



PROSPECTS OF A SETTLEMENT WITH THE AFGHAN TALIBAN

Exit, peace and governance from the Taliban perspective



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ABBREVIATIONS

AAN	Afghan Analyst Network
ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
APRP	Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Programme
AQ	Al-Qaeda
CT	Counter-terrorism
EU	European Union
GoA	Government of Afghanistan
HPC	High Peace Council
IDP	Internally Displaced People
ISKP	Islamic State in Khorasan Province
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PTS	Programme Tahkim-e Solh
RSM	Resolute Support Mission
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
US	United States

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a backdrop for identifying conflict resolution initiatives in support of a settlement with the Taliban in Afghanistan. It reviews the multifaceted peace processes, both past and present, and provides insights into the most recent developments among the Taliban. Based on secondary sources and interviews with Taliban leaders, commanders and foot soldiers, the report highlights the development of an unprecedented momentum calling for the international community to identify ways to support the Afghan peace and reconciliation process.

Afghanistan continues to face harsh challenges, ranging from widespread conflict and instability, fragile and corrupt governance, and the presence of numerous insurgent groups, including the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), as well as the continued presence of the Taliban, who appear stronger than ever. Even though the Taliban remain united under their current leadership, in recent years significant internal developments have taken place, including defections and divisions, but also their changing approach towards the future of Afghanistan. The Taliban interviewed for this report display a high degree of pragmatism towards ideas that observers would typically associate with their original vision of an emirate, and the report questions whether radical opposition to democracy truly defines their identity. Instead it appears that their primary *raison d'être* is the liberation of Afghanistan, and that they do not reject the idea of taking part in the electoral process. Subsequently, they are less concerned with sectarian interpretations or resistance to democracy than to ending the "US occupation" and the practice of decisions being "taken by the occupiers."

In addressing Afghanistan's daunting challenges, achieving national reconciliation and establishing peace with the Taliban are the most fundamental yet the most difficult tasks. However, certain positive developments in the recent past, including overtures by the Afghan government and a willingness on the part of both the US and the Taliban to engage directly with each other, perhaps as a result of the growing presence of the ISKP, indicate moderate progress towards a negotiated settlement. Even though a sense of optimism has been generated by recent events and developments, it is still in its nascent stage and will require extensive diplomacy, compromises and a willingness to move forward on the part of all stakeholders. Among the challenges in this regard are counter-terrorism (CT) efforts to split the group, which ironically work against the peace process and the ambition to avoid spoilers. At the same time, it is evident that a deliberate effort is being made by certain fringe elements both in Kabul and within the Taliban who benefit from prolonging the war and conflict, and therefore continue to oppose and disrupt the peace process.



**INTRODUCTION:
IS THE CONFLICT WITH THE TALIBAN
RIPE FOR RESOLUTION?**



Afghanistan continues to be affected by armed conflict, with a wide range of insurgent groups still operating in the country: the Taliban, a myriad of local militias, Al-Qaeda, and not least the Khorasan chapter of the Islamic State, the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP). The country has experienced an increase in violence during the past couple of years, as well as a related increase in internally displaced People (IDPs). Among the recurring challenges identified in the Afghan security sector are issues of loyalty and high desertion rates, the high level of corruption, the lack of full control over government militias, human rights violations, and the lack of intelligence gathering and capabilities. These challenges continue to exist despite NATO's capacity-building mission, Resolute Support Mission (RSM).

On the other hand, moderate progress has also been achieved in the peace initiatives that have been launched by the Government of Afghanistan (GoA) and the US. There currently seems to be a momentum for peace on the part of the GoA, the US and the Taliban. Talks about reconciliation and negotiations experienced a surge in 2014 when NATO concluded its ISAF mission and changed it into the RSM, which was aimed at preparing the Afghan security forces to take over the security role. In 2013, for example, the US administration launched a new program of negotiations with the Taliban, which in 2014 led to the Bowe Bergdahl agreement. The years since have seen an increase in the number of Taliban prisoners being released from Guantanamo Bay and returning to the battlefields in Afghanistan. Under both President Barack Obama and, more recently, President Donald Trump, the US has broken with George Bush's original mantra that "We do not negotiate with terrorists", which characterized the US approach to the Taliban in the early years of the war in Afghanistan. At least, compared to the Islamic State movement, the Taliban no longer stand out as the main terrorist threat in the rhetoric of the current US president. The Afghan government has also intensified its attempts to invite the Taliban to the negotiating table, most spectacularly with a ceasefire deal that lasted for three days in the summer of 2018. According to media reports in 2016, the Afghan government has also been giving financial and military support to a breakaway Taliban faction headed by Mullah Rasool in an attempt to increase fragmentation within the insurgency and invite some of its leaders to peace talks.¹

But what has the Taliban's stance been in this entire process? Seventeen years after the war in Afghanistan was launched by the US-led coalition, the Taliban are still a strong force who have made considerable gains in terms of both re-establishing their influence and regaining territory. In fact, they now have control or influence over more territory in Afghanistan than at any point since 2001.² While views vary over the group's exact area and percentage of influence and control, with the exception of a study conducted by the BBC indicating that the Taliban are openly active in 70% of

Afghanistan's districts, fully control 4 percent of the country and have an open physical presence in another 66 percent,³ other reports, including the latest report from SIGAR, consider that, as of 2018, the Taliban are active in more than 44% of Afghanistan, compared to 28% in November 2015, clearly indicating that they still constitute a credible military and political threat.⁴

The US and NATO have both abandoned the aim of defeating the Taliban. The security situation in 2018 is still very serious, since both the Taliban and the ISKP have demonstrated their ability to launch deadly attacks on various civilian and government targets. The ISKP have been active in Kabul, as have the Taliban, who, at the beginning of 2018, managed to carry out a spectacular suicide attack in Kabul, killing around hundred people in a single attack.⁵ The ISKP followed suit, for example, by claiming responsibility for an attack at around the same time on Save the Children in Jalalabad, in which at least five people were killed.⁶ There is some doubt about the extent to which the ISKP has the capacity to launch attacks on government targets, rather than just claiming responsibility for such attacks in an attempt to position themselves in relation to the Taliban.

