**Taliban Movement**

The Taliban Movement or just Taliban is a Sunni Islamist fundamentalist pro-Pashtun movement which effectively ruled most of Afghanistan from 1996 until 2001. It gained diplomatic recognition from only three states: the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, as well as the unrecognized government of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. The most influential members, including Mullah Mohammed Omar, the leader of the movement, were simple village mullahs (junior Islamic religious scholars), most of whom had studied in madrassas in Pakistan. The Taliban movement derived mainly from Pashtun of Afghanistan and North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan, but also included many non-Afghan volunteers from the Arab world, as well as Eurasia, and South Asia.

**Rise to power**

The Taliban, which is a corruption of the word ‘Tulaba’, referring to students of Islam, originated around 1993-1994. The group was started by Pakistani Interior Minister Naseerullah Babar, who struck a deal with exiled Afghan communist general Shahnawaz Tanai to break the deadly chaos that had engulfed Afghanistan with the complete fall of its communist government (ironically as a result of Pakistan's sponsorship of Tanai's failed coup to gain control of the floundering communist regime.) The first recorded appearance of Taliban was as an escort to a "trade delegation" launched by Babar out of Quetta to Kabul, which was able to soundly defeat all warlord opposition it encountered in its path.

The Taliban quickly swept across Afghanistan, absorbing or eliminating any rivals. The lone holdouts who refused to accept the Pakistan-sponsored Taliban were Northern resistance leader Ahmad Shah Masoud, and General Abdul Rashid Dostum from the communist regime that had collapsed due to the coup attempt. A protracted battle then ensued between Taliban and the Northern Alliance, primarily around the northern outskirts of Kabul, but also raging far and wide across the North, including Herat and Kunduz.

With its ambitious venture to break the chaotic impasse in Afghanistan and the promise of reaching the resource wealth of Central Asia beyond, Pakistan was soon able to get endorsement from the Clinton administration, Saudi Arabia and United Kingdom to aid, mobilize and expand the Taliban. A steady outflux of graduates from Pakistani madrassas (primitive religious fundamentalist schools), gave Taliban an essentially inexhaustible supply of new recruits. As the ranks of the fundamentalist cadres swelled, the original core component of Pakistan and Afghan soldiers were able to assume more specialized tactical leadership and operational roles.

Pakistan however decided to build up the persona of a fundamentalist leader named Mullah Omar, in order to put a more public face on what, up until then, had been a largely faceless movement taking direction from the shadows. The inexorable mullah-ization of Taliban became Pakistan's means of ensuring total control of the militia, with independent-thinking non-fundamentalists quickly being subordinated or marginalized. Ironically, as more and more fundamentalists swelled Taliban's ranks, the more the fundamentalist Frankenstein with Mullah Omar at its apex began to go out of even Pakistan's ability to control.

Some have concluded that Pakistan’s government was successful in obtaining the support of the US by posing the Taliban as a temporary solution to rid the ‘Jihadi’ groups out of the picture. The United States had come to believe that the Taliban would bring back the old monarch Zahir Shah of Afghanistan to power upon their success in gaining control of Afghanistan. Some members of the Taliban, mainly Mullah Rabbani, (not to be confused with B. Rabbani from the Northern Alliance faction) and a few others were actually active supporters of Zahir Shah and wanted to bring back the old monarch into power after they had taken control of Kabul. According to analysts, Washington was sold on the idea that the old monarch would eventually return to Afghanistan due to powerful lobbying by Unicol (American Oil Company) and Pakistan.

With the funding of Saudi Arabia, the intelligence of UK and US, and the handpicked Talibs by Pakistan, a successful force emerged and gained control of an estimated 80% of Afghanistan in less than 2 years. However, soon after the conquest of Kabul, it became evident that the Taliban would under no circumstances transfer power and control to Zahir Shah. The question arises as to why foreign governments supported and aided the Taliban, as we have briefly touched upon this topic, it definitely needs further elaboration. As always it boiled down to at least two motives: financial (energy) and power (land).

