

The fighting season – the unreported Afghan war and peace-making at the district level
Michael Semple, 1 Jul 2020

Every night for the past two weeks, squads of Taliban fighters on motorbikes have descended on the government-held villages around Qaisar district centre, to renew their attacks on the security posts. Typically about a hundred men join the attack. Most are armed with Kalashnikovs or rocket launchers. A few are specialists armed with Russian sniper rifles and the latest thermal imaging night sights. They are waging a war of attrition, rather than launching a decisive offensive. In each night of fighting there are usually a handful of casualties on each side. On Monday night it was the Taliban who came off worse, with four men killed and three injured. While the Taliban snipe at and try to storm the security posts, the local militia defending their villages have started to lay ambushes for the attackers. The Taliban killed on Monday night walked into one of these ambushes. In the two week assault, the Taliban have managed to occupy one of the villages on Qaisar's outskirts, Sufi Qala. But generally Qaisar's defenders have held their ground. The cost paid has been high. The fighting has led to another round of forced displacement. The Taliban have particularly targeted Arzalik village, which I visited before Eid. In Arzalik I met Bismillah Commandant, who heads a local militia supported by the NDS. With controversial commander Nizam Qaisari off the scene, Bismillah has a key role in rallying the defence of Qaisar, which has led to his village being targeted. On Tuesday, a resident of Arzalik told me that all but about thirty families from the five hundred normally resident in Arzalik have had to flee their houses in the latest fighting. A few have managed to escape to the provincial capital, Maimana, while most have had to find shelter in the centre of town or villages further from the front line. My friend in Arzalik reported that at last a UN humanitarian team has shown up and is doing an assessment of the displaced. He also commented that the aerial patrols which take place over Qaisar most nights have lost their deterrent value, because both sides have worked out that they are only watching and do not intervene in the fighting.

This grinding assault on Qaisar is part of a war taking place largely out of sight of the rest of the world, and indeed only sporadically reported on within Afghanistan. I was provoked into writing this note by the comments by Sohail Shaheen, spokesman of the Taliban Political Commission in Qatar. On Tuesday, Sohail boasted that Taliban political chief Mullah Baradar had claimed, in his latest phone call with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, that Taliban had helped reduce violence by refraining from attacks on big cities. In my visit to Qaisar before the start of this assault, I was impressed by the thriving bazaars, fertile agriculture and even the cultural scene. A local high school teacher hosted a stimulating discussion with a group of educated youngsters, in which topics ranged from previous egregious human rights abuses (Qaisar was the scene of an infamous massacre) to a review of world politics. The point is that the Qaisar which the Taliban are trying to capture is an important commercial and administrative centre. But nightly raids on Qaisar are simply not as newsworthy as the media-oriented suicide bombings in Kabul, from which the Taliban are currently refraining.



Figure 1 Bismillah Commandant

And of course, the Taliban operation against Qaisar is only one small front in their nation-wide operation, which they have launched unannounced in recent months. In the North West alone, over the past two weeks, apart from Qaisar, Taliban forces have repeatedly attacked Qaram Qol, Daulatabad and Shirin Tagab of Faryab Province, Qarqin, Kham Ab, and Aqcha of Jowzjan province and Charbolak, Daulatabad-Balkh and Balkh centre of Balkh province. These are not localised fights. They are part of a systematic campaign, mandated, orchestrated and financed by the Quetta-based Taliban leadership. The campaign is conducted by the loyalists appointed as walis and commanders in the Taliban's Islamic Emirate structures