Overall Afghanistan is not in a post-conflict situation of sufficient stability to allow a focus on institution-building and development-oriented activities, as stated in the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan report (UNAMA 2018). UNAMA has suggested that the UN should increase its role in supporting and promoting bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the aim of enhancing international support for the Afghan peace process. In line with the UN recommendations, the Swedish government, for example, has increased its support to the peace process in Afghanistan by implementing projects to strengthen women's participation in the process. One aspect of this is a mediation program led by the Swedish Folke Bernadotte Academy in collaboration with Afghan stakeholders and the Swedish embassy in Kabul. Norway also decided to step up its support for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan in 2018. Nonetheless the EU, including Denmark, could play a more active role in facilitating the multifaceted peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan based on an understanding of workable conflict resolution mechanisms in the country.

Denmark's strategy in relation to Afghanistan also includes the strategic aim of promoting peace in respect of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) as a platform (see country paper for Afghanistan 2018-2020). In addition, the Danish Stabilization Program includes a program for dialogue and to build trust between Afghanistan and Pakistan aimed at contributing to the stabilization of Afghanistan by focusing on regional connections and thus strengthening the regional dimension

of the peace process. However, overall there is a lack of concrete initiatives embracing conflict resolution thinking, particularly its local dimensions. One of the keys to achieving the strategic objective in the country, namely “to prevent Afghanistan from being a safe haven for terrorists”,⁷ is to work actively on promoting one or more of the conflict resolution mechanisms with the potential to work in the Afghan context in 2019.

In order to illuminate the local dimensions of the peace process and scrutinize potential focus areas for such interventions, this report provides a background analysis of the Afghan Taliban and their stance on a possible peace process. While the report is based on a review of the Afghan peace process up until now as reported in the media, conference proceedings, summaries of track-II meetings, think-tank reports and recent academic literature,⁸ more importantly it is based on interviews conducted in October 2018 with members of the Afghan Taliban with intimate insights into the peace process. These included a handful of serving and former Taliban leaders (officials and commanders), foot soldiers and Taliban sympathizers. The Taliban members who were interviewed for this report spoke on condition of anonymity, to protect which, and thereby their security, we are not able to disclose the locations of the interviews, nor to include a list of the interviewees. Although the interviews are not statistically significant, they nonetheless represent a tendency in the movement. Even though they are conducted with both high- and lower-level Taliban affiliates, the interviews demonstrated a high degree of correspondence in their responses. Both the authors of this report have followed the Afghan Taliban movement closely and have been able to draw on their insights from earlier interviews with members of the movement, both the Afghan and Pakistani factions. All citations have been translated.

The report considers four mechanisms of conflict resolution that peace and conflict research elsewhere show have helped bring conflicts to an end in other contexts.⁹ These provided a framework for the questions we posed to the Taliban affiliates. These conflict resolution mechanisms are:

- The transformation of those involved in the conflict into one or more political parties
- The potential for sharing power
- Acceptance of territorial and religious autonomy
- Peace deals that imply compromising on respective demands


The report presents the Taliban's contemporary attitudes towards a settlement, as well as briefly outlining developments in the last couple of years when it comes to the peace process. It also describes the contemporary organization and its fragmentation among the Taliban in order to better understand the movement as it exists today. Finally, the report presents the main insights gained from interviewing members of the Taliban and different stakeholders in the peace process, organized around the four conflict resolution mechanisms mentioned above that research on other conflict zones has found important in ending Islamist conflicts. A main, quite intuitive idea in conflict resolution research is to keep the conflict local and find local solutions, as this enhances the potential for resolution in the first place. At the same time, it is vital to prevent international jihadist movements such as Al-Qaeda (AQ) and ISKP from gaining ground. Afghanistan represents a complex constellation of conflict, which has already been internationalized due to regional power play, international troop interventions and the continued presence of foreign fighters.





**TALKS OF THE PAST:
THE US AND THE GOVERNMENT
OF AFGHANISTAN**

As described in an earlier DIIS report from 2013 on the peace initiatives aimed at the Afghan Taliban (Sheikh and Greenwood, DIIS), the peace process is multifaceted, some initiatives being taken locally, including by grassroot actors, while others are more official. On the government level, which is the primary focus of this report, the US and the Government of Afghanistan (GoA) have taken several different initiatives, some oriented towards a ceasefire, others towards negotiating prisoner exchanges and reintegrating foot soldiers, while attempts to open a dialogue about the future of Afghanistan have been sparse. Track II meetings facilitated by different external actors have tried to identify issues that might create the basis for finding a settlement in Afghanistan.



It is important that the prospects for a settlement be viewed not only at the official level, but also in the wider machinery behind it that is preparing for successful talks by establishing their legitimacy among the wider population, as well as among the ranks of the Taliban.

