told me that Mullah Dadullah had more than 500 suicide bomber volunteers on his register.)

In an effort to elucidate the motives and background of Afghanistan's suicide bombers, UNAMA analysts were permitted by the country's Ministry of Interior (MOI) and the National Directorate of Security (NDS) to interview persons who had been arrested either because they were allegedly "failed attackers" or because they were otherwise implicated in executing, organising or facilitating suicide attacks. However, the interviewees were selected from a list provided by the NDS and MOI according to their own criteria. This makes it difficult to determine how representative these people were of all suicide-attack plotters who have been arrested in connection with suicide attacks.

The interviews were conducted by UNAMA human rights officers in Afghanistan's Pul-e-Charki prison complex outside Kabul. Due to the sample selection, these interviews do not provide definitive insights into the motivations for suicide attacks, but the interviews do converge on several religious, political and personal motivations and concerns regarding "foreign occupation", dissatisfaction with the Afghan government, and honour violations, all of which are echoed in the public opinion polls conducted in Afghanistan.

The UNAMA analysts interviewed 23 persons incarcerated or awaiting trial in connection with suicide attacks in Afghanistan. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours. They reveal that, contrary to the popular contention that Afghans are not involved in suicide attacks, 21 of the 23 interviewees were Afghan nationals and two were Pakistani nationals. However, of the 21 Afghan nationals, 14 had spent time as refugees in Pakistan and two had been refugees in Iran. The youngest interviewee was 15 years-old and the oldest was in his 50s. The average age was around 26. The profiles of two of the interviewees are reproduced below (the UNAMA report provides biographical sketches of five prisoners). To protect their identities, all names have been changed.

Munir

Munir, 19, described himself as a member of the Deobandi (Pakistan-based) militant group Harkat ul Mujahidin. Munir is uneducated except for the four years he spent in a *madrasa* in Karachi. His father was a mullah who earned in his view an average income that was nonetheless inadequate for his family's needs. He explained that he was saddened by the defeat of the Taliban in 2001 because they were an Islamist party. He is accused of attempting a suicide attack and he admits to the same. He explained to the UNAMA human rights officer that he sought to kill Americans and other outsiders with a car that was loaded with a bomb. With little preparation and promises of nothing other than heaven (*janat*), he was willing to execute his attack. He had numerous grievances with the Afghanistan government, mainly for allowing foreign interference in governance. He believed that America is supporting the Afghan government and he hated not just the invaders but all foreigners. He was adamant that his planned attack was *jihad* targeted against Americans who "shouldn't have come to Afghanistan". He continued: "They are invaders ... The war against them is *jihad*." While intently interested in killing Americans and other armed outsiders, he claimed that he would have been careful to avoid harming civilians. He was unrepentant and said that he would attempt his mission again, if possible.

He offered explicitly Islamic arguments for his actions, explaining that instructors at his *madrasa*, Jamia Farooqia, taught that *jihad* and suicide attacks are obligations (*farz* in local pronunciation, *fardh'ain* in Arabic). Although his two friends encouraged him to become an *intahari* (suicide attacker), he explained that the views of his family were irrelevant to his decision. He did not inform them of his decision and he held their opinions of the issue in low

esteem. He explained to UNAMA staff that he had not told his parents “because the *jihad* is *farz*. [There is] no need for questions. God would have [taken care] of them”.

When asked whether he understood his act to be suicide or martyrdom (*shahadat*), he replied: “This is *jihad*, not suicide. If a Muslim is killed, he is a *shaheed* (martyr). If I’m killed, there is another life where there would be no accountability...and God will be happy because of this action”. He saw little scope to achieve his cause beyond the suicide mission, noting that if “I perform my holy task, I will be happy”. He embraced the persons who set up this mission for him as his “mission brothers”. He said that he would advise others to do as he did but to avoid harming civilians. (UNAMA 2007).

