



The Criminal Elements of Afghanistan's Most Lethal Insurgent Group

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An episode of the *Sopranos* featuring Mullah Omar playing poker with Tony Soprano at the Badda Bing Club would stretch the imagination. Tony and the Mullah have distinctly different lifestyles, social codes, and long-term aspirations. But, in a sense, both men are "wise guys." They are heavily involved in criminal enterprises, to include narcotics trafficking, extortion, shake-down operations, murder for hire, money laundering, theft, and occasionally bank robbery and kidnapping. They both operate with the consent of "commissions," which they lead. Further, they operate within a framework of established social norms, an acknowledged chain of command, and quick and decisive justice.

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Most similarities end there. At last check, Tony Soprano was indifferent to politics, as long as the system did not impinge on his criminal syndicate. In contrast, Mullah Omar has a clearly defined and highly Puritanical political agenda, which he and his foot soldiers imposed on Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. There was no Badda Bing Club in the Taliban's Afghanistan. Tony and the Mullah would feel very uncomfortable in each other's worlds. But, both men knew how to enforce order.

During its rule, the Taliban controlled the level of crime in Afghanistan. Reminiscent of the rule of Stalin or Mussolini, the Taliban's tenure was marked by morally primitive, if effective, justice. Behavior that diverted from Salafist norms was criminalized and publically punished. Like in the Soviet Union where citizens were encouraged to report on their neighbors' anti-social behavior, Afghans feared authorities. Unlike the Soviet system, the Taliban's legal code was Islamic law, or Sharia, as defined by a narrow, unforgiving, Wahhabi-like, strain.

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Under Mullah Omar, the Taliban became excessively cruel with Caligula-style executions frequently displayed in public places. The Taliban terrorized the populace into abiding by their moral code. Islamic law forbids gambling, drinking, and prostitution. But the Taliban went well beyond outlawing activity generally associated with vice. It banned fun. Kite flying, watching television, singing, dancing, and participating in most sports were criminalized.

If the Taliban's penal code crushed individuality, it also brought domestic peace. Despite the imposition by a brooding mullah of a misogynistic

and often totalitarian social code, there was nationwide relief that the fighting was over. The Taliban brought security and relief from killing, which, in turn, brought a modified return to normal living.¹ Clan disputes were suppressed, as the Taliban's vast informant network and paramilitary enforcers of Islamic virtue crushed organized and obvious defiance of the law.² Nonetheless, there was a nationwide sense of imprisonment.

The ostentatious cruelty of the Taliban, particularly when applied to girls and women, brought the scorn of many Western nations. When the Taliban were driven from Afghanistan into Pakistan, new leaders in Kabul relaxed the country's moral codes. Music poured out of Kabul's restaurants, taxicabs, and apartment houses. Men, if they chose, shaved, their beards, and boys crafted and flew their multicolored kites.³ Many women could and did shed their oppressive and uncomfortable burkas revealing more relaxed and revealing apparel. Less heartening, but certainly understandable given Afghanistan's poverty, some women reentered prostitution. The lives of women and girls in Afghanistan became particularly impoverished without government safety nets.⁴ Sometimes, prostitution was the only means of employment, even subsistence-level employment, for women in the cities.⁵



The Taliban were driven from power in late 2001. In some cities, there was a generalized chaos resulting from the temporary power vacuum and precipitous decline of law and order. There were savage, revenge killings directed against the Taliban and suspected collaborators.⁶ The Northern Alliance, which sprang from ethnic outcasts of the northern

provinces, particularly in the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, looted and permitted looting in homes and local markets.⁷

Something else happened when the Taliban were driven from Afghanistan; they became criminals. In a significant role reversal, the Taliban, who were enforcers of law when they ruled Afghanistan, became criminals when they were removed from power. To obtain the revenue necessary to continue operations and to sustain a force in the field, the Taliban turned to crime including extortion, kidnapping, bank robbery, murder, and narcotic trafficking.

