

## The Taliban at War: 2001-2018

by Antonio Giustozzi, New York, Oxford University Press, November 1, 2019,  
380 pp., \$65.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9780190092399

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## BOOK REVIEW

**The Taliban at War: 2001–2018**, by Antonio Giustozzi, New York, Oxford University Press, November 1, 2019, 380 pp., \$65.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9780190092399

Among the many NATO-Afghanistan bases in Regional Command East in 2010–2011, Forward Operating Base (FOB) Finley-Shields in Nangarhar and FOB Joyce in Kunar had great care-package distribution points. Essentially a table with stuff sent from well wishers in the United States, the best finds in this reviewer's experience were Starbucks "Via" Instant coffee packs, especially any dark roast, and books. During one trip to FOB Joyce, Antonio Giustozzi's *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan 2002–2007* was an especially relevant and informative find among the books and candy left for soldiers to take.<sup>1</sup> In subsequent scholarship, Giustozzi continued to build upon this book to form a solid reputation as a Taliban expert. Most of his books, for this reviewer, fell into that rare category best titled "actually read" while other scholars' works typically formed piles for an unfortunately larger category labeled "working on it," or, "will get to this stack of books hopefully soon."

*Empires of Mud: Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan* (2009) and *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field* (2012), edited by Giustozzi, also stood out as helpful descriptions and analysis of this highly diverse and complex insurgent organization. One of the best qualities Giustozzi brought to bear in all of these works included historical contextualization which helped specialists and new students as they sought to better understand the Taliban. These qualities are also advanced in his newest book, *The Taliban at War, 2001–2018*. Through an assessment of the intra-politics of the Taliban's different shuras, along with the success and failures these shuras have achieved over the recent past, Giustozzi brings readers up to date on the Taliban's organizational status as it moved toward negotiations with the Afghan government. However, considering the rise of ISIS as a competitor, particularly in Nangarhar in 2015–2017, the Taliban seems convoluted even now as peace talks with the Afghan government stagger forward.

*The Taliban at War* is divided into eight chapters. Chapter one assesses the Taliban after October 2001 and its earliest efforts to regroup between 2002 and 2004. Chapter two analyzes the predominance of the Quetta Shura up to 2009 while chapters three and four examine the rise of the Peshawar and Miran Shah Shuras as competitors with the Quetta Shura. It is important to point out Giustozzi's commendable use of interviews with Afghan elders and Taliban members which he incorporates throughout his analysis. This provides nuance and insight into how local civilians and the Taliban, an often-bewildering diverse group with almost always competing interests and goals, viewed events on the ground and as it negotiated its future as a multi-faction conglomerate.

*The Taliban at War's* real treasure troves are chapter five, "The Taliban's Tactical Organization," and chapter six, "Organizational Adaptation." Readers developing syllabi for professional military education, whether at academies or war colleges, will find these chapters valuable when tackling the subject of adaptation. Giustozzi's analysis of tactical innovation is of particular relevance and is in useful dialogue with other assessments of adaptation in contemporary conflict, such as that found in David Kilcullen's recent work.<sup>2</sup> In an irregular warfare context, the positive qualities of the Taliban's polycentric organization are echoed, in fact, by Kilcullen who envisions this characteristic as a key to rapid adaptation. This is particularly true when confronting militarily powerful adversaries, as Kilcullen observes, writing "the non-standardization, organizational diversity, and small-unit autonomy of these groups may create ideal conditions for adaptive adversaries to evolve faster than we do."<sup>3</sup> Polycentricism, however, also has downsides which Giustozzi examines in a balanced manner.

The tactical and organizational overviews in chapters five and six chronologically assess the Taliban's military evolution. After 2003, this included its tendency toward increased guerrilla tactics,

reliance on Improvised Explosive Devices (IED), and foreign funding which facilitated opportunities to experiment, even though this created a dependency on Pakistan and Iran that politically pulled the Taliban apart in important ways. In his use of interviews, Giustozzi adds his own take on this matter, observing that “the main source of tactical innovation were the Pakistani and Iranian advisors whose influence was felt mainly in the West, but also as far away as Nangarhar, due to the training they provided to eastern Taliban” (142). The Taliban’s political problems, in navigating between Iranian and Pakistani influence, are an important facet of the book that specialists will appreciate. At the more local-level concerning operations, Giustozzi also addresses the importance of non-kinetic tactics, including intimidation and proselytizing, and tax collection. This latter task was central, both in terms of control over local societies, but also in keeping the organization solvent.

