

Report

Afghanistan: Taliban's Intelligence and the intimidation campaign

Report by Dr. Antonio Giustozzi for Landinfo



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Report Afghanistan: Taliban's Intelligence and the intimidation campaign

SAMMENDRAG

Talibans etterretningsstruktur har utviklet seg over tid, og blitt mer og mer sofistikert. Intern spittelse i Taliban har imidlertid også påvirket hvordan etterretningen fungerer, til tross for forsøk på å koordinere og synkronisere de ulike shuraene. Talibans etterretningsoperasjoner spenner nå bredt, allikevel er ikke alltid informasjonen som formidles til Talibans lederskap, veldig god. En av hovedoppgavene for etterretningen er å tilrettelegge for Taliban's skremselskampanje mot Kabul-regjeringens «samarbeidspartnere» og andre fiender av Taliban. På grunnlag av et fastlagt sett med regler, synes Talibans ledelse å forsøke – så langt det lar seg gjøre – å unngå tilfeldig vold, og å fokusere innsatsen mot personer som faktisk er i opposisjon til Taliban. Disse reglene blir ikke alltid respektert, men ledelsen synes å gjøre et oppriktig forsøk på sørge for at de følges.

SUMMARY

Taliban's intelligence structures have evolved over time to become more and more sophisticated. However, the Taliban's internal division have also affected the functioning of the Taliban's intelligence, despite efforts to coordinate and synchronise it among the different Shuras of the Taliban. Taliban intelligence operations have now a very wide coverage, although the quality of the information supplied to the Taliban leadership is not always very good. One of the main tasks of the Taliban's intelligence is to enable the Taliban's intimidation campaign against 'collaborators' of the Kabul government and other enemies of the Taliban. The intent of the Taliban leadership seems to be to avoid arbitrary violence as much as possible and to focus efforts against individuals effectively opposed to the Taliban, on the basis of a clear set of rules. These rules are not always respected, but the leadership seems to be making a genuine effort.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report aims at providing a picture of how Taliban intelligence is organized. It also provides a short assessment of the strength and capabilities of the Taliban's intelligence. In order to facilitate user navigation, the report is structured into sections dedicated to the different aspects of the Taliban's intelligence. While some information of the post-2001 history of Taliban intelligence is provided, the focus of this paper is largely Taliban intelligence as of 2017.

The report is largely based on extensive research carried out previously, mostly in 2014-17; no additional research work has been carried out specifically for the purpose of writing it. Public domain sources have been used when available, but they contain very little up-to-date information on Taliban intelligence. The report as such relies heavily on oral sources (primarily face-to-face interviews and also telephone contacts), mostly Taliban and sometimes community elders living in Taliban influenced areas. What is happening in remote areas of the country and inside the Taliban's safe havens in Pakistan and Iran remains difficult to assess fully, particularly in the field of Taliban intelligence operation, which by their own nature are particularly secretive. Much of the information used might therefore be unbalanced, even if the author has tried to be as balanced as possible and has cast a critical eye on all sources utilised.

Over the years the author has carried out (and still carries out) extensive research on the Taliban and other insurgent movements. Some of the output of this research has been published, some is in the process of being published and some might never be published. All of it has been taken into consideration for the preparation of this report.

2. STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION

Before the intelligence 'departments' were established, it was the units on the ground who were handling intelligence directly: shadow governors, fronts and groups all had people tasked to do intelligence work; the intelligence cadres of the various units were subsumed into the new department of intelligence when it was created.¹ This system was inefficient and wasteful and as the threat to the Taliban increased with the deployment of ISAF to the provinces from 2006 onwards, the need for a reform became self-evident. Over the years therefore Taliban intelligence was professionalised, with the formation of dedicated structures and growing budgets. From 2006 onwards, one by one, the various Shuras of the Taliban started setting up dedicated intelligence departments, mostly within their military commissions. Dedicated training courses for intelligence staff were set up and gradually improved, with the assistance of foreign advisers from both other jihadist organisations and from government agencies supportive of the Taliban effort.²

¹ Interview with senior member of Intelligence Department of the Peshawar Shura, Taliban leadership 42, July 2015; Interview with senior member of Intelligence Department of the Quetta Shura, Taliban leadership 43, July 2015.

² Interview with senior member of Intelligence Department of the Peshawar Shura, Taliban leadership 42, July 2015; Interview with senior member of Intelligence Department of the Miran Shah Shura, Taliban leadership 39,

However, while Taliban intelligence was being centralised into the intelligence departments, at the same time it also fragmented as a result of intra-Taliban friction. As different components of the Taliban declared their autonomy vis-à-vis the political leadership gathered in the Quetta Shura, their intelligence structures also followed and became autonomous from each other. As a result, at present (2017) there are five autonomous Taliban intelligence entities:

- The Quetta Shura's Intelligence Department, which responds directly to the Rahbari Shura, and responding to the shadow governors in the provinces; the following two previously autonomous intelligence departments are now technically under the Quetta Shura as well:
 - The Miran Shah Shura's (but in practice reporting to the leader of the Haqqani network, Serajuddin Haqqani);
 - The Peshawar Shura's.
- The Miran Shah Shura's intelligence units, detached to assist the Fedayin Commission (organising complex attacks) in areas outside the Miran Shah Shura's turf (in this case the matter was a special concern about the risk of information leakage);
- The Shura of the North's Intelligence Department (under the Northern Military Commission);
- The Mashhad Shura's Intelligence Department (under the Mashhad Military Commission);
- The Rasool Shura's Intelligence Department (under the Rasool Shura's Military Commission).

