

A Review of Reconciliation Efforts in Afghanistan

By Joanna Nathan

TO ACHIEVE STABILITY in Afghanistan, there is a growing emphasis on political solutions with insurgents. The reality, however, is that such efforts so far have been fragmented and often contradictory. There remains no agreement within the Afghan government and international community, or between them, on what the concept is, who it is aimed at, and most importantly its place within wider stabilization strategies. Amidst an increasingly violent insurgency, the temptation has been to attempt local or grand bargains with insurgent leaders. Even if desirable, this strategy is unrealistic because amorphous anti-government elements show no desire for such deals. It further dangerously distracts from enduring political solutions—aimed at the Afghan people rather than at insurgents—of ensuring better governance and more equitable representation.

This article offers a short summary of post-2001 “reconciliation” and “outreach” efforts. It examines how since 2001 the international community and Afghan government have failed to pursue a coherent policy even in deciding which strata of the Taliban should be targeted, isolated or engaged. Furthermore, reconciliation efforts have for the most part been narrowly premised on a paradigm of amnesty and surrender rather than true peace-building. Moreover, operating distinctly from wider nation-building programs, they have failed to tackle underlying dynamics.¹ Given that the insurgents are widely perceived to have the strategic momentum, having a demobilization program for fighters as a centerpiece of such efforts is redundant at best. Political solutions must not be treated as a quick exit strategy when the aim is ongoing stability. Success will require a far greater commitment to coordination by all players, a nuanced understanding of the complex nature of the insurgency

1 Regional issues will not be included in this article for reasons of space and focus. Indeed, while realigning external equations is essential to long-term stability, this has too often been used as an excuse to distract from necessary internal measures.

and political system, and a focus on strengthening broader governance activities to cut off potential community support for the insurgency rather than rewards for violent actors.

The Early Years: Lack of Coherence

In 2001, the treatment of individuals associated with the Taliban regime proved remarkably arbitrary. In many cases, the use of airpower or arbitrary detentions was the result of information provided to U.S. forces by new allies seeking to settle old scores, the very randomness (and/or inaccuracy) of action contributing to early alienation.² Taliban camp cooks were reported to be on trial while a former international spokesman went to Yale.³ Some former Taliban leaders were detained at Guantanamo Bay, while others worked for the government with no transparent criteria for such decisions.

There was never a legal bar on regime members taking public roles. For example, a former Taliban deputy minister and a former envoy of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (a former Taliban rival whose faction of Hizb-i-Islami has joined the insurgency in a loose alliance) were appointed to the Senate. In the 2005 National Assembly elections, at least two former regime members were elected to the lower house.⁴ Soon afterward, a group of Hizb-i-Islami claiming to have split with Hekmatyar registered as a political party (Hizb-i-Islami Afghanistan), boasting more

2 International Crisis Group, “Afghanistan: The Problem of Pashtun Alienation,” August 5, 2003; Martine Van Bijlert, “Unruly Commanders and Violent Power Struggles: Taliban Networks in Uruzgan,” in Antonio Giustozzi, *De-Coding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field* (London: Hurst and Co., forthcoming). Van Bijlert provides a detailed account of one province—Uruzgan—and how such events helped drive some commanders (back) into the arms of militants.

3 “Guantanamo Prisoner says Taliban Forced him to be a Cook,” Associated Press, August 11, 2005; Chip Brown, “The Freshman,” *New York Times*, February 26, 2006. In this case, the suspect was apparently accused before the U.S. military tribunal of being an assistant cook.

4 The winners were Zabul commander Mullah Salam Rocketi and the former Taliban Bamiyan governor Mohammad Islam Mohammadi (later murdered). Among those who stood but lost out were former Taliban foreign minister Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil, former deputy interior minister Mullah Khaksar (also later murdered) and head of the Taliban vice and virtue department, Mawlawi Qalamuddin.

than 30 supporters in the lower house (of 249 seats). Many other “former” members of Hizb-i-Islami, a grouping always dominated by professionals and technocrats, took powerful positions in the administration. These examples highlight the complex web of overlapping identities and shifting allegiances that has characterized the post-2001 government.