The first motive to be discussed is the financial one. Billions of dollars laid at stake for foreign nations and companies. Pakistan, America, and other western nations wanted to exploit the natural resources of Central Asia. A proposed gas pipeline from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan via Afghanistan, towards South Asia (Indian Ocean) was envisioned. This project was heavily endorsed by Pakistan, Unicol, Delta (a Saudi oil company), and a number of other small investors. An investment of 3 billion dollars had been accumulated for the development of the pipeline.

Thus an extremely strong financial motive existed to support a puppet government in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the Rabbani (Masood) government had made a fundamental flaw while in power. They also dealt with the pipeline option, only to reject the proposal of Unicol, which many suspects was heavily endorsed by Pakistan and opted for the Argentinean oil company Bridas. Bridas was most likely the more lucrative choice for the Rabbani government but far less lucrative politically. Thus their existed a strong financial reason to support and aid a new group.

The second motive was the boundary issue resulting from the Durand Treaty between Afghanistan and the British, imposed by Great Britain in 1893. The treaty had a life span of a 100 years and expired in 1993, and the lost territory would have had to be dealt with once again, which was now part of Pakistan. In 1919, Afghanistan went to its third war with the British, to regain lost territory and gain complete sovereignty over its foreign Affair engagements. Afghanistan have been given credit for winning the war, but lost on making a beneficial treaty with the British to regain back Pashtoonistan (NWFP, current day Pakistan). Zahir Shah’s government in the past had contended for the lost territory and in 1947 had objected to the creation of Pakistan in the United Nations.

Furthermore, in 1955, all diplomatic ties with Pakistan and Afghanistan had been severed and the two nations stood strongly against each other. Thus according to many supporters of Zahir Shah, Pakistan coerced Washington into believing that the Taliban were acting on their own when they refused to transfer power back to the old monarch as envisioned by Washington initially.

Leaving the international political arena aside, let us focus on success and shortfalls of the Taliban within Afghanistan. With all their shortcomings, the Taliban were successful in accomplishing three important goals, which their predecessors could not bring about. Their accomplishments were the following: a centralized government, national security, and a de-weaponized Afghanistan. Another great accomplishment that the Taliban succeeded in, had been the drug issues.

Afghanistan had been plagued with producing drugs for a number of years, and with the war shattering other sectors of the economy, it became the number one export of the country. Afghanistan being one of the largest producers of drugs, soon turned into an almost drug free environment with one Taliban Decree. Without a doubt, no other regime in Afghanistan had ever come as close as the Taliban to rid the country of this vice. While these were extremely important achievements, very little else was accomplished to help the people of Afghanistan in other ways, such as providing jobs, food, and education.

People often claimed that the Taliban brought peace and subdued the ferocious people of Afghanistan. Yet many question whether Ahmad Shah Masood, Rabbani and the others did not want peace as well? They question: Was their intention to only spread chaos and have their own people turn against them?

The Taliban were unfortunately extremely callous when it came to successfully running a country. Rather than pursuing responsible good governance, they instead pursued ruthless oppression and rule of the gun. They overlooked the fact that the nation was starving and facing calamity in every possible way imagined. It seems they were more worried about people having beards than the fact that they were starving and dying by the thousands due to the most menial health issues. Many rational people have voiced out the following questions to better describe the Taliban methodology.

By enforcing a beard will the stomachs of the poor be filled? By enforcing a beard, will the country start to reconstruct on its own? Will it solve the atrocious living conditions of the refugees living in Iran and Pakistan? Will it stop people from killing one another? Will it stop people from raping others? Will it change people’s heart and make them better Muslims simply because they are forced to put on a beard?

Is it absolutely pertinent for a government to waste its minimal resources in forcing people to have beards, when the nation faces dilemmas unimaginable in this day and age? Issues such as hunger, starvation, over 6 million refugees, 3.5 million handicapped, the 2 million people martyred, drug trafficking, drug production, human trafficking, child slavery, and mass destruction of the entire infrastructure, (ranging from dams, to roads, to electric wires and mass destruction of every aspect of agriculture) extremely minimal education facilities and not one Islamic university which can act to change the people’s hearts rather than make them behave and live in fear.

