No peace process without the Quetta Shura!

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Western countries are ostensibly eager to keep Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Amir-ul-Momineen (Commander of the Faithful) of the Taliban movement out of peace talks with the Afghan government. But is this a realistic approach, or at the very least, a viable strategy? Looking at the structure of the insurgency it seems highly ambitious to assume that elements within the insurgency will circumvent its Amir and join the negotiation table to end the long and tragic violence that paralyzed the socio-economic and political development of Afghanistan for three decades. The Strengthening Peace Commission (PTS) established in 2003 and led by Hazrat Sebghatullah Mojaddedi claims to have disarmed 9,000 insurgents since its creation but in reality these numbers are questionable. The failures of PTS were largely a result of an incoherent reintegration strategy, lack of mechanisms for oversight and implementation and insufficient resources. This article will evaluate the insurgency’s position on reconciliation and reintegration and identify possible hindrances and solutions to overt barriers to the peace process as outlined by former and current Taliban members. This analysis has drawn exclusively on interviews with the Former Foreign Affairs Minister of the Taliban regime, Mullah Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil and prominent Afghan journalist, Mujahid Kakar. In addition to citing scripts and interviews conducted with various influential members of the Quetta Shura.

The Afghan peace process:

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The July 2011 withdrawal deadline does not signify an end for the insurgency rather they interpret it more accurately as a means to an end. The peace process aimed to facilitate NATO’s withdrawal and the transition of security from foreign to local forces is not pragmatic without pursuing reconciliation with Mullah Omar and other members of the Taliban leadership. Both Mullah Mutawakil and Mujahid Kakar concur that peace in Afghanistan is unattainable without including Mullah Omar. Regrettably, the international community is not ready to acknowledge that its ‘war on terror’ measures failed to destroy the Taliban, locate al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, or root out the threat of militancy and extremism in the region. Notwithstanding, international perceptions the peace process designed by the Afghan government is to be led by Afghans themselves and this should take priority over U.S. or international demands. The Afghan people and Afghan government are willing to coexist with insurgents as they sense with the current deadlines imposed by NATO-led ISAF that that U.S. will eventually leave, but the Taliban are here to stay.

1. Mullah Omar must be included in peace talks

“The Taliban think they can win this war” asserts Kakar. “Currently all major urban centers are surrounded by the insurgency, it reflects Najibullah’s period when the mujahedin had encircled all major cities” reflecting on Dr. Mohammad Najibullah’s presidency after the fall of the Soviet regime. As much as Najibullah tried to extend his authority outside of Kabul after Soviet withdrawal he was unsuccessful, and in 1992 (3 years later) the mujahedin captured Kabul. Similarly, the expansion of the insurgency in northern and western regions of Afghanistan has more or less circled most major urban centers. Thus after NATO withdrawal if an effective strategy for reconciliation is not implemented President Karzai’s government could see the same fate.

The United States has been hesitant to solicit unconditional support for dialogue with members of the Taliban leadership council, Quetta Shura led by Mullah Omar. Reasons for this

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vary amongst NATO members, but the general justification from the U.S. State Department has been the leaderships assumed close links with al Qaeda and Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The U.S. State Department holds the position that Mullah Omar cannot play a “constructive role in Afghanistan’s future because he is unlikely to renounce terrorism and remains attached at the hip to al-Qaeda chief Osama Bin Laden.” Other reasons cited include Omar’s close association with Pakistan’s ISI, and the assumption that removing him from the peace process will drive a wedge in the upper ranks of the Taliban leadership. In hindsight the only wedge this will cause will be between the Afghan government and the insurgency, as it will inevitably widen the level of mistrust and suspicious between the two.

“Reconciliation will not yield positive results if certain individuals are excluded,” argues Mullah Mutawakil, when asked about the prospects for reconciliation and reintegration with ‘moderate’ elements of the insurgency. In addressing this question, Mutawakil first points to what he deemed as critically important, and that is an understanding of the insurgency’s hierarchical structure. He states that the Taliban system is structured around local commanders, a Quetta and Peshawar Shura and an Amir which must be recognized and given consideration too in the peace process. He noted that the international community and Afghan government must not neglect to understand that the “Taliban are currently fighting a jihad against what they see as occupiers (U.S. and NATO members) and in a jihad an Amir’s role is critical, and insurgents would not take any decision independent of his.” With this assertion, Mutawakil points to a prudent fact that depicts gaining access to foot-soldiers would not be possible without addressing the vital role of the Taliban leadership. The Taliban have shown more continuity then discontinuity in the pre and post-2001 period when looking at the organizational structure of the insurgency. “The composition of its leadership, ideology, political aims and programme” has not witnessed any acute changes since 2001. For this reason, NATO must not approach the issue of reconciliation assuming that their dealing with a heterogeneous movement, rather the Taliban continues to represent a homogenous force despite the changes in tactics and scope. Mutawakil warns that “if

4 Ibid.
5 Mutawakil.
7 Ibid.
the Amir is distanced from the reconciliation process it would show that they (U.S.) does not believe in reconciliation and are only supporting their (U.S.) agenda for reintegration.”