In part these entities (except Rasool's) developed from 2010 a series of arrangements to allow co-operation among them. The entities agreed a territorial partition of Afghanistan among themselves, although they could not entirely agree on the boundaries, and their areas of operations overlapped in provinces in which more than one shura claimed for itself. For areas of overlap see Map 1. The overlap was usually a result of the shuras not fully agreeing about their areas of responsibility, with the exception of Kabul city where it was a matter of division of labour. Here the Haqqanis (Miran Shah Shura) would manage intelligence for special operations, while the Peshawar Shura (under the Quetta Shura) would handle routine intelligence, including for the targeting of individuals on the blacklist (list of wanted individuals). The exact modalities of how the blacklist is operated are not known, but except for the Rasool Shura the other Shuras share the same national blacklist. Local Taliban only have access to local sub-sets of the blacklist.

Typically the intelligence departments have been recruiting among seasoned Taliban, vetted as for reliability and then sent to three-month specialist training.³ Intelligence staff members were specially selected by senior Taliban leaders, on the basis of their

³ July 2015; Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Mashhad Shura, Taliban Leadership 44, July 2015.

³ Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Mashhad Shura, Taliban Leadership 44, July 2015.

skills and loyalty and long-standing links to senior Taliban, who could guarantee for them.⁴

The Taliban spies are a mix of former fighters, fresh madrasa recruits, and villagers. They could be shopkeepers, drivers, government officials, government staff, beggars, etc.⁵ Apart from a number of permanent employees acting as professional spies, the Taliban also rely on mercenary informers paid ad hoc for the information they provide. Because of their mutual agreements, each intelligence department can only use mercenary informers in the areas of responsibility of the other intelligence departments, not any permanent staff.⁶ Paid informers are usually well placed individuals who can sell classified information about target organisations and structures. In particular, the Taliban recruit informers at high levels of government, including army, police and NDS.⁷ Sources in the Taliban's intelligence departments claimed in 2015 to have a total of almost 900 informers inside the Afghan security forces and the government apparatus. Of these, 150 were claimed by the Haqqani network alone in Kabul. Apart from being paid for the information they provide, these informers were also granted immunity from the Taliban's targeting (that is they are taken off the blacklist).⁸

The Taliban's intelligence taps into the support networks, who usually provide information for free. Information feeds into the intelligence departments from all kinds of Taliban members and sympathisers.⁹ Usually these unpaid informers are the source for basic intelligence, such as new arrivals or departures from the village, suspicious behaviour of individuals, breach of Taliban rules, negative commentary on Taliban, recruitment of individuals into the security forces, etc.

According to a Taliban judge, the intelligence apparatus counted in 2016 a permanent staff of over 5,300 people nationwide, excluding the Rasool Shura and all mercenary informers.¹⁰ The staffing of the Taliban's intelligence departments has been growing steadily over the years, for example in the Peshawar Shura alone it went from 400 in

⁴ Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Miran Shah Shura, Taliban Leadership 39, July 2015; Interview with senior member of Intelligence Department of the Peshawar Shura, Taliban leadership 42, July 2015; Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Quetta Shura, Taliban Leadership 43, July 2015; Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Mashhad Shura, Taliban leadership 44, July 2015;

⁵ Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Miran Shah Shura, Taliban leadership 39, July 2015; Interview with senior member of Intelligence Department of the Peshawar Shura, Taliban leadership 42, July 2015; Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Quetta Shura, Taliban leadership 43, July 2015; Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Mashhad Shura, Taliban leadership 44, July 2015.

⁶ Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Quetta Shura, Taliban leadership 43, July 2015.

⁷ C. J. Chivers, 'In Eastern Afghanistan, at War With the Taliban's Shadowy Rule', The New York Times, February 6, 2011. See also Ben Brandt, 'The Taliban's Conduct of Intelligence and Counterintelligence', CTC Sentinel, Jun 01, 2011; Interview with former commander, Musa Qala, Helmand, September 2011.

⁸ Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Miran Shah Shura, Taliban leadership 39, July 2015; Interview with senior member of Intelligence Department of the Peshawar Shura, Taliban leadership 42, July 2015; Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Quetta Shura, Taliban leadership 43, July 2015; Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Mashhad Shura, Taliban leadership 44, July 2015; Interview with Haqqani cadre, Kabul, December 2016.

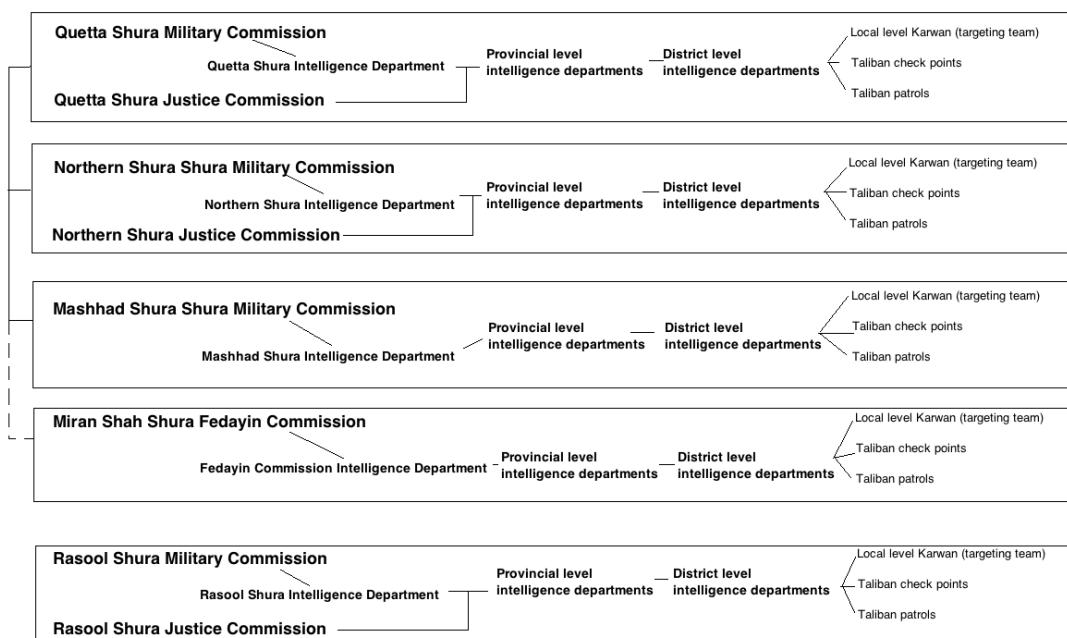
⁹ Interview with senior member of Intelligence Department of the Peshawar Shura, Taliban leadership 42, July 2015.

