



The Taliban: Reconcilable or Irreconcilable?

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‘Afghan leadership, Afghan ownership;’ another rhetoric of the Afghan conflict but one that carries a heavier task placing the burden of state-building upon Afghans for the first time in nine years. The London Conference on Afghanistan, held on 28th January, 2010 witnessed President Hamid Karzai’s determination in ending the deadly conflict in Afghanistan with the creation of an inclusive framework focused on six points of concern: Peace; Reconciliation and reintegration; Security; Good Governance; Fighting Corruption; Economic Development; and Regional Cooperation. These points are not any different than previous commitments made to Afghanistan; however, a significant development that set this conference apart from all others on Afghanistan was the international communities, namely the U.S. and U.K.’s of the National Reconciliation and Reintegration of Armed Opposition Groups. This is the single most crucial measure of Karzai’s framework. Karzai also intends to expand the Afghan security forces to 300,000 in the next five years with the support of a USD 140 million international fund to facilitate the transference of security from international to Afghan forces; an indispensable component of the reintegration process. Pronounced as a pivotal opportunity for Afghanistan to establish stability and security, the national reconciliation and reintegration initiative is nonetheless endowed with both various prospects and challenges.

When paralleling the events leading up to the current height of the Afghan conflict it raises many questions for researchers who are puzzled with the lack of deliverable since the conflict commenced in 2001. Starting from U.S. Defence Secretary, Robert Gates’ plea for the disarmament and reintegration of the Taliban, followed by the State Department’s pledge to increase political, diplomatic and economic initiatives, leading up to the culmination of initiatives at the London Conference. Juxtaposed to the evolution of the Taliban, from a terrorist group, to an insurgency, to

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'moderate' elements, to the most recent connotation referring to insurgents as 'our brothers' and 'sons of the same soil,' it is apparent that there were numerous incremental interests that culminated into the reconciliation framework appropriately scheduled after the withdrawal of NATO forces. International support for this initiative was very pronounced at the London Conference as everyone, from; U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, U.S. Secretary Hillary Clinton, British Foreign Secretary David Milliband vindicated Karzai's initiative. Nonetheless, the National Reconciliation and Reintegration of Armed Opposition Groups is infused with contradictions and duplicity. It resonates more like a strategy of ultimatums rather than a plan for reconciliation.

President Karzai, along with an audience of over sixty countries gathered to pave the way forward with an agreement that highlighted the transference of security responsibilities and a bid to dialogue with the Taliban insurgency. Karzai's initiative stemmed from the inevitability that military flexing alone will not suffice in bringing stability to Afghanistan. "Military actions can't secure Afghanistan, so we initiated a peace process and negotiations with all our Afghan brothers—the Taliban, Hizb-e Islami,"² excluding those who are related to Al-Qaeda articulated President Karzai. To facilitate this process, Karzai requested Saudi Arabia to mediate between his government and the insurgency. Saudi King, Malik Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz in response to Karzai accepted the request but upon the satisfaction of two conditions; the Taliban must stop giving sanctuary to al-Qaeda and the request for mediation must come directly from President Karzai. Furthermore, a USD 500 million fund was created by U.K. and Japan to fund the reintegration process over the next five years, this in sum can be described as a buy-out, or better yet, a bid to 'pay for peace.' The logic behind the 'buy-out' is that the majority of the Taliban, or 'so-called \$10 fighters,'³ are more moderate than the top strata of the insurgency. Therefore, the motivation for joining the Taliban for these fighters was more influenced by economic insecurities than ideological inclinations. This underpins Karzai's initiative assuming that when provided with an alternative these "rent-a-day foot soldiers can easily be broken."⁴ Dialogue with the top Taliban and anti-government leaders and a payout for the foot soldiers is the intended path to peace as outlined in London Conference. But will the Taliban defect? That remains to be seen but considering that this initiative is riddled with contradictions and mock scenarios it does not seem likely. Or, will they, though probably not for the reasons we are lead to believe.

² RFE/RL, "Karzai Says He Has Always Favored Peace Talks With Taliban," Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 29 January 29, 2010. http://www.rferl.org/content/Karzai_Says_He_Has_Always_Favored_Peace_Talks_With_Taliban/1943664.html

³ Reuters, "Buying off Afghanistan's '\$10 fighters,'" 31 January, 2010. <http://blogs.reuters.com/Afghanistan/2010/01/31/buying-off-afghanistan-10-taliban-fighters/>.

