

# Taliban and the potential for negotiations in Afghanistan

*Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn\**



The US engagement in Afghanistan, its longest war to date, has come under increasing criticism in the light of mounting Afghan civilian and international military casualties. Under significant economic pressure, the prolonged commitment of substantial financial resources, as well as the sacrifice of life, has seen domestic approval rates decline and has opened up the discussion as to the sustainability and future of the international engagement (1).

There has been increasing talk about a political solution, one that potentially holds the promise of stopping the current downward spiral and prepares the ground not only for the withdrawal of foreign troops, but that could also achieve a much-desired stability in Afghanistan that could prevent the country from again becoming a terrorist haven. There is considerable doubt as to the viability of the current government in Kabul and the Afghan security forces' ability to control and counter the growing insurgency. Riddled with corruption and stripped of legitimacy by endemic electoral fraud, the state seems to be rife with internal conflict and to be held together by external assistance. A political process that would result in a shift in the balance of power within the state as well as at local government level will be met with considerable resistance from the incumbent power brokers.

The insurgency at large should not be regarded as a unified body that has a clear goal-driven policy. While the Afghan Taliban's senior leadership has thus far managed to structure and control much of the insurgency in Afghanistan, it remains a distinct group among many others currently engaged in violent conflict with foreign forces and/or the Afghan government. For the Taliban's leadership, there is a mixed set of factors at play. In contrast to what the US military might see as the overall demise of the insurgency, the senior Taliban leadership is aware that the current capture-or-kill campaign has had a significant impact on its ability to lead, and is beginning to marginalise it as a group. The overall insurgency will continue regardless, albeit with different leaders and possibly different ideological positions. While the current leadership is opposed to the Afghan government and foreign presence in the country, it is aware of the devastating possibility of another civil war if no political solution is found (2). However, the new generation of Taliban leaders that are moving into the lower ranks are less likely to engage in any political process, a fact which is recognised by the older generation and politicians in the Taliban. Moreover, the core Kandahari leadership of the movement suffers battle fatigue, having grown into older men with families, and arguably less subject to the fiercely uncompromising stances of youth.

While there might be incentives to find a political solution, there are also factions within the insurgency and the Afghan government that are opposed to a settlement or to a substantial inclusion of the insurgency into the current political paradigm. President Hamid Karzai stressed that he seeks reconciliation, but there are significant voices within the administration that are not interested in any such process.

While the ongoing capture-or-kill campaign is eroding credible negotiation partners among the Taliban, the Afghan government also lacks credibility. Time, however, is of the essence. The trajectory of current processes is ending, limiting options for the future, much of which are heavily influenced by the policies pursued by the international community and by the United States. Moreover, the perception among the Taliban is that they are – in a broad sense – ‘winning’ (3). General David Petraeus, the commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, announced that the momentum has been reversed, but this does not reflect the perception of much of the general public – especially in Afghanistan's south and east, but increasingly in the north of the country as well (4). Many Taliban regarded the coalition forces' withdrawal from the Pech Valley in Kunar, for example, as an admission of defeat (5). Recent operations

in Kandahar province – such as the prison break that freed almost 500 insurgents; the assassination of provincial police chief Khan Mohammad; and the complex attack on a Kandahar police station, as well as other operations around the country – have given the Taliban a significant morale boost and added to their fighting force.

The underlying assumption for the coalition surge – that negotiations need to be held from a position of strength, and that the Taliban should be forced to the negotiation table by military pressure – offers a bleak prospect for peace. The prospect of a return to civil war – similar to that of the 1990s – offers a key incentive for all participants in Afghanistan to work on a political settlement that could prevent such a possibility.

The question of whether Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar will be part of the political process and/or settlement is important. His role within the insurgency is somewhat contradictory: he is increasingly sidelined and Taliban voices within Afghanistan seem more critical, yet at the same time he represents an institution that give considerable cohesion to the movement at large. His participation and role within the insurgency and within a political settlement depends heavily on how he is approached by international actors. A US State Department press spokesman remarked:

From our view, Mullah Omar has been attached at the hip to Bin Laden for some time. So, based on everything that we know about him today, in fact he will not meet the criteria that we have laid out. ... So you know, there's nothing that we see that indicates that Mullah Omar will, in fact, change his stripes. As a result, we don't see that he qualifies to play a constructive role in Afghanistan's future (6).

There will, no doubt, be more such statements were any negotiated political process to begin. Mullah Omar brings a certain cohesion (albeit symbolic) to the Taliban; he is a link to the past and to the dysfunction of the Taliban's previous interactions with the international community, but circumstances have changed, and any negotiated process would likely not see him ascend to the head of the Afghan government or to any role that gives him more than symbolic value.

In the course of discussions, there might be ways to promote the role of those in the tier below him – providing this level of the command structure is not eliminated in the meanwhile – without removing him completely, thus avoiding a possible backlash.

Mullah Omar's exclusion from the political process outright or against his will would likely have severe negative consequences for any negotiations or reconciliation. His title represents a de facto religious institution, and he retains sufficient power to act as a spoiler in negotiations. Thus, any side-lining or retirement from the leadership would have to be agreed upon by him or decided on by himself (7).

Regardless of his future role, various statements by US government and military officials as to the nature of the July 2011 withdrawal, the 2014 deadline and possible US involvement during and after this time period has created much confusion as to the intent of the US. The somewhat arbitrary time-line it put forward has been regarded by large sections of the Taliban as a sign of its waning commitment, a sentiment also often heard from the general public and from within the Afghan government (8).

