

What Are the Taliban?

by Ramtanu Maitra

Taliban is a Persian plural of the Arabic word *Talib*, “seeker of knowledge”—a religious formulation. Being a Talib constitutes the first stage toward becoming a Mullah.

The base of today’s Taliban movement, which has a long historical background in the Afghan context, consists of a network of teachers and students from rural-based *madrassas*, schools where Islamic teachings are provided, in Afghanistan and the neighboring Pushtoon-dominated areas of Pakistan (Northwest Frontier Province). During the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, millions of Afghans fled to Pakistan and at least a million moved into its Balochistan Province, where *madrassas* cropped up during the 1980s, and where Taliban were groomed.

The teachings of Mohammad Bin Abdulwahab, the founder of the Wahabi religious sect, which Saudi Arabia as a nation promulgates, date back to 1744, when Abdulwahab started teaching in exile in the sanctuary of Mohammad Bin Saud. Abdulwahab’s beliefs have a strong influence on the

present-day Taliban, which control 70% of Afghanistan.

The other important contributor to the Taliban is Mohammad Abed Hussain, who founded the *madrassa* of Deoband in 1837 in Saharanpur, in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Similarly, the founding father of Ikhwan-al-Muslimeen, Hassan-ul-Bana, who was born in Cairo in 1877, and Sayed Jama-luddin Afghani, a prominent Afghan scholar, have had an input into the beliefs which form the core of today’s Afghan Taliban.

At the time of the Saur Revolution, which dismantled the Afghan royalty and laid the foundation for a communist regime in Afghanistan in 1979, there were about 10,000 Afghan Taliban studying at various prominent Islamic centers, from Mashhad in Iran to Baghdad in Iraq, to south of the Durand Line in the adjoining Pakistani provinces.

All along, the Taliban movement has attracted the Pushtoons more than any other ethnic group of Afghanistan, and it is for this reason that the present Afghan Taliban regime is wholly under Pushtoon control.

Today’s incarnation of the Taliban movement (the Islamic Movement of Taliban of Afghanistan) was formed in response to the degeneration of the Afghan mujahideen, organized and armed against the Soviet Union by the West and Islamic nations. The mujahideen leaders had become virtual warlords in the Afghan countryside, involved in extortion, abduction of women, and looting: A good example is Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a highly educated, corrupt, and power-hungry leader who became the darling of the George



The current “Islamist” insurgencies in Central Asia stem from the 1980s Reagan-Bush CIA funding and arming of mujahideen groups to fight the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. These Muslim students, shown at the University of Ohio, were organized around the cause in 1980.

Bush-Oliver North-Pakistani ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) nexus.

The Taliban began to disassociate from the pillaging mujahideen groups in 1992, and in 1994 a group of *madrasa* teachers and students, led by Mullah Mohammad Omar, the strongman of today's Taliban regime, formed the Taliban movement and seized control of Kandahar City. Since then, the Taliban, instead of seeking knowledge, has

sought control of Afghanistan, and by 1998 came to take control of virtually the entire country by force of arms.

Foreign Elements

The state with the closest and strongest links to Afghanistan historically is Pakistan, the launching ground for pushing the invading Soviet Army back from Afghanistan, in what President Ronald Reagan called the "rollback policy."

Two Taliban Victims: Women, and the Drought-Stricken

This Spring, a mild to severe drought swept the entire Near East, from Syria to Afghanistan, and then to South Asia, into southern Pakistan and western India.

The drought in Afghanistan was severe. Almost a decade of scanty rainfall had dried up the land, leaving no pasture for the cattle to graze. As a result, cattle and people in southern, northern, and central Afghanistan suffered deeply, and the suffering is far from over. Thousands of livestock, mostly sheep, are dead, and hundreds of thousands of Afghans have had to leave their homes and head toward Pakistan. The normally lush Arghandab Valley in the north, famous for its bountiful grapes, apricots, and pomegranates, has dried up. The livelihood of about 1 million people is under threat in Kandahar Province alone, following the drying up of the reservoir behind the Dahla Dam.

UN agencies estimate that 1.8 to 2 million of Afghanistan's 12 million people could be uprooted by drought. Already, there are 1.2 million refugees in Pakistan, while Iran has another 1.4 million. If the Winter rain comes, it will not come before November.

Food Shortages

Most of Afghanistan's crop is lost, and shallow wells are going dry in the cities. Afghanistan faces a record wheat shortfall of 1.1 million tons. Pakistan has promised a million tons of wheat, which is yet to arrive, and in all likelihood, the promise will not be fully met. The United States has delivered 40,000 tons of wheat, which is only a fraction of the amount the country needs now and in the coming days. UN aid agencies have asked donors for \$67.8 million in emergency money, but because of the Taliban regime, less than 15% of the requested money has come to Afghanistan.

The Taliban militia is preoccupied with completing its conquest of the country and enforcing a puritanical in-

terpretation of Islam both within the country and abroad. It is evident that Kabul is keen to blame others for the misery of the Afghans in the villages, but has shown little or no interest in alleviating the misery. Kabul sent some trucks and helicopters to the worst drought-affected areas to evacuate families, but has no food to distribute.

