

CAN TALIBAN LEADERS BRING PEACE?

After weeks of speculation, the Taliban formally rescinded its long-held objections to exploratory peace talks with the international community. On Tuesday, Quetta Shura Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid publicly declared that the Taliban will establish a political office in Qatar for negotiations with the international community. The timing of the announcement is interesting given recent developments in Pakistan. Over the last several months, Taliban leader Mullah Omar and the deadly eastern insurgent group, the Haqqani network, reportedly reached an agreement with senior al-Qaeda commander Aby Yehya Al Libi and elements of the Pakistani Taliban to stop fighting against Pakistani security forces and instead focus their attention on coalition forces in Afghanistan. Omar's Taliban appear to be rallying their forces to chase U.S. and coalition forces out of Afghanistan as the 2014 deadline to transition security responsibility to the Afghans approaches. Despite this, the Taliban also appear willing to entertain offers from the international community—and they have nothing to lose.

There is a long way to go before the exchange between the Taliban and the international community could be considered “peace talks.” It is likely that both sides will demand preliminary confidence building measures to jumpstart the process, according to unnamed western officials.¹ For some, one appealing measure would be the establishment of ceasefire zones that could be used as steppingstones toward a full-fledged peace agreement. The establishment of “test” cease-fire zones may seem like a reasonable proposition from Washington, but such efforts are dangerous, as well as unlikely, given the current status and complexity of the insurgency.

If the Quetta Shura could orchestrate a cease-fire zone, however unlikely, it would almost certainly have to be located somewhere in southern Afghanistan. Of Afghanistan's southern provinces, Helmand and Kandahar would be the most likely candidates for a “test” cease-fire. However, even if the Quetta Shura could orchestrate a deal, the timing of that proposition would be dangerous for the international community and Afghan forces. Even though coalition and Afghan forces have severely degraded the presence and influence of the Quetta Shura in Helmand and Kandahar over the past several years, they must remain on the offensive and may need the 2012 fighting season to consolidate progress and unite secure areas in central and southern

Helmand with those in central Kandahar.² Any disruption of that plan, such as the establishment of a cease-fire zone in key contested terrain, could disrupt operational progress. Furthermore, even if a temporary cease-fire was established, coalition and Afghan forces would have to apportion scarce combat power to monitor the area in order to ensure the Taliban do not seize the opportunity to rearm, as the Pakistani Taliban have done during several cease-fires with the Pakistani military.³

Beyond the dangers posed to the fragile gains in southern Afghanistan, the prospect of a Quetta Shura-established cease-fire zone assumes a level of command and control and institutional congruence that no longer exists within the movement. Today multiple factions within the Quetta Shura appear to be in conflict with one another over the future direction of the movement. In February 2010, Pakistan's security services arrested the Quetta Shura Taliban's second-in-command, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. Baradar was reported to be involved in nascent peace discussions with United Nations officials in Dubai.⁴ Although Baradar is reportedly under some form of house arrest under the close watch of Pakistan's security services, his following within the movement may still support such overtures. After Baradar's arrest, he was replaced as the Taliban's second-in-command by two senior insurgents, Mullah Abdul Qayoum Zakir (sometimes referred to as

Mullah Zakir) and Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor (sometimes referred to as Mullah Mansoor). Mullah Zakir is a former Guantanamo prisoner who is described as “highly ideological” and “well versed in sharia law.”⁵ Furthermore, a tribal elder from Zakir’s home province of Helmand who met with the insurgent leader in Quetta, Pakistan, remarked, “I don’t think he will want to negotiate. ... He wants to win this war at any cost. That’s what makes him dangerous.”⁶

Since the arrest of Baradar, reports surfaced that Zakir and Mansoor have clashed over the leadership and direction of the movement.⁷ Although it is unclear exactly where the two differ, Mansoor is considered one of the “old guard” of the Taliban movement and likely resented the ascension of the younger Zakir. Additionally, Mansoor is widely rumored to be close to Pakistan’s intelligence service, the ISI, and that relationship may worry some Taliban commanders who fear they are being manipulated to serve Pakistan’s interests in Afghanistan. Casting further doubt on the cohesion of the Quetta Shura Taliban as a coherent movement is the existence of the Mullah Dadullah Front (Mullah Dadullah Mahaz) and “the Zarqawis.” Both are named after deceased Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders known for embracing al-Qaeda’s ideology of waging global jihad and incorporating al-Qaeda’s extremist tactics on the battlefield.⁸ These groups operate in the southern Afghanistan provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, and Uruzgan and are known to undermine negotiations between the Afghan government and lower-level Taliban leaders and fighters in the south.⁹ Given all of the infighting and factionalization with the Quetta Shura, it is unlikely that any one individual (even Omar himself) could order the establishment of a ceasefire that he could enforce among his erstwhile followers.

If the Quetta Shura was somehow able to coordinate and establish a cease-fire zone, other leading insurgent groups are unlikely to follow suit. Outside of the south, the Taliban maintain the facade of control over insurgent groups such as the Haqqani network, but in reality, they maintain little influence or control.¹⁰ Although the Haqqanis pledge fealty to Mullah Omar and would not publicly challenge him, they execute their own campaign plan, coordinate their own resources, and use extreme tactics that have been denounced in decrees from Mullah Omar for the

past several years.¹¹ The Haqqanis maintain control over southeastern Afghanistan and enjoy disproportionate influence in the provinces surrounding Kabul, such as Wardak, Logar, Nangarhar, Laghman and Kapisa, and they have expanded their reach to the south and north.¹² The Haqqanis have built increasingly potent alliances with international terrorist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Lashkar-e Taiba, the Pakistani Taliban, and al-Qaeda that afford them the hard-line credentials that may soon eclipse the regional standing of the Quetta Shura Taliban.¹³ Furthermore, as the Quetta Shura has been slowly degraded in the south, the Haqqanis’ power and influence has steadily grown with no signs of slowing down. The Haqqanis could engage in peace talks at some point down the line, but any arrangement they might seek would likely be anathema to the concerns of the international community.

The Taliban’s establishment of a liaison office in Qatar may be the first step toward a negotiated political settlement to end the conflict in Afghanistan. Though the Taliban will soon have an address where they can conduct discussions with the international community, it is far from clear who these people speak for within the Quetta Shura movement, and moreover, who the Quetta Shura speaks for among the panoply of insurgent groups operating in Afghanistan. Rather than negotiating from a position of strength, these efforts appear to be an act of desperation on behalf of the international community. Instead, the Taliban must first be convinced that they will not be allowed to succeed on the battlefield nor will they be able to simply wait out the international community’s presence in Afghanistan. Only then will the preconditions be set for a potential political solution.

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NOTES

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⁵Anand Gopal, “Qayyum Zakir: the Afghanistan Taliban’s rising mastermind,” *Christian Science Monitor*, April 30, 2010

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