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by Caleb D. King III

While the Taliban's unopposed takeover of the Afghan government in [August 2021](#) caught most of the world by surprise, [many Afghans knew](#) this day was coming since the first U.S. forces arrived in October 2001. The students, or [Taliban in Pashto](#), have been engaged in constant armed conflict since the [Soviet invasion of Afghanistan](#) in 1979, making them very experienced guerilla fighters. The truth is, the Taliban never wanted a war with the United States and were probably shocked when the U.S rejected their [offer](#) to turn Osama Bin Laden over in October 2001. However, the Taliban's offer of Bin Laden's extradition does not absolve them of the horrible atrocities they committed against the Afghan people that were nothing short of a small genocide - the [crime of crimes](#).

The Taliban learned a great deal about U.S. military tactics, both from engaging in direct combat with U.S. forces, and in many cases, being [trained](#) by U.S. forces. The Taliban learned with deadly consequences that U.S. precision airstrikes are particularly effective, a capability that can be launched without the need for troops on the ground. The Taliban learned to use the aftermath of these lethal strikes as a very effective [recruiting tool](#) for new fighters. The Taliban learned the Afghan National Army (ANA) had grown to be very effective in keeping them at bay but was rendered ineffective without U.S. contractors to perform vital [maintenance](#) on Afghan Air Force aircraft. The Taliban knew the ANA was simply incapable without air cover or medical evacuation capability and seized the opportunity. It might be correct to say the ANA lost the will to fight, but the statement is misleading without the context of why they lost it.

Cell phones and the [internet did not exist](#) in Afghanistan in 2001. Today, Afghanistan has a [modern internet and cellular network](#) that reaches most of the country's population centers. Access to the internet has most certainly changed Afghanistan. Even a satellite television was a rarity in 2001. The internet brings news, art, culture, education, and sadly, radicalization. Almost every western terrorist since September 11, 2001, [was radicalized](#), at least in part through the use of the world wide web.

The internet is both a blessing and a curse. It brings new ideas and violent extremist ones, which the [Taliban is using with effectiveness](#).

The Taliban of 2021 is more moderate after 20 years of conflict and increased engagement with other countries. This does not mean the Taliban will protect women's rights and beliefs that are not in line with their very extremist interpretation of Sunni Islam. Just days after taking Kabul in August 2021, the Taliban were already [painting women's faces on advertisements at hair salons](#), a sign that oppression of women's rights is coming despite [Taliban statements](#) that they would respect these rights. Most Muslims worldwide are highly [offended by the many horrendous crimes](#) against humanity committed by the Taliban

in the name of the religion of peace. A kinder, gentler, and more tolerant Taliban is certainly progress - but it simply will not be enough.

The dreamers, the educated, the modern thinkers are the Afghans leaving the country; the future is bleak for those who stay. The mentality of the Afghans choosing to support a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan is perhaps the best predictor of what the future holds - and it does not look good. We can only hope the Taliban will not allow Afghanistan to become a safe haven for another terrorist group that seeks to harm the West.

The Taliban are learning that a valley in the Hindu Kush about 2 hours north of Kabul may continue to be their [Achilles heel](#). Neither the Soviets nor the Taliban held the Panjshir, probably because the valley is almost impenetrable with treacherous mountains making it easily [defendable](#). The origin of the name is disputed, but it most likely means [five lions](#), directly translated from Farsi (پنج شیر). The Panjshir is the home of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the legendary commander of the Afghanistan resistance and staunch enemy of the Taliban who was assassinated by Al Qaida terrorists on [September 9, 2001](#).

Today, the valley is home to Massoud's son, Ahmad Massoud, a graduate of the British military academy at [Sandhurst](#). Along with Afghanistan's Vice President, Amrullah Saleh, Massoud is leading the [National Resistance Front](#) (NRF) from the Panjshir, where many Afghan soldiers [sought refuge](#) before the fall of Kabul. The Taliban most certainly know the Afghan soldiers brought supplies and weapons into the Panjshir, preparing for what is to come. The NRF and Taliban have a [common enemy](#) in ISIS-K, which may promote some temporary cooperation to achieve a common objective. Aside from watching what is brewing in the Panjshir Valley, the Taliban is most certainly looking for [Abdul Rashid Dostum](#). The Uzbek general has been an enemy of the [Taliban](#) since he broke ties with them. Dostum is likely [plotting](#) against the Taliban, who should not be surprised if they see him leading his men in a full assault on a [white horse](#), as he has done many times before.

Hopefully, the U.S. will quickly learn that support of the resistance in the Panjshir is vital to Afghanistan's future and the defeat of ISIS-K. U.S. support to the precursor of the NRF, the Northern Alliance, was instrumental in ensuring the swift ouster of the Taliban from Kabul in 2001, which was made famous in books like [Jawbreaker](#). This type of support to the NRF could be done with just a few troops on the ground in the relative safety of the Panjshir Valley and at tremendous savings because there is no need to build up massive bases funded by expensive contracts. The British used this technique very effectively in at least two insurgencies, [Malay](#) and [Dhofar](#); it is still not too late to use it in Afghanistan.

The Panjshiri resistance cannot be underestimated as they have lost many in this great and bloody game. Aside from Masoud's assassination, Saleh's sister was brutally [tortured](#) by the Taliban in 1996, and he has not forgotten. Alexander the Great was warned about Afghan resolve: "May God keep you away from the venom of the cobra, the teeth of the tiger, and the [revenge of the Afghans](#)."

In the end, the most important lesson the Taliban ever learned was the value of [patience](#) in winning the long war in the [Graveyard of Empires](#). Alexander the Great might tell you this lesson the students knew long before they were called the Taliban or ever met an American. In 329 BCE, a group of Afghan tribal leaders told the mighty Macedonian leader that he might defeat them, "[but you will never defeat our poverty](#)" - the world has yet to learn just what that means.

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