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REPORT FROM THE FIELD

Can we negotiate with the Taliban?

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The belief that the insurgency in southern Afghanistan is a singular entity and the assumption that negotiations with that entity can bring an end to the conflict are simplistic and do not take into account the other insurgent partners, nor the role of local power brokers. Care must be taken when providing advice in the public domain on how to end or limit conflict in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Taliban; Afghanistan; ISAF; Pakistan; Al Qaeda; Lashkar-e Toiba

In the United States, there have been numerous suggestions in the media throughout the spring of 2009 that the Western coalition shielding the Afghan government reconstruction efforts should enter into peace talks, or at the least, some form of dialogue with the Taliban. The accession of the Obama Administration to power in late 2008 and the wave of ‘hope’ that accompanied it has in part stimulated public commentary on the possibility of Taliban reconciliation. Indeed, the Afghan government approached Saudi Arabia to assist in mediation and has authorized contact between a high-level member of the Karzai family and a senior Taliban leader.¹ Are such suggestions, in fact, realistic? Do they really take into account the complexity of the situation that exists on both sides of the Durand Line? Can this form of peace actually address grievances, real and imagined, that fuel the insurgency?

First we need to dispose of the notion that we are confronted with a singular antagonist that we label ‘The Taliban.’ We are in fact dealing with something much more complicated. The term ‘terrorist syndicate’ was used by US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in 2008 and is probably the best descriptor for part of the insurgency, although the term ‘al-Qaeda compact’ has also been used by Indian analysts. In effect, there are numerous ‘players’ in this syndicate: the Taliban, al-Qaeda, Hezb-islami Gulbiddin (HiG), and the Haqqani Tribal Network. We should add Lashkar-e Toiba as well as it is more apparent of late that they have been part of what is going on. The ‘syndicate’ is based in western Pakistan and is supported by elements within the Pakistani security forces, business

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community, and the government. Financial resources are provided via a variety of international mechanisms, from global commercial ventures to criminal activity inside Pakistan. Weapons come from Pakistani, Iranian, and Chinese sources. This is itself a complex mechanism. The exact relationship between the 'syndicate', the Pakistani state, and certain Gulf states needs to be mapped before any negotiating action is even considered.

Then we need to differentiate between the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Taliban in Pakistan: they have different leaders, and, arguably, different objectives. The Taliban in Pakistan is a diverse social movement today, not merely the remnants of the defeated regime taken down by Operation ENDURING FREEDOM in 2001–02.

So who is there to negotiate with at the macro level? The insurgency isn't a state, although inside Pakistan elements of it have taken on the semblance of a para-state. Such a notion also assumes that such a para-state is even interested in negotiations. Like a syndicate, there is no singular leader. There are factions. Some may want to negotiate, others may not. It would be akin to having a sovereign nation enter into open negotiations with the Cali, Medellin, and Gulf Cartels all at once.

To negotiate at the macro level, there would have to be some clear understanding as to what both parties desire. The coalition's objectives are transparent, while the 'syndicate's objectives are obscure. Indeed, analysis of the factionalism may reveal that HiG wants one thing, al-Qaeda another, Haqqani a third, and so on. Will the coalition be able to acquiesce to all demands? Unlikely. What if the demands revolve around turning Afghanistan into a seventh-century theocracy? We don't know exactly what they want – other than getting the coalition out of the way. Al-Qaeda, for example, wants Islamic globalization or at the very least the re-creation of the Caliphate. Is that really negotiable? HiG and Haqqani: it appeared as though these organizations could be bought off or accepted into the Afghan political system. No longer. HiG appears to be trying to re-create itself as a social movement, though personality cult is a better description. Haqqani is similar in nature. Can the leadership be bought off or appeased in some way? Again, unlikely.

How does the coalition negotiate with Lashkar-e Toiba? LeT's objectives are related to the intractable Kashmir dispute, but LeT personnel have acted as mercenaries or specialist troops in southern Afghanistan alongside local Taliban forces. Their motives are not really related to the war in Afghanistan per se; they derive other benefits from the conflict that negotiations may not be able to address.

If we assume that the Pakistani state is hosting the 'syndicate,' is it possible to negotiate with Pakistan to get them to rein in the violence? Elements in Pakistan tried this and failed in 2006. Another iteration is ongoing as of spring 2009. If we accept that Pakistan is a nearly failed state riddled with factionalism and equipped with nuclear weapons, and that there is some form of parallel power or powers competing to protect their various interests, it is evident that whatever resources are thrown Pakistan's way to convince it to crack down on the militancy will be subsumed in a never-ending black hole.

This brings us to the situation inside Afghanistan, or at the very least, on the western side of the Durand Line. The situation is equally complex. 'The Taliban' is a label or brand: it is short-hand for nearly all forms of anti-government activity, including local bands with local grievances, to units with near-conventional capability, to intersections with those engaged in the narcotics trade.

The insurgency in southern Afghanistan has evolved significantly in the past three years and differs depending on the province. In 2006, the coalition view was that there were Tier I Taliban, who were ideological and fanatically motivated; and Tier II Taliban who were local levies that motivated by money or local grievances. There was a command council, the Quetta Shura, which theoretically acts as the overall leadership body. Al-Qaeda provided specialist information operations and suicide bomb capabilities to assist the Tier I Taliban. The thinking in 2006–07 was that the coalition and the Afghan government could drive a wedge between the Tier I and Tier II Taliban through job creation and aid projects while at the same time depicting the Tier I Taliban as outsiders interfering with Afghanistan.

These programs were partially implemented and started to achieve a measure of local success, but only in areas that the security forces could establish a presence. They could have no effect on areas where there was no government control.

