Afghanistan Analysts Network

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The Battle for the Schools

The Taleban and State Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

State education has been a major bone of contention between the Kabul government and the Taleban since 2001. By 2010–11, however, a changed attitude towards state education seemed to become the first confidence-building measure in moving towards political negotiations. Moreover, over the years the Taleban's strategy of aggression against state schools produced very modest dividends, as only small portions of the population were so radically opposed to state schools; this prompted a rethinking of the issue within the Taleban.

State education has been controversial in Afghanistan since its first roll out in the 1950s: rural communities and, in particular, mullahs have often opposed it, sometimes violently. Until 1978, the Kabul government (careful not to antagonise the villagers more then strictly necessary in light of its aim of gradual, slow change) kept such opposition under control. That changed in 1978, when a radical leftist regime took power and set out to intensify the use of education as a vehicle of modernisation and ideological indoctrination. The villagers and the mullahs, always suspicious, were pushed to openly rebel against state education. Educational reforms were one of the main causes of rebellion in 1978–79. In 1978–92, the conservative and Islamist opposition came to see state schools as a primary target, with thousands being torched; thousands of teachers also died in the violence.

In 1992–2001, state education was still controversial, this time mainly because of its absence. Schools were barely functioning in those years and the new Islamic regimes (the mujahidin's and the Taleban's) toyed with the idea of Islamising state education, increasing dramatically the share of religious subjects in the curricula, but achieved little in the way of a functioning system because of lack of resources.

After 2001, the new regime installed by international intervention did not particularly focus on education as a tool of political indoctrination, but some aspects of the textbooks adopted turned to be controversial, as was the modest role assigned to religious subjects. Clerical opposition was strong from the beginning, and some rural communities too seem to have resented state education, even if attending school was not compulsory.

Violence against schools started with a variety of conservative actors, but the Taleban soon adopted it as one of the main manifestations of their campaign against the new regime; attacks against schools peaked in 2006, with dozens of students and teachers killed and hundreds of schools affected. However, rural communities showed little support for the violent campaign and the Taleban faced a backlash from villagers who wanted their children to be given the opportunity to attend school.

Having openly committed to the campaign of violence, the Taleban could only backtrack slowly. In

2007, however, contacts with the Ministry of Education (MoE) took place, and then were cut off, allegedly because of American hostility to them. Neither the Taleban nor the MoE tried however to prevent local deals: a few schools started reopening. The substance of Taleban demands for the reopening of schools remained constant from 2007 onwards: adopting the Taleban curriculum, returning to the old textbooks and hiring teachers of religious subjects linked to the Taleban. A trickle of local deals continued until 2010, when the pace of local negotiations accelerated considerably, perhaps because the Taleban removed the authorisation to attack schools from their code of conduct in 2009. However, between late 2010 and early 2011, the MoE apparently decided to restart negotiations at the top level to allow for more-radical change. Perhaps the Afghan government decided that it did not need anymore Washington's authorisation to negotiate, or Washington did not oppose such willingness to negotiate. In any case, the Taleban decided to suspend attacks on schools altogether; the decision did not lead to a complete cessation of attacks, because of command-and-control problems, because non-Taleban elements were involved or because of alternative reasons for carrying out attacks against specific targets (as opposed to an all out campaign against state schools).

The fact remains that the level of violence dropped very substantially starting in the second half of 2010 and even more so in 2011. Taleban commanders in the field often openly talked about an agreement between the Taleban leadership and the MoE (mediated according to some by former Taleban Foreign Minister Mutawakil) to reopen all schools in exchange for the MoE's generalised adoption of a new curriculum. Deal making at the local level in the meanwhile continued, with girl schools also beginning to reopen in some provinces.

Perceptions of deal making on state schools vary among the population and among the Taleban. In the first half of 2011, when research was conducted, villagers saw the cessation of attacks mostly as positive. Among the Taleban, several interviewees seemed unenthusiastic about the change, but were encouraged by the promise of further concessions by the MoE, which would bring the national curricula much closer to the Taleban's. Voices strongly supportive of the new developments – and of secular education generally – existed even among the Taleban, perhaps as a result of growing recruitment of members from state high schools or even former members of more 'modernist' parties such as Hezb-e Islami.

At the time of writing, the MoE leadership seemed keen to turn deal-making on schools into a confidence-building measure for future political negotiations than the Taleban themselves were; the Taleban seemed more motivated by the need to bridge the gap with the rural communities, increasingly wary of a conflict which never seems to end. Communities have evidently put pressure on the Taleban since 2006–07, although saying what weight such pressure had in making the Taleban change their mind is difficult. In some cases, clerics seem to have been involved in lobbying the Taleban for negotiating local deals.

The Taleban's strategy for education seems aimed at trying to provide as much as possible a range of services to the population: Quranic schools, private schools (sometimes subsidised by Taleban), madrassas and Taleban-controlled state schools. The latter are of particular importance because they are the only free source (at least in principle) of secular education, and the Taleban have invested human resources in supervising state schools in the areas where they are most influential. The Taleban supervisors not only ensure that the deals with the MoE are respected, but also the attendance of teachers and students. This seems to result from the realisation that one key weakness of the Taleban is their limited ability to provide services to the population, which demands them insistently.

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

In early 2011, the attitude of the Taleban towards non-religious education came to the attention of the media because of a statement concerning a change in this attitude by Minister of Education Faruq Wardak. In reality, something had been fomenting long before that. This report was conceived in October 2010 and the project started in December, before Wardak's foray. Between the end of 2009 and early 2010, while researching another paper on education in Afghanistan,[1] one of the authors noticed negotiations going on at the local level in various parts of Afghanistan. Then during 2010, while researching another paper, *Insurgents of the Afghan North*,[2] the authors heard of the Taleban asserting their control over state schools in Kunduz. These hints that something was happening on the ground were enough to stimulate the authors' attention, not least because of the view, already expressed in *Nation-Building Is Not for All*[3] that control over education is a crucial aspect of any competition for political influence.

This paper therefore sets out to explore Taleban attitudes towards (non-religious) education in general and state education in particular, in greater depth than was possible in the first paper. The paper is based primarily on a series of interviews carried out by the authors between December 2010 and March 2011 with a mix of 82 Taleban, elders, teachers and informed people in 10 different provinces of Afghanistan. The informed people include tailors, shopkeepers and drivers, chosen by the field researchers because of their knowledge of local developments. Thirty-two of the 82 interviewees were Taleban commanders. Faryab, Helmand, Kandahar, Ghazni, Paktika, Nangarhar, Kunar, Laghman, Kunduz and Takhar provinces were chosen from areas having a significant Taleban presence as a sample representing the different regions of Afghanistan.

A group of Afghan interviewers, commissioned by the authors of this paper, carried out interviews in rural areas in their own provinces. They used a questionnaire, which was adapted in the course of the research to improve the collection of relevant information. The original version of it is attached to this report as an annex. All interviewers had previous experience of this type of research. The interviewers took notes during the interviews. The team decided that recording the interviews was not feasible and would compromise the gathering of information. Transcripts of the interviews were produced out of the notes and delivered electronically or manually for translation. A small group of trusted translators translated the interviews and quotes have been extracted for perusal in this report. Inevitably, the quality of the responses and the degree of cooperation of the interviewees varied widely, but on the whole, the interviewers found a fair degree of openness among the interviewees. Although the interviewees tended to make inflated claims, the authors believe that the material was useful as a representation of their views; interviews with Taleban were balanced by interviews with teachers and elders in order to verify the claims being made. In addition, the authors also carried out interviews in Kabul among diplomats and officials of international organisations. The material thus collected was assessed based on information available from other sources, including the existing literature and press reports.

This report starts with some brief considerations of the Taleban's campaign of violence against schools, teachers and students after 2001. The topic has already been debated elsewhere[4] and we discuss it here only to facilitate understanding of the subsequent changes. Importantly, state education has been controversial in Afghanistan since it was first rolled out on a large scale in the 1950s. Conservative families felt that the state was 'stealing' their children, inculcating in them a set of values different from those they held dear. Mullahs felt threatened – one of the main reasons villagers paid *ushr* (religious tax) to them was because they taught in the Quranic schools (where small kids get to know the basics of religion) and *madrassas* (where future mullahs are formed). Education of girls was the most controversial aspect of state education. Resistance and incidents occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in the south. Then, the politicisation of state education by the leftist regime in 1978 turned schools into one of the main targets of the armed opposition (the *mujahidin*). Until 1992, thousands of teachers and students died in attacks on schools, effectively wiping out state education in most of the countryside.

[1] A. Giustozzi, *Nation-Building Is Not for All: The Politics of Education in Afghanistan*, AAN Thematic Report 2/2010, Berlin, Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, May 2010.

[2] A. Giustozzi and Christoph Reuter, *The Insurgents of the Afghan North*, AAN Thematic Report 04/2011 Kabul, Berlin: Afghanistan Analysts Network, May 2011.

[3] Giustozzi, *Nation-Building* (see FN 1).

[4] See Giustozzi, *Nation-Building* (FN 1) for a summary. The main pieces of work are *Lessons in Terror: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan,* Human Rights Watch, July 2006; and *Knowledge on Fire: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan*, Care International, January 2009.

Education was also controversial in the years of the Taleban's Islamic Emirate, although for reasons opposite to those discussed above. The Taleban took over what was left of state education and tried to reshape it according to their model, mixing secular and religious subjects in approximately equal parts. They also greatly curtailed girls' education, allowing only a few NGO-run schools to keep teaching girls.

It was not until 2002 that the Afghan state was in position to roll out again state education in the Afghan countryside. Past experiences, however, contributed to make education a sensitive issue. Items like the pictures of Commander Massud (believed to convey the image of a hero) or of Mullah Omar (believed to convey instead the image of a villain) became highly controversial. Violence against school started again and peaked in 2006, in what seemed an orchestrated campaign against state schools.

The central part of the report is dedicated to discussing evidence of negotiations around schools; the first section focuses on 2007–09 when the first indications emerged that something was going on. The second section takes the discussion to 2010–11. In a separate sub-section, we discuss what motivated the Taleban's change of strategy; we also discuss separately the Taleban demands for a compromise. The last section looks at hints of the debate within the Taleban of what the future of education in Afghanistan could be.

2. THE CAMPAIGN OF VIOLENCE

2.1 The Dimensions of the Problem

In 2002, optimism was widespread in Afghanistan about the prospects of re-launching state education on a grand scale and with a largely secular syllabus. In reality, signs of resistance by sections of the religious establishment and by conservative sections of society were evident from the beginning, particularly concerning textbooks and the education of girls.[5] A previous report pointed out that opposition was stronger in areas that had been weakly exposed to state education in the past, such as southern Afghanistan, stating that 'up to 2006, we can notice the almost perfect match between the penetration of the Taleban and rural illiteracy rates'.[6] The available (mostly anecdotal) evidence suggests that some communities opposed certain aspects of education, in particular the curriculum and the textbooks, allegedly contaminated by foreigners; mixed boys and girls classes (in the lower grades) were reportedly a further reason for opposition.

Conservative elements had been, in many cases, campaigning for some time against state schools in various parts of the country, including the north: Mawlawi Islam (a member of Jamiat-I Islami who joined the Taleban and then returned to Jamiat at the end of 2001) closed state schools in Kamad, Samangan, in late spring 2001 and kidnapped teachers. Already in 2002, 'night letters' were popping up in front of schools and homes of staff members, mainly in the south but even in the north.[7] The content was similar throughout the country and was mainly a protest against international involvement in education.[8] Clearly, this opposition could not be strictly characterised as 'Taleban', because of its geographical spread. Conservative mullahs and members of armed militias were the chief suspects.[9] After 2002, a range of attacks and intimidation became more and more common in various parts of the country.[10] By October 2009, the Ministry of Education acknowledged that 800 schools had to be closed in the areas most affected by the insurgency, and even that might have been an underestimate of the extent of the problem.