When the Taliban were driven to Pakistan, they brought their infantry weapons with them. The Taliban moved into several border areas in late 2001 and 2002, and they expanded their bases of insurgent and criminal operations. By 2009, Karachi, the large Pakistani city with 18 million people, became a leading sanctuary of the Taliban. They could meld into the social fabric because they shared a common Pashtun ethnicity and practiced similar customs and ceremonies. They also brought with them discipline and a vast knowledge of firearms. In addition, they brought employment opportunities. By 2009, the Taliban in Pakistan were paid nearly \$100.00 each month, which is more than \$20.00 each month more than the average Pakistani policeman.⁸

A Taliban splinter group, the *Tehrik-i-Taliban* Pakistan (TTP), burrowed into parts of the Swat Valley and North West Frontier Provinces and

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needed to fend for itself. They were able to collect taxes for some local traders, but they turned to bank robbery. The TTP also generated the finance through timber mafia and to some extent controlled the lucrative emerald mines in tribal areas and Swat.⁹

Figure 1 shows the broad distribution of the two Taliban groups, the Afghan Taliban, in brown and the TTP, in green. The Afghan Taliban share



Figure 1: Regions of the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban and Other Groups

space with affiliate insurgent groups, primarily the Haqqani Network and the *Hizb-i-Islami*, in the east.

Rules of the Game

Both the Mafia and the Taliban have sets of rules. The Mafia's rules, to the extent the rules of the Five Families are still relevant, have not been publically advertised. However, when leading organized crime figures are brought to trial, these rules sometimes are revealed in court testimony. The Taliban have a list of nearly 30 rules contained in a 2006 document called the *The Book of Rules*. There are specific prohibitions on smoking; financially profiting from connections to the Taliban; misusing Taliban equipment; working for, or in any way helping, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) without explicit permission from Taliban authorities; moving to another district without the permission of a regional commander; harming fellow Taliban; harming "innocent" people, whose innocence is determined by provisional Taliban leaders.¹⁰

There are also rules that pertain to the behavior of non-Taliban. Taliban will not target those civil authorities whom they deem loyal. However, those who cooperate with Coalition face retribution. In the rules, teachers are singled out as a threat to the Taliban's agenda. Teachers are forbidden from working with "the current puppet regime" because it strengthens the government and weakens the rule of Islam. If a teacher teaches any material that is in conflict with the Koran, he should be warned once to stop. If he continues, he should be beaten. If this does not dissuade him, he should be killed.

Extortion

"Illegal use of one's official position or powers to obtain property, funds, or patronage. An excessive or exorbitant charge."¹¹

Afghanistan is the size of Texas with one-tenth the road network of that state. Many of these roads are in a poor state of repair.¹² About 3,000 tons of supplies destined for Coalition-related activities are transported every day to sustain the counterinsurgency. Supplies include food, water, fuel, and ammunition, which throughout trucked in Afghanistan, usually through Pakistan. In fact, 80 percent of this is routed through Pakistan, amounting to nearly 500 trucks per day.¹³ These goods come overland through Pakistan or Central Asia to distribution hubs at 200 points, including Bagram Air Force Base north of Kabul and a similar base outside Kandahar. Most of the trucks are owned and operated by Afghans.¹⁴ However, many of the roads are largely controlled by warlords and insurgent groups who extort the trucks for payment in return for safe passage.

Highway Robbery

From the earliest days of the current counterinsurgency, Coalition Forces faced an ethical and logistical dilemma. This was the same dilemma the Moghul and British forces faced when they sought to ensure safe transport of their goods and personnel into Afghanistan. In what is often called sarcastically a “pay to play” operation, Coalition Forces periodically pay individuals and organizations to protect trucks, which often travel in convoy. As with the turf wars of Chicago and New York in the 1930s, different insurgent and criminal enterprises sometime battle each other for territory. For this reason, it is difficult to know whom to pay or who controls the area into which Coalition goods and services need to be delivered.¹⁵

Travel is difficult for everyone in Afghanistan. Some of the more experienced US Army logisticians charged with delivering goods to remote Afghan destinations through hostile terrain found that the Afghan security

services were more inept and corrupt than their counterparts in Iraq.¹⁶ Military logisticians face the ethical dilemma of paying off regional warlords or having their supplies interrupted. The logisticians also deal with Coalition-imposed restrictions and prohibitions that make safe passage more difficult. For example, one handicap is prohibiting companies that ship US goods across Afghanistan from arming their security personnel or drivers with weapons heavier than an assault rifle. This rule prevents private security companies from devolving into private militias, but it also renders truck drivers ill prepared to combat criminals and insurgents armed with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs).