A critical facet contributing to Taliban factionalism included, and still includes, foreign funding. In 2014, local-level taxation, extortion, income associated with drug-smuggling, and business donations constituted approximately 20 percent of the Quetta, Miran Shah and Peshawar Shura’s revenues. The remaining 80 percent flowed from a combination of foreign governments (54 percent), private donors (10 percent), and from non-Taliban jihadist organizations (16 percent) (243). This broader financial situation created not only dependency on Pakistan and Iran, as noted, but also created critical implications for the different shuras’ legitimacy because Taliban competitors within Afghanistan, including the Islamic State, but also other militias (Lashgars), could criticize the Taliban as Pakistani and Iranian “stooges.” In the insurgent world, those are fighting words and Giustozzi points this out, writing “This (dependency) compromised the (Taliban’s) legitimacy as a resistance movement against a puppet government supported by the West. The abundance of funding destroyed the original romantic ethos of the Taliban and turned them into simply a colossal fighting machine, unsure of its overall aims” (245).

Popular support, as Giustozzi points out, is no less important in Afghanistan as it is anywhere else. Along with infighting, campaigns against schools, manipulation of civilians and indiscriminate mine-laying, these and other factors contributed to a degrading of ideological notions that the Taliban were the best protectors of Pashtunwali. The legitimacy of jihad that the Taliban advocated against non-Pashtun members in the government, and against infidel Western forces in ISAF, therefore, was compromised and this is an ongoing dilemma.

Organizationally, the Taliban’s polycentrism, created by several shuras forming different centers of power, is a major theme in chapter six. In contrast, in the Mujahidin days after 1979, the Soviet Union offered a common enemy against which to rally and centralization was still elusive. After reconsolidation of the Taliban in 2004, the United States and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan created a similar common enemy. Even then, the Taliban formed an often violently disjointed alliance that often fractured along tribal lines, despite a shared Pashtun ethnicity and conservative Sunni outlook. The problem in seeking a more centralized organization is found in how power is brokered. Different Shuras were, and remain, conflicted about the extent to which they were and are willing to give up local-based power in the name of consolidating into a greater common cause. The Taliban’s history, like those found among other insurgencies, especially anti-hierarchical ones, is a story of factionalism. Giustozzi does an admirable job holding his narrative together while describing the Taliban’s disintegration and its various reconfigurations across time.

The organizational tug-of-war between a *de facto* polycentrism and a more centralized Taliban, in fact, is at the heart of Giustozzi’s analysis. The polycentric nature of the Taliban, based primarily in the Quetta, Peshawar, and Miran Shah shuras, but also in others, such as the Rasool shura, contained both positive and negative characteristics. The Haqqani Network, in contrast to the shuras, appears to have had staying power largely because of their internal centralization, based in a patriarchal/family hierarchy, which remained in place, as well as in family hands, over decades since the Haqqani network’s founding during the Soviet occupation.

The larger story found in Giustozzi’s narrative primarily consists of recounting the ebb and flow of the Taliban’s attempt to navigate its polycentric nature while simultaneously seeking to glean positives from centralization when possible. Numerous commissions, the Quetta Military Commission is an

example, but also *loy mahazes* and other organizational structures, attempted to manage the polycentric nature of the Taliban. Yet, Pashtun political culture is historically allergic to hierarchical control and remains so today. Even strong leaders, such as Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar (before his arrest in 2010) and others, many of whom were acknowledged as skilled, virtuous, and competent by large swaths of Taliban, struggled to unite the organization along the lines that Mullah Omar was able to achieve in the years preceding 9/11. The fact that Mullah Omar's death was hidden for such a long time after his demise, a topic Giustozzi discusses, certainly magnified the problems of succession. This was exacerbated by the lack of written guidance on which factions could agree upon, that might unify the Taliban after Omar's death. These problems may remind readers of the political conflict and dissolution found in other movements and empires. Succession, of course, characterizes a great deal of history since at least Alexander the Great's death in 323 B.C.E., and certainly long before that too.