Clearly, the Taleban joined the wave of attacks against schools early on. What orders and when exactly they were issued is not clear; the first sign of codification of the campaign against schools dates back to December 2006. At that time the Taleban leadership included in its *layeha*, the code of conduct issued to field commanders, instructions to attack schools that did not abide by the rules established by the leadership itself; concerning the ban on the post-2001 curriculum, on the new textbooks gradually adopted; and on girls' education. Allegedly, the Taleban leadership took the decision after a major discussion on the topic in the previous months.[11]

[5] See Giustozzi, *Nation-Building* (FN 1).
[6] See Giustozzi, *Nation-Building* (FN 1).
[7] Interview with Faryab Provincial Council member, Maimana, March 2009; personal communication with Kate Clark, March 2010 and September 2011; Giustozzi, *Nation-Building* (see FN 1).
[8] NGO sources.
[9] See Giustozzi, *Nation-Building* (FN 1).
[10] Michael Den Tandt, 'In Afghanistan, to Teach Is to Live in Fear', *Globe and Mail* (9 March 2006); Saeed Zabuli, 'Insecurity Halts Learning in Zabul', *Pajhwok Afghan News* (22 December 2006); Sher Ahmad Haidar, 'Threatened and Snubbed: 50,000 Students Banned from School in Ghazni', *Pajhwok Afghan News* (2 January 2007).
[11] Kate Clark, *The Layha: Calling the Taleban to Account*, AAN Thematic Report 6/2011, Kabul, Berlin: Afghanistan

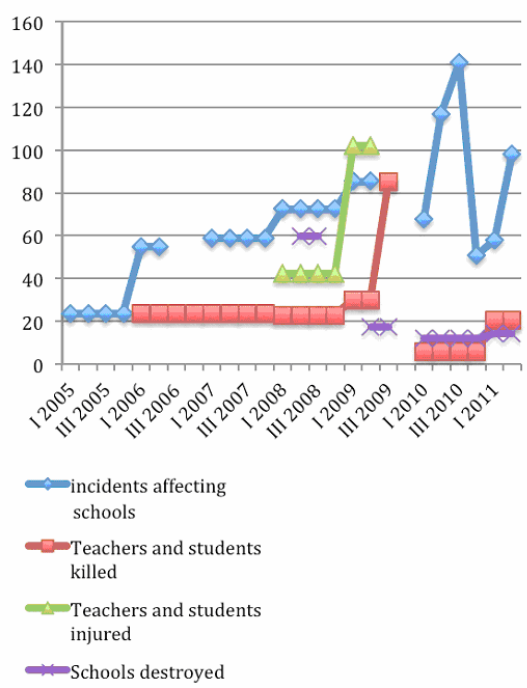
The incorporation of that decision in the layeha meant all girls' schools, and boys' schools that used post-2001 textbooks and syllabi, were in effect liable to be attacked. However, the real innovation of the layeha was to lay out a clear procedure on which attacks on schools could be authorised: first a warning had to be administered, then a physical beating and eventually (in case of non-compliance) the killing of teaching staff and the burning of the school would be authorised.[12] The actual increase in the pace of attacks against schools was already noticeable in the course of 2006 (see Graphs 1 and 2). ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) sources estimated that attacks against schools increased by 65 per cent in that year.[13]

2.2 Reasons for Taleban Opposition

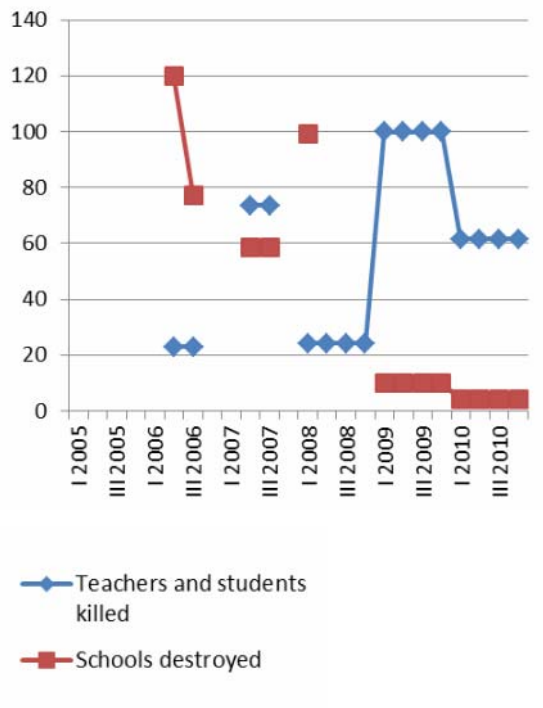
External observers advanced various explanations about what motivated the wave of violence against state schools and teachers. Previous studies rarely discuss why the Taleban have been targeting schools; the Care study however pointed out that girls' schools were more often targeted than boys' schools.[14] This is not surprising as girls' education had always been a particularly controversial issue in Afghanistan, more so in the years the Taleban were in power (1996–2001).[15] The Human Rights Watch study was the only one to address the issues of the Taleban's reasons and summarised that

> it appears that the attacks are motivated by ideological opposition to education generally or to girls' education specifically. In other instances schools and teachers may be attacked as symbols of the government (often the only government presence in an area) or, if run by international nongovernmental organizations, as the work of foreigners. In a few cases, the attacks seem to reflect local grievances and rivalries.[16]

Graph 1. Attacks on education, according to UNICEF



Graph 2. Attacks on education, according to MoE



Analysts Network, 2011; sources close to the Taleban in Pakistan, 2009.

[12] Jason Straziuso, 'Slaying of Teachers in Afghanistan Follows New Rules From Taleban', *The Washington Post* (10 December 2006).

[13] 'Taleban Attacks Killed Over 700 Afghan Civilians this Year: NATO', *Agence France Presse* (2 November 2006).

[14] Marit Glad , 'Knowledge on Fire: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan Risks and Measures for Successful Mitigation', Kabul, Care, September 2009.

[15] See Giustozzi, *Nation-Building* (FN 1).

[16] Human Rights Watch, *Lessons in Terror*, p. 8 (see FN 4).

Afghan analyst Wahid Muzhda, who worked with the Taleban during the Islamic Emirate period, expressed the view that the Taleban targeted schools not out of ideological conviction, but to deny the government a venue to propagate views contrary to those of the Taleban.[17] One explanation of the hostility of the Taleban towards schools was that ISAF and the Afghan security forces had been using them as camps; this is, for example, the interpretation provided by a tailor in Helmand[18] who happened to hear – from an individual unsympathetic to the Taleban – that schools effectively worked as 'hatcheries for the Police and Army'.[19] One interviewee believed that schools 'are providing a workforce to the National Army, National Police and other educated groups who at the end would strengthen the government'.[20] The use of schools as polling stations also proved controversial, as explained by one interviewee:

> In our region, Taleban closed schools for two months. Government wanted to use these schools as election stations and Taleban were against these elections so they closed schools. The local elders convinced the government not to conduct the election in schools and Taleban to permit the schools to function. Later on, the schools were granted permission to function.[21]

Available data confirms that when the electoral commissions used schools as polling stations in 2010, the attacks affecting schools increased by four to five times.[22]

Explanations for the attacks provided by rank-and-file Taleban were substantially similar over the years. The Taleban explained their ruthless attacks, including the killing of teachers and sometimes students, by saying they were only targeting schools 'where Christianity is being taught'.[23] From our interviewees, we collected variations on this theme:

> The Taleban do not like schools for the government institutions offer English and other current subjects. They fear that these subjects would weaken their faith. Islam only permits religious education.[24]

> Taleban are of the view that [the Communists who ruled Afghanistan in 1978–1992] were the product of schools and universities; therefore, they oppose these institutions and demand for the establishment of religious institutions like madrassas.[25]

> Taleban want to implement Islamic laws. They are not against acquiring education. But being a Muslim, one is supposed to acquire Islamic education only.[26]

> Taleban want the promotion of religious education. They don't like schools where un-Islamic education is imparted and students are diverted from their religion.[27]

> We don't accept the syllabus of invaders.[28]

> We are enemies of schools for the reason that they want to impart their version of education. But we say that religious education should be imparted to students.[29]

Even if the Taleban no longer admitted to attacking state schools in 2011, the oppositional rhetoric is still there:

> Why the nation rendered sacrifices and offered one-and-a-half million martyrs if people can't have a syllabus of their choice in schools as the present lacks courses of religious education.[30]

Some of the Taleban interviewees agreed with the view that schools bring support for the government, and hence have to be fought:

> Taleban do not like this government-run educational institution for it brings acceptance and support for government which Taleban fears will harm their interests.[31]

> Taleban do not oppose the schools as such but since they have differences with the government – they do oppose the schools for

[17] Mursal, 'The Taleban Don't Burn Schools?' UNIFEM, Afghanistan, 14 July 2007; Golnaz Esfandiari, 'Afghanistan: Militants Are Targeting Schools', *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty* (22 February 2006).
[18] Interview with Tailor A, Helmand.
[19] Interview with Shopkeeper HSH, Helmand.
[20] Interview with Tailor A, Helmand.
[21] Interview with Farmer MA, Sarhauza (Paktika).
[22] Interview with Hossain Nasrat, AIHRC official, 13 March 2011.
[23] Mursal, 'The Taleban Don't Burn Schools?' (see FN 16); Esfandiari, 'Afghanistan: Militants' (see FN 16).
[24] Interview with Taleban Commander AAA, Garmser.
[25] Interview with Taleban Commander AK, Dasht-i Archi.
[26] Interview with Taleban NAJ, Kunduz.
[27] Interview with Taleban Commander Mawlawi R, Faryab.
[28] Interview with Taleban Commander Mawlawi R, Faryab.
[29] Interview with Taleban Commander AS, Faryab.
[30] Interview with Taleban Commander AJ, Faryab.
[31] Interview with Taleb N, Nawa.

> they believe that it leads to the increasing influence of the government.[32]

At the roots of the hostility of the Taleban towards state schools is likely because Taleban field commanders, in particular, seem to be almost exclusively drawn from madrassas. A Taleb himself explained that

> several of Taleban leaders have got education in schools and universities. But such Taleban don't interfere in affairs of military; on the other hand, Taleban of seminaries don't interfere in civil affairs.[33]

At this stage, discerning whether this dichotomy between the military and the political-administrative wings of the Taleban is the result of a formal decision or has simply grown out of circumstances is difficult. Such dichotomy, however, might explain why the Taleban were slow in changing a policy of violent hostility towards state schools, even after the leadership had become aware of how unpopular such a policy was. Several responses to our interviews highlighted the view that madrassa education is the backbone of the Taleban fighting spirit (see Section 4).

Teachers in particular sometimes accuse Taleban cadres of looking down on state-educated people and of calling them 'inferior to farmers and peasants', as well of expelling fighters educated in state schools:[34]

> The Taleban of seminary have a contemptuous attitude towards school students. They try to expel school graduates from their ranks. But Taleban can't do without the help of school graduates. The people who attended schools used to wear turbans and run their government in the past.[35]

While the high school and state educated dismiss the Taleban as a bunch of illiterate zealots, the Taleban are adamant that all their leaders and commanders are educated (in madrassas) and proudly state that an illiterate person will never be able to become a commander, as education is a prerequisite.[36]

Taleban commanders and some external observers seem to agree on this point of friction:

> The leader of every group of Taleban should have command over the four schools of Fiqh but Taleban don't appoint people of schools as leaders.[37]

> Taleban leaders are educated people. They graduated from madrassas and haven't got education at schools. We (Taleban) consider Islamic education as the real education and not the one that westerners are trying to impart.[38]

> The Taleban of the madrassas don't like their colleagues, who have got education in schools. The Taleban say that they have knowledge of all four schools of thought [of Islam] while those people who have studied in school know nothing about even a single school of thought. So they don't respect their colleagues, who have got education in schools.[39]

Another one of the early reasons for opposition to state schools was reportedly the perceived discrimination against madrassas by the government, which invested very little in a very small number of government madrassas.[40] Some of our interviewees echoed this sentiment as well:

> Those [Taleban] who are educated or have some information about the schools are comparatively positive, but those who are ignorant of the school system are against it and allege that the students or graduate of these schools have negative opinion about the *ulema*. They are critical about the schools and do not like more patronage and attention given to the schools than the madrassas.[41]

> . . . the government is showing partiality. Why are they favouring schools over madrassas? This thing worries the Taleban and they don't like this discrimination.[42]

> A particular group is against the schools, and they do this in reaction to the fact that the government is not paying any attention to Madrassas.[43]

[32] Interview with Taleban Commander AQ, Zeri.
[33] Interview with Taleban Commander GYZ, Takhar.
[34] Interviews with Teacher NU, Faryab; Teacher MZ, Laghman.
[35] Interview with Teacher MZ, Laghman.
[36] Interview with Taleban Commander AS, Faryab.
[37] Interview with Taleban Commander Mawlawi R, Faryab.
[38] Interview with Taleban Commander AS, Faryab.
[39] Interview with Tribal Elder AH, Nangarhar. Note that teaching schools of thought other than the predominant one in a particular area is only superficially imparted in the average madrassa.
[40] Interview with Elder, Lashkargah.
[41] Interview with Elder, Lashkargah.
[42] Interview with Taleb AQ, Zeri.
[43] Interview with Taleb NM, Sang-i Hisar.