Yet another problem with the Taliban was inadequate leadership.

Mullah Omar, who was proclaimed the ‘Amir-ul-Momineen’, was proud of the fact that he had only spoken with two western journalists in his whole life period. This can only be derived from ignorance and misunderstanding of Islam. Mullah Omar, who perhaps had good intentions, had been illegitimately put into a position he was clearly neither suited for nor one he merited. In fact, people claim that Pakistan chose Mullah Omar because they knew he could easily be influenced and controlled.

Many suspects that Mullah Omar, whose own Islamic education was very limited, was easily swayed by the state-funded mufti's of Pakistan. Many people have even claimed that the Taliban were mere pawn for Pakistan’s larger plan of enlarging its land mass and thus achieve their own political agenda. Many analysts have claimed that if the Taliban had a better understanding of Islam and not fallen prey to Pakistan, Afghanistan might not be in the desperate situation it is in today.

The Taliban ran into another major mishap in the summer of 1998. After repeated setbacks in the north and betrayal by certain northern commanders, the Taliban committed something unimaginable in the “Shomali plains” of the north. In the early stages around 1996-1997, General Malik (Dostom’s second general in command), overthrow Dostum and took over Mazar-e-sharif and temporarily sided with Taliban. Soon afterwards, he switched sides again only to betray the Talibs and participate in the killings of 6 to 8 thousand Talibs.

The Talibs were in the territory of Abdul Malik and were easily captured by Hezbe-Wahdat. A near genocide had taken place against the Taliban in the betrayal; according to some, many Talibs were butchered alive on the grave of the Hezbe-Wahdat ex-leader Mr. Mazari. Later the Taliban captured Mazari-shariff and killed scores of people in attempting to avenge themselves. In 1997, Ahmad Shah Masood devised a guerrilla tactic in the Shamali plains to defeat the Taliban advances. Masood was very successful in propagating an ethnic war and making the ethnic Tajik’s of the north believe that the Taliban (who were Pashtoon dominated) would slaughter them if the Taliban gained control of the north. In collaboration with the locals, Masood had deployed his forces to be stationed at people’s houses and other hidden places.

Upon the arrival of the Taliban, some locals, who had vowed pacts of peace with the Taliban, as well as Masood’s forces came out of hiding and in a surprise attack killed thousands of Talibs. Soon after, the Taliban put a major effort into taking control of the Shamali plains and attacking and revenging themselves on all the people of Shamali. They destroyed the farms and produce, indiscriminately killed many young men, uprooted everyone from their homes, and forced them to become refugees. Kamal Hossein, a special reporter for the UN, had written a full report on these and other war crimes that further insinuated and inflamed the issue of ethnicity.

Yet one must keep in mind that the Taliban with all their numerous flaws, they had brought about some positive changes in the country (such as the ones previously discussed). Many people would also argue that the Taliban, as uneducated and ruthless as they have been depicted, are far better than their counter parts, the Northern Alliance. Even according to Amnesty International and United Nations, the security of women has vastly improved under the Taliban in comparison to what it was under the Northern Alliance (Rabbani government in Kabul before the Taliban). The ruthless crimes of Northern Alliance towards the people of Afghanistan are still remembered by the Afghan, and evident in the fear they show towards the new regime.

**Culture**

In the languages spoken in Afghanistan and Northwestern Pakistan, Taliban means ‘students’. It is derived from the Arabic word for seeker or student, *talib*. Through certain Pakistani madrasahs, the Taliban may have also been influenced by the Deobandi School of thought which emphasizes piety, austerity, and the family obligations of men. They emerged from the ethnically Pashtun areas of Afghanistan. Many of the Taliban grew up in refugee camps in Pakistan.

**Life under Taliban government**

**Islamic law**

Once in power, the Taliban instituted a form of Shari'ah (Islamic law) which closely followed the traditionalist Wahabi school of Islam. Among the laws applied were Islamic punishments, administered by a religious police force, including amputation of one or both hands for theft and stoning for adultery.