Mullah Omar’s hostile relationship with al-Qaeda and his distaste for the ISI have proven these U.S. justifications as without credence. The current insurgency reflects a socio-political movement that is religiously based, and which has several motivations but none that seek to wage jihad beyond Afghanistan’s borders. There is sufficient evidence to show that the Taliban ceased to uphold ideological inclinations to wage global jihad or affiliate its objectives in Afghanistan with those of al-Qaeda. An account of al Qaeda and the Taliban relations in the 1990s, as described by former spokesman for the Taliban regime, Maulavi Qudratullah impresses this fact, “…we did not invite Osama, we got him as a legacy.” The relationship between Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden was founded on a “common Muslim identity and Pashtun tribal values of hospitality and honour.” Nonetheless, Osama bin Laden’s ‘provocative and antagonistic’ ways infuriated Mullah Omar to the point where Osama had to be reminded that the Emirate followed the orders of only one Amir. Mullah Omar’s reaction to Osama’s 1998 “World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders” announcement is one such example of this. After Osama blatantly ignored repeated demands by the regime to refrain from activities that garnered Afghanistan negative international attention, he ordered the closure of several al-Qaeda training camps. Many believed that the Taliban only entertained bin Laden to secure funds and fighters which were needed to counter the Northern Alliance. U.S. intelligence reports in 2001 had defined the Taliban-al Qaeda relationship as being focused on short-term tactical gains rather than long-term policy. It was this shot-term tactical strategy which saw the Taliban hosting bin Laden in the mid-1990s. International experts have concluded that the relationship between the

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8 Mutawakil.
10 Ibid.
two in the pre and post-2001 era was primarily based on “pragmatic needs and personal alliances, rather than ideological coherence.”

On the other hand Pakistan has, and continues to, execute both direct and indirect influence over the Taliban’s strategic decision making of the Taliban insurgency. Pakistan’s ever increasing role and influence over the Taliban’s autonomy have created contentions between the two. For instance, elements from the Pakistan government, military and ISI are suspected to sit in the Quetta Shura. It has been concluded that this has been guided by Pakistan’s aspirations to strengthen its strategic depth in Afghanistan to ensure its interests are met and to counter expanding Indian influence in the region. Kakar denoted that at this juncture it was irrelevant to discuss the prospects of either reconciliation or reintegration as the key to dialogue as he believed lied in the hands of Pakistan. He states that the key to peace in Afghanistan is “to put pressure on Pakistan since the Pakistani army and ISI make up a great degree of support for the Taliban.” So the first step should be to prevent Pakistani support for the Taliban and then the next step is to start the dialogue process.”

Pakistan’s tribal border belt provides the Taliban with the only sanctuary available to them outside of Afghanistan. This coupled, with funding channels that are virtually untraceable, training facilities and weaponry define a few recognized links between the ISI and the insurgency. However, Pakistan’s support to the Taliban was never exempt of impediment demands which many insurgents began to slowly see as an encroachment on the insurgency’s operational autonomy. Pakistan’s dualistic agenda towards Afghanistan has both former and current Taliban members questioning Pakistan’s viable role in the reconciliation process. Matt Waldman, in describing the Taliban, states that many commanders have acknowledged that they “…were unhappy about perceived ISI influence over the movement especially at the leadership level.” Mutawakil expressed doubt over a possible mediating role for Pakistan just weeks after the London Conference summoned support the Afghan-led peace

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process. “They {Pakistan} should not be given an active role, for this will not produce positive results; it would be a mistake”\textsuperscript{15} asserted Mutawakil in an interview conducted earlier this year.

Mullah Omar’s 2009 and 2010 Eid al-Fitr messages have also shown that the Taliban have no ambitions to follow transnational jihadi struggles instead stressing a want for an Islamic system that embodies “economic, security, legal, educational and judicial aspect.” The leadership’s specific reference to the ‘prevention of civilians casualties; promotion of Islamic system, respect for all individuals regardless of gender; political, racial and lingual discriminations; and a foreign policy that promotes mutual respect between regional neighbours, shows signs of flexibility on their behalf. Moreover, Waldman argues ISI pressures, growing troop presence, the assassination of numerous Taliban commanders, fatigued fighters, and growing local resentment are also grounds cited by Taliban commanders leaning towards a political settlement with the Afghan government.