Tahir

Tahir, 23, was born in Shamshatu camp near Peshawar, which he described as “Hekmatyar’s camp”. His family is Afghan by origin (Spin Jumat, Zaji District, Paktya Province) and he speaks Pashto, Dari and Arabic. Tahir freely admitted his involvement in suicide attacks, and he is in fact purported to have been a group leader organising suicide attacks in Afghanistan. He was arrested in Kabul on Pul-e-Mahmood Khan (Mahmood Khan Bridge), allegedly while arranging explosives. While he denied this charge, he admitted that in December 2003, he had a remote-controlled bomb. He and a friend, Jalal, had received intelligence about ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) movements, and they wanted to kill the ISAF commander. He explained: “We had fixed a point for [Jalal]. When he was about to plant the bomb and before we could detonate it, the Afghan government people arrested him”. Tahir was in another vehicle a short distance away.

When Tahir and his associates saw Jalal being arrested, they tried to plant another bomb. When they heard two shots and an explosion, they left their car and ran away to a shelter in Kabul. He said: “Our friend had been killed as he had detonated the bomb. He was a faithful *mujahid* [holy warrior] with the decision to get rid of the United States”. He claimed to have been part of “Jalozai’s [Sayyaf’s] camp”. He also claimed he was arrested because one of his friends was a “spy” who provided photos and evidence against him to the NDS. He also admitted to conducting another operation against the United States, about which the NDS is unaware.

Tahir claimed that the same ISAF commander visited him in prison and inquired how he came to have information about ISAF movements. Tahir boasted that he refused to answer and confronted the commander, telling him that he should leave Afghanistan and that the United States came only to occupy Afghanistan. The ISAF commander reportedly countered that they were here to bring peace and hunt Al Qaeda, not him. He retorted that “Al Qaeda is now in Waziristan. [The Americans] should go there”.

Tahir expressed firm anti-Russian sentiments as well as a strong sense of Afghan nationalism. He recounted how his village in Afghanistan was bombarded by the Communist regime, forcing his impoverished father to go to Peshawar where he bought a rickshaw to earn money. His father “had no time to get involved with politics” and “had no political links and was against my decision to join the party. He wanted me to be a merchant”. Tahir opted to join Hizb-e-Islami (led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar) and believed that Hekmatyar acted in the best interests of Afghans compared to other groups. Significantly, Tahir emphasised that “I am not a *talib*” and boasted that “I had the reputation of the zealous Afghan in the camp. I did not take any Pakistani citizenship, because I would then have to be a part of another country’s military”.

Hizb-e-Islami, in his view, had many positive attributes, one of which was that “it has no relations with foreigners and is run by Afghans...Hizb-e-Islami is totally against the ISI [the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate of Pakistan], which is another factor why I joined it”. (Clearly, Tahir was ill-informed about Hekmatyar’s long-standing relationship with the ISI or chose to engage in deception with the interviewer.) Another reason for his affiliation was the large number of *madrasas* that Hekmatyar had established. He claimed that there “were 600, up to 700, boys in the *madrasas* and there were separate schools for girls”. In fact, he graduated from the 12th class from one of the *madrasas* run by Hekmatyar’s Hizb-e-Islami. He claims that the *madrasa* taught many modern subjects (except science) with a strong emphasis on English. Tahir noted with particular satisfaction that all the teachers were Afghans. This fact was important to him, and he again opined that “I am proud to be grown up an Afghan as I am sticking with my roots”.

While not a *talib*, he supported some of the Taliban’s actions even though, in general, he was not supportive of their governance. He was, for example, satisfied with the “executions and punishments meted out by the Taliban”. Following their defeat in 2001, he was sad, as an

Afghan, about their failure, and he was displeased with the arrival of the *kafir* (infidels). He was not open to a return to the Taliban but, consonant with his strong Afghan nationalism, he contended that they should adhere to real Islam, be true Afghans and control their own affairs, rather than being controlled by the ISI, and have “critical relations” with other countries.

