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## If the West withdraws will the Taliban return

*The article gives a clear description of the events which has rendered Afghanistan the centre of the Ecumene neo-fundamentalism and it is able to offer a chronologically and logically ordered picture. The author sets out various elements on which to reflect, and successfully avoids influencing the opinion which arises from the reading. It is, beyond specific and contingent reflections, a useful memorandum to recall the dynamics which made this country the place of the origin of the Qaida neo-fundamentalism.*



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It is the 11th of June, 2006. In the North-west Pakistan province of North Waziristan, numerous notices have been affixed by the Taliban in which the population is warned that all those that violate the prohibition to listen to music, watch the TV or video-cassettes which contents are non-Islamic will be severely punished – as well as all those sadly well-known prohibitions of the Taliban epoch of Afghanistan – These, “also against the will of the authorities” warn the threatening notices.

A great number of Taliban fugitives from the American bombardments have found refuge in North Waziristan and, according to rumours, also Mullah Omar is there, protected by the Pakistani Secret Services. It is not surprising, therefore, that in an environment with a high representation of conservative extremists, some take the trouble to remember the prohibitions imposed during the darkest Afghanistan period. However, what is surprising is that some independent local sources of the press report that the common people have received the prohibitions with as much favour as the re-emergence of a Taliban movement, which up to now – although present and active in the zone – has not publicly given any signs of vitality through any important political actions.

Five years have past since the North Alliance, guided, supported and allied by Washington, defeated the Taliban regime. Five years in which the fundamentalist phenomenon has been constantly underestimated and all energy has been directed to the Iraqi campaign, in this way, practically abandoning Afghanistan, erroneously considered to be a solved problem or, at least, almost so.

### The rise of the Taliban

We shall remember that the Taliban came to power by militarily conquering almost the entire Afghan territory. With the withdrawal of the Soviet troops, the Mujahiddin of the various factions had lost the logistic-financial support guaranteed by the United States through the ISI (Inter-Service Intelligence), the Pakistan Secret Service. The alliance between the warlords (1), which had been formulated in anti-

Soviet terms, started to show the first signs of collapse. The then President of the Republic, Najibullah, was supported by Moscow and was able to maintain his position thanks to aid in the form of food, ammunition and spare parts, sent by Mikhail Gorbachov.

With the fall of Gorbachov, El'cin suspended any further form of aid to Najibullah, accelerating the surrender, a short time later, under the pressure of the warlords. As a result, the President, unable even to flee – being left almost alone – had to take shelter in the delegation of the United Nations of Kabul.

The warlords in Afghanistan are those powerful local people who, enriched by the war, have been able to control private armies of thousands of men. Many of these warlords have had to give up their arms in order to obtain high government positions, but excluding heavy arms, the UNO collected, in Oct. 2005, prevalently useless AK47s, old muskets from 1900 and even some carbines with front loading.

It was April, 1992 and Burhanuddin Rabbani became President of Afghanistan. Allied to the Minister of Defence, Massud, he had started a war against Gulbuddin Hekmathar, the Prime Minister, supported by the Pakistan President Zia al-Huq and General Akhtar, head of the ISI. The Pakistan intention was to have a Sunnite Afghan government, subordinate to Islamabad, so as to maintain pressure at a high level on the Tehran Shiites, the new enemy of the United States, after the end of the Soviet empire. The strategy was convergent with that of the White House, which, after all, was not eager to maintain a close relationship with a fundamentalist Islamic state such as Pakistan with Zia al-Huq in power and where it feared that an overly high concentration of fundamentalist guerrillas in Afghanistan would result in being used by other Islamic countries in the friction areas of the United States and Islamic countries. However, Pakistan had decided to follow this strategy also because they expected consistent aid and investments from the USA.

But things did not proceed in the right way.

The profound division between ethnic groups, radicalized by the war lords who had by then broken alliance among themselves, had transformed the jihad against the Soviets into a civil war, fed by opium, smuggling and mafia organization of the transport: a million dollar business. It has been calculated that the customs duties alone cashed illegally by the warlord, Ismail Khan, in the province of Herat, amounted to two hundred million dollars per year.

The permanent instability of Afghanistan was detrimental to the projects of exploiting the gas and petroleum deposits of the Caspian, which needed infrastructures for transport towards the Persian Gulf through Afghanistan. The first society to be seriously interested in a gas-duct project on this route was the Argentinean Bidas, which managed, by an intensive diplomatic effort, to bring all the warring factions to an agreement. Bidas, however, was pushed aside by the American concern, Unocal, which sustained that the only way to realize such an enormous project was to constitute a single organization which was able to control everything. In fact, this opened the way to the idea that Afghanistan needed a strong central government as soon as possible: a solution which would also have silenced the warlords.



