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Inside the Taliban: 'The more troops they send, the more targets we have'

In the first of a series of exclusive reports in the run-up to next week's Afghan elections, award-winning correspondent Ghaith Abdul-Ahad meets a group of Taliban in their mountain stronghold

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A Taliban fighter loyal to Jalaluddin Haqqani, whose operations also include suicide bombers. Photograph: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad

The provinces of Khost, Paktia and Paktika in south-eastern [Afghanistan](#) are dominated by one name: Jalaluddin Haqqani. A famous commander, tribal chief and cleric, Haqqani came to prominence during the war against the Soviets. In more than 20 years of fighting, he built an extensive network of influence that covered eastern Afghanistan and the tribal area of Waziristan in Pakistan, and reached as far abroad as the Gulf states, which he visited often.

Once a minister in the [Taliban](#) government, he is now aligned with their leader, Mullah Omar, but has retained independence and control over his men. His operations have struck deep into the territory controlled by Hamid Karzai's government, reaching targets in Kabul. The movement's signature attack is well co-ordinated and includes several suicide bombers, who storm into buildings before detonating their bombs.

We waited for Haqqani's Taliban in a roadside cafe not far from the Pakistani border, where old Russian trucks decorated with hundreds of little bells, painted waterfalls and eagles and religious slogans swayed under the weight of rice, sugar and flour they brought from Pakistan, and the illegally logged trees they carried in the other direction.

It was noon and we had a few hours to kill. Like everywhere in Afghanistan, there was road etiquette to respect. From nine in the morning until four in the afternoon, the government controls the country's main arteries. The rest of the time they belong to the Taliban.

The air in the cafe was filled with the potent smell of meat stew and damp feet. Bedding and cushions were piled at one end of the room, while at the other end men hastily finished their prayers, then sat cross-legged on the mottled carpets where two young boys set plates of rice and stew in front of them.

"Here, we are all of the same tribe," said a young Pashtun poet and journalist. He had a flimsy beard and eyes the colour of honey. "Ninety-five per cent of the people here support the Taliban. They give the Taliban shelter. The businessmen and traders give them money, and the five per cent who work for the government look the other way and wave you through if you are with Taliban. The tribes here are very strong. It would bring great shame on you to arrest your cousin.

"The situation is very simple here," he continued. "We are Muslims and tribal people, the Taliban are Muslim and from the same tribes, the foreign troops are non-Muslims and there was no referendum from the people to ask them to come here. God told us to fight the occupation so the people are against the occupation. The people are ideologically similar to the Taliban, so the Taliban don't hide, they live with the people."

A driver with a big bushy beard lay on his back, hugged an ageing tape player and listened with closed eyes to a melancholic Pashtun woman singing about love, longing and betrayal. His right foot drew circles in the air.

An hour later another song, loud and screechy, filled the room. A young boy chanted, drowning the driver's love songs. In front of the restaurant, in the middle of the road, an old pickup truck was parked and an old Talib with a big black turban and a chest-long beard stood next to it.

"March to your trenches, oh Taliban," the boy sang. "March to your trenches." The chant emanated from a loudspeaker on top of the car.

Several men walked over to the Talib and dropped money in his hands, donations to the Taliban. In the back of his truck three teenage Taliban sat on sacks of rice and flour donated by other villagers. The poet smiled. His point made, he went back inside to finish his tea.

The valley

Our ride arrived around five in the evening. We drove out of the village, down a steep slope, around the side of a hill and entered a valley where any pretence of government control vanished.

The only road here is a shallow river that twists between boulders and trees and is littered with rocks. We drove along it for two hours, against a muddy current that crashed down from the mountains above. Sheets of rain fell from the dark sky.

Past a bend in the river where the valley was so narrow that the trees formed a canopy over it, small terraced gardens protruded from the cliffs on each side, almost touching each other. "This is where we meet after our operations," said one of the Taliban in the car.

Villagers hopped on and off the back of the truck as we drove along, grabbing lifts, and the hum of the Taliban chants from a tape player broke through the sound of the rain and the waterfalls.

Leaving the riverbed, we drove uphill through a thick forest, past two scouts, who lay as motionless as the rocks around them, and stopped in a clearing in the wood guarded by two gunmen.

In the fading light I could make out here and there guns, hats, combat trousers, boots, a beard, another gun and a white flag. As we climbed the slope into the camp, the scattered objects became men, and by the time the stout commander with his cap pushed to the back of his head shook my hand, I could see a whole unit of more than 100 spread out on the wooded hilltop.

Instead of the trademark Taliban uniforms of turbans, eyeliner and flip-flops, these men wore Russian and [Nato](#) poncho raincoats over their shalwars, and boots and trainers. Most striking was the way they held their guns. Instead of carrying them in the standard militia style, on their shoulders or holding them like walking sticks, they wore them strapped around their chests, one hand by the trigger and the other holding the muzzle down. They stood just like the Americans.

The stout commander, Mawlawi Jalali, sat surrounded by his men. One carried the white flag of the Taliban and another a video camera, which he kept pointed at me at all times.

"We are Afghans fighting the jihad and defending our country under the leadership of Jalaluddin Haqqani," the commander said. He spoke in a schoolmasterly tone. As well as being a commander, Mawlawi Jalali is a teacher in Haqqani's madrasa.

"The Americans toppled the emirate [of the Taliban] and we are fighting to bring it back. When the Taliban were here the jihad was only in Afghanistan. Now, thanks to the Americans, the jihad has spread to many other countries."

How did he plan to pursue his holy war? "We use different tactics: mining the streets, fighting and direct attacks. Here in this camp we make all the preparations and have all the men we need for these different tactics."