Like Munir, Tahir disparaged the Afghan government: “Regarding the government, it is not an elected Afghan government. The voters who were brought there were not real Afghans. There is a difference between Karzai and Babrak Karmal. One came with US plans; the other with the USSR. Both are puppet regimes and they will be toppled”. Unlike Munir, Tahir did not have an unqualified loathing of all foreigners and their efforts in Afghanistan. For example, he was pleased with the construction of roads and schools, but he was irritated that the government of Afghanistan seemed to pocket much of the aid money, and the government, in his view, had failed to make good use of the aid received. He asked: “Who has asked the government where the aid money is?” He also articulated a difference between “foreigners like the UN and Islamic entities and other diplomatic entities [who are good]...but those who are occupiers are not good”.

When pressed to say who the occupiers are, he identified the United States and those who support it. Interestingly, he observed: “[The Americans] are here to bring peace, but their presence has brought instability... [It’s] now clear that the Taliban and Hekmatyar want to talk to the government, but the United States is hampering this. NATO–ISAF are completely the people of the United States. But I am not against the unarmed foreigners”. Tahir believed that if the United States were to leave “Afghanistan for Afghans and the international community [stops interfering with] political parties...then Afghans can come together”. He blamed the ISI, the United States, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan for the disunity of present-day Afghanistan.

Also in contrast to Munir, Tahir did not detail at length any religious motivations for his actions. He consistently noted that his country “is invaded by the Americans and their friendly forces. I hate them and want them to leave the country”. As noted, he drew visceral parallels between the American and Soviet presence. When pressed about the religious dimension of his actions, he argued cursorily that success in an operation would make the perpetrator a *shaheed*. (He was not a suicide attacker himself.)

However, he quickly strayed from Islamic arguments to Islamist arguments, noting the dilemmas confronting Muslims throughout the Muslim world. He explained that when a *shaheed* goes to heaven, he can intercede on behalf of 70 guilty people. He also noted that a *shaheed*'s parents have a high position in paradise. He also explained that according to the Quran and the books that he had "from Beirut" such attacks were legitimate in Islam. He also claimed that there is an order to kill Jews and others "if they invade you". He cited the plight of the Palestinians who are "in a cage" and treated cruelly. He also identified Saudi Arabia where "there is *Hajj* but the reality is that it's occupied by the United States. They killed innocent children and women. Even when the Taliban and Al Qaeda operate in Afghanistan, they have minimal civilian casualties".

With respect to targeting in attacks, Tahir explained that his group of "pure Afghan Hekmatyar supporters" were more discriminating in their attacks, focussing upon the "occupiers" (the United States and ISAF), than those groups which he described as "ISI supported". He claimed that the "Government of Afghanistan is not our target but if they are present, they become our target. If we come to know they are slaves and mercenaries, then we will kill them. You UN people, you will lose prestige and you will be seen on the same side. You are supporting the United States. Hekmatyar and his son-in-law Baheer said time and time again that the UN should not support the United States".

UNAMA interviewers asked him to explain his conflation of the UN with the United States. He proffered the case of the US military action in Nangarhar and Sangin where the "United States killed people". He also noted that Dr Baheer had given a television interview and was arrested and sent to Bagram. He argued that Baheer spoke under UN principles of freedom but was arrested four years ago in Pakistan by the ISI and handed over to the US. He asked the UNAMA staff member: "Why do people stay silent?" He later suggested that the UN should work to secure its prestige in Afghanistan by, amongst other things, encouraging the United States to leave Afghanistan.

Like Munir, Tahir had no remorse and spoke with relish about how he had hoped he would kill all the commanders of American forces and ISAF. He candidly described his group's hidden military headquarters where they train operatives for three to six months. "Many of us do not need training", he quipped. He expressed confidence that the *jihad* would continue

and that they would prevail in defeating the United States. If given the opportunity, he asserted, he would tell others to do the same as it is “an order of Islam to do it and be proud of it”.

