

RECONCILIATION WITH THE TALIBAN: FRACTURING THE INSURGENCY

The Obama administration has pursued peace talks with the Taliban's leadership in Pakistan with the hopes of engineering a grand peace bargain with the Taliban. Making a deal with the Taliban senior leadership will compromise America's national security interests in the region by fueling ethnic tensions in Afghanistan and possibly providing a continued platform for international extremists to operate within the region and beyond. Thus far, there has been little to no progress and the effort has halted since the Taliban walked away from preliminary discussions in March. However, high-level outreach between the U.S. and Afghan governments and the senior Taliban leaders hiding in Pakistan has caused the various factions in the movement to turn against each other—some believing that peace talks are a step in the right direction and others vowing to fight to the death. Capitalizing on this infighting, rather than quixotically pursuing a negotiated settlement, may be the best way for the international community and the Afghan government to accelerate the demise of the movement.

During the May conference in Chicago, NATO announced its intention to withdraw the majority of combat forces from the country by 2014 and transfer lead security responsibility to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The Taliban insurgency will not likely be defeated by that time. Senior administration officials have hoped that reconciliation efforts would accelerate an end to the conflict between the Taliban senior leadership and the government of Afghanistan.

Reconciliation differs from reintegration, which focuses on convincing low- and mid-level fighters to abandon the Taliban and accept the writ of the Afghan state. The turmoil and infighting within the Taliban resulting from reconciliation efforts, in addition to their tactical and operational losses in the southern provinces, has provided the first real opportunity to tear the movement apart from the inside. This indirect operational effect of the diplomatic strategy of reconciliation is proving beneficial. The U.S. and the Afghan government should recognize this opportunity and capitalize on it—it is perhaps the best way to weaken the movement so Afghans, with limited U.S. and international support, can sufficiently handle the insurgent threat beyond 2014. The net effect of these efforts may also force the Pakistanis to revisit their policy of backing proxy forces like the Taliban, especially if they prove to be ineffectual.

THE STATE OF THE TALIBAN'S SENIOR LEADERSHIP

Rather than coming together as a unified movement to take advantage of the U.S.'s reconciliation outreach, the Taliban are stuck in a state of general confusion, mired in back-stabbing and score settling between senior members. The movement was never a cohesive, unitary organization but an amalgamation of factions with competing agendas and beliefs. While it would be a stretch to claim that the current disunity within the movement is solely a result of individual members' participation in outreach over peace talks, it is now the driving factor. "Many Taliban are ambivalent, hesitant and confused over peace talks," a former Taliban official who is the headmaster of a militant madrassa in Pakistan reported in March.¹ Mohammad Gol, a Taliban fighter from eastern Kapisa province, said he wonders how Taliban leaders can negotiate with "infidels" when they have been fighting a jihad for years, while other fighters have said they are distrustful of their own senior leaders.² The net effect of this confusion is disillusionment amongst the fighters in the field. The more disillusioned they become, the less willing they may be to fight for a faltering organization.

Perhaps the most pressing concern for the Taliban's leadership is the deterioration of the movement's command and control. As coalition and Afghan forces have killed and captured more and more low- and mid-level Taliban

commanders and created space between the insurgency and the population, it has become harder for the insurgency's senior leaders to exercise command-and-control over its fighters. Consequently, attempts to increase control over desperate fighters require higher levels of coercion, threats, and intimidation, which can further alienate the fighting force. If this cycle becomes more pronounced as a result of reconciliation, it will increase the challenges leaders have in controlling the rank and file.

The key leadership atop the Taliban's decision-making body has evolved over the years primarily due to deaths and detentions. The evolution has brought new leadership to the forefront with increasingly conflicting visions of the organization's way forward leading to the creation of factions for and against reconciliation. Some of these individuals enjoy close ties with Taliban leader Mullah Omar, although he has not been a visible leader for many years and may no longer be actively involved in the direction of the movement. Some may also be allied with elements of the Pakistani security services and support Pakistan's push to increase control and oversight over the movement as a whole. Maulvi Qayyum Zakir is the most powerful leader serving under Omar and is a hardliner with close ties to al-Qaeda.³ Others, such as Agha Jan Motasim are in favor of peace negotiations with the Afghan government. While some of the senior command echelon does spend time on the battlefield in Afghanistan, more are reportedly either unwilling or unable to leave the relative sanctuary of Quetta and the surrounding areas in Pakistan. As low and mid-level operational commanders are increasingly captured or killed on the battlefield in Afghanistan, the senior leadership in Quetta has not only lost a degree of command and control over the movement, but is increasingly mired in infighting over the strategic direction of the movement.

