

The Debate over Taliban Reconciliation

By Kara L. Bue and John A. Gastright

THE CHALLENGES TO peace and stability in Afghanistan spiked in 2008. The Taliban resurgence that began in 2006 continued to gain strength, with militants now capable of exerting influence over wide swaths of the countryside. Roadside bombs, assassinations, and carefully coordinated attacks on government and military targets have become common place. In the face of this rising violence, increased attention has been paid on how to resurrect positive momentum in a war and nation-building effort that has played second fiddle to Iraq for the last five years. Strategy reviews have been initiated, additional troops called for, and for the first time high level U.S. officials are talking openly about engaging in dialogue with the Taliban. While many believe that rethinking the existing strategy in Afghanistan is necessary, mere mention of talking to the Taliban has engendered heated debate. For some, it is a black and white issue, guided by principles of right and wrong. For others, the issue is grey, rooted in practicality. In the end, however, it is one that needs to be addressed in the context of a larger strategy. Overall, it is critical to view the concept of negotiating with the Taliban as one strategic element among others that has the potential to improve the chances for success in Afghanistan.

U.S. Officials Open to Reconciliation

Much of the conjecture about engagement began in 2008 following a flurry of media reports about possible negotiations with the Taliban. The reports fanned speculation of a formal dialogue by highlighting a meeting hosted by Saudi King Abdullah in September with representatives of the Taliban and of the Afghan government.¹ The reports quoted Britain's commander in Afghanistan, Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith, who said that negotiations with the Taliban could bring needed progress.² Other reports focused on Afghan President Hamid Karzai's appeal for peace to

Taliban leader Mullah Omar.³ This approach has since been publicly endorsed by both senior envoys from Afghanistan and Pakistan, who met at a two-day Pakistan-Afghanistan tribal elders jirga in Islamabad.⁴ Even Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of Hizb-i-Islami and one of the most brutal commanders in Afghanistan, has reportedly displayed a readiness for peace talks with the Karzai administration.⁵

Comments made last fall by senior U.S. officials spurred much debate. Defense Secretary Robert Gates and U.S. Army General David Petraeus each offered public support for engagement with insurgents who are willing to reconcile with the government as a means of reducing violence and isolating hardcore militants. As noted by Gates, "That is one of the key long-term solutions in Afghanistan, just as it has been in Iraq... Part of the solution is reconciliation with people who are willing to work with the Afghan government going forward."⁶

To many, these comments appeared to signal a significant change of approach in Afghanistan. Not only had the Taliban intentionally been excluded from the 2001 Bonn Agreement establishing the new Afghan state and institutions, but it had been pursued vigorously by international and Afghan forces with little inclination to talk. Suggesting that elements of the Taliban may now be allowed back into the fold through a form of political reconciliation seemed a sharp turn of events that was given all the more credence because of Petraeus' incoming role in Afghanistan as commander of U.S. Central Command. Petraeus had been the chief architect of the "Anbar Awakening" in Iraq, where the U.S. military successfully leveraged nationalist Sunni Arab insurgents as a means of driving a wedge between them and Sunni jihadists; a counterinsurgency strategy that many assumed he would employ against

insurgents in Afghanistan.

Critics Remain Doubtful

For critics of this approach, the once unthinkable idea of talking to the Taliban remains so. How could the Afghan government, the United States, and their allies consider negotiating with fundamentalist Islamist extremists who once brutally ruled Afghanistan, harbored terrorist Osama bin Ladin, and continue to be al-Qa`ida's allies and protectors? Would not a re-emergence of the Taliban amount to a human rights disaster and a giant leap backwards for the fledgling democracy?⁷ Moreover, what message would that send to hopeful Afghans about the future of their country, as well as to the Taliban and other insurgent groups about the United States and its seriousness in the war on terrorism?⁸ According to some, "the sudden courting of the Taliban leaders appears to be more an act of desperation, than strategy"⁹ in the face of growing threats in a complex and costly war. For others, it reflects an attempt by Karzai, in advance of upcoming elections, to cover up inadequacies of his often incompetent government.¹⁰