⁴ Ibid.

The international community has vowed to support the reconciliation process however the U.S. is still inconsistent with its approach on the matter. This paradox is illustrated in the Afghan government's determination to dialogue with senior Taliban leaders and other anti-government groups such as the Haqqani network and Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami. While the U.S., refuses talks with the top tier of the insurgency. Hillary Clinton verbosely ruled out talks with what she referred to as the "really bad guys in Afghanistan," though promising support the foot-soldiers. The basis of Clinton's assertions is reliant on the view that Mullah Omar and other hardliners are not amenable to renounce their affiliations with al-Qaeda hence reconciling would be a wasted effort. On the other hand, former U.N. Envoy to Afghanistan, Kai Eide's backroom wheeling and dealing with the Taliban leadership (Quetta Shura) in Dubai after the London Conference showed that the international community is still struggling to bridge their independent national interests with that of the state-building mandate in Afghanistan. Thus, while the international community tires to merge its discrepancies, President Karzai commenced talks with the Taliban and other anti-government groups at multiple levels, exhibiting that this is an 'Afghan led' process.

President Karzai invites those insurgents to participate in peace talks who can accept the Afghan constitution and relinquish contact with international terrorists, namely al Qaeda. The government will establish a National Council for Peace, Reconciliation, and Reintegration followed by a grand Peace Jirga comprised of tribal elders, parliamentarians and Afghan experts. The peace jirga is planned for April of this year, and the council will be endowed with the responsibility of implementing the decisions agreed at the gathering. The peace jirga will discuss ways to include the participation of those insurgents who surrender, in the peace talks. Spokesmen for the President, Waheed Omar has confirmed that "elements ready to join the peace process would be guaranteed their safety,"⁵ though he did not touch upon the topic of amnesty it can be gathered from his statement that certain conditions put forth by the Taliban are cautiously being met. Nonetheless, few believe that the top level of the insurgency will attend the Jirga as these varying mandates, resonate more like an agenda of ultimatums rather than a strategy to end the conflict. For instance, British Foreign Secretary, David Miliband has threatened the insurgency proclaiming that they must reconcile or face unremitting military force. However, threatening foot-soldiers to accept the 'buy-out' plan is unsustainable as it cannot replace the financial stability militants originally received from the Taliban.

This plan, aimed at low-level insurgents or foot-soldiers, will use USD 500 million, in addition to a USD 1.4 billion fund proposed by the U.S. Senate. These funds will support the reintegration

⁵ Pajwok Afghan News.

component of the peace process, aimed at draining the 30,000 fighters from the insurgency in the next five years. This means that each insurgent will receive USD 17,000, or approximately USD 3,000 a year.⁶ Unfortunately, in the long run this budget is ludicrous and can alternatively work to promote illegal rackets that are far more pragmatic in a nation that is ranked 135th in the U.N. Human Poverty Index in 2009 out of 135 other countries surveyed.⁷ Also, assuming that money alone can buy these insurgents, and particularly when the Taliban are at their peak denotes a sense of naivety on part of the Afghan President and his international allies. What makes even less sense is the U.S. withdrawal time-line, which is unreasonably set to 2011 irrespective of the growing insecurity trends. The justification for the 'buy-out' proposal and its focus on moderate elements (foot-soldiers) of the insurgency shows critical oversight on behalf of the Afghan government and its international supporters. We must ask, can the Taliban can actually be bought? How do we begin to define a 'moderate' from a 'hardcore' Taliban? Answers to these questions, may help us in understanding the contradictions inherent in this initiative.

The insurgency we see today is referred by many experts and scholars as the, 'Neo-Taliban' drawing on the significant differences between the new and the 'old Taliban' regime. Scholar, Antonio Giustozzi has provided the most comprehensive description of this terminology. Giustozzi differentiates the Neo-Taliban from the 'old regime' in describing the Neo-Taliban as having; 'absorbed a more flexible and less orthodox attitude towards imported technologies and techniques, they are more integrated in the international jihadist movement after 2001; they have a substantial base of 'true believers comprised of Deobandi'⁸ students from NWFP.⁹ Moreover, a key difference between them surrounds their free-market orientation. The Taliban regime had benefitted immensely from traders who transported goods from neighbouring countries or NATO supplies trucks traveling to Afghanistan. This saw the regime accept cash in return for clearing roads in southern Afghanistan. Conversely, the Neo-Taliban is more entrepreneurial, "exploiting the resources of the free market to conduct their war."¹⁰ Unlike the old regime, the Neo-Taliban exploited resources to fund not only their logistics but also their military operations. The Neo-Taliban, as articulated by Giustozzi, is known to pay certain fighters for 'piece work;' to carry out ad hoc missions.¹¹ These differentiations exemplify the entrepreneurial characteristics of the insurgency. They also show that in some capacity,

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ United Nations Human Development Report 2009; Afghanistan- The Human Development Index - going beyond income. http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_AFG.html

⁸ Antonio Giustozzi. Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan. 2007, Hurst Publications, UK.