For the past several years, senior Taliban officials in Pakistan have been pushing for the release of several high-profile Taliban detainees at Guantanamo Bay which may be a power play by certain factions within the organization to increase their influence relative to other groups. Unfortunately, it is unclear who within the movement is pushing for their release. The proposed transfers are high-level former regime officials, including a former Taliban governor and interior minister; the Taliban army chief of staff; a former Taliban governor and military commander; the former deputy intelligence minister; a commander and al-Qaeda operative; and a businessman who served as a top Taliban and al-Qaeda financier.⁴

These six detainees are only a few on the 20-person list the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) submitted to the U.S. for consideration; the full list also includes several individuals currently detained in Pakistan. Based on their public profiles, it would appear that these individuals may be less inclined to give up the fight, especially if their return to the Taliban strengthens the hardliners' position vis-à-vis proponents of reconciliation. The HPC's work to have these individuals released may be regarded as an attempt to build trust with the Taliban. The HPC has had little success, and after the assassination of HPC chairmen Burhanuddin Rabbani and Arsalan Rahmani in 2011 and 2012, hard-line elements of the Taliban have sent a pretty clear message that goodwill does not carry very far. Instead of pushing for these individuals to be released, they should remain in U.S. custody while the movement continues to suffer internal divisions.

SOWING DISUNITY

Sowing disunity within the Taliban is worth pursuing because it could weaken the cohesiveness and potency of the movement, and that would ease the challenges of degrading and dismantling it in the lead-up to 2014 and beyond. Some of the movement's moderate commanders may be willing to cede ground on possible peace negotiations. One example is Agha Jan Motasim. A former high-ranking Taliban official, Motasim served as Mullah Omar's minister of the treasury. In 2007, Motasim unilaterally conducted secret peace outreach efforts with European representatives in the Gulf even as he continued to fund and direct his jihadi militia in southern Afghanistan.⁵ Aside from his apparent interest in a political settlement, Motasim supported education and development outreach to poor, rural Afghans. Motasim's efforts apparently did not sit well with members of the Taliban's senior leadership cadre. In August 2011, in the Pakistani port city of Karachi, Motasim survived an assassination attempt, allegedly by hardliners within the senior leadership who opposed his "moderate" agenda. Although he is recovering in Ankara, Turkey, Motasim continues to claim that he is a leader within the movement. Efforts to convince Motasim and others like him to reconcile are useful even if they fail to reach an agreement because it creates further uncertainty and distrust with the Taliban's senior leadership and will undoubtedly lead to more internal purges, weakening the organization's cohesion and presenting potential outlets for those willing to give up the fight.

Taliban enforcers also allegedly detained Mullah Ahad Agha, a commander from Zabul, and Mullah Ghulam Hassan, a commander from Ghazni, in Quetta in March 2010 (though Hassan may not have been arrested but simply questioned).⁶ They were both accused of making unauthorized contact with representatives of the HPC and possibly accepting payoffs from NATO or the Karzai government. Although it's not clear who ordered their arrest, the incident demonstrates that elements opposed to peace talks exercise significant influence in Quetta. The pair was questioned about the activities of Mohammad Ismail, a Taliban commander in Afghanistan's Ghazni province and former deputy military council chairman for the organization. The Taliban's senior leadership council accused Ismail of pocketing large sums of money and accepting property from the Afghan state in exchange for holding meetings with the HPC, revelations that have shaken the Taliban, according to former deputy EU representative Michael Semple.⁷ Taliban fighters arrested Ismail in April 2012 near Quetta. The former Taliban members and Afghan intelligence officers who confirmed he had been arrested also claimed that Ismail was executed by Taliban fighters linked to Pakistani intelligence for his unauthorized role in backdoor talks with the Afghan government.⁸ If true, it demonstrates that elements of the Pakistani intelligence services are opposed to peace talks that they do not directly control. In response to Ismail's execution, Hassan released a videotaped statement in early May, detailed in the Long War Journal, threatening several senior Taliban officials, including the group's overarching military commander, Mullah Zakir, and vowed to avenge mistreatment and dishonor at the hands of the organization's leadership. Hassan's video marks the first public airing of the movement's widening rifts. U.S. and Afghan officials ought to capitalize on this opportunity by engaging Hassan in order to increase their understanding of the institutional rifts, potentially utilizing that information to track down Zakir and other irreconcilable hardliners.

RECONCILING THE RECONCILABLES

Capitalizing on the divisions and factionalization within the Taliban movement is useful because it weakens the cohesion and potency of the network on the battlefield in Afghanistan. If this results in increased infighting and score-settling within the organization, that is certainly a welcomed development. The key to achieving gains in this direction is to show those Taliban members who genuinely

want to pursue reconciliation talks with the Afghan government and international community an effective and secure route to do so.