Today, with the worsening security situation and gains made by the Taliban, it is unclear whether they have any incentives to negotiate. This is especially true given that a portion of the movement's motivation stems from ideology and not politics. As Taliban commander Mullah Sabir told *Newsweek* magazine in November, "This is not a political campaign for policy change or power sharing or cabinet ministries. We are waging a jihad to bring Islamic law back to Afghanistan."¹¹

Furthermore, there is the nature of the Taliban itself. Although the "Taliban" are identified as a group, it is more correctly identified as a loose alliance, united in common violence. As Richard

1 Jason Burke, "Revealed: Secret Taliban Peace Bid," *Guardian*, September 28, 2008.

2 Christina Lamb, "War on Taliban Cannot be Won, says Army Chief," *Sunday Times*, October 5, 2008.

3 Aryn Baker, "Facing Reality in Afghanistan: Talking with the Taliban," *Time*, October 13, 2008.

4 Paul Koring, "Time to Talk with the Taliban, Governments Say," *Globe and Mail*, October 28, 2008.

5 Javed Hamim, "Hekmatyar Show Readiness for Conditional Peace Talks," *Pajhwok Afghan News*, October 29, 2008.

6 Jason Straziuso, "Taliban, Afghan Officials Meet in Saudi Arabia," *USA Today*, October 6, 2008.

7 Terry Glavin, "The Price of 'Peace' with the Taliban," *Vancouver Sun*, February 5, 2008, reflecting on comments by Dr. Sima Samar, the chairperson of Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission.

8 Cheryl Benard, "Talk to the Taliban? Not Now," *United Press International*, November 11, 2008.

9 Baker.

10 Ann Marlowe, "Don't Negotiate with the Taliban," *Wall Street Journal*, November 18, 2008.

11 Sami Yousafzai and Ron Moreau, "Taliban Two-Step: Can't Sit Down Yet," *Newsweek*, November 10, 2008.

Boucher, the assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, explained,

the component entities have different motivations for fighting, including religious ideology, political aspirations, tribal solidarity, and even temporary employment. They work together tactically when their interests converge, but there is a lack of real centralized command and control. To the extent there is a leadership group, it resides in Quetta, Pakistan, with Mullah Omar as a titular head. Other key figures include the extremist warlords, Hekmatyar and Siraj Haqqani, as well as many local figures who fight on the provincial or district level for autonomy, tribal, or other reasons.

In addition to this complexity are the questions about what it means to “talk” to the Taliban and whether any one element could enforce an agreement. It is also doubtful whether the approach used in Anbar Province could be easily transferred to Afghanistan, where elements of the Taliban share much of al-Qa`ida’s harsh brand of Islam and believe that they are running their own war; two factors that did not exist for Sunni nationalists in the Iraqi context.

Engagement Strategies

The rationale for engaging the Taliban in substantive talks rests primarily on the belief that the Taliban cannot be defeated militarily and any lasting peace requires a reconciliation process.¹² As General Petraeus said at a Heritage Foundation forum in October 2008, “This is how you end these kinds of conflicts.” There is “no alternative to reconciliation.”

That baseline assessment results in a differing opinion on whether the Taliban can be reconciled. Those who are encouraging engagement suggest that the looseness of the Taliban organization actually supports the argument for engaging in dialogue. It is the lack of a strong central command and

Taliban elements’ varied motivations for fighting that make them vulnerable to division.¹³ The focus in this context would be to appeal to the non-ideological insurgents who are tired of the fight and ready to return to a more peaceful daily life. For the ideologically disposed and senior members of the Taliban, it is recognized that such approaches may be insufficient absent military action but that “the availability

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of these talks as a political solution is important to Afghanistan’s eventual peace.”¹⁴ In either case, supporters of engagement acknowledge that certain preconditions are necessary prior to any dialogue. Current U.S. policy, for example, demands the following preconditions: the Taliban must accept the Afghan constitution, abandon violence, cut all ties with al-Qa`ida, and not be given power-sharing deals or territory to control. The United States also has consistently held that any such negotiation talks be Afghan-led.