In a recent report, Thomas Ruttig and Obaid Ali (AAN, 2018) describe how, aside from the US–Taliban talks, the High Peace Council – the official government platform in charge of the peace process with the Taliban – has launched diplomatic initiatives, such as facilitating local meetings to create a consensus around the significance of peace talks with the Taliban and stimulating “counter-narratives” by reaching out to religious scholars to counter the Taliban’s religious justifications for the war they are engaged in. The report also mentions the wide number of third-party initiatives, ranging from attempts by organizations such as the Pugwash Conference to arrange formal peace negotiations to initiatives undertaken by other regional actors such as Pakistan, China, Saudi Arabia and Russia. Hence it is important that the prospects for a settlement be viewed not only at the official level, but also in the wider machinery behind it that is preparing for successful talks by establishing their legitimacy among the wider population, as well as among the ranks of the Taliban, thus “helping” the insurgents to define their demands and identify areas for compromise that can be brought to the negotiating table. However, in some cases third-party initiatives do not necessarily facilitate the process of a settlement but rather complicate the picture, since regional rivalries and considerations of power can make the process more complicated.


EARLY ATTEMPTS TO NEGOTIATE

Direct contact between the US and the Taliban began in November 2010, when US officials met Tayyab Agha, a representative of Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, in Munich, Germany to hold secret talks brokered by German officials and the Qatari royal family. Subsequently, in 2011 two rounds of preliminary meetings were held in Qatar and Germany before the Taliban established an unofficial political office in Doha in January 2012.¹⁰ The preliminary talks were mainly about prisoner exchanges involving the release of five Guantanamo detainees in exchange for the American soldier, Bowe Bergdahl. Since the US rejected the agreement, the talks broke down in March 2012. According to the US this was because the Taliban refused to guarantee that the Guantanamo inmates would not re-enter the fight against US troops in Afghanistan, but also this happened during the US election campaign, when there was strong resistance in the US Congress to the idea of prisoner releases.¹¹

Hamid Karzai embraced the idea of reintegrating the Taliban shortly after being elected president in the 2004 elections. In fact, efforts by the Afghan government to establish a dialogue with the Afghan Taliban date back as far as 2001. In that year, as head of the interim government, Hamid Karzai declared a general amnesty for ordinary Taliban fighters. From 2003 to 2004 an amnesty was again offered to all Taliban who were prepared to renounce terrorism, dissociate themselves from Al-Qaeda and lay down their arms. In April 2003, Karzai stated that a clear line “has to be drawn between the ordinary Taliban who are the real and honest sons of this country and those who disturb peace and security in the country.”¹² While the offer initially failed to convince the Taliban to lay down their arms and be reconciled with Kabul, it achieved limited success in 2005 by attracting certain Taliban members who had lost their influence over the group, as well as seven hundred Taliban fighters, but it failed to make a breakthrough with serving Taliban members.

Those who reconciled with the Kabul government were included in the political process and elected to the Afghan Parliament and Senate. Others were made governors, for example, Abdul Hakim Munib, the former Governor of Uruzgan province, Khial Mohammad Husseini, former Governor of Zabul and a member of the Wolesi Jirga, and Naim Kuchi, member of the Meshrano Jirga. It is significant that overall the reconciliation process has been slow: according to Michael Semple, out of 142 senior Taliban fighters who are on the UN sanctions list, only twelve have been reconciled with Kabul, along with ten other senior members not on the list.¹³

When a former Taliban sub-commander of Paktika province, Mullah Haji Jilani, came forward and renounced violence against the government of Afghanistan in August 2005, the Afghan government's initiative to achieve reconciliation with former Taliban loyalists gained publicity. Sebghatullah Mujadidi, an Al-Azhar-educated scholar and leader of a group of mujahideen during the Soviet era, ran a reconciliation initiative called Programme Tahkim-e Solh (PTS), also known as the Programme for the Strengthening of Peace, which Jilani joined. As a result of Jilani's decision to enrol in the programme, another twelve former Taliban fighters came forward in that province seeking more information about the programme. However, the PTS largely failed because of corruption among its administrators and the lack of sufficient political support.¹⁴ An attempt was made to revive the initiative in May 2010, when, among other moves, a peace assembly, or peace jirga, of tribal elders and powerbrokers was held to address the issue of reconciliation.¹⁵ This initiative also petered out without any substantial gains, though it did indicate a certain willingness to engage in a reconciliation process.



Regional actors have also taken a number of initiatives to seek a political solution to the conflict.

In October 2010 the PTS was officially replaced by the Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Programme (APRP), which is now administered under the High Peace Council (HPC).¹⁶ The APRP was also fraught with problems, most notably because the HPC was initially led by the former Afghan president and leader of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, Burhanuddin Rabbani (1992–1996), who was deeply mistrusted by the Taliban, few of whom could be expected to be willing to be reconciled in a programme under his command.¹⁷ Although the APRP did manage to establish a series of contacts with mid-level Taliban fighters, Rabbani was assassinated in September 2011. All negotiations were then suspended and were resumed only gradually. However, informal contact and dialogue continued, as reflected in a conference held the same month in Kyoto in Japan, in which a Taliban representative and Masoom Stanekzai of the Afghan High Peace Council both participated.¹⁸

Concerned over growing instability in Afghanistan, regional actors have also taken a number of initiatives to seek a political solution to the conflict. Pakistan, supported by China, has been at the forefront of this exercise.¹⁹ More recently, Russia and some Central Asian states have followed suit by initiating and in Russia's case leading forums such as the Moscow Format, aimed at seeking a solution to the conflict in Afghanistan.