¹⁰ Taliban Judge Safi, interviewed on 23 June 2016.

2007 to 2000 in 2014. The Peshawar Shura's intelligence apparatus was the largest within the Taliban until 2015 when it had to start sacking people due to financial difficulties. By autumn 2016 the Peshawar Shura and therefore its Intelligence Department as well were bankrupt and were absorbed into the Quetta Shura. The Mashhad Shura's Intelligence Department was the other one that invested more than average in intelligence: in 2015 it was the largest relative to the overall membership of the various shuras, with 1,000 members of staff.¹¹

Typically, if we take the intelligence departments as a whole, around 15 % of all Taliban intelligence staff would be based in Pakistan, including as part of an administrative structure, 7-8 % in Iran, and the rest inside Afghanistan. In each district the intelligence departments deploy from five to fifteen agents, depending on the different intelligence departments.¹²

2.1 FIGURE 1: THE ORGANISATION OF THE TALIBAN'S INTELLIGENCE

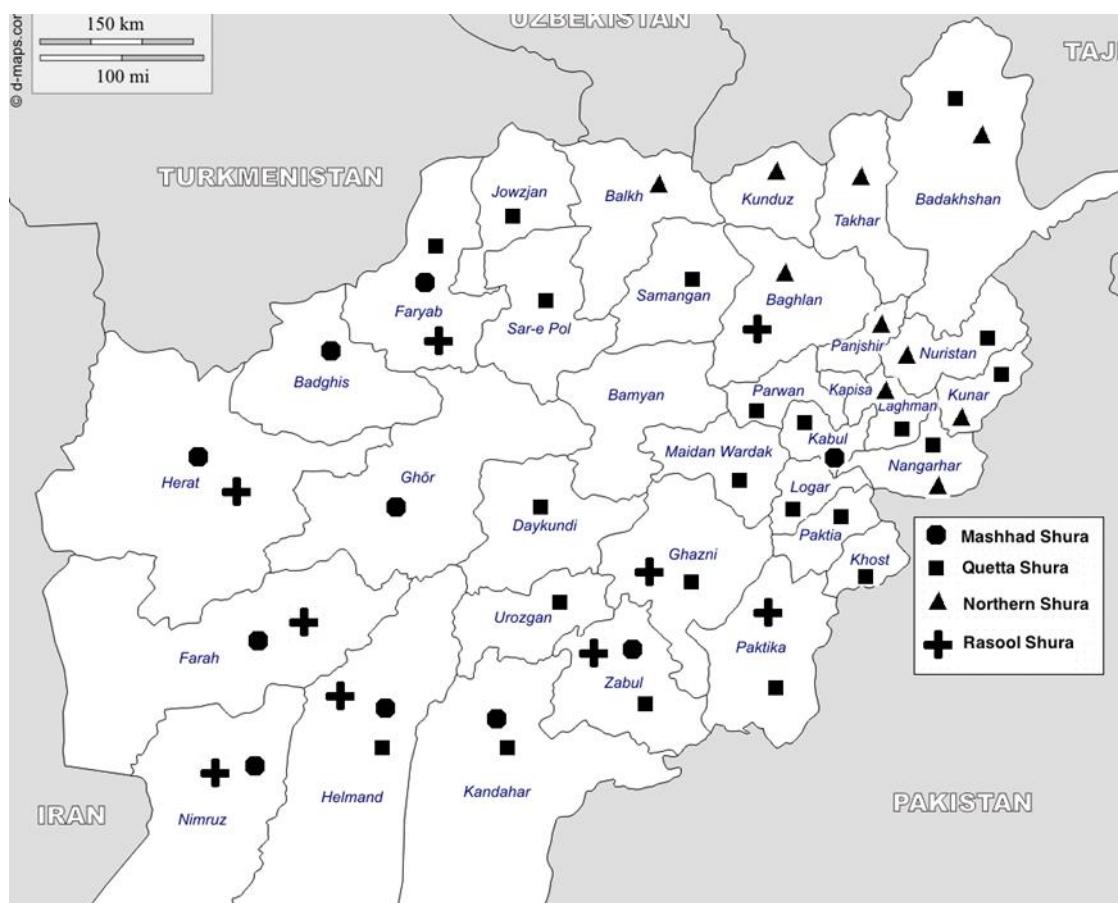


Source: Antonio Giustozzi 2017

¹¹ Interview with senior member of Intelligence Department of the Peshawar Shura, Taliban leadership 42, July 2015; Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Quetta Shura, Taliban leadership 43, July 2015; Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Mashhad Shura, Taliban leadership 44, July 2015; Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Miran Shah Shura, Taliban leadership 39, July 2015.

¹² Interview with senior member of Intelligence Department of the Peshawar Shura, Taliban leadership 42, July 2015; Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Quetta Shura, Taliban leadership 43, July 2015; Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Mashhad Shura, Taliban leadership 44, July 2015; Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Miran Shah Shura, Taliban leadership 39, July 2015.