The idea of an engagement strategy is not a new concept in the Afghan struggle. In April 2003, President Karzai first announced plans for a reconciliation policy in a speech before a gathering of *ulama* in Kabul, and in 2005 the Afghan government established the Independent Peace and Reconciliation Commission. In subsequent years, the Afghan cabinet adopted an action plan regarding reconciliation, and the Afghanistan National Assembly approved legislation

¹³ Fareed Zakaria, television interview of Dr. David Killcullen, an Australian counterinsurgency specialist who advises the U.S. and British governments, CNN, November 16, 2008.

¹⁴ These comments were made by Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard A. Boucher.

on amnesty. As noted by Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai, an adviser in the Afghan government,

attempts at outreach and reconciliation on a more local level also have been initiated with modest success by a number of actors—namely the Afghan government, nongovernmental organizations and the international community.¹⁵

Most would agree, however, that reconciliation efforts to date have lacked consistency and depth. As Stanekzai suggested, “The Afghan government and its international partners have offered conflicting messages, and there has been no consensual policy framework through which to pursue reconciliation in a cohesive manner.”¹⁶ The veracity of this argument can be appreciated when taking into account how Afghan officials offered amnesty to individuals such as Mullah Omar in direct contravention of UN Security Council resolutions that sanctioned those very leaders.¹⁷

Engagement Just One Element to Success

In the discussions about engagement, it has been easy to characterize the issue as binary—whether or not to talk to the Taliban. Given the complex nature of the Taliban and the social fabric of Afghanistan, however, the issue is far from that simple. Moreover, it is clearly not a question of whether talking to the Taliban will win or lose the war. Even supporters of engagement acknowledge that the Taliban have not publicly participated in talks and have not shown signs they are serious about negotiating. Even if they did, there is no guarantee any accommodation could be reached. Much more is required to secure a lasting peace in Afghanistan. What is important is to view the concept of talking to the Taliban for what it is: one element with the potential for improving chances of success in Afghanistan that needs to be considered as part of a larger, more coordinated strategy guided by well-defined goals.

That strategy would of course involve increased military forces and action. What is clear is that any discussions

¹² Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai, “Thwarting Afghanistan’s Insurgency: A Pragmatic Approach toward Peace and Reconciliation,” U.S. Institute of Peace Special Report, September 2008, p. 2.

¹⁵ Stanekzai, p. 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁷ The Security Council resolutions in question refer to UNSCR 1267 (1999) and 1735 (2006).

with the Taliban must be approached from a position of strength. To appeal to the Taliban in the current environment would likely embolden them further and validate their strategy. In this regard, the ongoing combat operations and additional forces bound for Afghanistan remain essential.

Despite the importance of increased troop levels in Afghanistan, they themselves cannot bring victory. Reconciliation is a necessary component of an overarching strategy. This does not only refer to reconciliation with Taliban elements, which has the potential for being part of the solution by offering an avenue for insurgents to come in from the cold, but it also refers to reconciliation of the Afghan government with its people. As Joanna Nathan, an Afghanistan analyst with the International Crisis Group, was quoted as saying in *Time Magazine* last year,

real reconciliation should be taking place at the grass roots, with Afghans who have become alienated from the government. If they can be persuaded that the government is looking after their needs, they are less likely to support the Taliban.¹⁸

This means truly connecting the Afghan people to their government through more focused and effective development efforts that provide basic services to ordinary Afghans, real security sector reform such as that proposed by Afghanistan's new Interior Minister Hanif Atmar, an Afghan government seen as rooting out corruption, and the development of a capable national army. Without real progress in development and increasing the capacity of the government to provide for its citizens, it is difficult to imagine that any amount of military action against the Taliban and its associates will lead to a lasting peace. Reconciliation must also involve regional actors such as Pakistan and India to resolve some of the root causes of strife in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Action needs to be taken to end the use of Afghanistan as a proxy Indo-Pakistani battleground, as well as to eliminate Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan.

Indeed, there is much to reconcile. To the extent that the prospect of talking

to or reconciling with the Taliban, or elements of it, has garnered peoples' attention, it should be viewed in context as a single, complex, and possibly necessary element of a much larger strategy for succeeding in Afghanistan.

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¹⁸ Baker.