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Talking to 'Moderate' Taliban

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"We are willing to talk to those Taliban who are not part of al-Qaeda or the terrorist network" exclaimed President Karzai in November 2007, three weeks after six parliamentarians were killed in the worst suicide attack since 2001. The Afghan government and NATO members have extended an olive branch to all but those who were involved in terrorist activities during the five year rule of the Taliban. NATO believes that dialogue with moderate elements of the Taliban insurgency, rather than strict use of military power against them will prove effective in reducing casualties and maintaining long-term stability.

Who are the moderate Taliban? How are their ideologies different from the hard-line Taliban groups? What factors are guiding the possibility and, or, potential for peace talks between the Afghan Government, NATO and moderate Taliban groups?

IS THERE A MODERATE TALIBAN?

The existence of a less-repressive Taliban group referred as the "moderate Taliban" was first realized as early as 2001. Then, the US Secretary of State Collin Powell and Pakistan President, Pervez Musharraf, recognized the possibility of incorporating less repressive Taliban members in constructing the coalition government in Afghanistan. This vision was disputed and ignored by Afghanistan's leading factional groups, who argued that such a group did not exist to negotiate with.

Regardless, such groups did exist within the ranks of the Taliban regime. Taliban members such as Mullah Mohammad Hasan Rahmani once Governor of Kandahar, and Taliban military commander Ibrahim Baloch, were considered moderate members of the regime. They advocated flexible laws, particularly in the realm of women and minority rights.

Moreover, propositions to hold negotiations with moderate Taliban members had been attempted in the past as well. The late Ahmad Shah Massoud conducted several negotiations in late 1900s with moderate Taliban elements such as Mullah Omar's deputy, Mullah Rabbani and Mullah Burjan. Unfortunately the talks did not lead into settlements because many moderate members of the regime were killed by the fanatical Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, for negotiating with Massoud.

Even during the Bonn negotiations, moderate elements were willing to cooperate with the participants to reach an agreement in the coalition government. However, they were sidelined from the negotiations primarily due to pressures from the United States.

Many are now acknowledging the decision to exclude the Taliban from talks in 2001 as a mistake. In retrospect, the architects of the Bonn agreement actually pushed the Taliban to the east where they sought representation and support from Pakistani sympathizers.

IS TALIBAN A MONOLITH?

The Taliban insurgency is a divided movement, reasoning behind such divisions is relative. However one facet of these divisions can be described summoning the regimes differing astrictive goals.

One explanation for such differing goals within the members of the insurgency could be the circumstances under which the insurgency is recruiting its fighters. The loyal core of the Taliban movement is comprised of young fighters, predominantly in their early to late teens, gathered from tribes across the province of Kandahar. At times, economic and social reasons underscore their proclivity to join the insurgency. When there are no alternatives to a normal life the ascriptions of a holy martyr death end up entrapping these kids in a fabric of misguided ideologies.

The only difference between “moderate” Taliban elements and hard-line Taliban members is the inspiration behind their jihad (holy war). The so-called “moderate” Taliban members who do not refute the possibility of official discussions with the state have made it clear that they will only negotiate if their conditions are met.

Most of these young teens sustain the insurgency in southern Afghanistan as a means to sustain themselves. Would these teens put down their arms if given an opportunity for a better life? The answer to this question could shed light on one divided strand in the insurgency.

However, this is not to suggest that the Taliban insurgency comprises only of misguided adolescents. Per contra, this classification does make it facile to distinguish hard-line members from the more economically dependent

adolescents who make up the core of the insurgency and with whom there is a possibility for talks. Humayun Hamidzada, spokesman for Karzai welcomes formal discussions with Taliban members. He asserts that the government has maintained communication with Taliban members wanting to join the political process or just reintegrate into society as ordinary citizens.

Moderate Taliban elements have always maintained a slightly open stance on communication with the government. They are ardent nationalists who support the idea of a pure Islamic state in Afghanistan. They do not necessarily believe in joining hard-line Taliban and al Qaeda groups in their jihadist stance against the west. Unlike moderate members, hard-line Taliban members follow al Qaeda's mission cossetting Huntington's theory of “the clash of civilizations;” waging jihad in the hopes of a global Islamic revolution. With the latter group, Hamidzada makes it clear that the state will not hold negotiations and instead will opt for a more militaristic approach to root them out.

MODERATE TALIBAN: AMBIGUOUS CONCEPT?

The term “moderate” denotes compromise, balance, impartiality, and amicability. According to these synonyms, the moderate Taliban groups, with whom everyone is now willing to negotiate with, is anything but. The only difference between “moderate” Taliban elements and hard-line Taliban members is the inspiration behind their jihad (holy war). The so-called “moderate” Taliban members who do not refute the possibility of official discussions with the state have made it clear that they will only negotiate if their conditions are met.