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It was at this point that Pakistan decided to invest conspicuous resources to ensure its control in Afghanistan: the novelty consists in the implicit absence of the United States and Saudi Arabia, which involves Pakistan in a substantial alliance with a defined political project. ISI is entrusted with operative and strategic tasks, also with conceiving and projecting the operations, presumably with the agreement of the United States.

The idea of ISI is ingenious in its simplicity: there are tens of thousands starving refugees who live in the madrasses of North Pakistan. These people are illiterate and learn by heart a few fundamental sure of their religion; the system of subsistence is basic and they are barely able to satisfy their primary needs. Alongside the intensive religious education, they are taught the rudimentary use of arms. The Mullahs responsible for the madrasses are offered the command of the various battalions which are formed. The students, it seems, are easily bought with a tin of meat or a pair of new shoes, symbols of luxury which, up to that moment, seemed unreachable. In this way, the Taliban guerrillas are born, as they are known throughout the world.

Numerically speaking, the Talibans are strong, but they are badly trained. The strategic errors committed in operation areas cost hundreds of their own lives which, after each battle, are replaced with new recruits. Yet, notwithstanding, the advance on the Taliban front is extremely rapid and due to, at least, two factors.

The state of "permanent" war (2) had exhausted the civil population, always poorer and hungrier. The

Talibans declare that they fight in the name of Allah to bring a stable and lasting peace against any faction, and this wins approval from the multitude of common people. But the more important factor was the intense work of the ISI regarding the warlords, who were literally bought with millions of dollars and agreements on the proceeds of future illicit traffic, not counting the money which would be earned from the gas-duct. In a few months, the Talibans conquered 7 of the 28 Afghan provinces. At the end of the war only a portion of the north of Afghanistan, the Panjshir Valley, remained unconquered. Massud, with a handful of men, thanks to the inaccessibility of the valley, impeded the proclamation of total Taliban victory and the complete control of the territory required by the companies to commence the investment of five billion dollars in an infrastructure for the transport of the gas. The gas-duct was, once again, out of the question: the risk of seeing it repeatedly blown up was too high.

The Talibans turn against their creator and financier, Pakistan; raising always more, the price of their loyalty. The American offensive then arrived and guided by the North Alliance defeated the Talibans almost completely. Afghanistan comes out of the nightmare imposed by an illiterate oligarchy, which advocated a rudimentary ideology, based more on the customary laws of the ancient Pushtan than on the Koran. But notwithstanding the reported victory, the Talibans have never been completely defeated.

### The return of the Talibans

It is the 18th of May, 2006. For about a month the allied forces have been conducting decisive action in the attempt to smash what in the public opinion is described as "the last pockets of Taliban resistance". But on this very day, the "last pockets" unleash an offensive of the like never known before. It was started on Wednesday, the 17th, by attacking Musa Qala in the province of Helmand, little more than 2 hours by road from Kabul. Until now, they had never pushed so near to the capital. When the Afghan troops retake the village, they find the bodies of 13 policemen and discover the theft of all the arms and ammunition. It is the beginning of the spring offensive proclaimed by Mullah Omar.

In the southern provinces where the Taliban presence is the strongest, if we exclude kamikaze and other attacks, the control of the territory reminds us of a game of two sides, where the stage is occupied in turn by groups of actors who rarely meet: government forces and allies by day, Talibans and smugglers by night. Waziristan is a large potential source of Taliban rebels and the southern provinces of Afghanistan are an ideal battle terrain. Here the United States have never had a presence sufficient to guarantee security, and war action does not seem to be incisive enough.

The following table indicates the foreign military presence employed in peace operations in the crisis area (3).

Theatre/year	Troops	Density: soldiers x Km <sup>2</sup>	Density: soldiers x inhabitant
Kosovo/2004	40.000	1 x 0,3	1 x 50
Bosnia/2004	60.000	1 x 0,85	1 x 66
Afghanistan/2005	36.000	1 x 25	1 x 1115
Iraq/2004	173.000	1 x 1,8	1 x 107

The security of the major part of Afghanistan is not guaranteed due to the scarcity of men and means, and of the consequent difficulty in reconstructing the institutions, and the people are asking what so many soldiers are doing there if the population is not receiving any benefit (4).