As soon as the Taliban took power in Kandahar in 1994, the regime began to impose Islamic laws. The first target was women, who were forced to put on *burqa* (a black veil that covers a woman from head to foot like a tent, with a slit-like opening to see). Female students were told to stay home and not attend school. Women were forcibly taken out of taxis in Kabul and other cities because they did not have their male relatives with them, or picked up on the streets because the authorities thought they were prostitutes.

Next came the edict in July 2000, barring women from working for relief agencies inside Afghanistan, because the Taliban rulers think that the women might be spies. Taliban spokesman Abdul Hakeem Mujahid told Associated Press that the former Soviet Union had trained 35,000 Afghan women as KGB agents.

The Vice and Virtue Ministry, under Mohammad Turabi, a disabled veteran of Afghanistan's war against the Soviet Union, has ordered residents of Kabul to paint their windows black to prevent passers-by from looking at the women within. Turabi demands that male relatives must accompany women when they are outside the home. His religious police roam the streets of Kabul enforcing the edicts.

Hanging in the balance is the future of some 28,000 war widows, who make a living working in World Food Program bakeries. If the edict barring women from working for relief agencies is not rescinded, women in Afghanistan will face harder times.

In Kabul, the Taliban's harsh treatment of women has resulted in a dramatic rise in the number of women and children beggars in the capital. One UN report says that thousands of children were seen scavenging the streets of Kabul, while in the war-destroyed ruins of the city, women in *burqa* with outstretched hands ask for alms.

—Ramtanu Maitra

Throughout the 1980s, when the Soviets were trying to conquer Afghanistan, Pakistan was receiving huge amounts of money and arms from its anti-Soviet allies and was deeply involved in the *jihad* against the Soviet Union.

The Afghan Taliban derives much of its inspiration from the Deobandi movement in Pakistan. Virtually all of the Taliban leaders were refugees from Afghanistan for many years and studied in *madrassas* affiliated with one or another branch of the Deobandi political party of Maulvi Fazlur Rahman. Under Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's government, Maulvi Fazlur Rahman was chairman of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the National Assembly—the Pakistani parliament.

The second important figure in recent Taliban history is Maulana Samiul Haq, who runs two important *madrassas*, the Dar ul-Uloom Haqqania in the North West Frontier Province and the Jamia Uloom-ul-Islamiya in the Binori Town section of Karachi, Pakistan.

In 1994, when Mullah Mohammad Omar seized control of Kandahar City, busloads of Taliban went to Afghanistan from Rahman's Deobandi party. Then in May 1997, following Taliban's defeat of the opposition militia led by Ahmed Shah Massoud-led in northern Afghanistan, droves of Pakistani and Afghani students joined the Taliban militia from Maulana Samiul Haq's *madrassas*. Thousands of Pakistani Taliban thus joined the Afghan Taliban and fought for them.

Behind the facade of a religious movement, there were other elements. Long before the 1997 exodus of Taliban to Afghanistan, Pakistan's ISI had formed an alliance with the controllers of the *madrassas*. So, along with the Taliban, a large number of Pakistani soldiers, wearing the trademark white flowing robe of the Taliban, moved in to help the Afghan regime.

Money has also flowed in from Afghan, Pakistani, and Arab traders—many of whom are also involved in smuggling and the drug trade—based in Balochistan, Peshawar, Karachi, and in the distant United Arab Emirates.

Another group of "religious warriors" who came to help the Taliban were a large number from the Pushtoon army who fled Afghanistan following the takeover of Kabul by the Tajik-dominated coalition government of Burhanuddin Rabbani in 1992. These army personnel had been a steady source of intelligence to the Pakistani ISI against the Rabbani government and acted entirely on behalf of the ISI.

Afghanistan has some 20,000 villages and a large number of them have *madrassas*. These *madrassas* have created many Taliban. This group, in reality, has a very superficial understanding of the teachings and principles that the Deobandi School propagates. Nonetheless, they are the most resistant to Western civilization and have provided the foot soldiers for the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, both during the Soviet invasion and during the current consolidation of power by the Taliban regime.

All Roads Lead to the Fergana Valley

by Ramtanu Maitra

In late August, Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev, whose army is now battling the Islamic rebels who have infiltrated into the tri-junction area of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, told newsmen that the "bandits" are making their way to the Fergana Valley to set up a permanent base.

During a similar rebel attack on Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan last year, one of the major rebel groups, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, told the British Broadcasting Corp. and the George Soros-owned Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, that their objective is to set up an independent Islamic state in the Fergana Valley.

In his June 25 keynote to the World Forum on Democracy in Warsaw, Soros, whose Open Society Foundation remains very active in Central Asia, called for an "international association of democracies" to be created, that should focus on backing insurrections in "Peru, Indonesia, and the Fergana Valley."

Back in 1992, when the Soviet Union ceased to exist and

FIGURE 4
Insurgents' Destination: The Fergana Valley



The tri-country junction where the rebels have challenged the government forces of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Their objective is to set up an "Islamic state" in the Fergana Valley. Major Tajik rebel camps in northern Afghanistan are shown at 1 and 2.