Again, these comments seem to highlight how the clash is between the secularly inclined and the Islamic fundamentalist types, with state control over schools only weakly emerging as a cause of opposition, as far as the views of individual Taleb are concerned. Obviously, however, given this substratum of hostility against secular schools among the Taleban, the leadership must have found it easy to unleash violence against state schools. The fact that secular private schools were largely unaffected, even before many of them started switching to the Taleban curriculum, suggests that the leadership was able to channel the fury of its rank-and-file members rather precisely, with an anti-state function. Unfortunately, in the absence of anything like reliable statistics on the presence of secular private schools around Afghanistan, saying how easy the task of the leadership was is difficult.

2.3 The First Signs of Taleban Reconsidering

The discussion within the leadership and the inclusion in the layeha of rules banning teachers are therefore more likely to have been a consequence of the wave of violence, rather than the cause. Faced with a backlash from the murders of dozens of teachers and students, the Taleban tried to place limits on the violence. Already in 2007, the Taleban announced that they would open their own schools in areas under their control. In January the Taleban leadership announced that from March onwards, 'Islamic education' would be provided for boys and later even for girls in six provinces under Taleban influence (Kandahar, Zabul, Uruzgan, Helmand, Nimroz and Farah). The Taleban announced that the schools would use the textbooks used under their Emirate in the 1990s and that preparations were already being made to print them; US$1 million was allocated for these schools, of which 10 were initially planned in 10 different districts.[44] A Taleban spokesman was quoted as saying that

> The aims are to reopen schools so children who are deprived can benefit and secondly, to counter the propaganda of the West and its puppets against Islam, jihad and the Taleban. Students will be taught subjects that are in line with Islamic teaching and jihad.[45]

The phrasing seems to implicitly refer to complaints by the communities that the opposition of the Taleban to state schools was depriving them of access to education.[46] That the Taleban felt at times embarrassed by the violence of some of their own commanders against state schools is confirmed by the fact that Taleban spokesmen would sometime deny their involvement in attacks. Alternatively, already in 2006, there was a widespread belief in southern Afghanistan that, rather than the Taleban in isolation, agents of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) were in fact to blame for most attacks.[47] Such beliefs were encouraged by some Taleban but in reality, field commanders, including most of those interviewed for this study, often acknowledged the attacks.

Although the Afghan government controls thousands of schools and hundreds of madrassas, attacks have only taken place against the former, as pointed out by the MoE itself.[48] This despite the fact that the Taleban (and the clergy in general) only accept the Deobandi curriculum and that the 'new' curricula adopted by state madrassas are rejected.[49] This would seem to indicate that the Taleban opposition to secular education is ideologically motivated and that targeting government institutions *per se* is not a major factor in the violence.

3. NEGOTIATIONS OR CONCESSIONS?

3.1 The First Negotiating Round: Local Deals, 2007–10

As mentioned in Section 2.3, from the very time of the initial escalation of attacks on schools (2005–06), the strategy proved controversial and not only among wide sectors of the Afghan population. Already at the end of 2006, the leader of Hezb-e

[44] Noor Khan, 'Taleban to Open Schools in Southern Afghanistan, Spokesman Says', *The Associated Press* (21 January 2007); 'Taleban Plan "Education Offensive" in Afghan Fight', *Indo-Asian News Service* (25 January 2007); 'Taliban to Spend 1 Mln Dollars to Open "Jihad Schools" in Afghanistan', *Hindustan Times* (21 January 2007); 'A Turn from Burning to Learning', *Pajhwok Afghan News* (21 January 2007).

[45] *Hindustan Times,* 'Taliban to Spend 1 Mln Dollars' (see FN 43).

[46] Khan, 'Taleban to Open Schools' (see FN 43); *Indo-Asian News Service,* 'Taleban Plan' (see FN 43); *Pajhwok Afghan News,* 'A Turn from Burning' (see FN 43).

[47] Scott Baldauf, 'Afghanistan: Afghan Schools Face Torch', *Christian Science Monitor* (2 February 2006); Suzanna Koster, 'Taleban Fighters Talk Tactics – While Safe in Pakistan', *Christian Science Monitor* (9 November 2006).

[48] 'Ten Schools Torched in Past Three Weeks', *IRIN* (10 April 2008).

[49] Personal communication with Thomas Ruttig, September 2011.

Islami, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, condemned attacks on schools.[50] In areas like Wardak, Nangarhar and Logar, where educational levels have long been higher and resistance to state education weaker, several commanders of the Taleban and other insurgent groups appear not to have targeted schools, even if colleagues operating within the same provinces were doing it.[51] These were all areas of strong Hezb-e Islami influence, an Islamist organisation led by university-educated and non-clerical figures, promoting a modernist interpretation of Islam as opposed to the revivalist or purist trend incarnated by the Taleban. There are no confirmed reports of attacks on school by Hezb-e Islami after 2001.[52]

A change of heart within the Taleban seems to have occurred relatively early, whatever the cause might have been. Already during 2007, elements of the Taleban were negotiating with MoE over some compromise on the curricula on the national level, but neither side was comfortable with going public about the talks. One of the Taleban commanders interviewed in this study hinted at repeated negotiating efforts in the past, which did not succeed because the MoE 'did not accept our demands'. The negotiations quickly ended when the Americans allegedly vetoed them and even reportedly arrested the mediator between MoE and the Taleban.[53] However, there was an impact in the provinces, where local negotiations sometimes resulted in deals.[54] The Taleban's inclination to negotiate a settlement on schools seems to have emerged with the rapid territorial expansion of the movement in 2006–07, which in turn created the need for a new image of a movement able to govern as opposed to just fight.

Negotiations on the reopening of schools in the south were already mentioned in the press in 2006, although it was not always made explicit with whom.[55] The first confirmations of the finalisation of local deals involving the Taleban started emerging after 2007 (see below in this paragraph). Although the Taleban might have been under some kind of pressure from the communities to leave the schools open or reopen those they had closed, they clearly were not ready to entirely renounce their stand on the corruption of schools by foreign influence and their use as centres for the spread of Christianity.[56] Agreements to reopen schools involved purging teachers who were not acceptable to Taleban and local conservative elements and hiring conservative mullahs with leanings towards the Taleban to supervise on behalf of the Taleban, affecting in particular the curricula.[57] Whether the Taleban compromised at all is unclear; perhaps communities and local officials of provincial departments of education decided at one point to simply accept the conditions imposed by the Taleban. The argument could be made that something more than negotiation was happening – educational authorities were giving way to Taleban demands, as this was the only way to reopen schools.

Whether the change in Taleban attitude in 2007–08 was a response to pressure coming from below is unclear. The deaths of key Taleban leaders such as Dadullah and Osmani and the rise in importance of Mullah Baradar might have played a role here. Baradar was wired into Popolzai tribal channels, which might have facilitated communication and negotiations with numerous Popolzais at the top of the Afghan government. Undoubtedly, resistance against the attacks on schools was widespread in the communities, particularly as in 2006–07, the Taleban had been entering villages which were not as conservative as the remote mountain ones where they had been dwelling until 2005. Occasional evidence of communities protesting against attacks on schools exists, going back to the early years of the insurgency. In Paktika, for example, the villagers condemned the destruction of a school built by the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan and then collected money among themselves to rebuild it.[58] The Afghan government made big claims between 2006 and 2008 that many communities were organising government-sponsored school-security *shuras* to involve local authorities and elders in protecting the schools. By early 2007, the Ministry of Education was already claiming that shuras existed in half of the country's 9,000 schools. Eventually 8,000 such shuras were

[50] 'Hekmatyar Says in Eid Message that US Facing Imminent Defeat in Afghanistan,' *BBC Monitoring South Asia* (30 December 2006).
[51] Personal communication with Asia Foundation staff member, April 2009.
[52] Interview with Amir Mansory of the SCA, Kabul, 10 April 2011.
[53] Meeting with official of international organisation, 3 April 2011.
[54] Interview with Taleban commander SK, Kunar.
[55] For the case of Arghandab district (Kandahar) see Baldauf, 'Afghanistan: Afghan Schools Face Torch' (see FN 46).
[56] On this, see Zabuli, 'Insecurity Halts Learning' (FN 10); Human Rights Watch, *Lessons in Terror*, p. 34 (FN 4).
[57] Interview with Ataullah Wahidyar, Chief of Staff, MoE, Kabul, 6 October 2009.
[58] Interview with Amir Mansory of the SCA, Kabul, 10 April 2011.

created, according to the MoE.[59]

Entrusting shuras with maintaining the security of schools appears to have been popular with the public. A survey carried out in 2008 found that the population viewed security shuras as the best way to defend schools (34 per cent of respondents), as opposed to 21 per cent who supported negotiations with the opposition. Just 0.4 per cent believed foreign troops had a role to play in defending schools, although, like all opinion polls in a country at war, the reliability might be questionable.[60]

In reality, the government was overstating the case. The use of weapons by school-security shuras seems to have been very rare. Interviewees in this study confirmed that cases of civilians resisting attacks on schools were unheard of, at least in their areas. In some cases, villagers hired armed guards, while in others, community self-defence groups were given the task of protecting the schools, but no record exists of armed engagements between these school security forces and the insurgents.[61]

Claims by the Ministry of Education that the shuras were reducing attacks on schools during late 2006 and early 2007 are difficult to verify, but statistics show a continuing increase in the overall number of attacks (see Graphs 1 and 2). In many cases, the shuras, which incorporated mullahs, elders and police, were actually negotiating with the insurgents to prevent attacks on schools. Already in 2006, administrative and security officials in the south were pointing out how 'reopening of schools without local cooperation was impossible', although village elders were sometimes sceptical of the willingness of either government or Taleban to allow them to play a role.[62] Such negotiations even led to the reopening of a significant portion of schools that had been closed (reportedly 220 reopened by October 2009 out of about 800 closed at that point).[63] These were not just local-level negotiations: significantly, the clauses ordering the Taleban fighters to attack schools and teachers were dropped in the 2009 version of the layeha and replaced by the order to obey the Taliban Emirate's policy on education.[64] With Faruq Wardak as minister, under pressure because of the wave of violence unleashed against schools, the MoE started allowing greater flexibility in the curricula at the local level, avoiding raising issues if certain parts of the textbooks were ignored or certain pages torn out: commander Massud's and Mullah Omar's pictures and some commentary on Afghanistan history, for example.[65]

Initially the reopening of some schools was attributed to 'the involvement of the elders'. In March 2009, 11 schools were announced to have reopened in the districts of Shah Wali Kot, Maroof and Khakrez (Kandahar). Probably contacts with the Taleban could not be mentioned because of the involvement of USAID (US Agency for International Development) advisors.[66]

In sum, the first negotiating round took place at the local level, although with the approval of both the Taleban leadership and the leadership of the MoE, but without the two sides being able to agree on a comprehensive deal, perhaps also because external partners (at least Kabul's) were not ready to tolerate it.

3.2 The Second Negotiating Round: Towards a National Deal in 2010–11?

The pace of local deal making described in Section 3.1, seems to have accelerated in 2010, at least in some provinces. In Ghazni, schools started reopening in spring 2010; in Gilan, the government announced in April that 18 of 22 schools were now open and openly acknowledged that negotiations with the Taleban had taken place.[67] In 2010, one school was reported to have reopened in Aqcha (Jowzjan), allegedly after the local communities put pressure on the Taleban.[68] The same applies to the reopening of schools in Gero district of Ghazni, where a district education officer acknowledged that it was the result of cooperation with the local Taleban as well as with the local elders along with

[59] On this point see Giustozzi, *Nation-Building* (FN 1).
[60] For more detail, see Giustozzi, *Nation-Building* (FN 1).
[61] Interview with head of education department of Herat province, October 2009; interview with Ataullah Wahidyar, Chief of Staff, MoE, Kabul, October 2009; Laura King, 'Afghans Try to Stop Attacks on Their Schools', *Los Angeles Times* (11 February 2007).
[62] Zabuli, 'Insecurity Halts Learning' (see FN 55).
[63] Interview with Ataullah Wahidyar, Chief of Staff, MoE, Kabul October 2009; 'Hundreds of Schools Reopen in Afghanistan', *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty* (1 May 2009); Abaceen Nasimi, 'Helmand Parents Face Unenviable Dilemma', *Afghan Recovery Report* (18 March 2009); Haidar, 'Threatened and Snubbed' (see FN 10).
[64] Clark, *The Layha* (see FN 11).
[65] Interview with Ataullah Wahidyar, Chief of Staff, MoE, Kabul, October 2009.
[66] Bashir Ahmad Nadem, 'Educational Institutions Reopening in Kandahar', *Pajhwok Afghan News* (26 March 2009).
[67] Mirwais Himmat, 'Schools Reopen in Ghazni District after Four Years', *Pajhwok Afghan News* (22 April 2010).
[68] Personal communication with Thomas Ruttig, September 2011.