Amidst a highly personalized, patronage-based system, the administration has jealously guarded its primacy in “reconciliation” efforts, but has failed to provide a serious strategic approach to more equitable and responsive systems. Instead, there has been continued public rhetoric offering succor to the Taliban’s top leadership and attempts at opaque behind-the-scenes deal-making with individuals. The disjointed programs—such as the Allegiance Program and “Takhim e-Solh”—often seem largely aimed at capturing donor funding or entrenching favored networks rather than strengthening government institutions and tackling sources of alienation.⁵

Members of the international community have also not acted cohesively. They have undertaken a series of unilateral, bilateral and multilateral efforts despite the theoretical lead of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). The latter holds a specific mandate to

provide good offices to support, if requested by the Afghan government, the implementation of Afghan-led reconciliation programs, within the framework of the Afghan Constitution with full respect for the implementation of measures introduced by the Security Council in its resolution 1267 (1999).⁶

5 For more on the current political set-up, see Martine Van Bijlert, “Between Discipline and Discretion: Policies Surrounding Senior Subnational Appointments,” Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), May 2009; Antonio Giustozzi and Dominique Orsini, “Centre-Periphery Relations in Afghanistan: Badakhshan between Patrimonialism and Institution Building,” *Central Asian Survey*, March 2009. For an account of how community exclusion can feed directly into the conflict, see Graeme Smith, “Inspiring Tale of Triumph over Taliban Not All it Seems,” *Globe and Mail*, September 23, 2006.

6 See UN Security Council Resolution 1868 (2009).

In fact, Resolution 1267,⁷ which institutes a travel ban, asset freeze and arms embargo on listed members of the Taliban, has remained cut off from efforts on the ground. Originally created in response to al-Qa`ida-directed bombings in Africa and the Taliban's refusal to hand over the suspects, it is now unclear whether it is supposed to be a fixed list of past regime members under continuing sanction or, as the current 1267 committee chair wants, "a dynamic list that addresses the evolution of the threat posed by Al-Qaida and Taliban."⁸

Currently it is neither, with many member states not ensuring enforcement nor aiding its update. Hekmatyar was listed in 2003, but there has been only minimal change to the Taliban entries. Of the major powers, only Russia has demonstrated a definite policy—blocking the removal of any names, even the dead. Today, the list of 142 individuals associated with the Taliban is disconnected from both the current fight and the current political framework.⁹ Abdul Hakim Monib, who acted as Uruzgan governor in 2006-2007,¹⁰ and others who have long worked with the government remain on the list while a new generation of fighters is largely absent. By October 2007, only two listed individuals were in the top 12 wanted insurgent figures on separate lists developed by international and Afghan security agencies and only 19 among the 58 considered current "key leaders."¹¹

7 For more information, see "Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1267 (1999) Concerning al-Qaeda and the Taliban and Associated Individuals and Entities," available at www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/index.shtml.

8 "Statement by the Chairman of the [1267] Committee Delivered at Briefing to Member States," United Nations, July 1, 2009, available at www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/latest.shtml.

9 The list was always fairly ad hoc, focused on those who held administrative rather than military positions in the regime. For instance, Mullah Dadullah, who destroyed the Bamiyan Buddhas and massacred local Hazara communities, became the Taliban's southern commander after 2001, yet he was never included on the list.

10 See, for instance, Colum Lynch, "UN, US actions Sometimes at Odds over Afghan Policy," *Washington Post*, July 5, 2007.

11 "Letter Dated 13 May 2008 from the Chairman of the Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1267 (1999) Concerning al-Qaeda and the Tal-

The 2005 Allegiance Program and Program Takhim e-Solh

An early specific Taliban "reconciliation" effort by the U.S. military was the Allegiance program launched in 2005. One of the few open source references by then chief of staff of Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan, Colonel David Lamm, stated that after briefing the ambassador and gaining Afghan government approval,

the command rapidly developed a reconciliation program for former Taliban, and began a release program of 80 former Taliban each month from U.S. detention facilities, again involving the Afghan government in a central role.¹²

A contemporaneous newspaper report quoted Lamm as saying that he expected most of the Taliban's rank and file, whom he estimated to number a few thousand, to take up the amnesty offer by summer.¹³

Its Afghan government successor, launched the same year in close coordination with the U.S. military, was Program Takhim e-Solh (Strengthening Peace, commonly known as PTS) headed by Sibghatullah Mujaddedi, a religious elder and leader of President Hamid Karzai's wartime faction.¹⁴ Mujaddedi was quoted stating there was no bar to the inclusion of even Mullah Omar and Hekmatyar for reconciliation: "our terms are if they lay down their weapons, respect the constitution and obey the government, we don't have big conditions for them."¹⁵ While he

iban and Associated Individuals and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council," United Nations, available at daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N08/341/88/PDF/N0834188.pdf?OpenElement.