In 2012, Pakistan and Afghanistan held talks in Turkey. Among other issues, they discussed the details of the so-called “Peace Process Roadmap to 2015,” drafted by the Afghan High Peace Council,²⁰ in which Pakistan was given a central role in facilitating the peace process. Some media read the roadmap as opening up the idea that the Taliban could govern parts of Afghanistan and that senior insurgents could become cabinet members and provincial governors.²¹ In July 2015 these initiatives led to the “2+2+1” or “Murree Peace Process”, marking the first officially acknowledged round of talks between the Taliban and Kabul.²² Though 2016-17 did not leave much hope for progress, not least due to the presence of ISKP fighters, the increase in the presence of US troops and the “re-broadening” of their mandate in Afghanistan, there were also a few positive developments.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Some very positive events have boosted hopes of finding a settlement in Afghanistan in the past few years. The first such event came with the Hizb-e Islami breakthrough, a deal signed in September 2016 between Hizb-e Islami and the Afghan government. This was the first big success story since 2001 of a settlement being concluded with one of the insurgent groups in Afghanistan. In return for Hizb’s renunciation of violence, the government promised to free prisoners, incorporate former insurgents into the security services and resettle thousands of Afghan refugees living in Hizb-affiliated camps inside Pakistan. Most prominently, the agreement paved the way for Hizb-e Islami leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar to return to Kabul after twenty years in exile.²³ As pointed out in a report by the USIP, among the reasons for this success was that it was specifically an Afghan deal. Ruttig and Ali (2018) describe the large role that the Afghan Intelligence Service and the National Security Council played in the success of the negotiations. While there is no doubt that the deal was the first major breakthrough for President Ghani, it was more a symbolic victory, as Hizb-e Islami was not actively in combat with Kabul and has thus remained largely inactive and low key. Moreover, the deal did not have the impact that Kabul had expected it to have on the Taliban, which dismissed the deal as a “political marriage.”²⁴

Another new and important development that took place during 2018 is the changed attitude of the US regarding direct negotiations with Taliban and the peace process, which traditionally revolved around and was limited to a US position demanding a bilateral peace process between Kabul and the Taliban. However, in a major strategic shift, the Trump administration has accepted the Taliban's demand for direct negotiations, resulting in the intensification of US talks with the Taliban.



In a major strategic shift, the Trump administration has accepted the Taliban's demand for direct negotiations.

The US has given up its idea that the Afghan government needs to be part of the talks, and in July 2018 it met the Taliban demand for a meeting in Qatar without Afghan officials or ministers. To push the reconciliation effort further forward, the former US ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalidzad, was appointed Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation. It seems that the Trump administration is taking the global threat from the Islamic State more seriously than the more local concerns related to the Taliban insurgency. As one of the authors of this report has described elsewhere, in an odd way, the Afghan Taliban and the US have been on the same side in the fight against ISKP in Afghanistan.²⁵

A third and more dramatic event took place in the summer of 2018, when the Kabul government declared an eight-day ceasefire. For the first time since the Taliban's ouster from power in 2001, the movement also announced a three-day ceasefire over the period of the Eid celebrations. The US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, promptly announced that the US and NATO would also observe the temporary ceasefire.²⁶ Even though the Taliban was not willing to extend the ceasefire after the initial three days, as requested by the GoA, the brief pause in violence hints at the Taliban's readiness to resolve the conflict.

SOME MAJOR EVENTS IN THE SEARCH FOR A SETTLEMENT

- October 18, 2016**
Informal peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government.²⁷
- August 24, 2017**
Top diplomatic and military officials stress American support for possible peace talks with Taliban.²⁸
- October 23, 2017**
US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated that the US was ready to negotiate with the Taliban.²⁹
- December 6, 2017**
The High Peace Council announced that the Afghan government was willing to allow the Taliban to open a political office in Kabul in order to start negotiations.³⁰
- January 14, 2018**
Meeting between senior Afghan officials and representatives of the Taliban in Turkey. The Taliban denied that the meeting had taken place.³¹
- January 17, 2018**
Taliban leader approves Islamabad meeting on Afghan peace talks between a delegation approved by the Taliban's supreme leader and a representative of a prominent Afghan politician.³²
- February 14, 2018**
Taliban calls on the US to start Afghan peace talks in an open letter released by its spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid.³³
- February 26, 2018**
The National Consultative Peace Conference (with tribal and jihadi elders and provincial council representatives) calls upon the Taliban to come to the negotiating table with the Afghan government.³⁴
- February 28, 2018**
Ghani offers the Taliban peace talks "without preconditions" and suggests the possibility that the Taliban could eventually be recognized as a legitimate political group with their own office in Kabul.³⁵

June 7, 2018

The GoA declares a brief, unilateral eight-day ceasefire with the Taliban.³⁶ US Secretary of State Pompeo announces that NATO and American forces “in Afghanistan will respect the ceasefire, as it applies to the Taliban”.³⁷

June 9, 2018

Taliban leadership announces three-day ceasefire during Eid al-Fitr.³⁸

June 16, 2018

The GoA extends the ceasefire with the Taliban and appeals to the Taliban to follow its lead and enter peace talks.³⁹

June 17, 2018

The Taliban reject the Afghan government’s proposal to extend ceasefire.⁴⁰

June 27, 2018

Afghan President Ghani states in Opinion NYT that he is ready to enter negotiations with the Taliban in order to achieve peace in Afghanistan.⁴¹

July 15, 2018

Trump administration tells its top diplomats to seek direct talks with the Taliban without the involvement of the Afghan government⁴² in order to jump-start the Afghan negotiations.⁴³

July 22-30, 2018

Alleged meeting between Taliban and a senior US diplomat.^{44, 45}

August 13, 2018

Taliban officials said preliminary talks with the US in July were “very helpful” and that another round will take place in Doha in September.⁴⁶

August 19, 2018

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani declares a conditional ceasefire with the Taliban ahead of Eid al-Adha, provided that the Taliban reciprocate.⁴⁷

August 22, 2018

Taliban say they will attend Afghan peace talks in Russia (Moscow Format). The Afghan government and the US declined Russia’s invitation to attend.⁴⁸

August 27, 2018

Russia agrees to postpone talks with Taliban.⁴⁹

September 5, 2018

Former US Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad appointed Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, with a “singular” mission to get the Taliban and the Afghan government to be reconciled, representing a new effort on the part of the US to enter into negotiations with the Taliban.⁵⁰

September 11, 2018

The Taliban state that they are ready for new peace talks with the US following the earlier round of talks in July.⁵¹

September 29, 2018

The Taliban and GoA officials meet in Saudi Arabia ahead of the elections to discuss security and a limited prisoner release.⁵² This is denied by Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, and the Afghan government declined to comment.