Tahir was forthcoming about the criteria by which his group selected recruits for suicide attacks. “Many people knew us in Peshawar... We do not pick them. They come to us. There is no power to stop them. They come from Jalalabad, Kuna, Gardez and there are too many. I swear to God I have never asked people to come to us to do this. Naturally Afghans are against occupation”. He claimed that some 1,900 youths had come to him without asking for money or support. He believed, however, that candidates should be at least 19 or 20 years old, should act without coercion and should not be mentally retarded. Moreover, he would dissuade candidates who were the primary earners for their families.

While noting that this caveat was for practical reasons, Tahir also cited the story of a man who had come to Prophet Mohammad offering to fight for Islam. When the Prophet understood from the man that his family was poor and that he was the sole earner, the Prophet turned him away. Tahir went on to state how recruits should aim for “heavy enemy casualties” and claimed to have carefully trained candidates himself. He asserted that 70 were willing and waiting to undertake their suicide mission, but he had been unable to prepare them because of his arrest. While he suspected that “everything fell apart” following his arrest, he had received some information that “they [were] organising themselves... [and] their numbers [had] increased and they [were] ready to do more suicide attacks”. He cautioned the UNAMA staff member not to compare the “youths of Afghanistan to the plastic youths of Kabul who are without any zeal. [Previously] it was Arabs and a few Pakistanis [who were suicide attackers]. But it is all Afghans since December 2003”.

Tahir provided a lengthy treatise on civilian casualties in this conflict. First, he noted that “in Islam, responsibility does not go to a *shaheed* if he kills civilians as collateral damage. Responsibility goes to the infidels because they positioned the public in a way [that put them in harm’s way] because they are cowards”. He went on to explain that before Islam came to Afghanistan, there were the Tartars. “Ibn Tayamia was a famous scholar of Islam. The same case existed at that time... The Tartars used Muslims as human shields and this is what is happening now. The United States push civilians into military attack areas. Three centuries

after Mohammad, there was a *fatwa* that our target should be enemies. But if the public is amongst the enemies and are killed, responsibility goes to [the enemies]”. (UNAMA 2007).

Insights from the UNAMA Interviews

The UNAMA interviews revealed a general disapproval of the foreign presence and scepticism about the legitimacy and competence of the Afghan government among most of the interviewees. They also indicate not only the religion-inspired motivations of the interviewees for their involvement in suicide terrorism but also the interviewees’ gullibility to religious propaganda due to a lack of education, poverty and, in some cases, a degree of deception. The interviews also underscore the importance of Pakistan as a place for recruitment and training for suicide attacks. Most of the UNAMA interviewees came from poor backgrounds, had little formal education, believed that the Taliban could bring peace to Afghanistan and saw the Afghan government as corrupt and ineffective.

The majority of interviewees disapproved of the presence of foreign troops as non-Muslim occupiers who were involved in the mistreatment and the dishonouring of the Afghan people, in causing civilian deaths and failing to deliver peace. Most wanted the foreign forces to leave and allow Afghanistan to rebuild itself through reconciliation among the various factions involved in collective violence. In fact, many believed that peace could only be restored in Afghanistan through dialogue with anti-government elements and saw the presence of foreign forces as an impediment to this process. The government was perceived as anti-Pashtun, morally lax and un-Islamic, and its police forces as looters and robbers of ordinary people. The searches by foreign troops were seen as humiliating. There was a perception that these troops were in Afghanistan not to rebuild but to kill and abuse. The civilian deaths caused by suicide bombings were not seen as the fault of the attackers themselves.