the demands of the population.[69] Later the government reported all schools were open in Andar and all except five were open in Abi Band.[70] At this stage attacks on schools were still occurring with no noticeable slowdown, although the Taleban were denying involvement with unusual strength and were even asking local Taleban commanders to investigate the reports.[71]

The reopening of the schools in Ghazni, to the extent that it took place, was based, according to newspaper reports (unconvincingly denied by the government),[72] on a settlement in which the government paid for the costs, the curriculum proposed by the Taleban was adopted, textbooks were changed and teachers recommended by the Taleban hired. The curriculum incorporated new religious subjects as in the Taleban time: study of the Quran, *tafsir* (exegesis or interpretation of the Quran), *hadith* (the words and actions of the Prophet Mohammed) and *aqaid* (Islamic beliefs). On the request of the Taleban, a 'supervision committee' was established to oversee the teachers and the students and to visit the schools regularly. Reportedly, in one case the governor of Ghazni even satisfied a Taleban request to move a school to a different place, under tighter Taleban control. According to the news agency, in Andar the Taleban ran all 28 schools in the summer of 2010; the Taleban had dismissed the teachers and hired their own teachers of religious subjects. Complaints surfaced that the quality of non-religious teaching, particularly scientific subjects, was poor.[73]

In 2011 another report, this time by the *Wall Street Journal*, confirmed that in Andar the schools were open because the head of the local education department was 'coordinating' his efforts with the Taleban. He claimed to be enforcing the government curricula, although no other government official was visiting these schools and his word had to be taken as fact. The district governor, Sher Khan, was not sympathetic to the head of education Taza Gul, whom he accused of sympathising for the Taleban:

> while the latter operated in Andar and could ride around in a motorbike, the district governor preferred to reside in the provincial capital of Ghazni. Neither the governor nor the American troops deployed in the area seemed however willing to replace Taza Gul, probably aware of the consequences if he left his job.[74]

By 2011, the Taleban claimed that through these local agreements whole provinces were now under their control as far as education was concerned:

> Taleban have gained complete control of several provinces, including Zabul, as the officials and departments of the present puppet government also support them.[75]

While the Ministry of Education would not officially confirm any deal with the Taleban, something seemed to be changing as at the end of 2010 ministry officials stated that no additional school had been closed in 2010, even as the Taleban continued to expand their military activities to new parts of the country.[76]

In early 2011, evidence emerged that the trend started in 2010 was more than the mere continuation of something begun in 2007. In January, while attending the Education World Forum, Minister of Education Faruq Wardak told an interviewer that the Taleban were 'no more opposing girls' education'. He also claimed that 'in many areas, local mullahs are more likely to oppose girls' education than the Taleban'.[77] Later in April, the minister stated on Tolo News that it is not the Taleban who were still occasionally burning schools, although he also admitted he did not know who the culprits were. He claimed that the shuras the ministry established to protect schools and that incorporated clerics, elders and teachers had convinced the Taleban not to attack schools.[78]

The Taleban had no public commentary on any deal with the MoE, but a cessation of attacks on schools was openly announced. In March, Mullah Omar issued a statement in which he denied that the Taleban were setting schools on fire.[79] A few days later, news was released that Mullah Omar had

[69] Mirwais Himmat and Stanikzai, '15 Schools Reopened in South after Years', *Pajhwok Afghan News* (8 April 2010).
[70] Mirwais Himmat, 'All Schools Open in Ghazni: Official', *Pajhwok Afghan News* (7 June 2010).
[71] For an attack in Qarabagh, see Mirwais Himmat, 'Girls School Blown Up in Ghazni', *Pajhwok Afghan News* (23 May 2010).
[72] See FNs 66, 68 and 69.
[73] Sher Ahmad Haidar, 'Taleban Taking Control of Schools in Ghazni', *Pajhwok Afghan News* (11 December 2010); 'Ghazni Schools Not under Taleban Control', *Pajhwok Afghan News* (16 December 2010).
[74] Maria Abi-Habib, 'School in Taleban Territory Shows Perils of U.S. Pullout', *Wall Street Journal* (11 May 2011).
[75] Interview with Taleban Commander GYZ, Takhar.
[76] '60pc Decline in School Damage Incidents this Year: Official', *Pajhwok Afghan News* (30 December 2010).
[77] 'Taleban No Longer Opposed to Female Education', *AsiaNews* (14 January 2011).
[78] 'Taleban Do Not Burn Schools: Afghan Minister', *TOLOnews.com* (11 April 2011).
[79] 'Taleban Leader Denies Setting Fire to Schools', *TOLOnews.com* (28 March 2011).

issued a decree 'instructing insurgents not to attack schools and intimidate schoolchildren', according to the MoE itself. The MoE referred to a message to the Taleban military council of Khost province, of which the MoE had become aware without specifying how. The MoE welcomed the development.[80] In April, Taleban spokesperson Zabihullah Mojahed stated in an interview that the Taleban were not against education and, more remarkably, that they were keen to have public support. [81] In other words, between the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011, what had until then been local deals seemed to be turning again into a nationwide policy, as had been discussed in 2007 (see Section 3.1 above).

Evidence from the ground largely confirms the existence of a significant change. By spring 2011, the number of attacks against schools was nearly at a standstill. Between 21 March and 8 June 2011, the MoE only recorded 20 attacks against schools, some of which were not necessarily attributable to the Taleban, or might not have been premeditated. The monthly attack rate was less than half the 2009 and 2010 ones; furthermore, the number of victims of the attacks appears to have declined even faster.[82] The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission did not record any attack on schools in March and April 2011 and had already recorded a decrease in attacks in the previous months.[83]

Only seven interviewees in this study, out of 82, confirmed to be aware of recent incidents involving teachers, students or schools. Of them, only six mentioned a concrete episode and in five cases they referred to the same one, an explosive attack in Nangarhar where an administrator was killed and two teachers and a few students injured.[84] The episode had been reported in the mass media and interviewees as far away as Kunduz and Takhar had heard of it, as well as several in Laghman. Interestingly, nobody in Nangarhar mentioned the episode. The other episode mentioned, dating back to 2010, was a mine blast killing four students in Paktika and was probably not a targeted incident. Another incident occurred in May 2011, after we completed the interviewing – the head teacher of a girls' school was assassinated after having been warned to leave his job. Significantly, the attack took place in Logar, where the Taleban had been reported to be softer on schools, including on girls schools, as we shall discuss later.[85] Another attack occurred sometime earlier, but we could not confirm the precise date: in Helmand, some locals reported the murder of a teacher by the Taleban because 'he was of the view that it is our parents who feed us and not God' (that is, he was a materialist).[86]

Authoritative sources reported a large decrease on attacks on NGOs in 2010, attributed to negotiations between Taleban and communities in areas where the Taleban were effectively in control.[87] Perhaps schools benefited from a similar process.

The process of reopening schools was of course still going on, although whether the pace has accelerated throughout 2010 is unclear. In some parts of the country, teachers were reported to be flocking back to their jobs, upon invitation by the Taleban.[88] Initially the process was slow, but after a few months without violence confidence started building up and the process accelerated, for example in Paktika.[89] However, *the order to stop targeting schools* and *negotiations over the reopening of schools* are two separate processes, and are only partially related. The negotiations over the reopening of schools started well before the leadership gave the order to stop attacks; the order might have facilitated the reopening of schools and might even have been a 'concession' made by the Taleban to encourage the Ministry of Education to give way to their demands concerning curricula and other issues.

The decision-making process within the Taleban is still little known outside the movement. Concerning education, diplomatic circles in Kabul were convinced that the decision to suspend targeted attacks had probably been taken in Peshawar, where the Political Commission of the Taleban is believed by many to be based. The decree of Mullah Omar concerning education appears indeed to have been printed in Peshawar, although this is not necessarily a demonstration of the previous point. In these conditions, the few former Taleban based in Kabul and maintaining links to their former colleagues remain one of the few accessible sources. Former Taleban Foreign

[80] 'Afghanistan: Government Hails Taleban Decree on Schools, *IRIN* (29 March 2011).
[81] Khan Mohammad Danishju, 'Taleban Try Soft Power', IWPR, Afghanistan Recovery Report (8 April 2011).
[82] Ray Rivera and Taimoor Shah, 'Filling Classes with Learning, Not Fears', *New York Times* (9 June 2011).
[83] Interview with AIHRC official, Kabul, April 2011.
[84] The attack took place in Jalalabad city on 15 March 2011, but nobody claimed it. See 'Explosion Hits School in Jalalabad', *TOLOnews.com* (15 March 2011).
[85] 'Taleban Kill Head of Afghan Girls' School', *Reuters* (25 May 2011).
[86] Interview with Tailor A, Helmand.
[87] Clark, *The Layha* (see FN 11).
[88] Danishju, 'Taleban Try Soft Power' (see FN 80).
[89] Interview with Amir Mansory of the SCA, Kabul, 10 April 2011.

Minister Mullah Mutawakkil reportedly announced to foreign diplomats in 2011 that a second decree by Mullah Omar would be released soon, this time concerning girls' education.[90]

Despite Education Minister Faruq Wardak's statement in January, as of the end June the new decree had not been issued. In early 2011, reports were emerging of girls' schools reopening in some areas, namely in Logar and then in Loya Paktia. In Ghazni, local sources confirmed that the Taleban no longer opposed girls going to school, but insisted on certain conditions, such as the girls covering their faces.[91] In some areas, such as Kunduz, girls' schools were already reopening in summer 2010.[92] Only female teachers were reportedly allowed for the older girls (over nine years of age).[93] In Kunar, the Taleban were allowing girls to go to school in 2011, reportedly because the local communities asked them to do so, although the conditions imposed varied across the districts: in Chapadarra, girls were allowed until the eighth class; in Naray and Watapur, until the eleventh; in other places, until they completed the twelfth class.[94]

In most of the country, however, the field commanders had not received any instruction in this regard. As the typical Taleb commander put it in early 2011,

> Taleban oppose girls' schools staunchly. They don't allow schools for girls even if the syllabus of Taleban is taught there. The present circumstances are not appropriate for female education.[95]

More specifically another Taleb elaborated, in line with the official line of the Taleban since the 1990s:

> They oppose female education because there are some problems in it for the time being. It is not appropriate to send girls to schools in the presence of Western forces in Afghanistan. Girls will be allowed to attend schools after peace is restored and the situation is normal.[96]

[90] Interviews with Western diplomats, Kabul, April 2011.
[91] Interviews with various people, Ghazni.
[92] 'Taleban Ready to Lift Ban on Girls', *The Guardian* (13 January 2011).
[93] Meeting with official of international organisation, 3 April 2011. In rural areas, female teachers often cannot be found and therefore male teachers must teach girls. In the cities, where most female teachers work, this is unusual.
[94] Personal communication with Fabrizio Foschini of AAN, September 2011.
[95] Interview with Taleban Commander STK, Kunduz.
[96] Interviews with Taleban Commander AH, Mehterlam Baba; Taleban Commander Maulawi R, Faryab.

The projection of local deals into national politics is what makes the authors of this paper talk of a 'second negotiating round'. Whatever the communication between the Taleban and the MoE was, the former might have been constrained in the speed of implementation by internal issues (on girls' schools). Considering how the initial contacts at high levels in 2007 ended (see 3.1 above), the Taleban might also have harboured doubts about the eventual success of any national talks and might therefore have wanted to proceed carefully and test the ground first.

3.3 Continuity in the Taleban's Policy

3.3.1 Taleban Demands

Some of the Taleban's demands for allowing the reopening of state schools have been well known to many teachers for a long time. This is particularly the case in the implementation of the old curriculum, the one set by the Taleban's Ministry of Education in the 1990s (featuring religious subjects like hadith and *fiqh* alongside the Quran and non-religious subjects).[97] Indeed this seems to be the key demand, which all the Taleban commanders interviewed mentioned first and foremost. The Taleban interviewed for this study consistently claimed that the Taleban syllabus is already taught in the schools that operate in areas they control.[98]

Although some Taleban mentioned a request delivered to all education departments of Afghanistan to change the syllabus,[99] interviewed Taleban commanders indicated that the understanding between the MoE and the Taleban occurred at the highest level. This understanding would have featured an exchange in which the Taleban agreed to no longer attack schools and teachers and the MoE agreed to prepare itself for the introduction of the new (in fact old 1990s) curriculum in the following academic year.[100] Reportedly, Taleban were visiting mosques in Nangarhar in early 2011, announcing that in the next academic year the Taleban syllabus would be taught in state schools:[101]

> We have been directed by Amir-ul Mominin to show patience and wait for the government to introduce our syllabus. He has ordered us to see if the puppet government

[97] Interview with Teacher NJ, Faryab.
[98] Interview withTaleban Commander NM, Sangi Hissar.
[99] Interview with Taleban Commander T, Kunduz.
[100] Interview with Taleban Commander AM, Kunar.
[101] Interview with Tribal Elder SN, Nangarhar.