October 12, 2018

The Taliban hold direct talks with the US for the first time in Qatar.

October 25, 2019

Pakistan releases two Taliban members, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, co-founder of the group, who was detained in 2010, and Mullah Abdul Samad Sani.⁵³

October 31, 2018

Five Taliban members⁵⁴ released from Guantanamo Bay in June 2014, in exchange for the US soldier Bowe Bergdahl, join the Taliban’s political office in Qatar.⁵⁵

November 9, 2018

The second Moscow Format takes place on Russia, which hosts a landmark international meeting on the peace process in Afghanistan, namely the the first meeting attended by representatives from the Taliban’s political office, headed by Sher Abbas Stanakzai. Other participants include representatives from eleven countries, including Pakistan, China, Iran, India and Central Asian states.⁵⁶

December 17, 2018

The Taliban hold a second round of talks with US officials led by the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) regarding the peace process in Afghanistan.⁵⁷ Three representatives of the Haqqani network – Hafiz Yahya, Saadullah Hamas and Dr Faqeer – were also present at the talks. This is the first time a US envoy has met with representatives of the Haqqani network.⁵⁸

TALIBAN DEMANDS OVER TIME

The Afghan Taliban have largely repeated the same demands in the talks they have taken part in. These demands can be read from interview-based reports, and some of them were mentioned in our recent interviews.⁵⁹


These are the following:

- Withdrawal of US and other foreign troops from Afghan soil
- An Afghan system built on Islamic principles
- Granting the Taliban an official office, thus recognizing them as a “legitimate” part of the conflict.
- Removal of the Taliban from blacklists that prevent their free movement and the release of Taliban prisoners
- A new constitution without the involvement of foreign actors. This, however, is something they are willing to negotiate over.
- Peace talks with the US to be kept separate from those with the Afghan government and follow a two-thronged approach: once direct talks with the US result in a breakthrough, the next step will be to talk to Kabul.

After the Pugwash Conference of January 2016, a non-governmental network of scholars from different countries engaged in facilitating peace, the Taliban reiterated some of the above demands by stating that “the release of an unnamed list of prisoners, to be removed from a UN blacklist freezing their assets and imposing a travel ban on its leaders, and to have a political office formally recognized” were all “preliminary steps needed for peace”.⁶⁰

On 14 February 2018, the Taliban also published an open letter directed at the American people in which they once again repeated their demand that the occupation be ended. The Taliban appealed to the American people’s senses of justice and logic by emphasizing the amount of money spent by the US in Afghanistan, combined with the lack of progress towards peace, and by stating further that the Afghan people have the right to reconstruct their country themselves and form a government only with support and assistance from other countries. Moreover, as the Taliban regard the Afghan government as illegitimate, they called for direct talks with the US administration about their withdrawal before being prepared to enter into internal Afghan peace talks.⁶¹

In June 2018, M. Suhail Shaheen, spokesman for the Taliban Political Office in Qatar, reiterated several of Taliban's demands, including the withdrawal of foreign troops, the removal of the Taliban from the UN blacklist, the opening of an office in Kabul and the exchange of prisoners, which Shaheen stated "provides scaffolding for negotiation and help both sides to gain trust in the tangibility of negotiation."⁶² He further stated that, as the Kabul government is a party to the conflict, they should be involved in talks about the formation of a new Afghan government. However, the Taliban were not prepared to discuss other main issues with the Afghan government, like ending the occupation, as this matter does not fall within the ambit of their authority, but rather lies in the hands of the US administration. Shaheen also opened the door to the possible participation of neighboring countries and international organizations such as the UN in the peace process, while stating that America's policy is the main obstacle to progress. Approximately a month later, in late July 2018, a meeting between the US and Taliban officials took place in Qatar without the participation of Afghan officials, meaning that the US administration was prepared to meet one of the Taliban's principal demands and suggesting a shift in the American policy as potentially an important step in the peace process. During this meeting, the Taliban allegedly demanded that its fighters should be allowed free movement between two Afghan provinces, a proposal the Kabul government had already rejected, whereas the US maintained its demand on retaining its military bases in Afghanistan throughout the peace process.⁶³



The Taliban's negotiators have shown a willingness to compromise on their demand for the withdrawal of all foreign troops.