The Taliban banned all forms of television, imagery, music and sports. In response to this ban the International Olympic Committee suspended Afghanistan from participation in the 2000 Summer Olympics. Men were required to keep their beards at a specified length: women were obliged to wear the burqa (a long cloak-like piece of clothing) when appearing in public, and failure to do so could attract a public beating.

**Opium trade**

The Taliban banned opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan in late 1997. But by 2000, Afghanistan's opium production still accounted for 75% of the world's supply. On July 27, 2000, the Taliban again issued a decree banning opium poppy cultivation. By February 2001, production had been reduced by 98%. Following the fall of the Taliban regime, the areas controlled by the Northern Alliance resumed opium production and by 2005 production was 87% of the world's opium supply. Most Afghan opium is sold in Europe and not the United States.

There was comment from the international human rights community on the brutality of the Taliban's anti-drug interdictions, including violent punishment of offenders. The U.S. State Department noted in 2001 that ‘Neither the Taliban nor the Northern Alliance has taken any significant action to seize stored opium, precursor chemicals or arrest and prosecute narcotics traffickers. On the contrary, authorities were said to continue to tax the opium poppy crop at about ten percent, and allow it to be sold in open bazaars, traded and transported.’

However, the Taliban had succeeded in cutting annual poppy production from a CIA-estimated 4,042 tons per year to only 81.3 tons per year. In 2001 The United States provided $43 million worth of supplies (primarily wheat) to humanitarian relief organizations for distribution to the people of Afghanistan, while continuing to criticize the Taliban's activities. This was widely reported by critics of U.S. policy (such as Robert Scheer) to be a $43 million reward to the Taliban for reducing poppy production. The Taliban subsequently raided the shipments, but no evidence has been offered to indicate that this was the United States' intention.

Poppy production hit a record high since the fall of the Taliban government. In 2002 an estimated 4,950 metric tons of opium gum potentially producing 582 metric tons of heroin were harvested. In 2006 an estimated record of 6,100 metric tons, an amount that exceeds global consumption by 30%, will be harvested.

**Women**

A member of the Taliban's religious police beating a woman in Kabul on August 26, 2001; photograph taken from footage filmed by the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). The footage can be seen here.

Women were strictly limited in their ability to work in public places. However, they were allowed to set up their own businesses from their houses, if they had the means to do so. While they were also permitted to work in certain medical positions, they could only treat female patients. Women with children were not permitted to do any work. The Taliban believed women should stay at home in order that their children did not have to grow up in the care of another, and also believed that work is the duty of the male in the house and to reject this duty was haram. Taliban did pay about 30,000 women the same amount of money they used to earn in some haram jobs or businesses and they would discontinue the job/business and stay at home.

The Taliban religion minister, Al-Haj Maulwi Qalamuddin, told the New York Times that ‘To a country on fire, the world wants to give a match. Why is there such concern about women? Bread costs too much. There is no work. Even boys are not going to school. And yet all I hear about are women. Where was the world when men here were violating any woman they wanted?’

While in power the Taliban claimed that the education of girls in rural Afghanistan was increasing, a UNESCO report said that there was ‘a whopping 65% drop in their enrollment. In schools run by the Directorate of Education, only 1 per cent of the pupils are girls. The percentage of female teachers, too, has slid from 59.2 percent in 1990 to 13.5 percent in 1999.’

Supporters of the Taliban suggested that the depression and the other problems plaguing Afghan women were the result of dire poverty, years of war, the bad economy, and the fact that many were left war widows, and could no longer provide food for their families without some sort of international aid.

The Taliban justified the requirement for women to wear the burqa by appeal to Islamic teachings which state that women must cover up her body in front of non-mahram men, and that both men and women should dress modestly. Some feminists saw the repression under the Taliban as a form of misogyny and gender apartheid.

**Children**

**Girls**

Most young girls were required to cover most of their bodies, but were normally not required to cover their entire body. The clothing they had to wear still allowed for more movement, and was more revealing, than the adult women's clothing. However, they could still be beaten for appearing in public without a male escort. They couldn't go to school. They were, however, able to go out for water alone.