What about the new American surge, I asked. Did it concern him?

"We attack the towns, like in Wazi Zadran, where there is a strong American and Afghan garrison, and mine the streets every day. We average two or three attacks a day against the Americans and their allies. The more troops they send, the more targets we have, so it's good."

Allahu akbar, the men around him murmured in response.

He went on to explain the difference between his men and the average Taliban.

"We follow Haqqani. He was a smart mujahid against the Soviets and during all his wars he taught us how to focus on training and teaching. I was taught by him and most of our men were trained by him and his commanders. We have order, because we had good teaching and good training."

By this time, night had begun to fall, dogs barked and the men melted into the darkness. Only a flicker of light from a mobile phone separated the ghosts around me from the mountain behind them.

"We have mujahideen from the time of the emirate, but we have new fighters too," Mawlawi Jalali told me. "The young are keen to join, but we tell them stay put, finish your madrasa now and then come. We can't provide for all of them now and we can't get them supplies. The government and the Americans control the streets and the cities because of the planes, but the mountains are for us."

The number of men stationed on this single mountain cliff might explain how the Haqqani Taliban have managed recently to launch bold and relatively large attacks.

The hum of a generator rose and fell in the background, sometimes drowning our conversation. I looked for signs of electricity, but apart from a few flickering oil lamps in a faraway village, there was nothing but darkness for kilometres on each side of the valley. I realised suddenly what a "generator hum" meant on a mountain in the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

"Drone ... plane ... sky ..." I mumbled my words, closed my eyes and waited for the whoosh of a missile.

The commander and his men laughed. "These are media lies, that Americans can see us," he said. "Look now, we are a big group of

Taliban. There are 200 men here and they can't see us. We believe in God, so don't be scared."

Another fighter spoke up: "If you stand still in the dark and not move they can't see you. It's written in the Qur'an."

On the way to the camp I had been told of other drone-dodging techniques. If you are on a motorcycle and the drone fires a missile, jump off and the missile will follow the motorcycle. If you are with a large group, stop, like musical statues, and the drone will confuse you with the trees.

A young fighter called for prayer and the commander and half his men lined up to pray, their guns on the ground in front of them. When they had finished, the other half began to pray.

"We are Afghans, we have lived all our lives in the trenches and caves," said the commander as he shook my hand. "We tell the Americans to stop this war, we are not tired." His fatigued voice, however, told a different story.

The village

The men separated into three groups. Two headed to different villages, while the third climbed up the cliff to take up fighting positions. We followed one group down to a small village.

After half an hour we were among houses, and the men dispersed. We waited outside a green door while a Talib went in to talk to the owners. In a valley where everyone comes from the same tribe and everyone is someone's cousin, finding a shelter for the night is simply a matter of knocking on a door.

The family gave us their largest room and six of us took their places, on cushions and mattresses that were still warm. A kerosene lamp was lit and we shared a dinner of eggs, tomato, yoghurt and dry, dark bread.

"You are not the first Iraqi here," said one of the fighters. He was tall and thin and poor-looking, with a big beard and clothes that were a faded grey. "There is an Iraqi commander who is fighting in the mountains. He has been here for many years and he is very good." He scooped up bits of eggs and tomatoes with a piece of bread.

Like everyone else, the tall fighter was a graduate of madrasas. Unlike other Taliban, Haqqani's men do not divide their time between farming or working and fighting. "When we don't fight, we take religious classes with the emir [commander]," explained the tall

fighter. He was a specialist in ambushes, he said, and explained his tactics. Because of the threat from planes, the fighters didn't move around in big groups any more: they travelled to the attack areas in twos and threes.

He positioned a glass and a piece of bread and a cucumber in a triangle. The glass represented the target.

"We hit them [the glass] with a mine and we position ourselves here [bread and cucumber] and shoot. Then when the attack is over we move towards the woods before the helicopters arrive."

After dinner the men wrapped themselves in their blankets and scarves and slept. We left the house soon after morning prayers as a thick mist that had settled in the bottom of the valley was chased away by the early morning sun, which filtered down the mountains through the cypresses.

Men squatted in the fields, relieving themselves. We walked in the muddy lanes. Women with heads wrapped loosely in colourful scarves walked in small groups carrying buckets of water. A young girl with wild hair and wide eyes followed us at a distance.

At the entrance to the village, local men sat on the edge of the river wrapped in their scarves and blankets and looked intently at everything that moved: the three trucks piled high with logged trees, the other villagers, and the Taliban and their guests.

We met Mawlawi Jalali again in a different field. A few of his men walked between the high grass and trees, patrolling the valley.

"The villagers are good," he said. "They feed us and give us shelter, even if we are 100 men, but sometimes their hearts are weak – they think that the foreigners bring development projects to help them, which is not true. This is why we have to forcefully stop these projects, to protect the villagers."

What about schools, and education for the villagers? "We have no problem with education, it's the curriculums that we have problems with. Under our [Taliban] government, when we taught the children the letter J it stood for jihad. Now it's *jar* [meaning neighbour]. So we closed the schools, but we have madrasas for the children."

As we drove out of the valley the Taliban pickup truck again gave lifts to villagers. Old women, young men and couples held on to the sides of the car as it climbed over the rocks and drove through the water.

On a mountain road outside the valley, a group of contractors and their heavily-armed security escorts were clearing the road of debris. It was the wreckage of one of their cars, an SUV that had been blown in half earlier in the week. Bits of blackened flesh lay on the road and a piece of blue cloth hung from a bush.

We drove on, down from the high mountains of eastern Afghanistan towards Kabul.