The meeting in late July was apparently successful, as the Taliban and the US administration seem to have made progress in their discussions, the Taliban having shown a readiness to engage in the peace process and to compromise after the US met their demand for direct talks. According to the US website *The Daily Beast*, in the aftermath of the July meeting the Taliban's negotiators have shown a willingness to compromise on their demand for the withdrawal of all foreign troops: "the report claimed that the Taliban could even countenance a remaining US force in the country so long as it was involved in the political process that reached such an agreement". Christopher Kolenda, an Afghan veteran who was present at the July meeting, said he was struck by the "much higher level of seriousness about bringing the conflict to a close" than he saw in 2011.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, in an official statement of August 18,

the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Hibatuallah Akhundzada, once again reiterated the demand for the withdrawal of American troops, arguing that “since the ongoing war in Afghanistan is the birth-child of American occupation therefore we have and continue to insist on direct talks with America to bring it to an end”,⁶⁵ indicating that the Taliban are not ready to compromise on its chief demand, at least publicly. After the first round of talks in late July, the Taliban stated on September 11 that the next round of talks should concern the exchange of prisoners: “We would hand over a list of prisoners languishing in jails across Afghanistan. If they set free our prisoners, then we would meet again for another great cause.”⁶⁶ On September 14, Waheed Muzhda, a former Taliban official, stated that the “US wants the Taliban to accept at least two military bases, Bagram and Shorabak. The Taliban are not willing to accept it,”⁶⁷ adding that the Taliban would only be willing to let the US maintain a nominal number of troops to guard the US diplomatic mission. This negates the earlier suggestion that the Taliban were willing to compromise on the demand for the withdrawal of all foreign troops, a conclusion supported by Kolenda, who stated that the Taliban’s “No. 1 reason for war, their casus belli, if you will, is the occupation. So, they’re not going to just simply say, ‘We’re OK with US combat troops running around Afghanistan.’ Because that’s what they’re fighting to prevent, from their point of view.” The Daily Beast report might have built its argument on Kolenda’s statement that “the Taliban did show some willingness to allow foreign troops to train Afghan forces, but only if a new government formed after a negotiated settlement, that would likely include the Taliban, agreed to their presence.”⁶⁸ The latest development in the negotiations was a second round of talks in Qatar between the Taliban and a US delegation led by Zalmay Khalilzad on October 12, when the parties discussed the ending of occupation and the removal of Taliban leaders from the sanctions list. This information comes from Taliban sources, as the US has not confirmed that the meeting took place.⁶⁹ The release of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, former Taliban senior military commander, and Mullah Abdul Samad Sani from a Pakistani prison seems to be a direct result of these talks, as confirmed by Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid.⁷⁰ These recent developments in the peace negotiations mark a pivotal turn in American policy towards the Taliban and Afghanistan, in which the US is following a different approach by meeting some of the Taliban’s demands.

TALIBAN DEMANDS OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS

- **January 2016**
Taliban vague on the issue of participation in elections
- **January 2016**
Taliban reiterates its demand to rejoin the Afghan peace talks
- **February 2018**
Taliban insist on US withdrawal
- **June 2018**
Taliban reiterates four demands: withdrawal of foreign troops, removal of blacklist, opening of office and exchange of prisoners.
- **July 2018**
Taliban demand on free movement of fighters
- **August 2018**
Taliban show willingness to compromise on demand of withdrawal of all foreign troops.
- **August 2018**
Taliban reiterate their demand on direct talks with the US and not the Afghan government.
- **September 2018**
Taliban states that the next rounds of talks should address a possible prisoner swap.
- **September 2018**
Taliban reiterate their demand for the withdrawal of all foreign troops.
- **October 2018**
Taliban and US officials meet for next round of talks allegedly on the ending of the occupation, as well as the removal of Taliban leaders from the UN sanctions list.
- **October 2018**
Release of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, former Taliban senior military commander, and Mullah Abdul Samad Sani, a result of the talks between US and Taliban officials earlier in October.⁷¹
- **December 2018**
Taliban hold second round of talks with US in the UAE and reiterate their demands for the withdrawal of foreign troops.⁷²





**DEVELOPMENTS WITHIN THE
AFGHAN TALIBAN**

Since the Afghan Taliban's ouster from power in 2001 as a result of the US-led NATO intervention, the Taliban have managed to remain significant as a powerful actor in the conflict. Numerous reports since 2015 have described the growth of the Taliban. As mentioned in the introduction, they have influence and control over significant swathes of territory in Afghanistan and are actively struggling to assert their control over other parts of the country as well.⁷³ Despite several setbacks, including major losses, defections and the reconciliation of certain senior members with Kabul,⁷⁴ the overall strength, resolve and capability of the Taliban have not been adversely affected, as they have been able to make good their military losses. According to the authors' anonymous sources, the Taliban are still having success in mobilizing new fighters, making their insurgency resilient to "defeat". Since their inception in 1994, they have remained united and more or less intact, with the late Mullah Muhammad Omar Akhund as their ideological and spiritual leader.⁷⁵ Very little information is known about the Taliban's *Amir-ul-Momineen* (Commander of the Faithful).⁷⁶ The Taliban have always operated as an indigenous group, comprising Afghans who are primarily ethnic Pashtuns.⁷⁷ They follow the Deobandi school of thought,⁷⁸ and their aim continues to be the liberation of Afghanistan from foreign control. Even though the current hierarchy of the Taliban is such that Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada is the current and third Amir of the group (after Mullah Omar and Mullah Mansoor), Mullah Omar will always be considered the *Amir-ul-Momineen*, the group's Commander of the Faithful.

FIGURE 1: MULLAH MOHAMMED OMAR AKHUND

- Mullah Mohammed Omar Akhund was born in 1960 in Chah-i-Himmat village in Afghanistan's Kandahar province.
- He is believed to be from the Hotak tribe.
- Mullah Omar was educated at the Jamia Dar al-Ulum Haqqania and also took part in the resistance against the Soviets as a Mujahideen.
- Very little is known about the background of Mullah Omar.
- He became the leader of the Taliban in 1994 and was ousted in 1996.
- He died in 2013, but his death was only revealed in 2015.