**Boys**

Boys had more freedom than girls. They were allowed to go outside alone, go to school, and have a job. They were also counted as escorts for women and girls of any age. However, they still weren't allowed to use kites or any other children's [toys](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toy). Some girls dressed as boys so that they could provide for their family if their father had died or been sent to prison.

**Religious Minorities**

On June 19, 2001, the Taliban instituted a policy of requiring all Hindus living in their territories to wear distinguishing labels on their clothing to mark them as non-Muslims. The Taliban stated that this was done to keep them from being targeted by religious police enforcing Islamic law, but opponents claimed that this might have the opposite effect. Hundreds marched in Bhopal, India, in a demonstration against this law.

**Buddhas of Bamiyan**

In March 2001, the Taliban ordered the demolition of two statues of Buddha carved into cliffsides at Bamiyan, one 38 meters tall and about 1800 years old, the other 53 meters tall and about 1500 years old. The act was condemned by UNESCO and many countries around the world. The intentions of the destruction remain unclear. Mullah Omar initially supported the preservation of Afghanistan's heritage, and Japan offered to pay for the preservation of the statues. However, after a few years, a decree was issued claiming all idols must be destroyed as per Islamic law that prohibits any form of idol worship as [shirk](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shirk_%28idolatry%29) (i.e., a sin).

Locals claim that Pakistani and Saudi engineers were onsite as volunteers to help with the statues' destruction, and that Afghanistan's treasures were ferried across the border to be plundered by private collectors. The government of Pakistan (itself host to one of the richest and most antiquated collections of Buddhist art) implored the Taliban to spare the statues. Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates later denounced the act as savage. The destruction of these priceless historical monuments made the Taliban look barbarous in the eyes of many in both the West and the East.

During a visit to the US in March, 2000, Syed Rahmatullah Hashemi, a senior representative (at the age of 24 however) of the Taliban designated as the roving Ambassador, projected the Taliban's action not as an act of irrationality, but as an act of rage over the refusal of the UNESCO and some Western Governments to permit the Taliban to use for drought relief the funds sanctioned by them for repairing the war-damaged statues of the Buddha.

**Previous Western links**

In 1996, the Taliban were in discussion with UNOCAL in the USA and with Bridas in Argentina regarding a proposal to build a gas pipeline to run from Turkmenistan across Afghanistan to Pakistan. In 1997, a delegation from the Taliban spent several days at the UNOCAL headquarters in Sugar Land, Texas.

**Relationship with Osama bin Laden**

In 1996, Saudi Citizen Osama bin Laden moved to Afghanistan from Sudan. When the Taliban came to power, bin Laden was able to forge an alliance between the Taliban and his Al-Qaeda organization. It is understood that al-Qaeda-trained fighters known as the 055 Brigade were integrated with the Taliban army between 1997 and 2001. The Taliban and bin Laden had very close connections, which were formalized by a marriage of one of bin Laden's sons to Omar's daughter. During Osama Bin Laden's stay in Afghanistan, he had helped finance the Taliban.

After the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Africa, Osama Bin Laden and several Al Qaeda members were indicted in U.S. criminal court.

The Taliban protected Osama bin laden from extradition requests by the U.S. variably claiming that Bin Laden had ‘gone missing’ in Afghanistan or that Washington ‘cannot provide any evidence or any proof” that bin Laden is involved in terrorist activities and that “Without any evidence, bin Laden is a man without sin... he is a free man’. Evidence against Bin Laden included courtroom testimony and satellite phone records but no physical 'proof' to date links Bin Laden to allegations made by US intelligence and Government channels.

The Taliban continued to harbor Bin Laden after the September 11, 2001 attacks, protesting his innocence, yet also offering to hand him to a third nation. In 2004 before the US elections Bin Laden allegedly took personal responsibility for ordering the attacks on New York and Washington in a videotape broadcast on Al Jazeera.