> honours its promise or not. All schools will be opened if government fulfils its commitment, otherwise not a single school will be spared.[102]

This demand of the Taleban is likely to arouse controversy when it comes into the public domain. Although many Afghans, even educated ones, would favour more religion in the curriculum, having half of the curriculum dedicated to religious subjects would likely reduce significantly the effectiveness of teaching other subjects.[103] Within our small sample, reactions to the demands of the Taleban were mixed. While some teachers and elders were willing to give some credibility to the Taleban's claim of not being against education per se, others countered that massively increasing religious subjects in the schools as demanded by the Taleban, in effect, would turn them into seminars:

> The main objective of Taleban is bringing government schools under their control. They want to turn schools into their training camps like seminaries.[104]

Some elements of the population seemed to see little difference between state schools and madrassas and were ready to support any compromise.[105] One teacher concurred and said,

> The people can't tell them that their course lacks knowledge of politics, literature and sciences; instead it is replete with jihad and only jihad.[106]

Some elders considered the Taleban's opposition to the government syllabus justified:

> Actually, Taleban don't oppose schools. They oppose this syllabus, which includes courses of Christianity. All Afghans oppose this syllabus.[107]

Moreover, the controversy is only likely to intensify, as this is not the only demand put forward by the Taleban. They also want changes to the textbooks.[108] The Taleban think that

> negative changes have been introduced in some books, like in the book of class one; then we oppose them and want that mujahidin-era subjects and books should be taught in the schools.[109]

Some people have developed the impression that the Taleban are opposed to pictures in the textbooks and want them removed, even if no Taleban told us the same.[110]

Yet another demand was the appointment of teachers by the Taleban:

> Now a fresh order has been released from the Taleban high command that schools will get teachers nominated or approved by the Taleban, and if government-appointed teachers continue teaching then the Taleban will take stern action against the school as well as the students and the teachers.[111]

One Taleb from Kunar said that

> we have been ordered to appoint teachers for all the schools in our area. And if they are not accepted by the government, neither teachers nor students will be allowed in schools.[112]

A former Taleban commander from Faryab commented that in the Taleban he was ordered to attack schools and 'not to let any school function'. According to him, the Taleban had been receiving complaints about closed schools from the populace for a long time, but would typically try to pacify them by promising to refer the matter to the relevant shura. For years, little follow up occurred; by the time the commander quit the Taleban and reconciled with the government, the leadership had still shown no sign of softening up. However, after his departure he did notice that the Taleban were promoting appointments of sympathisers as teachers. He seemed to believe the motivation was more patronage than the desire to indoctrinate children.[113]

The main point worth making about Taleban demands concerning the reopening of state schools is that such demands did not change much between 2007 and 2011: adopt the Taleban

[102] Interview with Taleban Commander MAL, Kunar.
[103] Interview with Amir Mansory of the SCA, Kabul, 10 April 2011.
[104] Interviews with Ex-teacher S, Laghman; Tribal Elder AH, Nangarhar.
[105] Interview with Shopkeeper AB, Kunduz.
[106] Interview with Teacher Z, Kunduz.
[107] Interview with Tribal Elder GMM, Laghman. No courses of Christianity are being taught in Afghan schools, of course.
[108] Interview with Teacher MZ, Laghman.
[109] Interview with Taleban Commander U, Dila. See above for details on the controversial aspects of the textbooks.
[110] Interview with Cab Driver SU, Kandahar City.
[111] Interviews with Taleban Commander WM, Takhar; Taleban Commander, Qarabagh.
[112] Interview with Taleban Commander Mawlawi A, Kunar.
[113] Interview with Former Taleban Commander AM, Faryab.

curriculum, mujahidin-era textbooks and Taleban-approved religious texts; hire teachers of religious subjects approved by the Taleban. The Taleban side did not compromise on any of these points; if accommodation occurred, the MoE side did it. The Taleban's concession was to make the order to stop attacking schools, which led to fewer incidents affecting schools.

3.3.2 Perceptions of Continuity

Based on what was discussed above, it would appear that by early 2011 a noticeable change in the attitude of the Taleban towards schools was taking place – the school deals were going national. Perceptions of what was going on however were not uniform, whether among the population or among the Taleban themselves. In reality, interviewees did not all agree. To most teachers and several elders and local observers, the predominant image of the Taleban in early 2011 had not changed much. In the words of one,

> Taleban have extreme views in this regard. They ask people to send their children to seminaries instead of schools. From the beginning Taleban have been opposing the schools. Their views have not changed since then.[114]

The failure to perceive a change was mostly because, in fact, the stance of the Taleban had not changed; the ceasefire against schools was motivated by the alleged promise of the MoE to make concessions. The Taleban commanders themselves often stated this clearly. In the words of some of them,

> [The people] have so many times approached us about the safety of schools but we follow our policy and work accordingly. There are discussions among the Taleban and the government officials.[115]

> The local Taleban agree with the people. But don't agree with them regarding running of schools. Because they fear that such action would strengthen the government.[116]

Essentially these Taleban attribute the change to the government, not to the movement of Mullah Omar:

> There has been no change in the policy of Taleban. They say that there is no need for schools. If someone wants to open a school, he will have to teach the course of Islamic Emirate and Taleban will have no objection over such schools. We have been standing on our stance since start.[117]

> Taleban have made it clear that they are not against schools; rather they are opposed to the new syllabus. They (the government) should implement the old syllabus so that we allow them to open schools and teach students.[118]

> Presently Taleban don't oppose schools, whether state-run or private, because the government has accepted our demand of introducing the syllabus of Islamic Emirate. So presently we don't oppose schools. We are waiting to see if the government is sincere in introducing our syllabus or not.[119]

Some Taleban denied that the problem had existed in the first place:

> Taleban are not against schools. Who says Taleban are against schools? This is the poisonous propaganda of the West against the Taleban to malign their image in the eyes of the international community. You saw that during the Taleban's rule. We supported educational activities throughout the country during the Taleban era. . . . Taleban reject Western schools and Western syllabus. They don't want Afghan children to become Western.[120]

> Teacher and students had never been killed. This is just a propaganda of our opponents. . . . The agents the secret service of Afghan government, and ISAF are destroying schools.[121]

These contradictory perceptions were in part caused by the confused communications policy of the Taleban. In 2006, Taleban spokesman Mohammed Hanif threatened to attack schools because of their curriculum, while telling a journalist at about the same time,

> We have not threatened anybody except those who work for Christians and for foreigners in Afghanistan. . . . We have never killed any teacher or any student.[122]

[114] Interview with Teacher NJ, Faryab.
[115] Interview with Taleb M, Sharana.
[116] Interview with Taleban Commander AW, Lashkargah.
[117] Interview with Taleban Commander AS, Faryab.
[118] Interview with Taleban Commander AS, Faryab.
[119] Interview with Taleban Commander AM, Kunar.
[120] Interview with Taleban Commander MAL, Kunar.
[121] Interview with Taleban Commander MNG, Laghman; interview with Taleban Commander Mawlawi N, Takhar.
[122] Human Rights Watch, *Lessons in Terror*, p. 34 (see FN 4).

3.4 Discontinuity

3.4.1 Perceptions of Discontinuity

Despite the confused perceptions described above, on the whole a majority of our interviewees had noticed a clear difference and expressed this view with statements such as,

> In near past, most of the Taleban showed tolerance or have adjusted themselves towards the schools. Their differences with the government officials too have melted down.[123]

> In past, Taleban were very much against the schools and had propaganda against the teachers and students but now there is a positive change in their approach. They know about the importance of education and so don't threaten teachers. They have permitted teachers to teach their students here.[124]

A teacher confirmed that even some of the most radical groups had shifted their attitude:

> Some of them support opening of schools, even the group of the brother of Mullah Dadullah [late Taleban commander] has announced support for schools.[125]

While some Taleban continue to deny it, towards the end of 2010, the evidence of change in the Taleban's attitude became very strong. The demands of the Taleban remained the same, but their violent attitude towards state schools greatly softened. However, the reasons for the change remain open to debate, as does whether it represents a tactical or strategic and long-term decision. Even one of the interviewees most hostile to the Taleban admitted that in recent times their attitude has changed, saying that this is because the Taleban now live among the population and are more exposed to their views. He also expressed the fear, however, that the Taleban only 'might be doing this to get sympathies of the people as in reality they are totally against it'.[126] Ultimately, whether the decision to suspend the attacks on the schools is only a temporary ceasefire to allow the MoE to change the curriculum or a long-term shift in policy should become clear if the MoE declines to introduce the changes expected by the Taleban.

Among those we interviewed, few were under the impression that the Taleban's change in attitude was due to ISAF's military pressure; indeed the most commonly stated view was that the insurgents were radicalising because of the greater ISAF activity. The few who believed that ISAF was having a positive impact were vague in their statements and referred to the need for foreign troops to establish permanent bases in Afghanistan. One exception was a teacher in Kunduz, who believed that

> Taleban have changed some of their views, becoming moderate. The schools near the houses of Taleban leaders are open and functional because they fear that destruction of these schools will expose them. So they don't harm such schools for their own safety.[127]

Quite implausibly, two interviewees, both tribal leaders, attributed the change to the fact that the government had started deputising police officers to the schools: a police officer would hardly represent a sufficient protection in the face of a group of Taleban.[128]

Some interviewees, by contrast, attributed the decline in violence to the opposite cause: in many areas, few schools were left functioning. This is particularly the case in Helmand. One Taleb explained that

> the Taleban do warn the people not to join or send children to these institutions, which most of the people has accepted. This is the major reason why such cases of murder or harassment have not occurred in the near past.[129]

An elder from Helmand concurred:

> Most of the people who are enrolled in the schools, they have left the territories under the control of Taleban and have shifted to cities.[130]

The majority of interviewees attributed the change to a conscious decision taken by the Taleban, reportedly the 'audio and visual commission'.[131] Quite a few viewed the change as merely tactical:

> Sometimes hardliners and sometimes softliners but no drastic change has occurred so far. They are soft in the areas where their hold is not so strong but in the areas where

[123] Interview with Trader AW, Dand.
[124] Interview with Farmer MA, Saroza (Paktika).
[125] Interview with Teacher Z, Kunduz.
[126] Interview with Farmer TM, Faryab.
[127] Interview with Teacher MK, Kunduz.
[128] Interviews with Elder SWK, Kunar; Tribal Elder MDQ, Laghman.
[129] Interview with Taleban Commander N, Nawah.
[130] Interview with Elder I, Lashkargah.
[131] Interview with Taleban Commander Maulawi WM, Faryab.

> they have a strong hold, they are aggressive.[132]

3.4.2 Reasons for the Change

Assuming the change was merely a tactical one, what was driving it would still have to be assessed. As mentioned above, this might have to do with the gradual transformation of the Taleban into a military-political insurgency, aware of the need to interact positively with local communities. Several interviewees stated that the Taleban had come under serious pressure from the communities. One elder from Kunar said that

> A delegation of common people met the leaders of Taleban and asked them to allow schools to function otherwise they would pinpoint their hideouts to government. Taleban leaders were forced to accept the demand of people but they put the condition about introduction of syllabus. . . . Taleban were not ready to accept the demand of people but religious scholars convinced them to accept the demand of masses, otherwise they would face problems.[133]

Similarly, another elder from Nangarhar stated that

> The change occurred because of the insistence of tribal elders, who told Taleban that they would teach them a lesson (if they again attacked schools). Taleban conveyed the views of tribal elders to their leaders, who softened their stance on schools, fearing reaction from people.[134]

More interestingly, some Taleban admitted coming under pressure:

> First, they were totally against schools but now common people and religious scholars have forced them to soften their stance.[135]
>
> The common people, tribal elders, white-bearded and religious scholar compelled Taleban to change their stance by sending a joint letter to supreme council about opening of schools. The supreme council forwarded the letter to Chief Mullah Sahib and he accepted their request.[136]
>
> People forced Taleban to inform supreme council about their grievances. The supreme council decided that schools would be allowed to function if they introduced the syllabus of Islamic Emirate of Taleban. The private schools have already been allowed to work. . . . The common religious scholars forced us to inform supreme council about the grievances of masses on the issue of schools. The supreme council issued directives that schools would be allowed to function if they introduced the syllabus of Taleban.[137]

Only a handful of interviewees believed the Taleban agreed to change their attitude towards schools under duress. The Taleban like to say their attitude has softened for two reasons: their desire to take the view of the communities into account and 'appease common people' (whereas the Taleban had earlier tried to convince them to leave children at the Quranic school) and their negotiations with government agencies. Concerning the desire to appease the communities, these are some fragments of what the Taleban and others had to say:

> Taleban don't need schools. They don't need opening of schools. Taleban have extreme views about schools but now they have changed their policy for the sake of common people.[138]
>
> A big change can be witnessed in the behaviour of Taleban as common people have conveyed their grievances to them on the issue of schools.[139]
>
> Taleban want to be popular among the general people and thus they are becoming soft and moderate towards schools.[140]
>
> One of the important factors of that change is that Taleban have realized that they can only get the support and sympathies of the people if they accept and agree with the wishes and needs of the local people. Taleban were blamed for showering acid on a girl but Taleban refused to have done that act. So Taleban permit the schools to avoid any sort of blame or allegations against them in this respect.[141]
>
> The Taleban have now realized that the foreign invaders are about to leave

[132] Interview with Tailor A, Helmand.
[133] Interview with Elder SWK, Kunar.
[134] Interview with Tribal Elder AH, Nangarhar.
[135] Interview with Taleban Commander MaM, Nangarhar.
[136] Interviews with Taleban Commander MA, Nangarhar;Elder AA, Ghazni.
[137] Interview with Taleban Commander SK, Kunar.
[138] Interview with Taleban Commander Mawlawi R, Faryab.
[139] Interview with Taleban Commander AH, Mehterlam Baba.
[140] Interview with Taleban Commander AK, Dasht-i Archi.
[141] Interview with Taleban Commander WM, Takhar.