12 Colonel David Lamm, "Success in Afghanistan Means Fighting Several Wars At Once," *Armed Forces Journal*, November 2005.

13 Victoria Burnett, "US Extends an Olive Branch to Taliban 'Moderates,'" *Boston Globe*, January 2, 2005.

14 Both programs are discussed in Carlotta Gall, "The Taliban's Rocky Road Back to Afghan Reconciliation," *New York Times*, March 21, 2005.

15 "Amnesty Offer to Taliban Leader," BBC, May 9, 2005. While the PTS program does not have an official website, the online biography of Mujaddedi states: "Since its establishment, the commission has had remarkable success in convincing thousands of Taliban supporters and their allies to lay down their arms. In addition the

quickly backtracked, President Karzai has publicly repeated such offers.¹⁶

In practice, however, the main focus of both programs was grassroots fighters and the release of detainees, with PTS claiming some 4,599 "reconciled" individuals by September 2007.¹⁷ Since monthly individual "reconciliations" are the main yardstick of progress, there has been a strict focus on the short-term; a

"Both the Allegiance and PTS programs suffered an absence of monitoring and follow-through."

small-scale UN survey apparently found that 50% of "reconcilees" were not genuine fighters.¹⁸ This supports tales from the southern and eastern insurgent heartlands of returning refugees and others being induced or threatened to sign up to boost numbers.¹⁹

Indeed, PTS' multimillion dollar budget, provided by various Western countries, has been the source of continuing allegations of malfeasance. Internal British correspondence wryly observed the opening of a bank account for one of the program's 11 provincial offices: "Whilst this in normal terms this would not be seen as an achievement, in the case of this project i[t] should be viewed as a considerable one."²⁰

commission has also secured the release of hundreds of Afghan prisoners from jails and detention centers in Afghanistan and abroad. Those who had reconciled and denounced violence lead a peaceful life today." See "Biography of Professor Sibghatullah Mujaddedi," available at www.mojaddedi.org.

16 Ron Synovitz, "Karzai Confirms Amnesty Offer is for all Willing Afghans," Radio Free Europe, May 10, 2005.

17 "Information Relating to British Financial Help to Afghan Government in Negotiations with the Taliban," Foreign and Commonwealth Office, July 8, 2008, p. 1.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

19 Personal interviews, civilians, Jalalabad and Kandahar, 2007 and 2008.

20 It continues: "Initially when the PTS Commission was established in May 2005 a bank account was opened but donors instead preferred to provide funding in case in U.S. dollars. This has resulted in many problems with accountability and transparency." See "Information Relating to British Financial Help to Afghan Government in Negotiations with the Taliban," p. 8.

Both the Allegiance and PTS programs suffered an absence of monitoring and follow-through. Long-standing conspiracy theories in southern Afghanistan that the Taliban are working with the Americans appear to have been fueled by English-language identification cards, provided to at least some reconciles, presumably useful in case of returning to the battlefield.²¹ Otherwise, given the prevailing security situation there has been little real incentive, with around 1,500 afghanis (about \$30) on offer to individuals to give up arms. Senior PTS staff have been keen to extend this to housing, cars and salaries, although how this could be achieved without pushing more people to take up arms in the hope of such rewards and alienating those who have chosen not to is unexplained.²²

Conflicting Programs, Lack of Links

To mitigate against such perverse incentives and the perception of special rewards, it is crucial that such programs be linked with wider disarmament efforts. For example, Mujaddedi's PTS has been entirely autonomous of the Disarmament and Reintegration Commission (DRC) headed by Vice President Karim Khalili. The latter offers community development projects in districts where (non-insurgent) "illegal armed groups" are deemed to have disarmed, although in reality is all but moribund. This is largely because of the reluctance by other groups to disarm in the face of the insurgency—yet another reason for harmonization.