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The warlords become stronger through the payoffs they received from logisticians to protect Coalition goods.¹⁷ Further, some of the money filters its way to the Taliban. This not only weakens the rule of law and promotes extortion, it helps to fund the insurgent enemy, whom the Coalition Forces are trying to destroy or suppress.¹⁸ US Congressional inquiries¹⁹ in July 2010 confirmed the labyrinthine and morally questionable practice of paying for protection when some of that money is channeled to the Taliban enemy.²⁰

Extortion Through Taxation

From its earliest days in power, the Taliban imposed *zakat*, or required Islamic taxes. Not all *zakat* is extortionist, and many Muslims give alms

out of a sense of strong Islamic obligation. But the Taliban forced a tax on those under its rule, and there was nothing voluntary about compliance. During its tenure, the Taliban required that narcotic cultivators and traffickers pay them a specified amount of their revenue. Several years into their rule, the Taliban controlled 96 percent of Afghanistan's poppy-growing regions and taxed the poppy growers and those who refine poppies into opium. Despite protestations to the contrary, the Taliban were heavily engaged and still are engaged in the narcotics trade.²¹ This is what is often referred to as “narco-terrorism.” It is a symbiosis in which both sides profit; the narco-traffickers have their products protected, and the terrorist groups, such as *Sendero Luminoso* in Peru, obtain necessary funding. The TTP has a flexible taxation. Sometimes the wheat farmers can pay in fuel or agriculture.

Robberies: “Sutton’s Law”

The Taliban rob banks for the same reason that the sociopathic Willy Sutton robbed banks- because “that’s where the money is.” Revolutionaries such as Joseph Stalin or a disoriented Patty Hearst have robbed banks to pursue their political agendas. The Taliban showed an early enthusiasm for robbing banks. What began as amateurish and comical, though brutal, heists evolved into relatively sophisticated and well-rehearsed operations. When the Taliban found themselves cutoff from traditional sources of money, they turned to bank robbery to supplement their meager and sporadic income flows. Many of the attacks are brazen, with little attempt by the culprit to disguise their identities. Some of the robbers have a distinctive look and are in no danger of being confused with the spur-heeled, six-shooters-clutching bank robbers of the old American West. They have swarthy complexions; long, black beards; AK-47s; and tend to kill the bank guards. They have become paramilitary operations, sometimes executing the operations with impressive precision.²²

Many of the Taliban's bank robberies take place in Pakistan, which has more wealth than Afghanistan. It is not unusual for bank robbers to move quickly and with more precision than is generally associated with amateurs. For example, according to police, a successful robbery in 2009 took only 3 minutes in broad daylight.²³

The Taliban rob banks largely to steal money; any other benefits are secondary. But some operations cause social disruptions and divert the capabilities of police forces. Things become particularly important at high-profile events that are designed to strengthen the legitimacy of the government. As an example, government forces, already strapped of well-trained on uncorrupted security personnel, are concerned that when military and para-military forces are needed to protect polling stations.²⁴ The threat of bank robberies diverts security personnel from protecting government buildings and protecting government figures.



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Many security personnel are vulnerable to bribes or threats by the Taliban. Because of systemic corruption and vast poverty in Pakistan and Afghanistan, robbers can coordinate with security personnel to facilitate the heists. Taliban offer both positive and negative inducements. Some security services are bought off with bribes and others are intimidated by threats. Pakistani newspapers have commented about the lack of resistance to the Taliban heists. As an example, in one attack, "thieves made off with more than \$200,000 in cash from Kabul's main money bazaar. The brigands were methodical in their noisy work, dismantling the metal shutters and jimmying the locks on 10 stores. They met no opposition

from the soldiers who stand watch over the deserted bazaar at night.”²⁵

Kidnapping

The Taliban kidnap high-value targets because ransoms have paid handsomely. Kidnapping is not uncommon in Latin America and other areas of the world where there are desperately poor groups of criminals or terrorists and a tier of rich and vulnerable targets. Kidnapping is a significant source of the Taliban’s overall income.²⁶ The high-profile targets bring the Taliban an estimated revenue of \$10 million each year, but this figure may be low. Some payoffs go unreported. Some of the targets the Taliban would have murdered are now placed on a kidnapping list. Foreigners, high-profile political or administrative figures, and businessmen are prime targets and are likely to remain so as long as ransoms are paid for their release.