According to Qari Yousef Ahmadi, Taliban spokesman interviewed by BBC correspondent Chris Morris, these conditions include; the immediate removal of foreign troops, implementation of 100% Islamic law and no foreign interference in Afghanistan's affairs. Hence, one should not succumb to coining these

Taliban members as moderate since they are only willing to blow themselves up in Kabul and others as radical or hard-line because they are willing to blow themselves up in the west. In conclusion, they are both following a jihadi approach utilizing terrorist tactics as a means to their end.

President Hamid Karzai says that contact with moderate Taliban leaders have increased over the past seven months. Deemed as a preventative measure that will decrease bloodshed and promote national reconciliation, his government has been forthcoming in its determination to accommodate talks with moderate Taliban elements. Some NATO commanders and government officials however are cautious of entering talks with such groups because they consider their ideologies as unrepresentative of the majority of the Taliban insurgency.

In late 2006, there was news of a possible ceasefire between moderate Taliban groups and NATO in the district of Panjwai. Described as the birth place of the Taliban movement it has been the scene of heavy military combat since 2001. The residences of Panjwai were hopeful that a ceasefire would create space for reconstruction efforts to commence. Under pressure from shura members, Taliban commanders in Panjwai had agreed to hold negotiations with NATO commanders.

In December 2006, Panjwai residents approached NATO commanders including Canada's ranking officer in Afghanistan, Brig Gen Tim Grant, to negotiate a cease-fire agreement. However speculations doubting the genuineness of the Taliban's objectives led to its failure. These assumptions were not far-fetched. Various Taliban commanders have since acknowledged that a cease-fire would allow them to withdraw to safe havens in Quetta, Pakistan, where they could "rest, rearm, and re-strategize".

A Taliban fighter who agreed to talk to MacLean

affirmed that random suicide attacks and road-side bombs were not enough to defeat NATO's considerable military capabilities hence a ceasefire would give them much needed time to re-strategize their attacks.

A ceasefire means surrender and defeat for majority of the Taliban insurgents regardless of their ideologies. Obeid Urahman, a mid-level commander from Panjwai, explained that moderate-Taliban elements are currently discussing ways to "reunite under a nationalist banner" so to distinguish their war from the larger war pursued by other Taliban groups and the al Qaeda.

Prospective talks with the Taliban should not be considered as an end in itself, but rather the beginning to a conflict transformation process. If participants of the Bonn Accords had incorporated those Taliban members willing to put down their arms and negotiate then that would have blocked the shifting of Pashtun allegiance from Kabul to Quetta.

Thus even moderate Taliban members will not be easily coerced to give up arms unconditionally. For this reason one should ask, 'if the distinction between hard-line and moderate Taliban groups are primarily based on differentiated ideologies vis-a-vis national jihad versus global jihad, could dialogue necessarily lead to the cessation of hostilities under such a pretext? Perhaps, Afghanistan's foreign minister, Rangeen Dadfar Spanta's position on "moderate" Taliban elements is contingent upon this distinction when he blatantly rejected the existence of any sort of moderate Taliban group in a meeting with German politicians on 5 April, 2007.

Despite the consequences, dialogue remains essential to the construction of a stable relationship between the Taliban and the government which will nonetheless bring much wanted stability to Afghanistan.

TALKING TO TALIBAN

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Undoubtedly, negotiations with moderate Taliban leaders would bring long-term stability as reconstruction efforts could once again resume in Taliban strongholds. President Karzai and NATO must take advantage of this conflict certain Taliban members are facing while attempting to distinguish themselves from al-Qaeda and other terrorist cells. Many members of the insurgency have joined under socio-economic burdens which have inclined them to adhere to the ideologies of the insurgency.

Currently, Karzai's government is working to recruit locals to form an auxiliary police force that would take over security duties from NATO at the village level. Thus enabling NATO to operate in other unstable parts of the region. Moreover, by distinguishing moderate Taliban members from hard-line extremists NATO has been able to carry out "pinpoint strikes" aiming at removing

leadership at the top ranking levels of the Taliban insurgency rather than front-line fighters.

By targeting leadership, NATO hopes to "limit the extent of collateral damage." Haroun Mir, a policy analyst in Kabul, suggests in his article "The Benefit of Negotiating with Moderate Taliban Leaders" that President Karzai should incorporate influential Pashtun supporters of the Taliban insurgency from within Kandahar into his government regardless of their coloration with the Taliban as a means to bring legitimacy to his government. By binding moderate Taliban members, their supporters, NATO and the Afghan Government to a common goal, the sovereignty of Afghanistan, they can facilitate the peace-building process currently underway

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