EARLY TALIBAN LEADERSHIP

Even though the Afghan Taliban have remained a cohesive force, there have been important junctures when differences and divisions have arisen within the group's senior members. The first such division emerged over the issue of the group's leadership after Mullah Omar's death was announced in July 2015⁷⁹ and the subsequent appointment of Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansoor as their leader in August 2015. Although he had been a close aide of Mullah Omar, many among the Taliban opposed the elevation of Mansoor as the group's top leader. Nonetheless, on July 31, 2015 the Taliban published a "Declaration of the Leading Council of the Islamic Emirate" regarding the appointment of Mansoor as the new leader of the Islamic Emirate. In addition, Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada and Mullah Sirajuddin Haqqani were appointed the group's deputy heads. Initially Mullah Omar's son Mullah Yaqoob and his brother Mullah Abdul Manan refused to accept Mansoor's appointment, but later they too declared their allegiance to Mansoor, who was thus confirmed as the second leader of the Taliban after Omar. His appointment also caused some influential Taliban commanders such as Abdul Qayum Zakir (who once headed the Taliban military commission)⁸⁰ and Mullah Mohammad Rasool Akhund to break away from the mainstream Taliban due to their opposition. However, in 2016 Zakir was reconciled with Mullah Mansoor and declared his allegiance to him as the Amir of the Taliban.⁸¹

FIGURE 2: MULLAH AKHTAR MUHAMMAD

- Mansoor hails from Kandahar and belonged to the Ishaqzai clan of the Durrani tribe.
- He served as the Taliban's shadow governor of Kandahar and was also a part of the Taliban ruling council.
- He was civil aviation minister during the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan.
- In 2007, Mullah Mansoor served as a deputy to Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, acting head of the Taliban.
- In 2010, Mansoor took over as acting head of the group after Baradar's arrest.
- In July 2015, Mansoor became the head of the group after the disclosure of Mullah Omar's death.
- May 2016, Mansoor was killed in a US drone strike and was replaced by Moulavi Haibatullah Akhunzada.

Mansoor's period as Amir of the Taliban did not last long, as he was killed in a US drone strike in May 2016 while travelling from Iran to Pakistan.⁸² According to an anonymous senior Taliban leader, Mansoor's death was a big blow to the group, since he was intent on evolving the Taliban and transforming their tarnished image so that they could appear as a social and political group compatible with and capable of governing Afghanistan.

According to a Taliban foot soldier interviewed for this report in October 2018, "the group began to evolve on so many fronts under the leadership of Mullah Mansoor. Mullah Mansoor introduced us to the concept of peace in warfare as mentioned in the Holy Quran. Initially we could not think of giving up our struggle against the outsiders, as that would imply weakness and be equated with surrendering. However, through his sermons and teachings Mullah Mansoor convinced us that achieving our goals through talking and peace was not tantamount to surrender but in fact was what the Almighty has destined for us." After his death Mansoor was replaced by his deputy Mullah Haibutullah as the new leader of the Taliban.

INTERNAL DIVISIONS AND CONFLICTS

In November 2015, following the internal divisions that arose after the death of Mullah Omar, Mullah Mohammad Rasool Akhund defected from the Taliban and formed his own splinter group under the name of the High Council of Afghanistan Islamic Emirate.⁸³ Akhund appointed Mullah Mansoor Dadullah Akhund and Sher Mohammed Mansoor as his deputies. Due to differences, the two Taliban factions headed by Mullah Mansoor Dadullah and Mullah Rasool respectively became

FIGURE 3: MULLAH MUHAMMAD RASOOL AKHUND

- Mullah Muhammad Rasool (in his midfifties) hails from Kandahar.
- According to Taliban sources he was a trusted aide of the late Mullah Omar.
- During the Taliban's rule, he served as the governor of Nimroz and Farah province.
- In November 2015, Akhund formed his own Taliban splinter group, the High Council of Afghanistan Islamic Emirate.
- In March 2016, Mullah Mohammad Rasool Akhund was detained by authorities in Pakistan after he crossed the border.

involved in clashes, as a result of which Mansoor Dadullah was killed in November 2015.⁸⁴ Later, in March 2016, Mullah Mohammad Rasool Akhund was detained by the Pakistani authorities Pakistan after he crossed the border.⁸⁵

In addition to conflicts between competing factions, there have also been disagreements of late regarding peace talks with Kabul. Some fringe elements within the Taliban continue to oppose talks, and some are even more predisposed to joining the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP). As a result, the ISKP capitalized on these differences, attracting many Afghan Taliban fighters and commanders to defect and join them. Among the prominent members who have taken this route are Mullah Najib Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim, Mullah Qahar and Syed Emarati.⁸⁶

As a result of these differences and divisions, according to a senior Taliban leader who was interviewed for this report and spoke on condition of anonymity, "Defections had perturbed the group and as a result, the leadership began to focus more on the unification and centralization of the group be it at the leadership, commander or foot soldier level."⁸⁷ Yet, it is evident these challenges have not affected the Taliban's political or military strength. Under Mullah Haibatullah, their current leader, and particularly with the support of his deputy Sirajuddin Haqqani, they have undergone important developments, including in respect of their attitude towards the peace process.