> Afghanistan and thus they are now trying to win the hearts of the people of Afghanistan.[142]

How did such synchronisation between Taleban and communities occur? In some cases at least, it was the result of a local dialogue between Taleban, elders and *ulema*. A trader in Dand believed that 12 schools that had reopened in Kandahar were the result of such a dialogue. The same source indicated that local negotiation did not seem necessarily to start from the government as claimed by Minister Faruq Wardak in 2011:

> Few days back a council of the local elders in the Panjwai district demanded the government to facilitate or open the schools and they themselves will protect the schools from Taleban.[143]

A Taleban commander from Faryab produced a similar account:

> Of course, elders and white-bearded people ask Taleban repeatedly not to harm schools. But Taleban convince them to introduce their syllabus. People appreciate the policy of Taleban when they understand it.[144]

The second factor, as already mentioned, is the Taleban's negotiations with government agencies. The Ministry of Education was involved somehow, as it had to pay for the schools. One typical example of dynamics on the ground is this one:

> Once Taleban came to our village and told us that they wanted to close the local school but we didn't agree with them. Then they informed that government excluded courses of religious belief, fiqh and hadith from the syllabus. We took the issue with the education department and officials assured us that those courses would be again included in the syllabus. . . . It happened in many areas that Taleban planted explosive devices at schools but then removed the same when we asked them to do so. Taleban pay heed to advices of elders. . . . The people forced them to accept schools and stop attacking educational institutions. . . . We told them that our children would become illiterate and deprived of education if they closed all schools. Then Taleban softened their stance about schools and offered some relaxation in this regard.[145]

Some Taleban confirmed that this type of dynamic played a role. According to one of these Taleban commanders,

> The issue of schools was settled by common religious scholars. The religious scholars talked to the members of Supreme Council [of the Taleban] and convinced them to allow opening of schools with the condition that course of Taleban times would be taught to students.[146]
>
> Common religious leaders have requested us to begin teaching in government schools. We have conveyed their request to Supreme Council.[147]
>
> Common religious scholars convinced Taleban to allow schools to function. They have demanded to the government now to include Islamic courses in the syllabus.[148]
>
> The religious leadership got fed up and contacted provincial council; then, the provincial council contacted the supreme council and finally it was conveyed to Amir-ul Mominin. Then Amir-ul Mominin constituted a commission and the commission decided that schools must open for Afghans. Afterwards, Mullah Sahib officially issued a decree that the Taleban do not object to the opening of the government schools.[149]

As the Taleban present it, such negotiations produced compromises heavily favourable to them. They get the government to pay for something that ultimately reinforces their recruitment basis or, at the very least, does not produce any support for the government. This is particularly the case if we agree that state education is a major factor in detaching the populace from the more conservative views.[150]

However, it is unlikely that local negotiations accounted for all of the school reopenings. In some areas, attempts negotiated by the communities to save the schools succeeded. But in Kandahar, for example, they did not.[151] Some Taleban even dismissed the role of the ulema:

[142] Interview with Taleban Commander AK, Dasht-i Archi.
[143] Interview with Trader AW, Dand.
[144] Interview with Taleban Commander AJ, Faryab.
[145] Interview with Tribal Elder HSKM, Faryab.
[146] Interviews with Taleban Commander Mawlawi R, Faryab; Taleban Commander MMA, Takhar.
[147] Interview with Taleban Commander AML, Kunar.
[148] Interview with Taleban Commander T, Kunduz.
[149] Interview with Taleban Commander Mawlawi MW, Khwaja Bahauddin.
[150] See Giustozzi, *Nation-Building* (FN 1) on this point.
[151] Interviews with Taleban Commander AK, Dasht-i Archi; Teacher MI, Kandahar City.

> The Taleban have respect for every religious scholar. Almost all the old religious scholars are our teachers and teachers have a number of rights over students. We do listen to them but the matters are decided by our council of scholars.[152]

> There is no role of the local religious leadership. Taleban don't follow others in their matters.[153]

> There is no such role of the ulema and religious leaders. Taleban are now removing senior ulema; most of them happened to be the teachers of Taleban for they do not want their interference in their affairs, mostly on important and hard decisions and policies.[154]

> Common religious scholars can do nothing. The directives of Chief Mullah Sahib are implemented at any cost.[155]

Several Taleban interviewees explicitly hinted that top-level negotiations were the key factor leading to a change on the ground:

> The former foreign minister of Islamic Emirate, Wakil Ahmed Mutawakil, has talked to the minister for education of the incumbent government in this regard, telling him that Taleban will not harm schools if the old courses are taught to students. The government has accepted his condition. Now we await fulfilment of the promise, made by the present government.[156]

Apparently, the role of Mutawakil and the agreement were reported on the radio too.[157] Even some elders had heard the same about Mutawakil.[158]

One indication of the importance of decisions taken at the top in determining the shift in Taleban attitudes is the spread and synchronicity of implementation. From our relatively small sample, judging the effectiveness of the Taleban in implementing the new rules of engagement towards schools is difficult, although as we have seen some provinces seemed to have gone significantly farther than others. However, eventually the order was implemented countrywide, although with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Perhaps the Taleban road-tested their new policy before full implementation; that was what perhaps was happening in 2011 concerning girls' schools. Some indiscipline within the ranks might have occurred. We even came across allegations that the Taleban were asking for money to allow the schools to stay open.[159] A Taleb admitted that some bribery may occur:

> People do make such efforts to protect the schools from the Taleban. Sometime they even give money to Taleban and they make promises to join them in jihad. Taleban usually do not interfere in the private schools and that for two reasons. Firstly private schools teach the syllabus of the Taleban's time and secondly they give some monetary benefits or commission [bribe] to Taleban.[160]

One interviewee hinted that the order was implemented more strictly around the command structure of the Taleban:

> Even now, Taleban have their own governors, administrators and judges. The schools situated near the houses of their [shadow] officials are safe and functional, as Taleban leaders have ordered them not to harm these schools.[161]

Limited local negotiations appear to have driven a change of policy that in turn affected other communities. Negotiations and tactics aside, the question remains whether Taleban views of non-religious education have been changing or not. One elder expressed the view that this change

> has not come due to the pressure of their elders, rather it is due to the increasing consciousness among them on individual and collective basis.[162]

Certainly, among some Taleban the hostility to state schools had not disappeared. Listening to some of the Taleban commanders, one is tempted to agree on the tactical character of the move:

> Taleban want to set up and develop seminaries instead of schools to promote religious values, which is the prime duty of all the Muslims to carry out accordingly. . . . All Taleban are against schools because schools are like cancer for the new generation. It

[152] Interview with Taleban Commander AS, Faryab.
[153] Interview with Taleban Commander AK, Dasht-i Archi.
[154] Interview with Taleban Commander WM, Takhar.
[155] Interview with Taleban Commander AZ, Takhar.
[156] Interviews with Taleban Commander AS, Faryab; Taleban Commander AJ, Faryab 8; Taleban Commander Mawlawi A, Kunar 1; Taleban Commander MAL, Kunar; Taleban Commander WM, Takhar.
[157] Interview withTaleban Commander WM, Takhar.
[158] Interview with Shopkeeper AB, Kunduz.
[159] Interview with Cab Driver SU, Kandahar City.
[160] Interview with Taleban Commander WM, Takhar.
[161] Interview with Teacher MK, Kunduz.
[162] Interview with Trader AW, Dand.

> diverts them from the basic Islamic teachings.[163]

Even within the Taleban, however, different views are emerging. Perhaps some at least have re-examined critically the experience of the 1990s of running the country without the technical and scientific know how to do it effectively. An imam clearly close to Hezb-e Islami provided a particular interpretation of this partial shift in Taleban views:

> The leaders of Hezb-e Islami, who are real leaders, have caused this change. . . . Hezb-e Islami has a positive approach towards schools so far. May Allah help them to spread this ideology among all mujahidin.[164]

Education Minister Faruq Wardak was a member of Hezb-e Islami in his youth, during the anti-Soviet jihad, and many officials whom he brought into his ministry share the same background; some even had a Taleban background and might have acted as a bridge with the Taleban.[165] Usually the Taleban were far from appreciative of the stand of Hezb-e Islami towards education:

> Taleban are against schools. They say that going to school is a habit of Ikhwans [a term associated with some jihadi groups in Afghanistan inspired by the founders of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt]. 'The Ikhwans can't see seminaries flourishing,' Taleban claim.[166]

Within political Islam,[167] technical education is considered as an obligation, contrary to the Taleban who do not consider it obligatory; both converge on the point that religious education is obligatory. In the 1990s, some of the Taleban supported the idea that university education was not necessary. This does not rule out the possibility that the Taleban might have engaged in a debate over education and in the process absorbed some Islamist ideas about it, perhaps without even realising it.[168]

Whether due to the influence of former members of Hezb-e Islami or not, the Taleban's attitude towards state-educated individuals seems to be changing. At least one elder in Nangarhar reported,

> Now the Taleban don't kill teachers and students but they contact intelligent students and persuade them to quit school and join a seminary and jihad.[169]

We have seen how the Taleban were previously often deeply hostile to state school graduates. Is this, together with the shift discussed above, a sign of a change of attitude? Taleban efforts to recruit in high schools in Kabul province, Wardak and Ghazni were confirmed to us by other sources; their relative success seem to have derived from the frustration of school leavers who failed to be admitted to university.[170] While the exact motivations are unknown, the Taleban reportedly had young activists among the high school students working to convince their fellow students to join the insurgency. The desire to expand the ranks may be outstripping the capacity of madrassas to provide recruits, but a re-evaluation of the suitability of recruits from state schools seems implicit.[171]

Recruitment from state schools might therefore be another factor driving the shift in the Taleban's policy towards schools. Some Taleban commanders expressed comparatively open views towards non-religious education, suggesting that such views have recently become tolerable within the Taleban:

> There is no difference between the education of school and seminary. Everyone can get education everywhere if is committed to the cause (of education). There are private schools and private language centres. Taleban are not against education or English language. They don't attack English language centres. But the main issue is that of syllabus. Taleban will allow all schools to function if their syllabus is introduced (in schools).[172]

> Armed Taleban don't ask anyone why he doesn't go to seminary instead of school. It is a matter of choice of every student. Many of our colleagues have got admissions in courses

[163] Interview with Taleban Commander AZ, Takhar.
[164] Interview with Imam TH, Laghman Markaz.
[165] Personal communication with Kate Clark, September 2011.
[166] Interview with Elder AJ, Nangarhar.
[167] That is 'Islamism', as opposed to 'Islamic fundamentalism' (that is the Taleban), or in other words Islam as a political ideology of the secularly educated class as opposed to the conservative interpretation of Islam of sectors of the clergy.
[168] Interview with Amir Mansory of the SCA, Kabul, April 2011. On the difficulty the Taleban had running the country in the 1990s, see Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My Life with the Taleban,* London, Hurst, 2010.
[169] Interview with Tribal Elder AH, Nangarhar.
[170] Personal communication with Kate Clark, who interviewed a young Taleb fighter and a sympathizer in Wardak in September 2011.
[171] Personal communication with Afghan journalist from a district of Kabul province, April 2011; personal communication with Afghan researcher from Wardak, April 2011.
[172] Interview with Taleban Commander AJ, Faryab.

> of different languages in Kabul, Nangarhar and other provinces. Everyone should try to learn new things.[173]
>
> Nowadays both Islamic and modern education is being imparted in schools and madrassas. We do understand the importance of modern education so there is no such disagreement among the Taleban commanders.[174]

In summary, the evolution of Taleban thinking on education seems driven by a complex set of factors and cannot be explained simply in terms of negotiations among a few individuals at the top.