The book's remaining chapters and conclusion, after Giustozzi's analysis of Taliban tactics and organization, focus on events in and after 2014. The conclusion's title, "The Impossible Centralization of an Anti-Centralist Movement" amply reveals this part of the book's content. Giustozzi's overarching goal for this project, which is centered on assessing the evolution of the Taliban's military organization, is certainly successful. No book, however, can cover everything. The most noticeable omissions include the Taliban's information operations campaign and adoption of communication technology to promote its cause. The capacity of the Taliban's Information Operations is referenced, but a more detailed analysis, considering Giustozzi's expertise, would have been illuminating. The Taliban, for example, used Twitter to promote its 2011 spring offensive, Operation Badr, before NATO in Afghanistan even had a Twitter account set up. NATO in Afghanistan's Twitter account was established in July 2011.<sup>4</sup> For all the talk of American commanders' ability to "dominate the battlespace," the Taliban had the inside track when exploiting their attacks on the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, U.S. and Indian Consulates, and the accidental burning of Korans at Bagram Airbase and the purposeful burning of them by a fundamentalist Christian parish leader in Florida, also in 2011.

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's website, "Voice of Jihad," was also important in the information sphere because it not only presented the Quetta Shura's analysis of events but promulgated its long-term goals and ideological framework. Taranas, a mixture of chants and poetry, and "Night Letters" are also long-held approaches found in Taliban propaganda and Giustozzi points this out. Still, how these outlets contributed to the Taliban's broader military evolution might have been more fully developed. Similarly, the critical consequences of "insider attacks," whether "green-on-blue" (Afghan security forces attacks on ISAF) or "green-on-green" (Afghan security forces attacks on other Afghan forces), are discussed only briefly. In 2011–2012, this was such a serious matter that ISAF created the "Guardian Angels" program to help prevent these events. The Taliban's infiltration of government forces forced ISAF to institute even more severe force-protection measures than existed in 2010 and earlier.


Aside from these minor criticisms, however, Giustozzi brings so much useful information to the table that this book may inspire significant future research. Two examples of this may suffice to illustrate *The Taliban At War's* value. First, the wealth of data found across three detailed annexes is important and centralizes a great deal of information for students, as well as specialists. Funding, casualty reports, rate and types of attacks, and especially organizational charts of the Taliban's chain of command in 2006, 2013, and 2016 are especially helpful. Also important, Giustozzi points to the development of Taliban special forces, the "Sare Qeta," in his epilogue. It is likely that data on this group are difficult to gather but he points out that "the Sare Qeta have become the cornerstone of the Taliban's strategy" and that "much of the increased casualty rate of the Afghan security forces appears to have been due to this shift of the Taliban towards greater military professionalism" (257). The importance of foreign support, primarily training provided by Hezbollah in Lebanon and sponsorship by Iran's Revolutionary Guards, is also a subject deserving further analysis.

Giustozzi's narrative skill, analytical authority, and long-standing reputation as an expert on the Taliban and events in Afghanistan after 2001 are advanced in *The Taliban at War*. Faculty developing professional military education at war colleges and academies, and especially with those interested in

adaptation and innovation, will find much that may be of use in their courses and individual research. Specialists will particularly benefit from Giustozzi's comprehensive and detailed accounting of inter-shura competition and the net advantages and liabilities differing Taliban organizations endured while fighting ISAF and Afghan government forces. Islamic State analysts, finally, will also find Giustozzi's assessment of the Islamic States in Khogyani and Sherzad districts in Nangarhar Province of interest. Technically, while often more analytical than some of his earlier work, *The Taliban At War* deserves to remain in the "must read" category, even if other worthwhile books might pile up nearby.

## Notes

- 1 Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan 2002-2007* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 2 David Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest learned to Fight the West* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020).
- 3 *Ibid.*, 51.
- 4 For NATO-Afghanistan's Twitter account, see <https://twitter.com/NATOscr> (accessed July 12, 2020).

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