⁹ North West Frontier Province located in the Tribal border belt of Pakistan.

¹⁰ Giustozzi, 2007. pp. 14

¹¹ Ibid.

insurgents can be bought; for either the sake of war or peace. But these \$10 fighters do not represent the masses of the insurgency and are a limited group.

The 20/80 percent division which views 80 percent of the insurgency as 'moderate' and 20 percent as 'hard-core' as prescribed by armchair strategist in the U.S., is a conjecture at best. If the international community and President Karzai stress that moderate elements do exist it is a misguided categorizing of the insurgency. Though it is correct to assume that since 2002, "economic and social reasons have incited certain members to join the insurgency,"¹² it must be kept in mind that if we define 'moderate' it denotes "compromise, impartiality and amicability,"¹³ and these militants embody anything but these characterizations. For instance, those insurgents who had accepted Karzai's earlier calls for reconciliation live in virtual self-exile thereafter. These individuals cannot return to their villages in the south because they are threatened by the insurgency, and they despise living in Kabul because they consider city life to be Un-Islamic. Understanding what makes life in Kabul unfavorable to former militants gives us a fundamental clue in the perceptions of Taliban after disarming. They refer to coed schools, dancing, drinking, music, movies and the accumulation of wealth as violations of the *Holy Koran*. It can be gathered from this that a Taliban will always live by the same principles that initially guided his course to the insurgency. Former insurgents living in Kabul feel like outcasts, they sense that people make fun of their country ways, with their huge black turbans and kohl eyeliner. Consequently, once a Taliban decides to disarm, the challenge of reintegration begins. Accordingly, a Taliban's actions maybe alterable with economic incentives but to change their perceptions, beliefs and ideologies a sustainable approach, void of all foreign reasoning, must be adopted. The insurgency has rejected Karzai's peace plan stating that their ideologies and principles are not for sale. Nevertheless, the insurgency is amenable to peace talks but only with the condition that foreign forces withdrawn from Afghanistan at the earliest.

Local and international analysts have little hope for the successful development of the reconciliation and reintegration initiative pointing to the Karzai government's inability to understand the most fundamental characteristics of the Taliban. In order to decipher the identity of a Taliban, a national dialogue must take place in which all Afghans must expose the issue of civil ethnicity and the acute lack of a national identity. This will engage different ethnic communities to expose the discriminatory and prejudice indoctrinations embedded in the political and social arena of present day Afghanistan; a corollary of international politics played out in Afghanistan in the last thirty decades.

¹² Mariam Safi, "Talking to 'Moderate' Taliban," International Institute for Peace, December 2007. No. 57,

¹³ Ibid.

The insurgency is not a monolithic group and has members that are both against and for, negotiations; this remained valid during the Taliban regime as well. Members of the old regime participated in negotiations with the late-Northern Alliance leader, Ahmad Shah Masoud in the early 1990s. The Taliban regime also wanted to participate in the Bonn Conference in 2001¹⁴ but were sidelined by the U.S., and in 2006 a former member of the Taliban regime Maulavi Abdul Hakim Munib became the first 'former' militant to become the governor of Uruzghan province. In addition, certain members of the Neo-Taliban have been acquiescent to talks with the former U.N. Envoy, Kai Eidi who met with the members of the leadership council in January 2010. Also, in February 2010, Mullah Baradar, second in rank to Mullah Omar tried to facilitate a peace jirga between the Afghan government and the Quetta Shura before his arrest in Pakistan. These events show that just like the old regime, the insurgency too has members that are reconcilable, as opposed to 'moderate.' Thus they will enter talks but not devoid of their terms and conditions.