The effect of a draw-down of US forces – even if cosmetic – on the fragile Afghan state is far from clear. Analysts have warned that the Afghan National Security Forces are unlikely to be able to provide security nationwide in the given time-frame that sees security operations being turned over by international forces (9). This concern gains credibility with each successful insurgent operation. The composition of the Afghan

security forces as well as various other actors and their networks raises doubt about the current strategy that seems to fail to account for the fractured nature of the Afghan government. The interests of many of these groups do not match international or even broadly national interests.

The latest incarnation of the local militia programme, the 'Local Defence Initiatives', being implemented around the country seeks to fill the security vacuum created by the withdrawal of foreign forces and to boost the size of the government's security forces. It is being touted as a speedy solution to deteriorating security around the country. Past experience, however, showed that an incorporation of such forces into the formal security apparatus of the Afghan government is problematic. Much of the post-2001 inclusion of militant groups into the Afghan government and security forces has not resulted in their demise or a transference of their power to the government. Individuals formerly associated with the Northern Alliance and others have used the past decade to strengthen and reinforce their hold. In particular, some from the Afghan National Army suggest that its coherence and integrity is fragile (10). The lack of unity among the actors, based on their particular ethnic and regional orientations, should be taken into account when assessing the possible effect of deadlines and troop withdrawal.

The insurgency – particularly the Afghan Taliban – is a swiftly changing group; they have various voices and opinions regarding negotiations and settlements. The senior political class of the Afghan Taliban also believes in the justness and righteousness of its cause, a strong theme in its public and private discourse. This has become more acute as the Afghan government has become increasingly corrupt (11). The true ideological fighters of the Afghan Taliban – of which there are relatively few – are also opposed to doing a deal with international actors, because they see them as illegitimate occupiers who work with a corrupt and illegitimate Afghan government. The obstacles and pitfalls on the road to a political process that would address the current conflict and its underlying causes are manifold. A central concern is the growing lack of trust from the Afghan population regarding the intentions and goals of the US government. Particularly in the south, there seems to be universal doubt that increasingly blames foreign forces for the successes of the insurgency, accusing the US of actively supporting the Taliban in order to legitimise its presence in Afghanistan. By this logic, foreign military forces are pursuing alternate (read: secret) goals unknown to the general public. The detrimental effect of this widespread belief is another major obstacle to any US effort in Afghanistan.

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*\* Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn are researchers based in Kandahar. They worked in Afghanistan from 2006, focusing on the Taliban insurgency and the history of southern Afghanistan over the past four decades. They are the editors of the acclaimed memoir of Abdul Salam Zaeef, My Life With the Taliban (2010), and An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban/Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970-2010 (to be published later this year)*

#### Sources

1- See, for instance, a poll released by CNN/Opinion Research Corp. in September 2009 showing that only thirty-nine percent of Americans were in favour and fifty-eight percent against the war in Afghanistan. See <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/09/15/afghan.war.poll/>.

2- In a workshop held in Washington in the summer of 2010, over ninety percent of participants (experts, practitioners, researchers and journalists concerned with Afghanistan) agreed that Afghanistan was heading towards civil war, or a situation comparable to the early 1990s.

3- See, for example, the AlJazeera interview and report from Nuristan in June 2010, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia/2010/06/20106682427762407.html>.

4- Chick, Kristen (2010), "Petraeus says US has momentum over Afghan Taliban", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 23 August 2010, <http://www.csmonitor.com/layout/set/print/content/view/print/321076>.

5- Chivers, C.J., Alissa J. Rubin and Wesley Morgan (2011), "U.S. Pulling Back in Afghan Valley It Called Vital to War", *The New York Times*, 24 February 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/25/world/asia/25afghanistan.html?pagewanted=print>; <http://theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Ma11/America%20salutes%20Kunar,%20the%20proud%20land%20of%20our%20Mujahid%20forefathers!!.htm>.

6- AFP (2010), "US cannot see Mullah Omar playing role in Afghanistan", 14 October 2010, [http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5geyxhk-e9CXDa19d02MyzAe0Qc\\_w?docId=CNG.bd6bd0d86d63f1a0e61b464e310712d2.941](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5geyxhk-e9CXDa19d02MyzAe0Qc_w?docId=CNG.bd6bd0d86d63f1a0e61b464e310712d2.941).

7- The possibility that Mullah Omar dies or is killed does exist, but should not be seen as a goal nor can it be planned for. Moreover, an active targeting of the Taliban leader (and one that results in his death) as part of the military campaign could have serious negative consequences for any negotiation process.

8- Interviews, Kandahar and Kabul, Winter 2009-10.

9- International Crisis Group (2010), *Exit vs Engagement*. (New York, 28 November 2010), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/B115-afghanistan-exit-vs-engagement.aspx>.

10- International Crisis Group (2010), *A Force in Fragments: Reconstituting the Afghan Army*. (New York, 12 May 2010), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/190-a-force-in-fragments-reconstituting-the-afghan-national-army.aspx>.

11- See, for example the statement on 2 September 2010, entitled, "Karzai in Vortex of Corruptions", <http://theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Sep10/the%20Islamic%20Emirate%20of%20Afghanistan%20Karzai%20in%20vortex%20of%20corruptions.htm>.