2.2 MAP 1: PRESENCE OF INTELLIGENCE DEPARTMENTS OF THE QUETTA, MASHHAD, NORTH AND RASOOL SHURAS AS OF 2017



Source: Antonio Giustozzi 2017

3. SPREAD

Government officials even in areas of weak Taliban presence believe that the Taliban are informed of everything that happens.¹³ The Taliban for sure claim to have an intelligence presence in all provinces of Afghanistan. While this is to some extent true, the level and quality of their presence varies hugely, with some provinces almost entirely under Taliban control, and others barely affected. Map 2 is based on Taliban data, but appears a rather realistic assessment of Taliban presence. It should be kept in mind that Taliban intelligence efforts are the least detectable of all Taliban efforts.

In areas of weak or non-existent Taliban presence, however, the Taliban are not able to tap into the information provided by the networks of members and sympathisers. The members of course are not present there, but even any isolated sympathisers in

¹³ Borzou Daragahi, ‘Afghan Taliban intelligence network embraces the new’, *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 2011.

such areas would not be able to easily pass on information to the Taliban. In areas of strong Taliban presence, the Taliban patrol team would regularly visit the villages, collating any information that sympathisers might want to share, but this cannot happen in areas of weak Taliban presence. In areas of mobile network coverage, however, sympathisers might be able to pass on information to the Taliban by phone, if they have had any previous contact by Taliban agents.

Kabul city is a special case as at least three different Taliban intelligence organisations overlap there; the Haqqanis', the Quetta Shura's and the Mashhad Office's. The Kabul Military Commission, once run from Peshawar but taken over by the Quetta Shura in 2016 together with the whole Peshawar Shura, had in 2016 according to Taliban sources about 500 spies and informers.¹⁴ In total the different intelligence departments of the Taliban are reported to count 1,500 spies in Kabul, distributed in all 17 districts, but with a strong concentration in the two districts, where embassies and government offices are mostly concentrated.¹⁵ One Taliban source in Kabul put the number of Taliban operatives (i.e. excluding informers and support) at 800 in 2016, excluding the Haqqani network.¹⁶ According to Abdul Haq Haqqani, Taliban are present in all districts of Kabul, at least with intelligence gathering, but most attacks take place away from the city centre, where the wealthy and the powerful live and where the police and the security services concentrate their efforts. These attacks tend to be targeted assassinations, including magnetic bomb strikes against vehicles. Only the complex attacks of the Fedayin Commission against protected locations tend to take place mostly in the city centre.¹⁷

4. TARGETING FOR INTIMIDATION AND KILLING

The Taliban intimidation and targeting effort is particularly dependent on Taliban's intelligence efforts. It should be kept in mind, however, that intimidation and targeting is only one of many tasks that the intelligence departments have. Taliban interviewees describe the tasks of the intelligence departments as to work for all branches of the Taliban, laying the ground for forthcoming operations and preventing threats from the enemy, including by detecting enemy informers. They also investigate suspect government collaborators and selects targets for the Taliban's blacklist for incorporation in the hit lists (which is a sub-set of the blacklist, including blacklisted people cleared for execution). The Quetta Intelligence Department is an exception as it is not part of the Military Commission and reportedly does not select targets. Finally

¹⁴ Interview with Haqqani cadre, Kabul, December 2016.

¹⁵ Interview with Moulavi Zarif Ishaqzai, member of Taliban Justice Commission in Pakistan. 29 October 2016.

¹⁶ Interview with Haqqani cadre, Kabul, December 2016.

¹⁷ Interview with Haqqani cadre, Kabul, December 2016.

it keeps an eye on Taliban's misbehaviour, such as abuses against the population and corruption.¹⁸

The Taliban have been targeting a wide range of what they consider 'misbehaving' people:

- a) Political enemies: leaders and key members of parties and groups hostile to the Taliban; examples include
 - a. Prof. Rabbani;
 - b. Uruzgan strongman Jan Mohammad;
 - c. Gen. Daud.
- b) Government officials and employees of western and other 'hostile' governments – any civilian working for the government or for western diplomatic representations or agencies;
- c) Members of the Afghan security forces of any ranks;
- d) Individual believed to be spying or informing the authorities on the Taliban;
- e) Violators of Shari'a (as interpreted by the Taliban) and of Taliban rules;
- f) Collaborators of the Afghan government – potentially anybody helping the government in any way;
- g) Collaborators of foreign military forces – potentially anybody helping the foreign forces in any way;
- h) Contractors working for the Afghan government;
- i) Contractors working for foreign countries, opposed to the Taliban;
- j) Interpreters working for hostile foreign countries;
- k) Individuals of any category selected by the Taliban as useful or necessary to their war effort, and who have refused to collaborate.¹⁹

As a whole, these categories of targeted individuals include a number of people which is difficult to quantify with precision, but in all likelihood exceeds 1 million people (there are around 400-450,000 members of the security forces, plus over 500,000 civilian employees of the government, and then we should add tens of thousands of contractors).

Attacks against the categories of people mentioned above have been going on since the early days of the insurgency (2002). In fact, in 2002-2004, assassinations of individual 'collaborators' was the main form of activity of the Taliban, whose military capabilities were still weak. In 2005-2007, the Taliban started large-scale military activities and targeted assassinations became somewhat less important for them. After 2007, military pressure exercised on the Taliban by foreign military forces (ISAF)

¹⁸ Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Miran Shah Shura, Taliban Leadership 39, July 2015; Interview with senior member of Intelligence Department of the Peshawar Shura, Taliban leadership 42, July 2015; Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Quetta Shura, Taliban Leadership 43, July 2015; Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Mashhad Shura, Taliban Leadership 44, July 2015.

¹⁹ Interviews with Taliban commanders and cadres, 2014-2017

pushed the Taliban to rely on intimidation tactics more extensively, an asymmetric tactic meant to delay or prevent the consolidation of the Kabul government.