Pakistani counterterrorism officials speculated that kidnapping for ransom may have been the single largest revenue source for the Taliban's top commander in the country, Baitullah Mehsud, before he was killed in a U.S. airstrike. In 2009, Mehsud's network may have held as many as 70 hostages. Pakistani authorities calculated that just 10 percent of kidnappings are connected to the Taliban. Ransoms for high-level foreigners can generally be \$60,000 to \$250,000 each.²⁷

There have been spectacular kidnappings of large groups and high-profile personalities. One example was the wholesale kidnapping of dozens of students and staff members from a Pakistani army preparatory school in North Waziristan, Pakistan, in 2009. Most of the boys were rescued but there were casualties.²⁸ The incident that garnered international attention, particularly in Asia, was the 2007 kidnapping of 23 Korean Christian aid workers who were abducted while traveling in a bus. Two

were killed and the rest were released after 6 weeks of negotiation. In addition to paying, what has been speculated to be significant money, perhaps \$20 million, South Korea pledged to withdraw its 200 troops from Afghanistan, as previously planned, and agreed to prohibit Christian evangelizing in Afghanistan.²⁹ The kidnapping was successful in two ways: it garnered money and forced South Korea from military participation. The threat of kidnapping also gives foreigners, whose governments and corporations have paid ransom in the past, pause for fear of being kidnapped themselves.

Sometimes the motives, or even the authenticity of a kidnapping, are confusing or dubious. This is the case of Beverly Giesbrecht, a Canadian convert to Islam who became re-born as Khadija Qahaar, also known as Khadija Abudl Qahaarand, and who trumpeted her allegiance to the international jihadist movement (see figure 2). After the September 2001, attacks she converted to Islam and established a website called Jihad Unspun. She worked as a freelance journalist for al Jazeera and tried to advance the cause of militant Islam. Despite her enthusiasm about promoting the Afghan jihad, she was *allegedly* kidnapped by insurgents in 2008 and held for a ransom that neither her family nor the Canadian government was prepared to pay.



Figure 2. The Canadian Beverly Giesbrecht, Who Became Khadija Qahaar³¹

Unconfirmed reporting in November 2011 indicated that she died, after an unspecified, prolonged illness. But her kidnapping, as well as her

spiritual path from materialism and hard drinking to Islamic zeal, is surrounded by speculation. Was she really kidnapped or was this a ruse to extort money for the Taliban? If this were the case, she may have been a party to a ploy from the beginning. In fact, she might still be alive.³⁰

Murder

The Taliban murder for several reasons. They kill to advance their political goal of ridding Afghanistan of a foreign military presence, to remove the current government, to eliminate criminal rivals. They also kill for a fusion of reasons including, cruelty, revenge, and spontaneous behavior. As with Mafioso psychopaths, some Taliban enjoy killing and do it when they have the chance.

First, they kill in pursuit of their political agenda. When the Taliban were in power they killed political rivals. Today, even when they are not in power, they continue to kill their enemies. Their enemies list is very long. Accomplished women are threats to the Taliban and are targeted. The most prominent female police officer in Afghanistan was murdered because she worked for the government, held a higher social and work-related position than many men, and tried to rescue women and girls from fundamentalists.³² Ministers are also routinely targeted. For example, Abdul Rahman, Afghanistan's civil aviation and tourism minister, was murdered despite his record as a hero of the war against the Soviets in the late 1980s.³³ In recent years, the Taliban began to murder lower-level, less-protected officials, some of whom have only the slimmest connections to the authorities.³⁴

Journalists critical of insurgents or Sharia find their place high on the Taliban's death list. The TTP has claimed responsibility for the killing of a senior journalist Misri Khan Orakzai because, in the words of the Tali-

ban spokesman, "He twisted facts whenever we gave him a report. He (had) a leaning towards the army in his reports."³⁵ Western journalists who are sympathetic to the insurgency or who work for *al Jazeera* are in less danger of being harmed because of their propaganda value. In fact, *al Jazeera* journalists are often given warm receptions and heavy protection when they travel to Taliban-controlled areas.