Reconciliation efforts for insurgents have also been largely premised on a militarized/security agenda, developing separately from transitional justice initiatives emerging from a human rights perspective. For instance, the wide-reaching but largely overlooked Peace, Reconciliation and Justice Action Plan launched in December 2006 actually has reconciliation as its fourth pillar. It is stated that

as a first step, the transitional justice strategy aims to realize peace and national reconciliation, to restore co-existence and co-

operation, to heal the wounds and pain of the victims and to reintegrate citizens into a peaceful life in society.

In seeking a more cohesive approach across all eras of violence, an obvious focus would be common standards of vetting. Currently, even as it is widely agreed that impunity and a lack of justice contribute to the insurgency, the only standard for deal-making with insurgents appears to be potential "co-optability."

Such complete impunity was explicitly stated in the 2007 Amnesty Resolution by the Afghan parliament, driven largely by those members who as (former) warlords and commanders feared for their own fate. Extraordinarily, this held out full, ongoing amnesty to

those individuals and groups who are still in armed opposition with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and who will end their opposition after this charter is in effect, join the national reconciliation process and respect and observe the Constitution and other laws of the country.²³

Fighters could simply continue the battle until they felt it was not in their interests, secure in the knowledge that there would be no consequences. While there was widespread international condemnation of the National Assembly, in reality this remains the conceptual framework for such efforts. As stated by one analyst,

the worst of all worlds would be to not only employ violent and predatory commanders to wage the war on terror, but also to welcome back—without conditions—the

most violent Taliban commanders in order to "win the peace."²⁴

Finally, the most recent grassroots effort outreach, the 2008 Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP), similarly lies outside broader governance efforts. ASOP, launched in Wardak and Helmand provinces, appoints district councils to

ensure stability and security through addressing the gap between people and the State and to strengthen traditional leadership roles and relations to the government and help prevent the destruction posed by insurgents.²⁵

ASOP, however, is not part of the overarching governance framework of the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), despite being overseen by the very same agency.²⁶

Nationwide constitutionally-mandated district council elections, which could allow representative local voices to be heard and provide legitimate outlets for opposition, are currently scheduled for 2011, although few of the necessary preparations appear to be underway. In contrast, these parallel ASOP councils, appointed by the district governors "temporarily" in "priority" provinces,²⁷ appear a continuation of top-down patronage rather than true outreach. Afghan respondents to an assessment of the program in Wardak also questioned the wisdom of starting such projects in the most violent areas, pointing out that "the gap between people and the state is widespread and it is not only limited to insecure areas of the country." They urged that the initial focus be "to rescue the semi- and relatively secure areas from falling into the hands of insurgents."²⁸

²³ See Amnesty Resolution, Article 3 (ii). The exact status of this bill/resolution remains unclear, with the Afghan government stating in a May 2009 submission for the United Nations Human Rights Council: "Although the National Assembly approved the National Reconciliation Bill, the President did not sign the bill. The bill has caused some misunderstandings and as a result this program was not implemented in 2008." See "National Report Submitted in Accordance with paragraph 15(A) of the Annex to the Human Rights Council Resolution 5/1," (Universal Periodic Review), United Nations Human Rights Council Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, (A/HRC/WG.6/5/AFG/1), p. 10.

²⁴ Van Bijlert, "Unruly Commanders."

²⁵ "Assessment Report on Afghanistan Social Outreach Program," The Asia Foundation, November 10, 2008.

²⁶ See "Draft Subnational Governance Policy," Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, May 20, 2009.

²⁷ The assessment notes: "In two such instances even the very high ranking government officials (ministers or higher) were involved in recommending the Community Council members. Based on the political sensitivity of the issue and the nature of the report they have not been named here." See "Assessment Report on Afghanistan Social Outreach Program."

²⁸ Ibid.

²¹ Personal interviews, civilians, Kandahar and Lashkar Gah, 2006 and 2007.

²² Personal interviews, senior PTS officials, Kabul and regional offices, 2007 and 2008.

What the people are highlighting is the broader issue that the insurgency is being treated as the disease rather than as a symptom of wider malaise. Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic, multi-regional state that has been in an almost perpetual state of conflict driven by, and exacerbating, multiple fissures and fractures for more than three decades. The current focus is too much on reacting to violence where it manifests itself rather than tackling the underlying conditions.

It is often stated that in fighting an insurgency military efforts must focus on protecting the population and not the insurgents. The same logic of concentrating outreach and empowerment efforts on local communities rather than violent actors has yet to be applied to so-called political approaches.

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