With the withdrawal of the bulk of foreign military forces during 2014, Taliban priorities shifted again. In 2014, as foreign forces already hardly participated in the fighting, UNAMA records of civilian victims of targeted assassinations by the Taliban showed a slight drop of 3.6 %, the first drop since UNAMA records began in 2008. In 2015 there was a rebound with a 10.4 % increase, but in 2016 the strongest fall yet took place, at -27.3 % (Table 1 below). Since at that point the Taliban were by all accounts expanding operations and taking over territory, the decline was certainly not a result of weakened capabilities, but rather of a shift of focus and policies: there was less interest in undermining the Afghan government, and more in directly overthrowing it. It is also likely that many ‘collaborators’ feeling unprotected, fled exposed areas, depriving the Taliban of easy targets.

Except for categories a), d), e) and k) above, the Taliban offer all ‘misbehaving’ individuals the opportunity to repent and demonstrate their willingness to redeem themselves. Categories a), d), e) and k) are considered to be crimes per se, as opposed to working as a contractor, for example, which is not a crime for the Taliban unless the contractor rejects the Taliban’s warnings. The opportunity to repent is a key aspect of the Taliban’s intimidation programme, and its main rationale: undermine the functioning of the Kabul government without excessive bloodshed, and tie individuals to the Taliban by getting them to cooperate. Categories b), c), f), g), h), i) and j) can avoid being ‘sentenced’ by the Taliban by stopping activities deemed to be ‘hostile’ by the Taliban after being warned.²⁰

b) Government staff and employees of western governments: they can avoid being warned by the Taliban or being sentenced before receiving the final threat letter by paying taxes to the Taliban, pass on information and spying on their colleagues, help the Taliban carry out operations against their own institutions or in improving their organization. Known special cases are:

- I. Educational staff: are allowed to operate if their department of education or school signs an agreement with the Taliban, change curriculum and textbooks, recruit teachers recommended by the Taliban for the religious subjects and allow the Taliban to supervise the school.
- II. Health staff: are allowed to operate if they accept treating injured Taliban cadre.

c) Members of the Afghan security forces of any ranks: same as b) above, but they also have the options of defecting to the Taliban and of signing protocols (as a unit) with the Taliban, offering some kind of exchange based on shared interest.

- f) Collaborators of the Afghan government: same as b) above.
- g) Collaborators of western military forces and of military-related aid efforts, including guesthouse staff: same as b) above.
- h) Contractors working for the Afghan government: same as b) above.
- i) Contractors working for foreign countries, opposed to the Taliban: same as b) above.

²⁰ Interviews with Taliban commanders and cadres, 2014-2017

j) Interpreters working for hostile foreign countries: same as b) above.²¹

Their top targeting priorities are described by the Taliban as officers of the security services (NDS), interpreters or anybody working with the foreign military and diplomats. For example, during 2015 the Taliban claim to have killed 15 interpreters in Kabul and in the surrounding suburbs, and 23 in 2016 as of beginning of December 2016; whether the Taliban accurately identified their victims as interpreters is not clear. The Taliban surely inflate their achievements by reporting deaths that did not occur (particularly when bombs are used). Most attacks have taken place in the suburbs (17 in 2016).²² The Taliban of course also target foreigners, particularly if in some way related to the counter-insurgency effort.

Wherever the Taliban are present, they have been particularly proactive in targeting members of the Afghan security forces who refuse to quit service, and Taliban have exercised pressure on their families in order to force them to resign, threatening punishment in case of non-compliance. In some cases, they have gone as far as executing relatives. Mainly, such members and their families have gradually been forced to relocate to safer areas under government control, although some Taliban targeting occurs here too. Others who can afford to do so quit, and hundreds have been executed over the years. Even those relocating have been at risk of being caught travelling on the roads at a Taliban check-point.²³

There are however exceptions to these general rules about targeting. The Mashhad Shura attributes a low priority to government collaborators and focuses instead on collaborators of western governments, of Daesh and on counter-intelligence, as well as westerners.²⁴ The Rasool Shura often collaborates tactically with Afghan government security forces and does not pursue government collaborators at all, prioritising instead the hunt for infiltrators from other groups of Taliban. The targeting of serving members of the security forces is also subject to some tactical considerations: the Mashhad Shura stopped doing that in 2015, and in specific areas of recent infiltration the Taliban would adopt softer approaches, lobbying households to take their sons away from the security forces, without threat of violence.²⁵ The actual degree to which the Taliban would proactively pursue members of the security forces was therefore subject to tactical considerations.²⁶

Taliban sources in late 2016 put the number of individuals in their national blacklist at almost 15,000.²⁷ This suggests that the Taliban do not have access to government databases about security personnel or government officials, otherwise the number of

²¹ Interviews with Taliban commanders and cadres, 2014-2017.

²² Interview with Haqqani cadre, Kabul, December 2016.

²³ Interview with Faryab Elders, Almar, Qaysar and Khwaja Sabz Posh, May 2015; Interview with Kandahar elders, Zhrai and Daman, November 2014; Interview with former Taliban commander, Mohammad Agha (Logar), March 2015; Interview with Baghlan elder, Dandi Ghori, July 2014; Interview with Herat elders, Pashtun Zarghun and Obeh, April 2015; Interview with Nangarhar elder, Bati Kot, March 2015; Interview with Wardak elder, Sayed Abad, July 2014.

²⁴ Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Mashhad Shura, Taliban Leadership 44, July 2015.

²⁵ Personal communication with David Mansfield, who visited Nangarhar for research purposes in 2014-15.

²⁶ Interview with Faryab Elder, Qaysar, May 2015; Interview with Herat elder, Shindand, April 2015.

²⁷ Interview with Moulavi Zarif Ishaqzai who is member of Taliban Justice Commission in Pakistan, October 2016.

blacklisted individuals would be much higher. This is not surprising as the government itself is hardly able to tell for sure who is really in its security forces, or works for the government. In the early stages of the war it was not uncommon for the Taliban to catch police and soldiers at checkpoints, while they were on leave with their IDs in their pockets. It rapidly became harder and harder to catch somebody so foolish to take an ID with him.