Afghans have a historic suspicion of foreigners, and the Taliban have strong hatred for any organization or person who threatens to introduce foreign values or customs. This is particularly true of any non-government organizations that supported the current government. In October 2009, the Taliban attacked the UN food agency's heavily fortified office and killed five people.³⁶ Foreign medical personnel, despite the difficult conditions in which they live and the contributions they make are killed by the Taliban. In 2009, six Americans, one Briton, and one German medical worker were killed for "spying for the Americans" and "preaching Christianity." A survivor recounted how the victims were lined up against the wall and shot.³⁷ These intimidation tactics have often worked, though not all Christian charities have been driven from Afghanistan.³⁸

Religious figures who disagree with the Taliban are often labeled apostates. The penalty of apostasy in Islam is death. Some of the murdered religious figures were obscure, but others had local celebrity. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the recent killing of renowned religious scholar and psychiatrist Farooq Khan, who helped troubled youth. The 56-year-old Khan, who was trained in Vienna, ran a school to help deprogram Taliban-indoctrinated youth and offered a gentler Islam.

The tactics of the Taliban differ in the provinces. For example, the Taliban use more high-profile attacks and tend to focus more on government

leaders and commercial buildings in Kabul. In contrast, in villages, the Taliban use more speed and stealth and focus on lower-level officials, such as beat cops, aid workers, and opposition tribal officials.³⁹ If any region is a murder capital, it is Kandahar.

Sometimes, they kill for no apparent reason. Taliban leaders kill to settle personal scores, to eliminate potential rivals, or because they enjoy it. Like organized crime syndicates, the Taliban attract an element of homicidal psychopaths who enjoy murder. It is sometimes difficult to separate criminal from political intent. For example, if a local Taliban commander orders a specific policeman killed, the decision could have come from a number of reasons. The decision could have been driven from the perception that the cop was a political enemy, an impediment to narcotics trafficking, or the sudden impulse to kill someone.⁴⁰



The Taliban also kill to terrorize Afghans to do their will. Young children and defenseless women are targeted to send the message that there are few boundaries to the brutality. In Helmand Province, the Taliban murdered a 7-year-old boy, claiming that he was an informant. Women can be killed for spying on the Taliban or because they have been accused of having morals that are loose by Taliban standards.⁴¹ The table in figure 3 distinguishes the standard criminal motives from those of the Taliban's, as well as the successful and unsuccessful practices.

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	Standard Criminal Motives	Taliban's Motives	Taliban's Successful Practices	Taliban's Unsuccessful Practices
Extortion	Obtain money; sustain territory for prestige	Obtain money; prove the government has no control; assert power over individuals	Keep the level of extortion sustainable; negotiate level of zakat	Demand a level of taxation that victims cannot afford; cruelty alienates populations
Kidnapping	Obtain money; not common practice in the United States	Obtain money; terrify foreigners resident in Afghanistan	Targeting victims whose families or employers can pay	Targeting victims who are ill and are likely to die in Taliban custody
Bank Robbery	Obtain money	Obtain money; divert government security resources	Professional and well-rehearsed operations that limit killings	Clumsy and brutal attacks with unnecessary killing
Murder	Enforce criminal order; revenge; money contract	Tactic to terrorize the enemy; prevent collaboration government	Highly selective targeting	Target children and persons not connected to the insurgency
Narcotics Trafficking	Obtain money	Obtain money	Preventing a surplus of narcotics, which lowers prices; partnering with cultivators	Demanding excessive payments from cultivators and traffickers

Figure 3. As Crime Increases in Kabul, So Does Nostalgia for Taliban

Blowback from Crime

“The Taliban are a group of thieves. If it (my property) were God’s, they'd steal from him, too.” *A Karachi businessman*

In Afghanistan, a sense of fatalism has set in. According to findings from the Asia Foundation, the number of persons reporting violence or crime to authorities declined steadily from 63 percent in 2007 to 54 percent in 2010. There were several reasons for this. The most frequently cited reason was it wasn’t serious, 23 percent , followed by a fear of retaliation, 21 percent. Of the eight reasons cited for pessimism, respondents cited insecurity at 44 percent , corruption 27 percent, bad government at 18 percent, and presence of Taliban at 6 percent . These issues all bear on crime. Finally, figure 4 is a response to the question, “What kind of violence or crime did you or someone in your family experience in the past year?”⁴²