At the same time, the Taliban command structure was internally divided. One faction demanded a ramp-up of near-conventional activity and won out in its view over the more cautious but no less violent faction. Those near conventional operations failed by late 2007, and the main proponents in the Taliban leadership structure of those operations were killed by coalition SOF action or marginalized by their accomplices.

The coalition counter-leadership campaign conducted from 2006 to 2009 and the continual damage and disruption caused by coalition forces has had a devastating effect on the Taliban forces inside southern Afghanistan. There have been two effects. First, the insurgency has been forced to bring in more and more help from the 'syndicate' to make up for the loss of experienced commanders and specialist personnel (IED makers for example). In 2008 and early 2009, there were more and more reports of HiG and Haqqani cells infiltrating the south, but particularly in the Kandahar area. The Sarposa prison 'spectacular' in 2008 was probably conducted by specialist LeT personnel working with local Taliban networks. Canadian forces have constantly killed well-trained mortar teams and even captured a Pakistani mortar specialist.

Second, there appears to have been a reduction in the influence exerted by the Quetta Shura both within Afghanistan but also within the 'syndicate.' The Quetta Shura has not been successful; therefore it should not be reinforced. With the pending mass influx of American personnel in the south, the Quetta Shura may have been deemed not up to the task. That would, in theory, reduce Mullah Omar's importance in the overall scheme of things vis-à-vis the insurgency. We must ask the question: is he worth negotiating with? How much relative

power does he in fact wield today compared to 2006? Even if the coalition could negotiate with Mullah Omar and his Taliban faction, it would have little or no effect on the specialists and new commanders being brought in from northern Pakistan to fight in the south.

As a side note, there is the case of Helmand province. The insurgency in Helmand differs somewhat from the insurgency elsewhere in Regional Command (South) because of the poppy economy and its extremely close relationship to the tribal power structures in the province. Not all violence in Helmand is Taliban violence. Specialist personnel have in the past been brought in by the 'narcos' to interfere with coalition operations. These mercenaries aren't Taliban. In some cases, where the Taliban do operate in the province, they have a tactical and cooperative relationship with the narcotics people. The narcotics traders have significant relations with similar organizations inside Pakistan, which in turn overlap with the insurgency there too. Who, exactly, should we negotiate with?

Successful negotiations with the Taliban will not necessarily address what their dispersed local units are doing. Indeed, the Taliban has played on local grievances to gain recruits and support in various districts. Those grievances will not be addressed by high-level negotiations, and the violence will continue at the local level. The Taliban is not an army and cannot necessarily order all of its 'units' to ground arms at the whim of the Quetta Shura. A HiG suicide bomb cell working alongside local Taliban networks would not necessarily cease its activities just because the Quetta Shura ordered a stand-down.

Here is an example of the problem at the local level. West of Kandahar City lies the town of Bazaar-e Panjwayi. This government-dominated area is under assault on a variety of planes by insurgent forces. The insurgency consists of several groups. First, there are two separate IED cells: one local, the other brought in from outside the district (and possible even the province). The outsiders ask the local cell permission to operate. Other insurgent cells from HiG or Haqqani use the district as a transit area into Kandahar City. At night, gangs of youths on motorcycles armed with pistols converge on outlying areas to intimidate local people; they disperse during the day. In areas with no government control, pairs of teenagers operate in communities to keep an eye on local shuras and report back to the insurgent leadership in the district. To the south, there are formed guerilla units operating in roughly platoon strength and equipped with RPGs, 82 mm recoilless rifles, and 82 mm mortars. They conduct direct fire and indirect fire attacks on coalition forces in the more rural areas. These units appear to come from outside the district, are definitely led by people not indigenous to the district, and are logistically supported from Pakistan. To make matters worse, elements in the district government use violence for their own commercial and power-based agendas, and then blame the Taliban, while certain power brokers align themselves with the Taliban to further their personal agendas.

Even if the Karzai government successfully negotiated with the Taliban led by Mullah Omar, it would probably only partially affect the insurgency in Bazaar-e Panjwayi. It would not stop local opportunists – those using the Taliban

as cover – from using violence against the population. The non-Taliban units would not necessarily comply. It would not stop narcotics activity or the violence associated with it. Most importantly, however, negotiations cannot address the increasing co-option of the youth at the local level, which leads us to the larger problem of where the insurgents are getting their recruits, locally and externally.

Each entity in the ‘syndicate’ controls its own recruitment, education, and training system that reach deeply into Pakistan and even beyond for the Al Qaeda movement. Pakistan’s education system was co-opted by the Islamist ideologues back in the early 1990s, which provided fertile ground for recruitment into various radical Islamist efforts. How exactly will discussions with Mullah Omar’s faction of the Taliban address the larger and much more systemic problem of ‘Taliban: The Next Generation’?

There is an emergent debate over the coalition’s best approach in Afghanistan. It is increasingly evident over the past three years that ‘top-down’ solutions like diplomatic-style negotiations and Kabul-based bureaucracy will not address the insurgency at the district and community level, and this is the place where the insurgency is now starting to gain traction in shifting the population away from the government. It is possible that successful negotiations with Mullah Omar’s Taliban faction would have some effect, but we must confront the possibility that that window of opportunity is now closed and that we are up against something new. Negotiations may not be possible, or relevant.

Note

1. ‘Obama is Talking Sense on the Taliban,’ *Canberra Times* (10 March 2009); Ben Farmer, ‘President Barak Obama declares America Should Be ready to Talk to the Taliban,’ *Daily Telegraph* (8 March 2009); Martin Gerner, ‘Taliban Respond Positively to Obama’s Offer to Talk,’ *Middle East Times* (9 April 2009).