Afghan and international forces in Afghanistan agree that senior Taliban leaders who are willing to entertain reconciliation talks ought to be given protection to do so. In May, U.S. and Afghan officials agreed to provide "safe passage" to representatives of the Afghan Taliban who were willing to engage in preliminary peace talks. The details of the "safe passage," including where such meetings would take place, were not released.⁹ At the end of May, during a U.S., Afghan, and Pakistan meeting in Islamabad, the three countries pledged to work together so that "Taliban leaders who want to enter into direct talks with the Afghan government [sic] not to feel threats to their lives and harassment of their families," Afghan Foreign Ministry spokesman Janan Musazai said.¹⁰ Despite the pledge, the Pakistanis pattern of behavior to date suggests they will continue to restrict individuals who refuse to represent their interests in Afghanistan.

Even if insurgents are willing to reconcile, the mixed record of the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP) is not encouraging. There are problems with the program's processes and procedures that have not been adequately addressed: a limited commitment on behalf of the national and provincial government, an inability to address and rectify fighters' grievances, the lack of appropriate oversight, and other issues that have plagued the program.¹¹ If reconciliation and reintegration are going to be effective, mutually supporting mechanism for peeling insurgents off the battlefield, the Afghan government must make substantive progress in these areas.

Perhaps the most troublesome issue with reconciliation and reintegration is the inability of the Afghan state to provide adequate security for those who have been willing to give up the fight. Insurgents have threatened and even assassinated multiple former Taliban commanders who have joined the Afghan government and served as provincial High Peace Council members. The most well-known case was the recent assassination of Arsalah Rahmani in Kabul. On May 13, Taliban gunmen killed Rahmani, a top negotiator for the HPC in Kabul and a former deputy education minister for the Taliban regime. Rahmani was one of Afghan President Hamid Karzai's most senior interlocutors. The Rahmani killing was not surprising, given the 2011 assassination of HPC head Burhanuddin Rabbani and the Taliban's

April announcement that its members planned to target members of the HPC as part of a “spring offensive.”¹² If Afghanistan and its allies cannot protect former Taliban such as Rahmani from Taliban factions seeking to undermine reconciliation efforts, current Taliban leaders will be unlikely to accept the Afghan government. In any case, the elimination of two high-profile individuals pushing for Taliban reconciliation certainly undermines the standing of senior Taliban reconcilables in relation to their hardline opponents in Quetta. It also forces the hand of the irreconcilables to threaten and attack within, which hastens their organizational demise.

PITTING THE TALIBAN AGAINST THE PAKISTANIS

Yet another challenge in dealing with the Taliban’s senior leadership is the degree of influence and control that elements of the Pakistani security services exercise over the group. For the better part of the last 30 years, Pakistan’s security services have used proxy militants to achieve influence in Afghanistan’s Pashtun regions. These elements in Pakistan use the Taliban primarily to maintain strategic depth or territorial influence in the south and east, to limit Indian influence in Afghanistan, to prevent a long-term U.S. presence and pressure the Karzai government in Kabul to heed these concerns, or at the very least, not interfere. Pakistan is also keen to prevent the formation of an independent Pashtunistan, which Pakistan views as a threat to its territorial integrity. Weakening and dividing the Taliban’s senior leadership not only reduces the efficacy of the movement, but also may force the Pakistanis to recalculate their policy of relying on the Taliban in a post-U.S. Afghanistan. This policy directly undermines Afghan and U.S. objectives in the region and must be prevented for the sake of regional stability.

The influence of some elements within the Pakistani security services over Taliban leadership is well documented. Since the early 1990s, Pakistan has supported the Taliban with weapons, food, clothing, money, training, and strategic guidance, as Ahmed Rashid and Steve Coll discussed in “Taliban” and “Ghost Wars”, respectively. The vast majority of Taliban members have not crossed the Pakistanis, though there are a few exceptions as more and more Taliban officials feel that the Inter-Services Intelligence is manipulating them and limiting their independence. The rifts exist primarily because Pakistani intelligence or ISI is increasingly pressuring the Taliban as the divisions within the movement have become more pronounced and

as the ISI fears exclusion from talks between the U.S. and Afghan governments. The ISI can threaten the Taliban decision-making council and their families because the Taliban’s senior leadership heavily relies on sanctuary in Pakistan. As a result, the relationship between the Taliban’s decision-making council and the Pakistani security services is neither cordial nor robust. Reconciliation pulls the Taliban in one direction, while Pakistan pulls them in another, potentially to a breaking point.

Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar illustrates the uneasy relationship between the Pakistanis and senior *shura* members. In February 2010, Pakistani security forces arrested Mullah Baradar in the port city of Karachi. Baradar is a Popalzai Pashtun, like the Karzai family, and Karzai and Baradar are rumored to be blood relatives.¹³ In late 2001 Baradar showed his ties to the future president, rescuing Karzai’s resistance force from advancing Kandahari Taliban in Uruzgan province. At the time of his arrest in 2010, Baradar was serving as the Taliban’s military chief and deputy to Mullah Omar.¹⁴ Baradar provided effective strategic guidance to the movement’s fighters. Coalition forces initially touted the arrest as a victory because it removed one of the most senior Taliban members from the battlefield. However, Baradar was reportedly engaging in secret peace talks with the Afghan government without the knowledge or permission of the Pakistani security forces. Pakistani security forces likely decided to remove Baradar from the battlefield in order to retain control of the negotiating process.

The arrest of Baradar is just one example of Pakistani security forces eliminating, neutralizing, or intimidating senior Quetta Shura members in order to increase control over their activities. Another notable example is the case of Mullah Kabir. In 2010, Kabir, head of the Taliban’s eastern shura and former Taliban governor of Nangarhar, was rumored to be participating in unofficial peace talks with the Afghan government. Pakistani security forces arrested Kabir in February 2010 and officially replaced him in 2011.¹⁵ Arrests of these individuals signaled to other senior Quetta Shura members that they could meet a similar fate if they acted in ways contrary to the wishes of the Pakistani security services. Pakistan has repeatedly refused Afghan officials’ access to Taliban leaders that their security services have detained, which suggests that Pakistani military leaders are unwilling to assist with Afghan reconciliation unless it advances their conception of a desirable outcome. That outcome, according to South Asia scholar Ashley Tellis, is “a malleable regime in Kabul

post-2014—and only if [Pakistan is] permitted to play the paramount role in midwifing this result.”¹⁶

Pitting the Quetta Shura’s senior leadership against the elements of the Pakistani security services that seek to manipulate and control them is a secondary effect of accelerating efforts to widen the rifts within the movement. If the Pakistanis perceive that they are being cut out of reconciliation and are losing influence over the movement as a whole, their natural tendency will be to increase their coercive and intimidating behavior, further exacerbating the popular grievances within the organization.

A NEW PATH FORWARD

Pursuing high-level reconciliation with the Taliban senior leadership as a unified, singular organization will fail to achieve the grand bargain that the U.S. and Afghans seek; that is, an agreement to renounce al-Qaeda, respect the Afghan constitution and cease insurgent operations targeting Afghan government officials and security forces. Recognizing that the Taliban is a diverse movement where significant internal divisions and mistrust abound, reconciliation efforts should instead be pursued as a means to divide and weaken the cohesion of the movement’s senior leadership cadre. However, before such efforts can achieve their desired intent, U.S. and Afghan forces must develop a sophisticated understanding of the differences among the factions and their leaders, and identify, encourage and protect those who want to reconcile. The purpose of these efforts is not only to support the primary aim of reconciliation, but also to fracture the Taliban operationally and thereby limit Pakistan’s leverage over the Afghan state.

U.S. and Afghan forces can further capitalize on the narrative that the organization’s senior leadership is absent from the fight and afraid to return to the battlefield due to constraints Pakistan’s security services placed on them or out of fear of death or capture in Afghanistan. More effective messaging will help underscore the consequences for Taliban fighters in Afghanistan, accelerating the disillusionment that is already occurring. U.S. and Afghan efforts to engage the Taliban in reconciliation talks will stoke hardliners’ fears that they will be increasingly isolated and will likely continue to tear the organization apart from the inside out. Naysayers may argue that this approach will strengthen the hand of the extremist elements of the movement and that the Taliban will become more

dangerous and more committed to retaking Afghanistan. In fact, the opposite is true. The movement will have more difficulty attracting support among the Afghan populace and the departure, death or defection of commanders and fighters who are not supportive of a more radicalized Taliban will weaken the appeal of the organization as a viable alternative to the Afghan state.

Defeating the insurgency in Afghanistan is a momentous task, made more difficult by external sanctuaries and support, a corrupt Afghan government and a host of other issues. The U.S. and international community are leaving—not entirely, but it has become a question of how soon, not when. The prospects of successfully reconciling the Taliban’s senior leadership as an organization have nearly disappeared and indeed, were never a realistic possibility when substantive reconciliation efforts began several years ago. It is time to confront this hard reality and adjust the desired intent, which is not to bring an end to the fighting by negotiating peace, but instead by tearing the organization apart from the inside. A weakened, less cohesive insurgency that is a less reliable proxy force for elements of the Pakistan security establishment and more susceptible to degradation at the hands of the ANSF is the desired end-state, and this might just be the best way to get there.

Jeffrey Dressler is a Senior Analyst and Team Lead for Afghanistan and Pakistan at the Institute for the Study of War in Washington DC and author of the recent report, “The Haqqani Network: A Strategic Threat.”

NOTES

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