The major part of American energy is distracted by the Iraqi campaign and the Afghanistan mission remains unfinished, entrusted to the forces of the NATO command. The withdrawal of a fifth of the American contingent – about 4,000 men out of 20,000 – has been interpreted by extremists as the beginning of total withdrawal from the Country. In fact, the Taliban spring offensive, declared by Mullah Omar, coincides with the announced period of the American withdrawal.

The spontaneous revolt triggered off in Kabul on May the 30th, 2006, caused by a car accident which involved American military vehicles and civilians is the litmus paper of a situation which becomes more heated every day. An American military vehicle crashes into a taxi provoking the death of the passenger and injuring six other people. The crowd reaction is violent: stone throwing follows and there are shouts of "death to Americans". According to eye witnesses, a volley of machine-gun fire comes from one of the American military vehicles and 4 civilians are killed. The crowd, which is pushed back by Afghan forces, turns towards the city quarter of the embassies where, in an attempt to break through the police cordon, three other people are killed.

### The Afghan opium

It seems evident since the times of the "Great Game", which matched Russia and England over the control of Afghanistan, that the Afghan perception of the foreigner is essentially utilitarian.

The foreigner is tolerated as long as he offers some benefit, aid, investment and reconstruction. It is just the question of reconstruction which is the sore point: to be won, contemporary wars require a supplementary effort after the battle, and a shrewd planning project. The American government, writes Ahmed Rashid, the journalist who has dedicated years to the documentation of the Afghan affairs, "refused to take state building seriously after 2001" and continues: "Afghanistan has received far less funds for reconstruction, compared to ex- Yugoslavia, East Timor or Haiti" (5). Agriculture, for example,

which represents 70% of the population's income, has been abandoned, according to ONG representatives present on the territory, and this has provoked a rapid return to the cultivation of the poppy for opium, thanks to the economic incentives offered by drug traffickers – when it is not a case of coercion. These incentives are abundantly superior to the aid distributed by the international organizations for the destruction of the plantations. In the absence of help, in areas stricken by drought, some of the poorer families are compelled to give opium to their very young children to calm the hunger pangs.



photo ansa

The opium economy generates corruption and this severely conditions the control of the territory by government authorities: to be able to govern is perhaps, the reason why President Karzai accepted ministers belonging to the category of warlords, and these, to maintain their power, came to agreement with the small criminal bands and local clans. They belong to the institutional system only in a formal sense and depend on or control the diffused illegality of the provinces.

As an example, the Province of Herat can be cited – for a long time governed by Ismael Khan - he refused to turn over the customs revenue to the Central Government. To allow the nomination of a new governor for the province, who was loyal to the central authorities, Ismael Khan was nominated Minister of Energy.

The historic rival of Ismael Khan, Amanullah Khan, warlord of the Provinces of Shindand and Farah did not appreciate the nomination, at all, and threatened violent reprisals. South of Shindand, human life is no longer guaranteed by anyone; even the private military companies are not reliable. During an attack, the escort of a convoy of the European Union was the first to flee.

It is unthinkable that Amanullah Khan does not know or control everything that happens in 'his' zone. And for this reason, the threat of a man as important as him must always be heeded. Therefore, negotiations between an emissary of President Garzai and Amanullah Khan is spoken of; as a result of which, the latter renounced his plans of extending the zone of 'insecurity' more to the north. The price that was paid is unknown.

Outside all bounds of control, on the contrary, is the already mentioned Province of Helmand, where a quarter of the Afghan opium is produced. There is a real poppy industry, with four hundred thousand employees made up of cultivators, transporters and external participation, which feed a business turnover of almost five billion dollars on the western market, according to the UNDCP, the United Nations Agency, which is committed to the fight against drugs.

Once, the major producers of opium in the area was Pakistan, but then with the war and the necessity of financing arms and logistics without the costs appearing on the State budget, according to Rashid: "an enormous commerce of narcotics was developed under the legitimate 'umbrella' of the arms supply line, organized by the CIA and ISI. (...) As it was in Vietnam, where the CIA chose to ignore the drug trafficking of the anti-communist guerrillas (whom the USA was financing), likewise in Afghanistan, the United States chose to ignore the growing collusion between the mujahiddin, the Pakistan drug traffickers and sectors of the Army" (6).

The recuperation of the situation thus created, would probably require such high investments that the idea among the donating countries is fast becoming that to allocate funds for the fight against the opium trade would be like throwing money to the wind.