Mullah Omar’s Eid statements can be analyzed to determine the changes that are taking place internally in the overall aim of the Taliban movement. Antonio Giustozzi, international expert on Afghanistan presents the most comprehensive outline on the differences between the old regime and the insurgency defining members of the current movement as ‘Neo-Taliban.’ Giustozzi expresses that the Taliban regime {Taliban regime 96-01} varies from the Neo-Taliban in that, “…they {Taliban insurgency} seem to have absorbed from their foreign jihadist allies a more flexible and less orthodox attitude towards imported technologies and techniques.”\textsuperscript{16} The Taliban have adopted communication strategies that are far more effective than NATO-led ISAFs or the Afghan government. This is particularly true seeing the number of websites, radio stations, magazines and other mediums of communication the Taliban have established which help broaden their scope and reach significantly. Furthermore, Ahmed Rashid, marks in his article “A Deal with the Taliban?” (2010) Mullah Omar “sounded more like a diplomat then a extremist”\textsuperscript{17} in his 2009 Eid statement which showed first signs of flexibility on the Quetta

\textsuperscript{15} Mutawakil, Mullah Wakil Ahmad. "The Taliban: Reconcilable or Irreconcilable?." Personal interview. Feb. 2010.
Shuras part. Rashid recognizes that Omar’s statement though continues to urge insurgents to fight the U.S. it also pledged “that a future Taliban regime could work towards building peace and noninterference from outside forces, and would pose no threat to neighboring countries.”

Giustozzi also suggests that the Neo-Taliban is less of a homogenous hierarchal movement citing the foot-soldiers as representing a new generation of ‘autonomous’ fighters. Befitting to Western perceptions of reintegration with so-called autonomous fighters this belief neglects the Taliban’s omnipresent heterogeneous characteristics. The insurgency, despite its structural changes still preserves its loyalty to its Amir-ul-Momineen Mullah Omar from whom these insurgents get their directions. Moreover, the insurgency’s two shuras, the Quetta and the Peshawar Shura continue to implement its strict Islamic ideologies through ‘formal’ shadow governments in 33 out of 34 provinces in Afghanistan. The Quetta Shura, itself was represented by members of the old regime (Taliban era) who were predominantly from tribes rooted in Kandahar. Some of these members have now been either killed or arrested and they include Mullah Muhammad Hassan, Mullah Jalil, Qudratullah Jamal, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur, Amir Khan Mutaqi {Arrested}, Abdulhai Mutema’en {Arrested}, Mullah Obaidullah, Mullah Beradar {Arrested}, Muavlai Abdul Kabir and Agha Jan. In light of this, it becomes lucid that the insurgency is not a divided group and still rests its powers in the Quetta Shura without whose sanction and oversight, reconciliation, or even at the very least, reintegration is incomprehensible.

Recent speculations by the New York Times that face-to-face talks between “the inner circle of President Hamid Karzai and members of the Quetta Shura” had begun are baseless. Mujahid Kakar, cites two facts that highlight the illegitimacy of these claims. First he documents initial claims that Mullah Baradar (a member of the Quetta Shura who was arrested by Pakistan in early 2010) was been transported to Kabul to talk to Afghan officials. He questions that if this was true how effective would these talks have been if they had taken place. He states, that it is

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18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
not difficult to transport Mullah Baradar who is reported to be in Pakistani custody to Kabul, “but how effective can he {Mullah Baradar} be as a mediator if he remains to be in custody” Argues Kakar. Furthermore, “Mullah Baradar has already been replaced in the Quetta Shura by Mullah Abdul Qayum Zakir and Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour. Hence even if Mullah Beradar was the ‘senior Taliban member’ U.S. claimed talked to Afghan officials there is still huge doubt over the kind of role he could have played” reasons Kakar. Similarly, Mutawakil also expressed doubt over these reports, “I believe these claims are baseless” without “an official and formal address,” the Taliban are unlikely to cede to talks says Mutawakil.

2. Taliban Need an Address

Mullah Omar and Maulavi Abdul Kabir, member of the Leadership Council of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and the Coordinating Chief of the Eastern Province, rejected the National Consultative Peace Jirga and the creation of High Peace Council that followed it. Mullah Omar referred to the jirga as a “spurious jirga” and Maulavi Kabir described the High Peace Council, “as a one-sided entity, having been established to protect their unilateral goals and interests.” These comments should not be interpreted as the Taliban’s disregard for the peace process but should indicate reasons for their rejection. Neither reactions represent an outright rejection of the mandate of the HPC, instead they highlight a level of frustration and resentment the Taliban harbor in light of the limitations prescribed onto them, in what is suppose to be a negotiation process.