**NATO invasion and displacement of Taliban**

On September 20, 2001 after an investigation by the FBI the U.S. concluded that Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden were behind the September 11, 2001 attacks. The U.S. made a five point ultimatum to the Taliban:

1. deliver to the US all of the leaders of Al Qaeda;
2. Release all imprisoned foreign nationals;
3. Close immediately every terrorist training camp;
4. Hand over every terrorist and their supporters to appropriate authorities;
5. Give the United States full access to terrorist training camps for inspection.

The Taliban rejected this ultimatum on September 21, 2001, stating there was no evidence in their possession linking Bin Laden to the September 11 attacks.

On September 22, 2001, the United Arab Emirates and later Saudi Arabia withdrew their recognition of the Taliban as the legal government of Afghanistan, leaving neighboring Pakistan as the only remaining country with diplomatic ties. On October 4, 2001, it is believed that the Taliban covertly offered to turn Bin Laden over to Pakistan for trial in an international tribunal that operated according to Islamic sharia law. Pakistan is believed to have rejected the offer. On October 7, 2001, before the onset of military operations, the Taliban made an open offer to try Bin Laden in Afghanistan in an Islamic court. This counter offer was immediately rejected by the U.S. as insufficient.

Shortly afterward, on October 7, 2001, the United States, aided by the United Kingdom and supported by a coalition of other countries including the NATO alliance, initiated military actions, code named Operation Enduring Freedom, and bombed Taliban and Al Qaeda related camps. The stated intent of military operations was to remove the Taliban from power because of the Taliban's refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden for his involvement in the September 11 attacks, and disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations. On October 14 the Taliban openly counteroffered to hand Bin Laden over to a third country for trial, but only if the Taliban were given evidence of Bin Laden's involvement in 9/11. The U.S. rejected this offer as well and continued with military operations.

Hostilities against the Taliban continued according to NATO plans. The ground war was mainly fought by the Northern Alliance, the remaining elements of the anti-Taliban forces which the Taliban had routed over the previous years but had never been able to entirely destroy. Mazar-i-Sharif fell to U.S.-Northern Alliance forces on November 9, leading to a cascade of provinces falling with minimal resistance, and many local forces switching loyalties from the Taliban to the Northern Alliance.

On the night of November 12, the Taliban retreated south in an orderly fashion from Kabul. This was sufficiently orderly, that on November 15, they released eight Western aid workers after three months in captivity (see Attacks on humanitarian workers). By November 13 the Taliban had withdrawn from both Kabul and Jalalabad. Finally, in early December, the Taliban gave up their last city stronghold of Kandehar and retired to the hilly wilderness along the Afghanistan - Pakistan border, where they remain today as a guerilla warfare operation, drawing new recruits and developing plans for a restoration of power.

**Resurgence of Taliban**

Most of the post-invasion Taliban fighters are new recruits, drawn again from that region's [madrassahs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madrassah) (madrassah means ‘school’ in Arabic). The more traditional Qur'anic schools are claimed by the U.S. to be the primary source of the new fighters. The insurgency, in the form of a Taliban guerrilla war, continues. However, the Pashtun tribal group, with over 40 million members, has a long history of resistance to occupation forces in the region so the Taliban themselves may comprise only a part of the insurgency.

By June 2006, the unrest was sufficiently notable that Afghan President Hamid Karzai, had taken the extraordinary measure of publicly criticizing the methods of western powers who worked to place him in power: ‘And for two years I have systematically, consistently and on a daily basis warned the international community of what was developing in Afghanistan and of the need for a change of approach in this regard.’ He added, ‘The international community [must] reassess the manner in which this war against terror is conducted.’

Before the summer 2006 offensive began, indications existed that NATO peacekeepers in Afghanistan had lost influence and power to other groups, including potentially the Taliban. The most notable sign was the rioting in May after a street accident in the city of Kabul.

The continued support from tribal and other groups in Pakistan, the drug trade and the small number of NATO forces, combined with the long history of resistance and isolation, lead to the observation that Taliban forces and leaders are surviving and will have some influence over the future of Afghanistan. A new introduction is suicide and terrorist methods not used in 2001. This points to an expansion of foreign Jihadist influence in the war. Russia designated the Taliban as a terrorist organization in July 2006.