4. TALEBAN VIEWS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

In Section 3.3.1, *Taleban demands*, we have seen how the Taleban would like to reshape the state educational sector in Afghanistan in the short term. What would happen if the Taleban were back in power in Kabul can only be a matter of speculation; the 2011 Eid message of Mullah Omar seemed to hint at a more conciliatory approach than in the 1990s.[175] However, the Taleban's views of the role of education in society are wider than that. They feature the long-term strengthening of the role of madrassas and Quranic schools. They also feature an expanded role for private schools (that is not state-run and excluding private madrassas), although how long-term this should be in the Taleban's strategy is unclear. Finally, the debate on state education does not appear to be over within the Taleban's ranks. On the one hand, the Taleban are investing considerable human resources in bringing state schools under their control; on the other, within the Taleban prejudicially hostile views still exist. The Taleban might possibly have seen some value and an opportunity in a deal with the Ministry of Education over the schools, in terms of building confidence and trust for future political negotiations.

4.1 The Taleban and Private Schools

While in the early years of the insurgency they might have banned all schools, virtually all the people we interviewed agreed that the Taleban have been permitting private schools to operate for quite some time, under their (mostly informal) supervision. These private schools had to adopt the Taleban curriculum to stay open.[176] In fact, the Taleban say that they invite families to send their children to private schools.[177] The process of co-opting private schools continues in 2011; the Taleban claimed to have recently reached an agreement with schools in Faryab for the adoption of Taleban texts.[178] Aside from endorsing private schools that adopt the Taleban's curriculum, the Taleban have also been claiming that private schools are of a better standard than state schools.[179] Sometimes, state-run schools seem to have reopened as private schools:

> In many areas state-run schools have been turned into private educational institutions and started teaching courses of Taleban.[180]

Even before the recent negotiations with the MoE, the Taleban seem to have decided to facilitate the emergence of more private schools, to square the circle – making the communities happy and at the same time rejecting the role of the state in education.[181] In recent times, the Taleban started distributing pens and religious textbooks among the pupils of private schools, although the extent to which this is happening is unclear.[182] The schools opened by the Taleban in 2007 and mentioned above (see Section 2.1, *The dimensions of the problem*) might in fact have already been private schools sponsored by the Taleban.

A related aspect of the new educational effort linked to the Taleban is the appearance in Kabul of a new NGO led by Mullah Zaeef, dedicated to building schools for boys and girls. As of April 2011, only two schools had been set up, but the NGO had started operations only a few months earlier. The schools were teaching both the government and the Taleban curricula and were registered as private schools with the MoE.[183] The NGO planned to open more schools in Logar, Khost, Paktia, Badghis, Kunar and Nuristan provinces.[184] The

[173] Interview with Taleban Commander SK, Kunar.
[174] Interview with Taleban Commander U, Dila.
[175] Abubakar Siddique, 'Deciphering Mullah Omar's Eid Message', *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty* (2 September 2011).
[176] Interviews with Teacher NU, Faryab; Taleban Commander AS, Faryab 6; Taleban Commander SK, Kunar.
[177] Interview with Taleban Commander Mawalwi R, Faryab.
[178] Interview with Taleban Commander Mawlawi WM, Faryab.
[179] Interview with Taleban Commander AM, Kunar.
[180] Interview with Taleban Commander GYZ, Takhar.
[181] Interview with Taleban Commander AM, Kunar.
[182] Interviews with Elder AJ, Nangarhar; Taleban Commander MAM, Nangarhar.
[183] Lianne Gutcher, 'Turnaround by Taleban Gives Girls a Chance', *Times Educational Supplement* (10 June 2011).
[184] 'Ex-Taleban to Start School Programme in Violent

female teachers working in these schools were vetted by both Taleban and MoE.[185]

> Taleban are positive for they do visit mosques in winters and ask the people to educate their children in winters too. We visited a mosque the other day and told the people that they should send their children to madrassas if the schools are closed in the winter and when the schools are reopened then send the children back to schools.[186]

> Taleban have launched a new educational program. They visit mosques in those areas where there is no school and ask people to send their children to mosque for getting education. Taleban teach them their own syllabus in mosques.[187]

4.2 Differences among Taleban about State Schools

A few Taleban commanders (and the former one interviewed in Faryab) admitted to differences in attitude towards state schools among the Taleban:

> There is difference of opinion among various groups. There are some who supports the schools but others will oppose it and will want to replace it with madrassas. . . . Education is an important factor. Those who understand the value and importance of education are positive irrespective of their education background. It may be the reason that the illiterate commanders are against it.[188]

> They have different opinion and approach in this regard. At some places, schools are running even near to top commanders of Taleban but in other parts they don't allow schools at all.[189]

A dividing line seems to be between Afghan and foreign Taleban, with the former being more flexible with regard to education. A sympathiser expressed hatred for the foreign Taleban:

> Students of seminaries in Afghanistan get a different kind of education while another type of education is imparted to students in other countries. But with help of Allah we will not accept the ideas, imported from other countries. The non-local Taleban, who want to impose the ideas of others on Afghans, will be humiliated and expelled soon.[190]

Several of the Taleban made a similar point:

> If Quran and *sharia* is taught in these schools, local Taleban don't oppose their presence but the foreign Taleban don't permit any type of school, as the foreign Taleban are not interested in bringing peace in the region. They want the people of this country to be illiterate and backward. They fear schools will spread un-Islamic norms and values.[191]

> The groups supported by the foreigners want to close both schools and madrassas.[192]

A common position among non-Taleban is that not all insurgents have been involved in attacks on schools; a frequent distinction is between local Taleban and out-of-area Taleban or foreign fighters, with the latter alleged to be the ones attacking schools. [193] A teacher had direct experiences of visits by foreign and out-of-area Taleban:

> Taleban, when frustrated, either come directly to schools or go to the teacher's houses. They tell them that 'you are preaching Christianity'. But Afghani Taleban are educated, they don't act so. They come and check the books and then leave, but the illiterate Taleban are the real bastards.[194]

Some interviewees, like this shopkeeper from Paktika, rejected the idea that the elements hostile to schools were Taleban:

> Taleban have now admitted the importance of schools and this might be the reason that they are not destroying schools especially in this area. Although some forces are against the schools and destroying schools, they are not Taleban.[195]

Taleban from Pakistan often operate in Paktika, Wazir and Mehsud, and they are known for their particularly hostile attitude towards schools and for their extremely conservative views.

The distinction between foreign and Afghan Taleban was not the only one our interviewees drew. Several elders, a few teachers and a former

Areas', *Pajhwok Afghan News* (14 December 2010).
[185] Meeting with official of international organisation, Kabul, 3 April 2011.
[186] Interview with Taleban Commander AM, Barmal.
[187] Interview with Taleban Commander AJ, Takhar.
[188] Interviews with Taleban Commander AQ, Zeri; Taleban Commander NM, Sang-i Hisar.
[189] Interviews with Taleban Commander AK, Dasht-i Archi; Taleban Commander WM, Takhar.
[190] Interview with Tribal Elder GMM, Laghman.
[191] Interview with Taleban Commander AW, Lashkargah.
[192] Interview with Taleban Commander MSN, Arghandab.
[193] Interview with Farmer TM, Faryab.
[194] Interview with Teacher FR, Khas Kunar.
[195] Interview with Shopkeeper AM, Meta Khan.

Taleb expressed the belief that Taleban educated in state schools tended to be less hostile towards them, compared to illiterate or madrassa-educated ones.[196] According to a teacher from Kunar,

> The majority of Taleban leaders have got religious education and they don't oppose schools within Afghanistan. They even allow their sons and nephews to attend schools and never oppose the schools. But the illiterate Taleban are in opposition to schools.[197]

Another division pits 'fresh Taleban', opposed to schools, against older ones, who are more flexible:[198]

> Those old were not against schools but this new generation of Taleban is a new breed. These new Taleban neither spare schools nor teachers.[199]

> The Taleban, who got education in Afghanistan and worked in the government of Taleban, are moderate. The root cause of the problem is emergence of these Taleban, who have become mullah after spending only six months in seminaries. In the past, a man would spend 20 years away from home to become a mullah but now they become mullah after spending few months in a seminary.[200]

Views turned out to be divided about the role of the Pakistani educational establishment. In southern Afghanistan, Pakistan can pass as a modern, progressive place to receive an education:

> Those who have studied in Pakistan, they are familiar with schools and it brings positive change in their attitude but those studied in Afghanistan they are not that much familiar with the schools; that's the reason the latter strongly oppose the schools and the former are moderate on the issue of schools.[201]

Almost all the interviewees who expressed an opinion on the matter held a contrary viewpoint to the one just mentioned, saying that Pakistanis do not want to see Afghanis advance in education:

> Those who have studied in Afghanistan they are the well-wishers of Afghanistan. Those who have studied in Pakistan or other places, they don't want Afghanistan to make advancement. So they are against the schools. They make misinformation that schools preach Christianity.[202]

> Those who have studied in Peshawar or Quetta are more extremists. Those who were educated inside Afghanistan are behaving normally to the schools and local elders.[203]

> However, the Taleban who have got education in Afghanistan are not hardliners as compared to their colleagues, who have got education in other countries. The non-local Taleban have learned many other things besides getting education but they will succeed in their mission. They will leave Afghanistan in humiliation and their own country will suffer from the cancer, they have brought to Afghanistan.[204]

> The Taleban commanders who have attended seminaries in Afghanistan don't oppose schools. Such Taleban have respect for education. But the Taleban, who have attended seminaries in Peshawar and Quetta hate education and oppose schools.[205]

> Those who have studied in Afghanistan, they are not that much strict in their approach and policies as compared to those who have studied in Pakistan. Some mujahidin visit the schools, mosques and madrassas and collect the students and teach them in line with their own interpretations.[206]

What is out of the question is that different positions concerning state schools exist among the Taleban. A trader from Dand (Kandahar) said,

> Those who are moderate, they do not oppose the schools. There is a separate group which calls the schools as home of or centre of Satan [*shaitan*]. They say that if there are religious institutions there is no need of schools. . . . In our territories, the moderate Taleban do try to convince the hardliners not to harass the students and the teachers and not to destroy the schools.[207]

In Kandahar, an elder mentioned an episode in

[196] Interviews with Former Taleban AM and Teacher NU, Faryab; Shopkeeper HSH, Helmand; Teacher MI, Kandahar City.
[197] Interviews with Teacher FR, Khas Kunar; Tribal Elder MDQ, Laghman.
[198] Interviews with Teacher FR, Khas Kunar; Shopkeeper AW, Takhar.
[199] Interviews with Teacher Z, Kunduz; Tribal Elder MDQ, Laghman.
[200] Interview with Teacher MZ, Laghman.
[201] Interview with Taleban Commander A, Zeri.
[202] Interview with Cab Driver SU, Kandahar City.
[203] Interview with Teacher FR, Khas Kunar.
[204] Interview with Ex-teacher S, Laghman.
[205] Interview with Tribal Elder AH, Nangarhar.
[206] Interview with Taleban Commander WM, Takhar.
[207] Interview with Trader AW, Dand.