Essentially the blacklist includes any type of wrongdoer (in Taliban's definition) whose identity and address the Taliban have been able to ascertain. Such details are essential because according to Taliban rules before being included in the blacklist a collaborator has to be warned and to be given the chance to amend his ways. Taliban are therefore dependent on their informers providing details about would-be-targets for their intimidation system to function. The Taliban claim however to be able to monitor who enters the country, thanks to spies working for them in the border police at Kabul airport, as well as in many other places. The Taliban claim to be getting regular reports about new arrivals to the country.²⁸

Targeted killings are relatively easily measurable and has clearly escalated dramatically over the years in retaliation of ISAF's 'night raids', with increased targeting of civilians (see Table 1). While there is no UN data for targeted assassinations before 2008, it is clear that the Taliban were already carrying them out in 2004 if not earlier, although on a relatively small scale. USAID reported already in 2006 that its Afghan staff had been targeted for three years, with a loss of about 100 staff members, while the assassination of pro-government clerics started in the summer of 2005 in the south.²⁹ The lack of precise data on previous years makes it difficult to evaluate where 2008 stood in terms of a trend in Taliban targeted assassinations, but overall Taliban-inflicted civilian casualties rose by more than half in that year, so it is not far-fetched to presume that targeted assassination also rose significantly.

4.1 TABLE 1: CIVILIAN CASUALTIES INFILCTED BY THE INSURGENTS, 2006-2016.

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Total	699	700	1160	1630	2080	2332	2179	2311	2643	2315	2131
<i>Of which targeted assassinations</i>			271	225	462	495	698	743	716	790	574

Source: Antonio Giustozzi 2017. Figures based on UNAMA.

Note: UNAMA figures (in italics) also include collateral damage victims.

It should be noted that UNAMA data only include civilian victims of targeted killings; police and army members are not included, although they have been a major target of the Taliban. ISAF sources estimated that in March-September 2011, of 190 targeted assassinations which they recorded, 50 involved personnel of the Afghan security forces, 32 government officials and the rest individuals who were not working for the

²⁸ Taliban Judge Safi, interviewed on 23 June 2016.

²⁹ Declan Walsh, 'Taliban assassins target the clerics faithful to Kabul', The Observer, 27 August 2006.

government: security officials accounted therefore for roughly a quarter of all targeted assassinations.³⁰

On this basis we can estimate that total targeted killings by 2015-16 were close to 1,000 per year. The Taliban themselves claim to have punished 1,633 individuals in 2015 and over 2,000 in 2016, figures that include amputations, corporal punishments and injuries.³¹ Taking into account failed attacks and arbitrary killings (in the Taliban's terms, that is unauthorised attacks), we can estimate that every year the Taliban carry out attacks on at least 15-20 % of their blacklists.

5. TALIBAN'S RULES

Like suicide bombing and mines, targeted killing of civilians was also controversial among the Taliban, as some opposed targeting teachers, doctors, engineers, etc.³² Although former Taliban often nostalgically recall the mythical early years of the insurgency as a time of restraint and rule of law among the Taliban, which ended as the old leaders were killed or detained one after the other, in fact targeted killing was at its most intense in 2005-10 in southern Afghanistan, despite the smaller size of the Taliban then.³³ In Kandahar targeted killing was particularly violent, with hundreds of elders being killed.³⁴ After the initial wave of violence, arbitrary killings of suspected spies and government collaborators became relatively rare, as few villagers would dare challenge the Taliban. Many elders were struggling to recall specific episodes of violence by 2014-16.³⁵

As the Taliban system shaped up, and their codes of conduct became more sophisticated, rules were established requiring the Taliban to warn collaborators at least twice before actually taking action against them. The system appears to have been in place from 2009 or 2010. Only the 'big criminals', such as top government figures,³⁶ are excepted from this rule. Thus the procedure for targeting individual collaborators is:

1. Identify them;
2. Find their contact details (address or telephone);

³⁰ ISAF source, September 2011.

³¹ Interview with member of Taliban Justice Commission in Pakistan, October 2016.

³² Interview with member of Quetta Political Commission, Taliban Leadership 1, September 2014; Interview with former member of Rahbari Shura, Taliban leadership 7, September 2014.

³³ Interview with former commander, Baghlan Taliban 16, May 2015.

³⁴ Anand Gopal, 'The Battle for Afghanistan: Militancy and Conflict in Kandahar', New America Foundation, November 2010, p. 37.

³⁵ Interview with Herat elders, Pashtun Zarghun and Chist-i Sharif, April 2015; Interview with Kandahar elders, Panjwai, Daman, Dand, Zherai and Maywand, February 2015; Interview with Nangarhar elders, Khogyani, Shirzad and Bati Kot, March 2015; Interview with Faryab Elders, Almar, Qaysar, Khwaja Sabz Posh, May 2015; Interview with Ghazni elder, Andar, August 2014; Interview with Logar elders, Baraki Barak and Mohammad Agha, February 2015; Interview with Wardak elders, Sayed Abad and Jaghatu, July 2014.

³⁶ Interview with Haqqani cadre, Kabul, December 2016.

3. Warn them at least twice;
4. Interrogate and have them go through the Taliban's courts;
5. Include them in the blacklist if they fail to comply with Taliban injunctions;
6. Wait for a suitable opportunity to strike at them.