In 2007-8, I conducted a number of interviews in Pakistan with Pakistani intelligence officials and well-placed journalists familiar with suicide bombing operations and operatives. Most of my interviewees felt that suicide bombing operations in Pakistan and Afghanistan were likely to become more serious in the foreseeable future. A senior journalist with extensive connections in Pakistan’s tribal areas, including the Taliban leaders, told me that when he reported in a newspaper article that the Afghan *ulema* (religious scholars) have declared that suicide bombings were anti-Islam, a prominent Taliban leader called him to

express his annoyance for doing so and gave him the text of a *fatwa* from other *ulema* on the permissibility of suicide bombings in “fighting for Islam and *watan* (country)”. According to my other respondents, also familiar with Taliban leaders’ thinking on suicide bombings, the Taliban believed suicide bombings were sanctioned under Islamic law when fighting for Islam, country and against the infidels such as the US and ISAF forces.

Many Taliban leaders have also come to this conclusion because of the practice of this tactic by Iraqi insurgents and the Palestinians. Taliban leaders have held as justification of the use by Iraqis and Palestinians of suicide bombings in their struggles, the fact that they are Arab Muslims and are well grounded in Islamic law and tradition. If they are using this tactic, then it must be permissible under Islamic law. Taliban leaders are using the *ulema* sympathetic to their cause to lecture and indoctrinate new recruits for suicide missions in Afghanistan. Financial support for the Taliban insurgency is generated through taxation imposed on traders, transporters and smugglers in return for allowing them to carry on their activities without harassment. (Personal interviews, January 2007).

The ever-deepening militarisation of around 1,500 kilometres along the Afghan-Pakistani border is undoubtedly a factor aiding Taliban insurgency and resurgence. According to press reports, training camps are sprouting in and around the heavily forested Shawal region in northern Waziristan, and the Taliban are recruiting, training and raising money for operations in Afghanistan. (ICG 2006a). Support for the Taliban insurgency is grounded in tribal relations and a shared Pashtun identity. Pakistani Pashtun in these tribal border areas believe that Afghanistan has been occupied and that Pashtuns are being killed in the conduct of the national and international anti-Taliban operations. The commonly shared *pashtunwali* and tribal bonds are important factors in moving the recruits to Afghanistan and in establishing safe houses between the point of recruitment and the point of deployment.

According to Seth Jones, a Rand Corporation researcher who has conducted extensive fieldwork in the tribal areas of Pakistan, some lower-level Pakistani intelligence officials are involved in directing suicide operatives into Afghanistan. (Jones 2007:15-32). It is also worth noting that suicide assailants enjoy support, which was indicated by the refusal of the Pakistani Parliament on 3 August 2007 to adopt a proposal condemning suicide attacks, even within Pakistan. Some Pakistani parliamentarians, especially those from the Islamic parties,

believe that suicide attacks are a response to the US occupation of Afghanistan, and they condemn the Pakistan government for supporting US actions. (BBC 2007).

In the Pashtun tribal region of Pakistan, the production of suicide belts has become a cottage industry. One household makes the detonator, another sews the belt, a third moulds ball bearings and so on. These are collected and paid for by the Taliban, who claim having hundreds of volunteers ready for the martyrdom missions. According to the Taliban, their main problems are the lack of sufficient explosives and the difficulty of finding good targets. While most of the suicide bombers are Pashtuns, there are some Pakistanis, Kashmiris, Central Asians, Chechens and, most recently, a German-born Turk, Cuneyt Cifci, who on 3 March 2008 rammed his explosive-laden car into a US military outpost, near Khost in eastern Afghanistan, killing two Afghan civilians and two American soldiers and wounding another 15. (Rashid 2008).

Afghan President Hamid Karzai has been pushing for Islamic scholars to issue a *fatwa* condemning suicide attacks. At the urging of his government, the Afghanistan High Peace Council had prepared a proposal to hold a regional *ulema* conference on the issue in 2013, and was supported in doing so by Pakistan. But the proposal reached an *impasse* when the head of Pakistan's *Ulema* Council Tahir Ashrafi declared in March 2013 that suicide attacks are permissible in Afghanistan so long as US forces remain in the country. This is contrary to the position of Afghanistan's *Ulema* Council. According to reports in the Pakistani media, Ashrafi's rhetoric on suicide attacks is identical to that of the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan. (Lundquist 2013).