in the northern provinces, as in other parts of Afghanistan. To underline the point about the central organisation helping to drive the fighting, the Taliban leadership have sent the newly designated head of their north western regional military command, Daud Muzamil, to tour the provinces under his command. Muzamil, who is one of the Taliban's senior-most military figures has held a series of meetings with walis and field commanders, urging them to stay loyal and fight hard. During Muzamil's tour, not only has the fighting intensified, the Taliban have moved ahead with establishing or expanding military training centres in the provinces, to ensure a steady local supply of suicide bombers and martyrdom-ready commandos. Mozamil and the military commission efforts to escalate the fighting, and Sohail and the Taliban's diplomatic effort in Qatar are part of an integrated effort. Sohail and colleagues in a very real sense provide the diplomatic cover needed for Mozamil to lead the fight. Mozamil is able to drive through the provinces of Afghanistan rallying the troops because he is confident that US air assets will not strike him, because of the restraint exercised since the 29 February US-Taliban deal. He had a narrow escape from an Afghan air-force strike in Saripul, on Saturday, but survived because Afghanistan lacks the capability for precision strikes. The Taliban did not call off or even postpone their annual offensive, in response to the deal with the US. As in previous years, the Taliban selected a name for the offensive – Fateh Akhiri, or final victory. But this year they are running their campaign without having published the name. Thus Sohail can tweet claiming that the Taliban are involved in a peace process, while Muzamil can drive around urging the troops to wage a jihad until victory over the Afghan government.



Figure 2 High fashion in Qaisar's bazaar!

Perhaps the least reported front of the current war in Afghanistan is the efforts of thousands of Afghans to stop the war, or at least to reduce the violence and buy time for peace-making. In multiple locations across Afghanistan I have been able to document efforts by civilians (often the ubiquitous tribal elders or local clerics) as well as serving members of the Taliban movement, to blunt the offensive and stop the fighting. Indeed, the emerging widespread bottom-up resistance to renewed Taliban fighting is one of reasons impelling leaders such as Muzamil to take to the road and urge Taliban to fight.

In Qaisar during June, three civilian delegations travelled from the town centre to Taliban headquarters in Shakh, about fifty kilometres away. They tried to petition the Taliban military district chief Ismail, one of the few Uzbek commanders who has joined the fight Khaleel and the Taliban civilian district chief Allauddin. In line with Afghan political culture, the petitioning effort was highly orchestrated and enjoyed the support of several Taliban leaders, who had to stay in the background. The message of the Qaisar elders was that the Taliban should call off their offensive on the town and surrounds because of the losses being imposed on civilians, not least because the fighting coincides with peak agricultural season. Two of the nightly attacks set the standing wheat crop on fire. The civilians also accused the Taliban of fanning ethnic tensions, as the Taliban sent a largely Pashtun force, raised in the area west of Qaisar, to attack villages with a predominantly Uzbek population. Alongside the intervention by civilians, senior Taliban figures both complained about the fighting through Islamic Emirate channels and lobbied commanders to keep their men out of the fighting. The civilian delegations and behind-the-scenes efforts of Taliban seniors have not yet turned off Muzamil and the military commission's offensive. Indeed, Taliban uluswal Ismail hid from the delegations sent to see him. But the grassroots mobilisation against the fighting has helped to delegitimise it. There is a growing sense that the Taliban military commission is imposing a conflict on the region against the will of the population and without the support of many who were long loyal to the movement. This has consequences for the Taliban's ability to sustain the war and probably helps explain why a hundred Taliban fighters have been assembling for the nightly raids, rather than a thousand.

The efforts to restrain the Taliban offensive which we have been able to document in Faryab are replicated in multiple other fronts where the Taliban military commission has been trying to escalate the conflict. Bala Morghab in neighbouring Badghis again provides an instructive example. There, a caucus, organising within the district Taliban, was successful in de-escalating the conflict during the three month period late March to late June. In the weeks after the US-Taliban deal, the Taliban wali, with assistance from central Asian militants attached to the Taliban there, launched a high casualty suicide attack against an

outpost of the ANA base close to the district centre. After this attack, the caucus ensured a go-slow. There were no further major attacks on the army base and Bala Morghab commanders avoided supplying fighters to the raids which Taliban staged against government positions in neighbouring districts. During this period, the caucus orchestrated demands from civilian representatives to allow the return of some of the almost 10,000 IDPs who had fled villages around the district centre, during the Taliban's battles for control of Bala Morghab. A major IDP return has now taken place and shops on the outskirts of the district centre bazaar have been able to reopen after a yearlong closure. This partial normalisation has been a major achievement of local peace-making in Bala Morghab.

