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Insurgent Alliances in Afghanistan

Summary

- The degree to which insurgent commanders in Afghanistan coordinate their activities and submit to the overall strategic direction of senior Taliban leadership is a subject of considerable debate. Most insurgent forces are organized into localized fighting groups, and the extent to which they coordinate their actions varies.
- Overall, the decision to forge an alliance with another group is very much context specific. Commanders have to weigh a host of factors, including the extent to which they are integrated in a higher command structure and the relative strength of local leadership, the level of violence or security in the area, and the specific objectives of the group.
- Although fighting groups sometimes rely on outside stakeholders to bridge trust gaps with other commanders, tribal elders rarely play a role in alliance formation. Though limited in the formative stages, communities do appear to play a supportive role once alliances are established.
- Generally, the working agreements studied were considered mutually beneficial by respondents. Those few groups that did break with alliance partners often attributed their split to disagreements over Pakistani intervention in the conflict.
- The CAPS study reinforces assessments of the importance of local commander-level decision making in consolidating what is otherwise an organizationally fragmented insurgency. Buy-in from senior leadership will be critical for any future prospective peace agreement to hold across antigovernment fighting groups.

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Introduction

One of the contributing factors to Afghanistan’s long period of civil conflict has been the fluidity within military alliances at the sub-national level, preventing any given coalition from dominating. The degree to which insurgent commanders in Afghanistan coordinate their activities and submit to the overall strategic direction of senior Taliban leadership has been a subject of considerable debate over the past decade of conflict. Most insurgent forces are organized into localized fighting groups, and the extent to which they coordinate their actions varies. This brief explores findings from a Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies (CAPS) study that examines the circumstances of such cooperative agreements, based on field research in five Afghan provinces.¹

Alliance Formation

In forming partnerships with other fighting groups, commanders have to weigh a host of factors, including the extent to which potential allies are integrated in a higher command structure, the relative strength of local leadership, the level of violence or security, and the specific objectives of the group. Due to the localized and closed nature of most fighting groups' social networks, relationships between groups tend to rely upon outside individuals who share relationships between units. These individuals tend to be situated as essential stakeholders—such as a Taliban governor or other similar official position—in the local community with a wide range of ties. When the individual is not a major stakeholder in the community, he tends to be someone widely respected.

In Kunduz, for example, most of the commanders interviewed sought assistance and coordination from the Taliban shadow district governors and provincial authorities after a series of heavy losses at the hands of the Afghan government and, to a lesser extent, coalition forces. Commander respondents told CAPS that they requested assistance from their shadow district governor, who then helped make the appropriate arrangements for cooperation with other groups. Nangarhari respondents, by contrast, attributed all decisions regarding intergroup working agreements to Taliban provincial authorities in a top-down process. Interviews with Herati groups revealed that commanders in the province were overall more judicious and reluctant to forge working agreements with groups outside the immediate cluster of their social networks. Some Helmand groups adhere very strictly to the organization's chain of command and refuse to step outside of it for fear of harsh repercussions from leadership. Factions that may have been more cut off from leadership concentrations in the district and provincial centers were able to initiate working agreements with other groups.

The most commonly cited means through which working agreements were solidified between insurgent groups were face-to-face meetings. Though meeting in person carries more risk than telecommunications, it lays the groundwork for a genuine relationship and mutual respect. Most respondents reportedly met only once, while a few interviewees said the agreement took multiple meetings to negotiate. In Kunduz, for example, the Taliban district governors are very active in their management of the local groups' partnerships. The governor's presence aids in trust building, particularly when the prospective partners do not know one another or belong to different tribes. This also allows the district governor to monitor an alliance and maintain consolidated control over his men. Other respondents reportedly met with their alliance partner without the presence of a head commander. This was usually done after the head commander had given orders for the groups to work together, or in advance of seeking approval for the agreement from leadership. Occasionally, in-person *jirga* meetings convened on a larger scale involving commanders from all local subgroups.

It is often assumed that community members and tribal elders play a large role in the activities of armed groups operating in their area. However, the sample respondents indicate that tribal elders rarely play a role in alliance formation. In the rare cases where nonmembers are included in formation meetings, the precise extent of their influence over the outcome remains unclear. Though limited in the formative stages, communities do appear to play a supportive role once alliances are established; one Helmand commander, for example, reported that sometimes tribal elders did attend meetings between the alliance partners and weighed in on issues pertaining to the partnership.

Alliance Maintenance and Duration

Once the working relationship has been solidified between the two groups, respondents indicated that most communication took place on an ad hoc basis. This is unsurprising given the elastic nature of these alliances, where subgroups come together primarily for joint operations at the

request of a higher commander or district governor. The majority of respondents agreed that all maintenance communication took place at the commander level, usually at the request of a higher commander, often the district governor. Indeed, most soldiers denied participating in planning or preparatory measures prior to a joint operation. And despite the relationship mapping matrices suggesting otherwise, most soldiers claimed that they did not regularly speak with the men in the other group outside of joint fighting opportunities.