### The Western strategy in Afghanistan

The question, however, is very complex. The real knot to untie regards the reconstruction of the State – Italy is presently employed in the reconstruction of the Afghan judicial system – for which major resources are necessary and, perhaps, a major coordination between the governments committed in the Country, by considering the collective interest of the international community before the single national interests.

Military and civilians work together in the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT). The PRT are constituted on a national basis and in this way, for example, the PRT of Herat under Italian command, is composed of elements of the Italian Cooperation and of the Italian Armed Forces and dispose of financial aid allotted by the Italian Parliament. In the Province of Badghis, the PRT is Lithuanian and their financing is decisively more modest. These disparities in the reconstruction operations at a local level are also due, to a great extent, to the level of security which the Armed Forces are able to guarantee.

In this way a spiral is created, which means that in the Southern Provinces, where fighting still exists, the reconstruction co-operators are obliged to live in specially protected dwellings, with very scarce going out into the area. Consequently, the activities of reconstruction in those places are very slow. Among the people, who perceive the foreign presence as useless, discontent grows and sympathy for the Taliban fighters increases.

At the root of this situation is an error of evaluation by Washington, the same that Donald Rumsfeld made in Iraq: the reduction of the troops on the territory to an indispensable minimum.

Today, there is a growing awareness that to guarantee development and autonomy to the Afghan people, the military effort must be increased, and it would be auspicious, with the next hand-over of command at the NATO, also a major European involvement.

Afghanistan no longer seems to be in the thoughts of George W. Bush, but for a possible means of resources to send to Iraq. A possible and dramatic future scenario sees a further United States disengagement in Afghanistan, according to the reasoning – in function of the American elections – that one cannot lose in Iraq, while Afghanistan has a relative importance and a decisively inferior media impact.

The instrumental use of US troops for home politics would force Europe to take on a peace-keeping operation which, at the moment, is unthinkable without the United States, even though a reinforcement of the European presence is propitious in the short term.

### Future scenarios

However, the increase of a military presence should be brought about after strategic reflection regarding also the creation of a civil network for the reconstruction, in such a way as to avoid waste of resources and the disparity of interventions.

The supporters of an unconditional withdrawal from Afghanistan have not given enough thought to the real situation and to the scenarios which could loom up on the horizon in the very near future. What could happen with the withdrawal of the Western troops or simply, with maintaining the present configuration? The jihadists would have a free hand and would be able to propagandize the Western withdrawal as a victory similar to that of the Soviet troops: they would have extreme ease in recruiting new supporters. This would be translated as a defeat for the United Nations Security Council, which approved the operation.

With the increase of the Jihadist thrust, the Central Government, deprived of the substantial international support, would not be able to guarantee the numerous agreements taken at the tribal level and, since peace and stability are guaranteed by such agreements, it is easy to imagine the resumption of a new civil war with more factions in conflict.

The reinforcement of the Taliban and Jihadists would provoke even more serious damage at an international level, to start from that delicate equilibrium on which the Pakistan President, Pervez Musharaf maintains his power. The worst thing for Pakistan and the international community would be an Islamic coup d'etat in anti-West terms, which would be directly caused by the Afghan de-stabilization. The Pakistan atomic arsenal would fall into very insecure hands.

Even without hypothesizing a rapid fall from power for Musharaf, the bordering ex-Soviet republics, sustained by dictators, reinforced by the Islamic rise, would be perceived as a threat. The production of opium would further increase and heroine would even more massively invade the markets, to the great advantage of organized crime.

To sum up, therefore, the withdrawal of the troops would be harmful not only for the embryonic democracy in Afghanistan – emblematic is the fact that in three provinces in the 2005 elections, three candidates brought a plebiscite of votes superior to any man – but it would be a defeat for the entire international community. A peace keeping intervention within a few years, after a non-auspicious withdrawal today, would no longer have sufficient credibility to act with incisiveness. And in the meantime, millions of people would be condemned to hunger and hardship.



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- old muskets from the beginning of the 1900's, and even some carbines with front loading mechanisms.
- (2) 17 wars have been fought in Afghanistan since 1816, up to date: 10 against foreign armies and 7 civil wars.
- (3) A. Politi, in Nomos & Khaos Rapporto Nomisma 2005 on the strategic- economic prospects. Page 85.
- (4) Testimonies gathered by the writer in the period June-October, 2005 at Herat, Afghanistan.
- (5) Rashid, A. Afghanistan: Taleban's second coming, in BBC news online [www/bbc.co.uk](http://www/bbc.co.uk).
- (6) Rashid, A. Taliban, Islam, Oil and the New "Great Game" in Central Asia, London, 2000.

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