Passage 4 is waived in circumstances where interrogation or detention is not feasible. In Kabul city for example the Taliban cannot usually detain suspects and culprits, so the two options available are monitoring the suspects until they get out of Kabul and detain them at that point (the Taliban claim 350 such detentions in 2015/16) or proceed with the assassination teams, bypassing the trial.³⁷

The actual implementation of passage 6 (see above) is normally subject to the capabilities of the local targeting team compared to their workload, to the risk implicit in carrying out the 'sentence'. A protected target, or a target based in an area heavily patrolled by the authorities, might be valuable to the Taliban, but it would also imply a high risk of the assassination team being lost during the operation. A target of low importance, but residing in an area easy to access and to get away from for the Taliban might be targeted sooner than a target of higher importance, but better protected. The Taliban's intelligence passes on its lists of suspects to the Military Commission (or in the case of the forces of the Quetta Shura, to the shadow governor, or again in the case of the Miran Shah Shura to the provincial representative of the Haqqani network), who will decide whether to include them in the target list. Each province's intelligence department is assigned a team (Istakhbarati Karwan), tasked with pursuing collaborators in collaboration with the Military Commission. In most provinces, the team is composed on 20 members, but larger in places like Kabul.³⁸ These karwans carry out most targeting activities, but wanted individuals are also at risk from Taliban checkpoints and Taliban patrols in the villages, who have the local subset of wanted individuals.³⁹

Although the Taliban's political leadership seems to be keen on the rules that it introduced and would like to see them implemented, most Taliban admit that arbitrary executions still happen.⁴⁰ Sometimes Taliban executions take place in anger at being targeted in airstrikes and night raids. Not being able to do anything about it, the Taliban commander might scapegoat some of the local villagers, particularly if they were already suspected of disloyalty to the Taliban.⁴¹ Moreover, like their Afghan

³⁷ Interview with Taliban Judge in Logar, 23 June 2016.

³⁸ Interview with senior member of Intelligence Department of the Peshawar Shura, Taliban leadership 42, July 2015; Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Miran Shah Shura, Taliban Leadership 39, July 2015; Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Quetta Shura, Taliban Leadership 43, July 2015.

³⁹ Taliban Judge Safi, interviewed on 23 June 2016.

⁴⁰ Interview with Uruzgan Taliban, Shahid Hassas, commander, March 2015; Interview with former commander, Shindand, December 2014; Interview with former commander, Baghlan, May 2015; Interview with former fighter, Baghlan , May 2015; Interview with former group commander, Ghazni, May 2015; Interview with former commander, Nawur, Ghazni, May 2015; Interview with commander, Baghlan, May 2015; Interview with former commander, Kandahar, May 2015; Interview with former commander, Kandahar, July 2015.

⁴¹ Interview Kandahar elder 9, Panjwai, February 2015; Interview with former commander, Ghazni, May 2015; Interview with former fighter, Wardak, May 2015; Interview with former commander, Wardak, May 2015.

government and ISAF rivals, the Taliban's intelligence is also affected by faulty intelligence driven by feuds and vendettas.⁴²

The targeting of family members also occurs occasionally; the Taliban appear to have restrained this practice after police and militia started going after Taliban family members in retaliation.⁴³

The purpose of the Taliban's judicial system is in part at least to highlight the shadow-state character of the Taliban. The Taliban are therefore keen to highlight the continuity between the Taliban as an insurgent organisation and the Taliban Emirate of 1996-2001 – indeed formally the Taliban still call themselves Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Because of this all sentences issued by the Taliban for whatever crime are still held to be applicable, even those issued before the fall of the Emirate. Indeed, according to Taliban sources, of the 15,000 persons on their national blacklist, 3,000 are individuals sentenced during the Emirate's time (the judicial records were taken to Pakistan as the Emirate folded). Clearly those who escaped Taliban sentences at that time are likely to have been abroad, hence quite few of these individuals (about 200) were in fact caught by the Taliban in 2002-16.⁴⁴

The Taliban keep a close eye on strangers arriving in the villages and small towns they control, and on villagers travelling to areas under government control. Clearly they fear being spied on and try to limit the recruitment of informers by the government. Those travelling in or out of a Taliban area should be able to provide a convincing justification for their travels, better if backed up by some evidence of trading deals, medical needs, etc. In the event of the Taliban looking for culprits of spying in the government's favour, anybody suspected of having gone to the authorities would be at great risk.

6. INFORMATION FLOW WITHIN THE TALIBAN

The intelligence departments of different shuras started signing cooperation agreements from December 2010 onwards, which made regular exchange of information possible. The agreement was initially not extended to the Mashhad office when this declared its autonomy in 2014, reportedly because its leaders rejected it. A source within the office claimed that it had informers within the intelligence department of the other shuras, and hoped to obtain information from them without any exchange. Most of the information exchanged concerned government threats to the Taliban and the monitoring of individuals; other information, deemed not to be of concern to the other shuras, is not exchanged. Some cadres, called Mamba, were tasked to coordinate among intelligence departments.⁴⁵

⁴² Mike Martin, *An intimate war*, London: Hurst, 2015, p. 130; Interview with former commander, Kandahar, Spin Boldak, December 2014.

⁴³ Carter Malkasian, *War comes to Garmser*, London: Hurst, 2013, p. 212.

⁴⁴ Interview with Moulavi Zarif Ishaqzai who is member of Taliban Justice Commission in Pakistan. 29 October 2016

⁴⁵ Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Miran Shah Shura, Taliban Leadership 39, July 2015; Interview with senior member of Intelligence Department of the Peshawar Shura, Taliban leadership 42, July

As of late 2016 the Shuras of Quetta, Mashhad and the North were sharing intelligence; there was no intelligence sharing with the Rasool Shura. There was also only partial sharing with the Miran Shah Shura teams deployed to accompany the Fedayin Commission. The intelligence teams linked to the Fedayin Commission are not sharing operational information with other Taliban because it fears leaks that might compromise its operations, but it is sharing other intelligence. This Commission is a special case because its task is carrying out complex attacks and its intelligence gathering is exclusively focused to this purpose.⁴⁶