Many of the working agreements between groups were reported to have lasted between two and four years. However, approximately 68 percent of the quantifiable working agreements were reported to have lasted less than two years. This is somewhat surprising given the relatively strong interconnections between groups. Familiar relationships, physical distance, tribe, fighting legacy, and religious affiliations were all considered by CAPS as strong social linkages between individual members of a given Afghan community. Perhaps there are other indicators that were not collected that have a greater impact on relationship strength.

Relationship metrics aside, there are several more possible explanations that may account for the short duration of the sample working agreements. Soldiers were unable to reliably speak about working agreement durations beyond their own tenure in the organization. External security developments may have also impacted the formation of working agreements in that two-year time period. It is possible that the sample alliances were formed at a time of heightened pressure during the 2010–11 “surge” of U.S. forces and had only aged 1–2 years by the time of study.

Alliance Assessments

Soldier respondents unanimously favored the existence of the alliance to which they were a part. This phenomenon was observed in all target provinces and did not appear to correlate to group size or alliance duration. It is unclear whether the steadfast support of the alliances were a product of genuine, unwavering support or fear of saying something that might be construed as direct criticism for the commander or organizational leadership. As seen throughout the interviews, the pressure to fully submit to the decisions of the commander is intense. Commander respondents both recognized this and prided themselves on their ability to maintain order and authority in their groups.

The vast majority of commanders viewed the alliance experience favorably. Commanders typically viewed the strength that comes in numbers as the biggest asset of the working agreement. This notion of strength includes both extra men during coordinated activities as well as the idea that the organizations’ morale and overall ideological goals were boosted from unity formed through the alliance.

Though many reported that the alliance had only a positive outcome for their group, a few respondents were more pragmatic in their assessment. Some recognized the increased financial burden that accompanies joint operations. Not all commander complaints were financial: They also voiced concerns over their own security and that of their men. By allying his Hizb-e-Islami fighters with local Taliban, one local commander feared that his men were at greater risk because “Taliban can now come to our area with loaded guns. They could turn their guns on us and attack at any time.” Another Helmand commander explained that he felt the joint operations actually made his men less safe than working alone.

In those few groups that did report breaking a working agreement, respondents attributed the break to disillusionment and frustration with the involvement of Pakistani intelligence apparatuses in their operations. This perception of Pakistani intervention was fundamentally at odds with the local commanders’ ideas of why they were fighting the war— notions of independence from

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief, prepared by Mallory Sutika Sipus, Senior Research Analyst at Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies, provides a synopsis of key takeaways from a larger USIP-supported CAPS study, *Understanding Alliances in Afghanistan*. Additional research support for the larger study came from CAPS Research Analysts Hekmatullah Azamy, Sayed Maqsoodi, Ehsanullah Kamal, and Dr. Monsoor Majaab. Data Visualization Specialist Mitchell Sipus also lent his social networking expertise. Finally, Deputy Head of Research Halim Kousary and former CAPS Director Mr. Hekmat Karzai contributed key substantive and logistical insight.

foreign intervention and a government that fit their own understanding of Islam. Though only a minority of respondents reportedly broke an alliance in this way, these commanders lamented what they felt was the loss of a true Islamic jihad.

Conclusions

Although this research was conducted on an exploratory basis, CAPS' study can provide insight for future studies and some potential policy lessons. Upper- and lower-level command was supportive of alliance construction, though typically for differing reasons. Lower-level soldiers primarily sought strength in alliances, while commanders were more strategic toward deeper ambitions. Tribal elders hold almost no influence within alliance formation, yet communities do play a supportive role once the alliance is established, if at least to not disrupt the fragile stability introduced via the alliance.

Despite the fragmented nature of the insurgent landscape, responses to this study suggest that if commanders and leadership lay down their arms, their soldiers will follow. A political reconciliation between Taliban and Afghan government leadership would probably do the most to encourage soldiers to lay down their arms by officially ending the conflict, but it is also the most difficult. While efforts at peace talks should be bolstered, political reconciliation efforts at the provincial, district, and community levels must begin immediately and in earnest.

Notes

1. CAPS, in partnership with USIP, conducted mixed-method, field-based research regarding alliance formation, structure, maintenance, and resilience among armed groups in five Afghan provinces (Kabul, Herat, Helmand, Kunduz, and Nangarhar). The study took place over eleven months, from December 1, 2013, to November 30, 2014; in total, CAPS researchers conducted 145 individual interviews with active, reintegrated, and detained militant commanders, soldiers, community elders, and political leaders from approximately forty-two groups in the provinces. The majority of the interviewed groups self-identified as active or former Taliban, although the Hizb-e Islami of Gulbaddin Hekmatyar and other independent armed opposition groups were also studied within the sample. This research primarily focused on mid- and sub-level commanders and their subordinate soldiers. Alliances were defined as an agreement between two commanders to work together to further the strategic military or ideological goals of the organization. Most often, these working agreements were made between two mid-level commanders; however, agreements between commanders either at the request or independent of the higher commander are also present in the sample.



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