However, in the last week of June, there was a flare-up in fighting around the army base. Taliban strafed at helicopters trying to land there and ambushed a party of soldiers which ventured out of the base. In return, the Afghan Air Force launched a series of air raids on villages in central Bala Morghab. The brunt of these aerial bombardments seems, yet again, to have been borne largely by civilians. Members of the caucus visited houses which had been bombed and concluded civilian casualties. In the air strike on 28th of June, a poor



Figure 3 Ghulam's Sheep pen bombed in Bala Morghab

sheep farmer and his son were killed, along with a dozen sheep, blown up in their pen. Whatever may be the evaluation of the targeting by the Afghan Air Force in Bala Morghab, the flare-up in Bala Morghab in the last week of June hit home the message that, where the Taliban launch attacks against government positions, it triggers an escalation, the price of which is paid by civilians – again, an imposed local

war. Members of the Taliban caucus reported, in the wake of the episode, that they plan to step up the efforts to normalise the district, by excluding fighters from the district centre, on the east bank of the Morghab, to encourage further IDP return. But that still leaves the challenge of addressing the siege of the army base on the west bank.

In Paktia, similar patterns in the conflict have been documented. A peace caucus operating within the Taliban in Zurmat district has successfully signed up locally based Taliban commanders to cooperate in maintaining a local ceasefire. During April and May, the outreach and protocols signed by the caucus were key to keeping the district free of major incidents. However, Zurmat is politically and strategically important and so remains one of the most contested districts in the South East, with the Haqqani Network and remnants of Al Qaida both trying to assert their presence. After Eid, in late May, there has been a concerted effort by the Taliban military commission, to escalate in Zurmat. A mobile unit of several hundred fighters moved into the district, apparently having crossed the border from Kurram in Pakistan. The unit seemed mainly interested in a show of force and so conducted a series of mosque meetings, lecturing the population on the necessity for the Taliban's plan to sustain the war until they had overthrown the government. They also brought with them a supply of IEDs, which they deployed on several of the district's access roads. But the

population seemed singularly unconvinced by the message of these outside fighters, whom they had to feed, of course. The head of the Zurmat caucus reported that locals considered the uninvited presence of this force to be a new “occupation”. Then, in the last week of June, the Islamic Emirate’s new wali for Paktia, Mullah Qassim, showed up in Zurmat with another party of fighters, and started plotting a major attack on the district headquarters. His arrival was part of the latest deployment ordered by Qayyum Zakir, the head of the Taliban’s military commission for the eastern zone. Zakir ordered all walis to report to their area of operations and step up attacks by their forces on government-controlled areas. The new push by Zakir and the military commission altered the nature of the challenge for local peace-makers such as the Zurmat caucus. From March to May, achieving relatively peaceful conditions in Zurmat depended upon winning the cooperation of locally-based commanders and armed groups, backed up by multiple gatherings of tribal elders to legitimise the idea of a pause to the conflict. In this, the caucus was largely successful and its leaders emerged confident. But as the military commission has stepped up its campaign, post-Eid, the challenge of local peace-making has become one of resistance – how to mobilise local forces to render it impossible for the wali or external units to operate in the district. The caucus leadership reports that it has adjusted its strategy and has a way forward. It remains to be seen whether local peace-making really can thwart Qassim and Zakir’s efforts to escalate the war in Zurmat.



Figure 4 Caucus outreach in Zurmat

The experience of all the case studies mentioned above, from both the south and the north of the country, indicates that local peace-making is intimately linked with national-level developments in the war. The fact that so much of the war now takes place well

beyond media or academic scrutiny means that those dynamics are little appreciated. The Faryab, Badghis and Paktia examples suggest that there is an emergent popular rejection of the Taliban’s efforts to sustain the fight against the Afghan government, in the wake of the US-Taliban deal. The Taliban’s central structures are struggling to sustain the fight in the face of reactions which range from scepticism to resistance. The Taliban team in Doha, which the international community had hoped would help bring peace, has instead been intent on boosting the legitimacy and authority of the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate. In all the fronts which we have documented, Taliban have invoked the authority of the Islamic Emirate to sustain and escalate the fighting. So far, if there is any progress in practical peace-making, it is through the efforts of Afghanistan’s local peace-makers, rather than Sohail and his comrades in Doha.