Mullah Mutawakil echoed Maulavi Kabir’s projections over the HPC. When asked what he perceived as hindrances to the Afghan peace process, Mutawakil cited the lack of an official

22 Kakar.
23 Mutawakil.
24 Ibid.
address for the Taliban as the single most important impediment to the peace process. He described this as a “technical issue” which should be addressed without delay if the Taliban are to entrust faith, trust and legitimacy to the Afghan government’s efforts in integrating the insurgency into Afghan society and various levels of the government. He asserts that the Taliban need a political office which should be located in a foreign country “where media and diplomats alike can have access to Mullah Omar’s representatives.” Consequently, Mutawakil suggests that the insurgency’s existing political commission led Mullah Mohammed Tayeb Agha should be institutionalized in either of the following two nations, Qatar or the United Arab Emirates. These two nations were suggested because of their friendly relations with the Afghan government, credibility amongst the Taliban and their experiences dealing with issues of militancy in their region. Conversely, Kakar construes that the mandate of the HPC is a mere repetition of the unsuccessful peace council that was established under Mojaddedi, “this has happened before but it did not work because the Taliban did not respond to it, at some level there might be contact with low level Taliban commanders but peace is not achievable in this way, as NATO and the Afghan government imagine it to work, because Taliban think they can win this war.”

3. Other hindrances to the peace process that must be addressed

Afghan and international experts have been trying to promote the position that Mullah Omar and his commanders are in fact “fatigued and under increased military pressure” at the moment. Though, we cannot misunderstand their fatigue for weakness seeing as the insurgency still retains its strength against foreign troops we can however argue that after three decades of fighting Mullah Omar, is showing indications that he wants to put an end to this war. “We {Mullah Omar} can consider any option that could lead to the achievement of this goal {the goal of independence and an Islamic system}.” However, the Afghan conflict represents a labyrinth of paradoxes in which the peace process is just another mired process. In addition to ignoring the importance of reconciliation, Mullah Mutawakil cites the removal of the UN sanction list, U.S.
bounties, and closure of Bagram Prison as catalysts for the peace process. “Peace can only happen, when trust is developed, there is not trust in the current process” disclaims Mutawakil. Furthermore, an important aspect of the negotiation process, lies is the surreptitious nature of these talks which have been regularly exposed by western media. The success of these talks depends a lot on its secretive nature and this should not be jeopardized by any official or media organ. Both Mutawakil and Richard Holbrooke believe this statement to be true. Mutawakil laments that the peace process in Afghanistan is complex in that it involves many entities, such as the Afghan government, NATO-led ISAF, and the U.S. He states that “as important as it is for the U.S. and Taliban to dialogue, these discussions should be kept secret and behind closed doors.” Holbrook, who recently denounced claims that talks had taken place with high level Taliban leaders lashed out at the media citing false reports of peace talks, "Confidential things must remain confidential in order to be confidential. And I believe in the confidentiality of serious discussions.”

The peace process is riddled with contradictions and this was one of the primary reasons why PTS failed to yield positive results in 2003. How can reconciliation take place with those insurgents who are still on UN sanction lists, or, have U.S. bounties on them? How can we reconcile with the Taliban while simultaneously targeting, attacking, imprisoning and torturing insurgents? How can trust be built on fallen promises, misleading reports by Western media and constant squabbling between the Afghan government and its allies over how to proceed with negotiations? NATO-led Isaf’s counter-insurgency campaign (COIN) is also affecting peace process, taking the position that the U.S. troop surge which is currently engaged in Operation Dragon Strike in Kandahar will be enough to force the insurgency to the negotiation table. This, as Matt Waldman argues is questionable in strategy, “given the constraints of counter-insurgency operations, and Taliban sanctuary and support in Pakistan.” In the same light, the constraints of COIN are in that the insurgency has sufficient room for casualties, as one fallen commander is replaced by another. Moreover, it is a wide held belief and a proven reality in many instances that the up and coming commanders are “aggressive and vengeful.” If there is one thing that the Afghan government and International community must learn from its previous mistakes is

32 Waldman, October 2010. pp. 7.
33 Ibid.
that reintegrating foot soldiers is not possible without first reconciling with the Taliban leadership. This has been particularly difficult when the international community, specifically the United States refuses to talk with Mullah Omar. To encourage the Taliban to approach the negotiation table certain preliminary efforts should be made by the Afghan government and its allies accordingly to Mullah Mutawakil and Mujahid Kakar. These efforts include garnering western support in engaging the Taliban Leadership Council in the peace process, provide the Taliban legitimacy by institutionalizing its commission, define a role for Pakistan in the peace process, remove sanction list and close down Bagram Prison.