Concluding Remarks

Suicide attacks are now a strategic tactic that is shaping public perception of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. The Afghan Government and the international community are seen as being unable to provide security in the country, and these perceptions, reinforced by the extensive media coverage of these events, detract from more positive developments being achieved through the collective efforts of the Afghan Government and the international community. The strategic success of suicide bombing in undermining public confidence in the Afghan Government and foreign forces means that it will remain a potent weapon of insurgency in post-2014 Afghanistan.

However, while as a strategic tactic, suicide attacks are successful in Afghanistan in terms of their efficacy, as measured by their victim yields and lethality, they are actually among the least successful in the world. According to the UNAMA data compiled in 2007, 31 suicide attacks that targeted foreign forces killed all 31 attackers but only 10 foreign soldiers. The attacks that targeted Afghan soldiers produced only slightly better outcomes (56 Afghan soldiers and police casualties against 25 attackers). These statistics show that although suicide attacks might have limited military utility, they are important in sustaining the coherence of the insurgency and helping it raise funds and attract new recruits for future operations.

Suicide attacks have furthermore negatively affected public perception of the ability of the Afghan Government to provide protection and are therefore proving a serious impediment to governance and national development. These in turn are adversely influencing the flow of international funds for development and reconstruction initiatives. They are also having a demoralising influence on the foreign staff working in the country and are hampering programme delivery. Public opinion polls show that a large majority of Afghans support their government and the international presence in Afghanistan and that a significant minority dislikes the Taliban. But the evidence showing that an increasing segment of the population is having serious misgivings about the current situation is growing. This is leading to an increasing support for the Taliban and, paradoxically, the key reason for this is the belief that the Taliban can provide security. This belief resonated in the UNAMA interviews as did its converse that the international troops not only fail to deliver security but also bring about insecurity. (UNAMA 2007).

Evidence from the UNAMA report and my research indicate that suicide attackers in Afghanistan are markedly different from suicide attackers in other areas of conflict where this tactic is employed. In other theatres, such as Sri Lanka, Palestine, Lebanon and possibly Iraq, suicide attackers tend to be better educated and more employable relative to the societies from which they are recruited. In Afghanistan, suicide attackers are younger (sometimes even children), poor, uneducated, more likely to be exploitable by their recruiters and drawn heavily from *madrasas* across the border in Pakistan. Their motivations appear to be drawn from religious rewards and duties, concerns with such issues as occupation, security and

ethno-nationalism as well as communal and personal concerns with such issues as dishonour and humiliation.

The recruitment cells supplying and training operatives and enabling them to carry out their missions are now well established in the main Pashtun-dominated cities and receive varying degrees of support from their kin from across the long, porous border with Pakistan. Any mitigation of suicide attacks would require defeating the problem in both countries. Ultimately, however, it is the situation in Afghanistan that will be the final arbiter. If the security situation in Afghanistan does not improve significantly, if rampant corruption in public life is not brought under control and if confidence in the government's ability to deliver social and economic services to its citizens remains low, there will be a continuous erosion of legitimacy and public confidence in the national government and the international actors. That will give succour to anti-government elements and encourage them to expand their tactics, including suicide attacks.

Unless the national security institutions are perceived as representing the population as a whole, the reconstruction, disarmament and demobilisation efforts being pursued by the Afghan Government and its foreign supporters are unlikely to find popular support. A large majority of Pashtuns feel alienated from the political process, and this sense of alienation is further compounded by the displacement of large numbers of Pashtuns in the north as the result of ethnically targeted violence after the collapse of the Taliban regime. Heavy-handed counter-insurgency tactics and reports of civilian deaths from air strikes have been fuelling discontent with the coalition forces and their presence in the country. Why is the Afghan insurgency being led by Pashtuns? What is the nature of their insurgency? These and related questions will be explored in papers to follow.

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