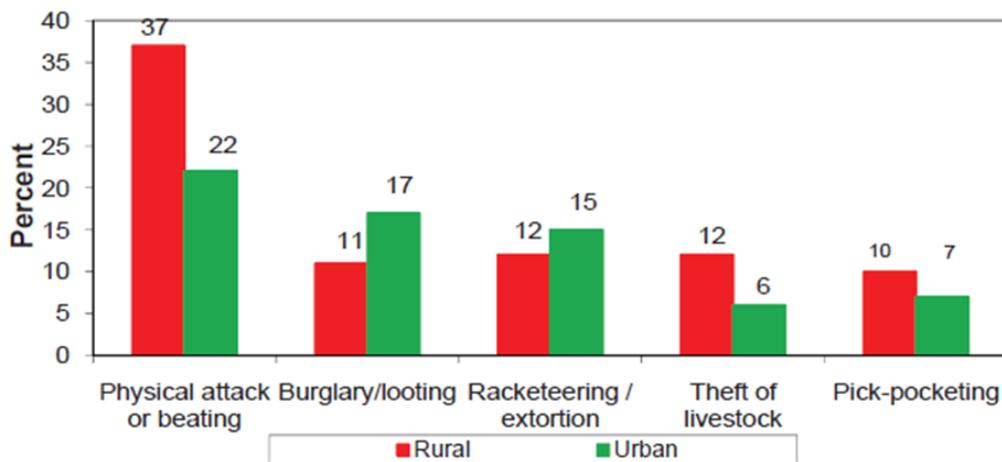


Figure 4: Response to Question on Violence⁴³

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The Taliban have paid a penalty in Afghan public opinion. The morbid cruelty that often accompanies the criminal activities has angered, offended, and sometimes enraged Afghans. Afghans have a historic reputation of being a tough nation, but not of being sadistic. When the Taliban were in power, they suppressed the level of crime. However, there were public executions and amputations, summary justice for even trivial abuses, and public beatings of women. Many Afghans did not support this and were relieved when the Afghans were disposed.

Now that the Taliban are out of power and are, themselves, the criminals they continue the cruelty and compound it with extortion, kidnapping, murder, and narcotics trafficking. Their rule is often tenuous because it is based on fear. There is an ambient fear of being harmed or threatened by the Taliban. Part of this stems from an element of unpredictability to the Taliban's criminal behavior and this causes confusion and alienation. Sometimes the Taliban do not communicate with each other and villagers do not know when to expect murders or shakedowns.

Though the Taliban ruled in the name of Islam, many Afghans saw nothing Islamic in their drug profiting or their strapping bombs onto boys, whom they sarcastically called Mullah Omar's missiles. In a set of informal interviews by The Associated Press with more than three dozen Pakistanis in 2009 no respondent praised the Taliban, and most wanted them shot on sight. The Taliban retains support in parts of Afghanistan. Some of the support comes from personal interest, some from Pashtun solidarity, and some from a generalized hatred of the West. But most Afghans and Pakistanis fear the Taliban and do not want their presence.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The Taliban are not likely to be confused with the Mafioso of New

York's five families. Paramilitary, aggressive, puritanical, they are nonetheless violent criminals. They commit a variety of crimes to include extortion, kidnapping, bank robbery, murder, and narcotics trafficking. They have established networks for their criminal enterprises and are adept at intimidating and extorting large populations of villagers who feel vulnerable in Afghanistan and in Pakistan.

The Taliban have a strong presence in many parts of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area, but they are not necessarily welcome. They are generally tolerated because villagers have no choice but to tolerate their counterinsurgency pressures. The situation is in its 10th year and might continue for another 10 years. If this happens, the Taliban are likely to continue their criminal enterprises and extort, kidnap, and murder their fellow Afghans and Pakistanis. They will also maintain strong contacts to the narcotics cultivators and traffickers who ship illicit opiates all over the world, including the streets of America.



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