Reconciliation is the most critical component of the peace process and one that is far more difficult to achieve than reintegration. This is a result of the target groups designated to each variable; reconciliation targets the leadership of the insurgency while reintegration focuses on foot-soldiers. Nonetheless, it must be noted that access to the foot soldiers can only be granted by the top leadership of the insurgency. Therefore, reconciliation must take precedence over reintegration in the peace initiative. Reintegration has been ongoing in Afghanistan since 2001 and many Taliban members have left the insurgency as a product of this process. However, reconciliation is regarded as a more sensitive component since it deals directly with the leadership of the insurgency. Also, the leadership of the Taliban, Hizb-i-Islami and Haqqani are on both the U.N. black and the U.S. terrorist list which is extremely problematic for U.S.-Afghan cooperation in reference to reconciliation. Also, the Afghan government cannot pursue its strategy for reconciliation void of Pakistan's help since the leadership of the Taliban, the Quetta Shura, is located in Pakistan. Though initially, the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban opted to exclude Pakistan from mediating in the peace talks but this was reversed for reasons that were unknown until the recent detention of Mullah Baradar.

Talks between Kai Eide and the Quetta Shura had started in summer of 2009 and had reached an intense level until Pakistan interfered by arresting Mullah Baradar and fourteen other insurgents. A close advisor, of President Karzai had told AP on the condition of anonymity, that "Baradar had given the green light to participate in a three-day peace Jirga in April,"¹⁵ in consultation with the Afghan government. Therefore, his arrest prevented the reconciliation process from entering into a productive phase of negotiations. The reasons behind Pakistan's actions shows a disconnect between the

¹⁴ Safi. 2007.

¹⁵ Julian Borger, "Kai Eide Lashes out," Guardian.co.uk., 19 March, 2010.

insurgency and the Pakistani Amry and intelligence who enjoyed great influence during the Taliban regime. But the Neo-Taliban, on the other hand wants to disengage from Pakistan due to a number of reasons.

Though Pakistan's actual role in the Afghan conflict is puzzling, one thing that is for certain is that the insurgency garnered great resentment from the Afghan populace for being associated with Pakistan.¹⁶ To begin with, the issue of Pashtunistan which remains a concern for many Afghan Pashtuns was a point of contention between Pashtun communities and the Taliban, as they were sought to support Pakistan's stance on the issue. Secondly, some members of the insurgency began to resent pressure from Pakistani security services, "accusing them of forcing the Taliban to attack schools and development projects as to prevent Afghanistan from progression."¹⁷ Thirdly, Pakistan feared that the above to factors would combine into a possible unification of Pashtuns on both sides of the border and raise the issue of a 'politically unified Pashtunistan.'¹⁸ Thus Pakistan developed contacts with non-Taliban and non-Hizb insurgent groups in southern Afghanistan, in conjunction to employing elements within the insurgency, to counter such a development. Thus, according to Giustozzi, this saw many mainstream Taliban figures distance themselves from commanders who were rumored to be under the directive of the Pakistani security services. Therefore, when Pakistan was sidelined from the reconciliation process, it arrested those Taliban leaders amenable to peace talks in an effort to maintaining only those it deemed 'irreconcilable' to prevent the creation of a strong Pashtun configuration on the Afghan side as well as the Talibanisation of the tribal border belt on the Pakistani side. Pakistan, may want a political deal to be struck in Afghanistan but one that is with its alleys in the insurgency as a means to freeze the process of a strong Pashtunistan sentiment at the grassroots level in Afghanistan.

The concept of peace and reintegration will be carried forward with two approaches in the coming months; one will be a political effort which will have implication at the strategic level and the second will be tactical which will have implications at the operation level. It seems that at the strategic level, the Afghan government is looking to reconcile with the leaders of the Taliban, Hizb-e-Islami and Haqqani network, and at the operational level, Afghan forces in joint operation with NATO will utilize the newly adopted approach of "clear, hold, and build" to remove Taliban presence in the most volatile provinces. Though the peace initiative is not clear of its contradictions and challenges, it holds dire implications if its fails which will cause the nation to spiral into a state of complete anarchy. Some of the possible implications of the reconciliation and reintegration process could be a demand

¹⁶ Giustozzi. 2007. pp. 26.

¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 27

¹⁸ Ibid.

by the insurgency for the premature withdrawal of foreign troops, seeking territorial control, the possible risk of re-integrating criminals, gaining irrelevant intelligence and information, and possible influx of foreign Jihadist whom are politically or ideologically motivated. But this peace process will not succeed void of regional cooperation with key stakeholders in the Afghan conflict namely Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. This will require a convergence at the level of national interests between international and regional interests in collaboration with the Afghan government.