Ghazni, where a Taleban commander who had permitted a school was later brutally killed by other Taleban and the school closed, as evidence of big differences in viewpoint among the Taleban.[208]

4.3 Taleban's School Monitoring

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Taleban's educational strategy as it developed from 2007 onwards concerns their effort to establish a degree of control over state and private schools. Most interviewees believed or knew that the Taleban were keeping an eye on state schools, but the system implemented seemed to vary from place to place. In Ghazni,[209] Paktika and Kunduz, the schools were being supervised in a rather professional way, with a dedicated commission established for the task. In Paktika,

> they assign us tasks to go and collect information from schools and then a special committee looks into the matter that the subjects taught in the schools are of any good for the people or not.[210]

> We do keep a check on the schools and I have personally visited the schools so that to see that students are not influenced through the Western type of education or subjects. But most of the time we do not interfere with the schools.[211]

> Yes we do keep a check on schools by deputing or sending our men to report us on the subjects and activities so that we look that the students are not misled and guided in the line of infidels.[212]

> Taleban have their council or group which looks in to the matters of schools and syllabus so that no anti-Islamic material should be added in the syllabus.[213]

In Kunar, too, the Taleban took over the supervision of schools within their areas of control, as acknowledged by the education authorities of the province.[214] According to Thomas Ruttig, 'At least one teacher at every school is named by the Taleban, or, if already there, is made their representative. He must clear all other teachers employed at his school. This resembles the days of the Emirate when the village mullahs were made "the eyes and ears" of the Taleban.'[215] The process of setting up supervising commissions was still going on in autumn 2011: according to the Afghan authorities, such a commission was established in Kapisa province by the Taleban in October 2011.[216]

In some areas we were not able to establish what was happening; our informers used vague expressions such as,

> They send their men in schools and observe them in the Taleban controlled areas.[217]

The Taleban claimed in Kunduz to

> visit each school to collect information. They close down those schools, where courses are not according to the culture and traditions of Afghans. No one can open such a school again; if someone tries he is turned into a lesson for others.[218]

In many cases where the Taleban did not seem to strictly supervise the schools, they seemed to recruit informers within the schools, visited the houses of teachers to check the textbooks and the exercise books, or even sent elders to schools to collect textbooks for the Taleban.[219]

> If they receive reports about any book, they just call the school headmaster and warn him about the teaching of that book. But once they study that book also before taking any action.[220]

In some areas, where no trace of Taleban supervision of schools could be found, like in Helmand, this might be because very few schools are active in such areas like Babaji.[221] The Taleban claim to

> have also complete information about teachers as to when they go out and at what time they return home.[222]

A former teacher we interviewed experienced this directly:

> Taleban receive complete information about the school as to which book is being taught, at which time a teacher comes to school and

[208] Interview with Cab Driver SU, Kandahar City.
[209] Interview with Elders H, DM, AA, Ghazni.
[210] Interview with Taleban Commander AM, Barmal.
[211] Interview with Taleban Commander U, Dila.
[212] Interview with Taleban Commander J, Sharana.
[213] Interview with Teacher MH, Yousuf Khail
[214] Khan Wali Salarzai, 'Kunar Taleban Support Education Process', *Pajhwok News Agency* (31 August 2011).
[215] T. Ruttig, 'Tactical or Genuine? The Taleban's "New Education Policy"', AAN Blog (posted 15 January 2011).
[216] Bakhtar Safi, 'Taliban Monitoring Schools in Kapisa', *Pahjwok Afghan News* (18 October 2011).
[217] Interview with Cab Driver SU, Kandahar City.
[218] Interview withTaleban Commander STK, Kunduz.
[219] Interview with Tribal Elder HSKM, Faryab.
[220] Interview with Teacher Y, Sharana.
[221] Interview with Elder KJ, Helmand.
[222] Interview with Taleban Commander AM, Kunar.

> when he goes home. Taleban first warn and then attack a teacher. I was warned several times by Taleban when I was a teacher. At last they kidnapped and I promised them that I would quit my job.[223]

In the context of an ongoing conflict, where the Taleban have been under growing military pressure by their adversaries, this effort to supervise schools is a major one. What does it tell us about the Taleban's aims? Perhaps it represents a compromise between those inclined towards a hard line and those in favour of a softer approach – the relatively greater tolerance might have been harder to sell to the radicals without guarantees of a strict respect of the 'rules'. Seen within the context of the wider Taleban effort to form a shadow government inside Afghanistan, it might be an attempt to address their weakness in providing services to the population, 'hijacking' state education and reshaping it in its image. The inspections in the school contribute to this by ensuring that the quality of the education provided is better than in schools under state control.

4.4 The Taleban and the Clergy

Although the clerics we interviewed were almost all linked to the Taleban, several non-Taleban among the interviewees, including the single former Taleban commander, were of the view that the clerics supported the Taleban: 30 out of 61 said that the Taleban help madrassas. Although most Taleban denied that the movement as such had anything to do with the madrassas, 12 out of 32 admitted to some kind of relationship between madrassas and Taleban, and a few even conceded that they transfer funds to some madrassas:[224]

> Taleban offer their blood for seminaries, let alone financial assistance. They donate their *zakat* and alms to seminaries. Taleban have offered their entire life for the service of seminaries in the path of Allah.[225]

> Taleban assist seminaries from the gains of war and alms, donated by rich traders and businessmen to them. The well-off people buy essential items for seminaries and provide financial assistance to students and teachers of seminaries happily.[226]

> Earlier there were few opponents of the schools among the Taleban leadership but now there is positive change in their attitude and they do order not to interfere in the schools but most of them do focus on madrassas for they want religious knowledge to be popularised and given to the people.[227]

In general, the Taleban claim that the clerics actively collaborate with them in shaping an expanded religious sector in education:

> Of course, common religious scholars are playing an important role. They deliver sermons in mosques and inform people about the educational program of Taleban. They tell people that Taleban want to chalk out a strategy for implementation of their syllabus as soon as possible. They impart education to children in mosques and Taleban provide them with pens and books to distribute among the children.[228]

Although it seems likely that the clerics in general would support the Taleban's policy of islamicising education, Amir Mansory of the Swedish Committee pointed out that the level and type of education received by mullahs vary across the country: certainly Nangarhar's mullahs are more likely to have been exposed to non-religious subjects than those of the south.[229]

5. CONCLUSION

State education has long been controversial in Afghanistan and has fuelled violent conflict since at least 1978, if not earlier. Despite hopes of the contrary, this continued to be the case after 2001. There are multiple reasons, ranging from a lingering resistance among the clergy and some sections of rural society, to structural factors such as the fact that schools often represent the only visible presence of the state in the villages (hence presenting the only target against which to vent grievances).

Among the Taleban, hostility and suspicion towards state schools were undoubtedly widespread after 2001. The shortage of government targets converged with this hostility to generate violence against schools, teachers and students. At one point (2006), an organised campaign against schools seems to have been launched by the Taleban leadership. The indications are that such

[223] Interview with Ex-teacher S, Laghman.
[224] Interview with Taleban Commander AAA, Garmser.
[225] Interview with Taleban Commander AS, Faryab.
[226] Interview with Taleban Commander AH, Mehterlam Baba.
[227] Interview with Taleban Commander A, Zeri.
[228] Interview with Taleban Commander NAJ, Kunduz.
[229] Interview with Amir Mansory, Kabul, SCA, 10 April 2011.

campaign was not welcomed in most villages, because the portion of the rural population opposed to state schools was a minority, particularly in the more densely populated districts neighbouring the cities.

Between 2006 and 2011, the Taleban redefined their attitude towards state schools. From an all-out campaign of aggression, they gradually found an approach more acceptable to rural communities, which in many cases wanted their kids to have access to state education. Although the pace of school reopenings accelerated in 2010 and even more so 2011, it might not have been due to a change in the Taleban's approach: since 2007, state schools had been reopening based on agreements with the Taleban; the MoE's readiness to satisfy Taleban demands is as likely as anything else to account for these reopenings.

The genuine development of 2011 is the Taleban's decision to stop attacking schools across Afghanistan. The Taleban explained this is meant to give the Ministry of Education the chance to adopt the Taleban curriculum countrywide. Attacks largely ceased, apart from a few incidents, which may have been due to flaws in the Taleban's command-and-control system, to the presence on the ground of groups of Taleban linked to Pakistani jihadist groups or to specific accusations against Ministry of Education staff (of cooperation with the government). Even if the development of a Taleban educational policy did not start in 2011, by then it was taking shape as a relatively complex effort to offer something to the population, as opposed to simply rejecting state education. Apart from co-opting state schools, an effort at which the Taleban were becoming quite adept as of 2011, we have also seen how the Taleban learned to lure the private sector towards their positions, at least in the areas they dominated. Of course, private education is not a surrogate of state education because it is not free; the Taleban have however tried to address this problem by printing textbooks to be used in those schools. The Taleban have also tried to boost the mosque schools, which impart civic education to little children more then anything else, and the madrassas. After insisting on creating alternatives to state schools for three to four years, they ended up investing significant human resources in establishing control over state schools; this shows that they were aware that private, madrassa and mosque education would never be seen by the villagers as a full alternative to state schools.

Even if the Taleban's policy towards state schools was not really new in early 2011, its relationship with the Taleban's wider political strategy might still have changed. The involvement of Mutawakil in mediating a deal with the MoE seems to suggest that a linkage might have emerged relatively late in 2010 or 2011 and that originally the policy emerged out of the relationship with the village communities. It matters whether the Ministry of Education took the initiative or whether it was some of the Taleban, even if at present we do not know the answer. In any case, the demands of the communities towards the Taleban seem to have played an important role. This means that the new policy which was taking shape in 2010–11 might last longer than if it had been determined by a simple opportunistic change of mind at the top of the Taleban movement.

This is not to say that decision-making at the top has not been important. As of end October 2011, the expected new stand of the Taleban on girls' education was not formally announced yet; it was apparently being road-tested in a number of provinces. A formal announcement on girls' education would certainly create a sense of momentum in the evolution of Taleban views, not least because it would weaken any sense of continuity with the past. The Taleban's caution on this point shows that the issue remains divisive within their ranks; however, it also shows that the leadership appears to be ahead of the base.

Therefore, the Taleban leadership seems to be riding the tiger of reconciliation with the communities, trying to prevent local commanders from making separate deals. But what is the aim of the leadership: political negotiations or expansion of its political base among the population and territorial control? The Ministry of Education clearly hoped that engaging the Taleban on the schools could be a way to build confidence and therefore facilitate political negotiations. The Taleban must have understood what the ministry was aiming at; still they seem to have been mainly driven by other considerations. In the body of the paper, we have mentioned the first signs that the Taleban are systematically recruiting high school students. The Taleban accompanied their policy change with a re-launch of mosque education and a continued effort to make private education more viable. These efforts suggest that they see the village communities as their primary interlocutor and the MoE and the Afghan government as secondary. They hedge their bets by privileging their relationship with the communities, which could bring rewards regardless of the ultimate outcome of political negotiations at the top. In a sense, the Taleban's developing approach to education is a win-win proposition for them, as it

strengthens the movement in their relationship with the communities and could be used as a confidence-building measure in hypothetical forthcoming negotiations with the government. The old Taleban leadership gathered in the Quetta Shura must have known that political negotiations would be difficult to kick-start and that their outcome would be highly uncertain, so hedging their bets was a natural approach from their point of view. More generally, it would be unwise for any insurgent leadership to invest too much in possible political negotiations, particularly in the early stages of the process. Militarily, the Taleban are strong enough that they no longer need soft targets like schools to advertise their presence. The greater presence in the provinces of ISAF and Afghan security forces offers plenty of ways for the Taleban to demonstrate their determination to fight. At the same time, the Taleban need the support of the communities more than ever.

The reduction in the Taleban's attacks on schools and the concessions made by the Ministry of Education to the Taleban in order to reopen schools represent an improvement for Afghanistan's rural communities: children get access to free, secular education, even if the quality (never very high in the state sector) is further diluted, as hours dedicated to secular subjects are reduced to make room for religious subjects. From the perspective of the Afghan state, this development only seems good if it really can contribute to kick-start political negotiations and even this assumes that such negotiations would end positively. Otherwise, the Afghan state ends up giving away more than it gets: the benefits for the Taleban are more obvious than for the Afghan state, the more so as the Taleban can claim to be the ones who make state schools work as they supervise them. As of October 2011, optimism about the possibility of political talks had faded considerably since the beginning of the year; the next school year in Afghanistan starts in March 2012 and by then whether the MoE is delivering the promised changes in the curricula to the Taleban and how the Taleban are going to react should be clear.

ANNEX

Questionnaire for Interviewees in the Villages

Do the Taleban oppose state schools in this area?

If yes, how violent is their opposition? Have they been killing teachers or students?

Are all Taleban in this area opposed to schools or there are differences?

Why do they say they oppose schools? Do they all offer the same motivations?

The differences in attitude towards the schools: what motivates them?

- Previous affiliation (for example Hezb is more tolerant towards state schools?)
- Previous educational background (those having been to state schools being more tolerant?)
- Location of recruitment: Pakistan, out-of-area Afghan, or local?
- Requests by local communities?
- In this case are all communities/villages trying to protect their schools or some are not?
- Shadow governors and commanders: do they have different attitudes?
- Can we estimate how many commanders in this area oppose state education and how many do not?
- Different groups of Taleban: different commander, different affiliation (Quetta, Haqqani, Peshawar, AQ . . .)?
- Anything else?

What are the directives of the leadership council and of the shuras concerning schools and state education?

- Do commanders all respect these directives?
- Are they taken seriously?
- Do the leaders try to punish those disobeying?

Has there been an evolution in behaviour towards education over time? Did the Taleban become more or less aggressive towards state education?

- If yes, what has determined it?
- Orders from the top?
- Changes on the ground like growing ISAF pressure?

Do the Taleban try to influence the madrassas?

- How? Support them financially?
- Impose teachers?

Do the Taleban try to influence the state schools left open?

- How?
- Impose teachers?
- Change curricula?

If Hezb-e Islami operates in this area, how does their attitude to state education differ from that of the Taleban?

ABOUT THE AFGHANISTAN ANALYSTS NETWORK (AAN)

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