The intelligence departments share information with each other on an ad hoc basis. If a wanted individual is believed to have left the area of responsibility of an intelligence department, his file may be transferred to one or more of the other intelligence departments.⁴⁷

Still it is quite likely that the different Taliban shuras might not exchange 100 % of the information. For example, the shuras often have different ideas of what represents an enemy. Some Taliban shuras have relations with some of the supposed enemies of the Taliban, and clearly have no interest in targeting them or in passing on information about them to other Taliban, who might not have such relations. For example, the Shura of the North and the Mashhad Shura have friendly relations with most leaders and commanders of Jamiat-i Islami, a party that was the cornerstone of the United Front in the 1990s, the anti-Taliban coalition. The Quetta Shura, including the Shuras of Miran Shah and Peshawar, see by contrast Jamiat as one of their worst enemies. For the Shuras that recognise the Rahbari Shura in Quetta as their leadership (Quetta, Miran Shah, Northern, Peshawar) in principle the decisions taken in Quetta about targeting are binding. In practice it might not be so. Even groups of local Taliban might not want to share all the names of their wanted individuals with higher levels of the chain of command, for example when these individuals would not qualify on the basis of the Taliban's rules. Figure 2 summarise the way Taliban blacklisting functions.

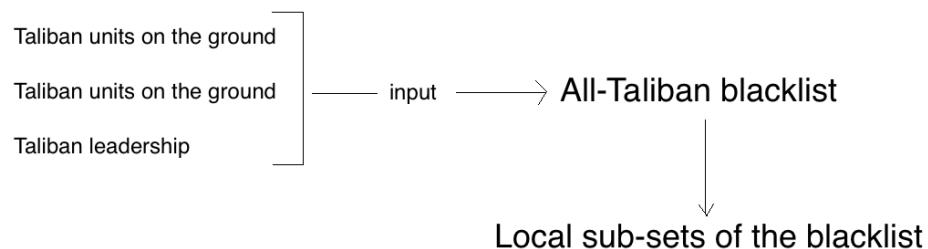
⁴⁶ 2015; Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Quetta Shura, Taliban Leadership 43, July 2015; Interview with senior member of intelligence department of the Mashhad Shura, Taliban Leadership 44, July 2015.

⁴⁷ Taliban Judge Safi, interviewed on 23 June 2016; Interview with Haqqani cadre, Kabul, December 2016.

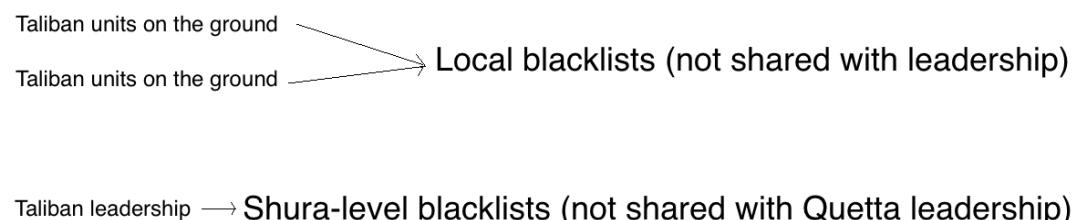
⁴⁷ Taliban Judge Safi, interviewed on 23 June 2016; Interview with Haqqani cadre, Kabul, December 2016.

6.1 FIGURE 2: THE FUNCTIONING OF THE TALIBAN'S BLACKLISTS

The system on paper



The parallel blacklists



Source: Antonio Giustozzi 2017

7. CONCLUSION

Over the years the Taliban have built a sophisticated intelligence structure, all together employing almost 6,000 trained staff if we also include the Rasool Shura, as well as large number of paid and unpaid informers. However, the development of Taliban intelligence has at the same time been negatively affected by growing Taliban fragmentation. With the exception of Rasool's Shura, other Taliban components have managed to work out a system for the exchange of information, so that the Taliban intimidation and targeting system continues to function as a nationwide entity, even if not necessarily always in a smooth way.

The Taliban intimidation and targeting effort has probably reached its peak, unless American presence in Afghanistan is going to surge significantly again. The strategic importance of intimidation and targeting has declined because now the Taliban believe they can win an outright confrontation with the armed forces of Kabul, and they are channelling more and more resources towards their semi-regular, mobile forces. The general perception in Afghanistan is of an erosion of government influence to the Taliban's advantage, a fact that reduces the need for intimidation tactics. The government has also pulled out of many rural areas, where the Taliban are now in control.

However, intelligence remains important for the Taliban, as they seek to penetrate the cities on a greater scale than they have done so far. Frontal assaults on the cities were attempted by the Taliban in 2015-16, but they could not succeed in the face of swift

intervention by US air assets. Already during 2016 the Taliban have shifted towards lower profile infiltration tactics, in order to get into the target cities without being exposed to retaliation from the air.

Taliban intelligence also remains important because the different shuras of the Taliban are all connected to different foreign patrons, which in all likelihood prize the information that the Taliban might be able to gather.

During 2016 there was a significant return in fashion of air and drone strike against Taliban leaders; the best known victim was Amir Akhtar Mohammad Mansur, but he was certainly not the only one. The trend is likely to intensify further in the second half of 2017 and beyond, if rumours of an American mini-surge will be confirmed. The air assets made available by the Pentagon and CIA to Afghanistan increased in 2016 already, even if they remain way below the peak reached in 2012-13. This trend means that counter-intelligence is regaining importance in the Taliban's eyes; the hunt for spies never stopped, but is likely to intensify, offsetting at least in part the decline in targeted killings.

We should also expect an increase in the Taliban's efforts to infiltrate the Afghan security forces. In part this is in order to carry out attacks against the US advisory teams that might return to the battlefield in significant numbers, but also to carry out more strikes deep inside territory held by the Afghan government, targeting provincial level leaders in order to disrupt the chain of command of the enemy.