THE TALIBAN'S CURRENT LEADERSHIP AND STRATEGY

After the death of Mullah Mansoor, the Taliban wasted no time in appointing a new head. According to a senior Taliban leader and others we interviewed,⁸⁸ in order to avoid further divisions or controversies such as those that had emerged following Mullah Omar's death and the subsequent elevation of Mullah Mansoor, Haibatullah was elected with the aim of uniting the group.⁸⁹ In fact, his appointment saw various factions under the group being reconciled and uniting as one under his leadership, including those who had been opposed to Mullah Mansoor. Yet even though Haibatullah is the temporal leader of the Taliban, the group continues to be guided by Mullah Omar's charisma, ideology and teachings. Currently the hierarchy of the Taliban is such that Haibuatullah is the Amir of the group and Sirajuddin Haqqani and Mullah Yakoub are his deputies.⁹⁰

With Haibatullah in power, there were concerns that his focus would be on strengthening the Taliban in the field and thus derailing the peace process. However, it now appears that under his leadership the group has been undergoing a change

and that greater strides have been made in accepting and even pursuing the notion of a peace process than under any other preceding leader. In the recent past this has been indicated by the Taliban's open letter to the US calling for direct talks, the group's call for a peaceful settlement, its three-day ceasefire, its direct talks with the US in Doha and the UAE and its public participation in the Moscow Format).⁹¹

While the Taliban still rely heavily on warfare on the battlefield, they have shown signs of a willingness to engage in dialogue and seek a political settlement to end the war. For the most part, the Taliban have been adamant in engaging with Kabul regarding the peace process, due to Kabul's inability to deliver.⁹² According to a senior Taliban leader, "From the very beginning, we have expressed our desire to engage in direct talks with the Americans. However, the Americans, along with Kabul, have refused to do so in the hope that the we will be defeated militarily."⁹³

According to a member of the Afghan Taliban, "The initial talks in July 2018 were to establish 'basic contacts' and develop the ground for dialogue. The second meeting in Doha between the Taliban and Zalmay Khalilzad was used as a platform by both sides to express their views and respective demands."⁹⁴ Although no general agreement was reached, it was more encouraging that the two sides agreed to continue engaging in talks. According to a senior Taliban leader, "Although the talks are at a preliminary stage, the fact that both parties have agreed to engage in talks has raised the prospects (God willing) of a potential agreement to end the war in Afghanistan."⁹⁵

FIGURE 4: **MULLAH HAIBATULLAH AKHUNZADA**

- Mullah Haibatullah Akhonzada (56) is from the Noorzai tribe and, like most of the Taliban, hails from the southern Afghan province of Kandahar.
- Akhonzada is amongst the oldest and most prominent figures within the group and was a close aide of Mullah Omar, who would refer to Akhonzada as his teacher.
- He served as a senior judge during the Taliban's rule and is also known to have run a madrassa (religious school).
- Revered by the group as a religious scholar and adviser, Akhonzada is known for his stringent views and verdicts.
- Prior to his elevation as leader of the Taliban, Akhonzada was a close ally of Mullah Mansour and served as his deputy.

Following the two rounds of talks, the inclusion of five Taliban members in the group’s political office in Doha is yet another positive sign and an indication of the significance and seriousness of talks and the direction in which they are headed.⁹⁶ The “Taliban Five”, as they are referred to, are Mohammed Fazl (former Taliban military commander), Khairullah Khairkhwa (former governor of heart), Mullah Norullah Nori (deputy intelligence chief), Nabi Omari (governor and telecommunications chief) and Mohamad Nabi (former governor of Helmand).

FIGURE 5: **AFGHAN TALIBAN STRUCTURE**

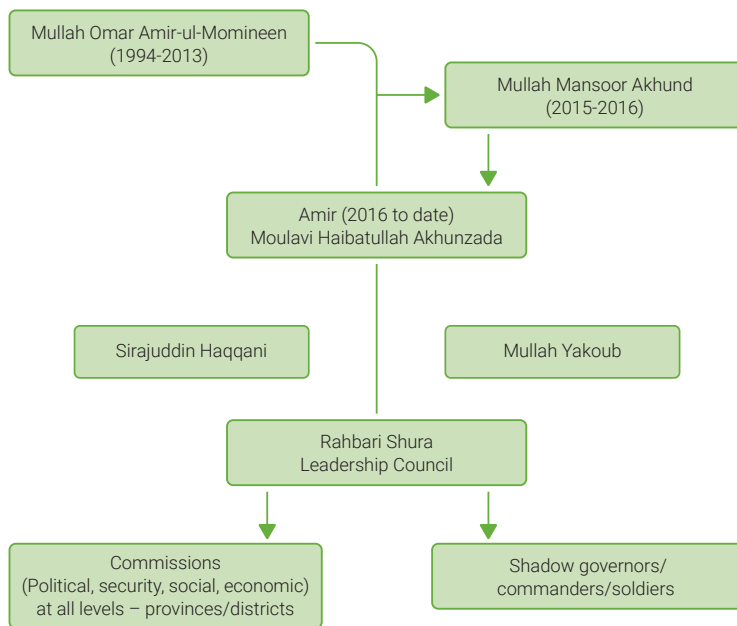
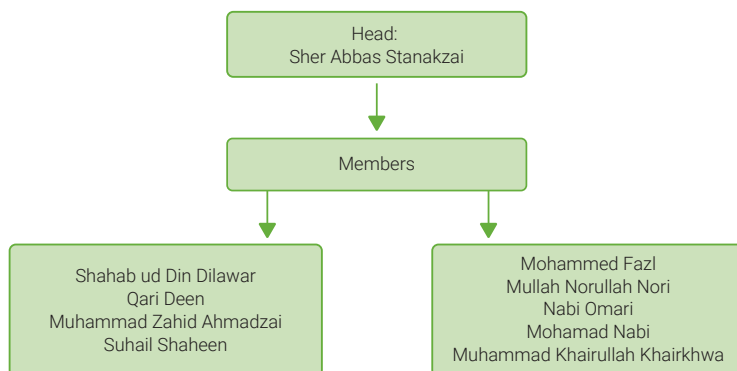


FIGURE 6: **THE DOHA OFFICE**







**THE TALIBAN'S ATTITUDE
TOWARDS A SETTLEMENT**

This section is based on the responses of serving and former Taliban leaders (officials and commanders), including one who was an active commander until September 2018, when he lost a leg, foot soldiers, including a part-time soldier, and Taliban sympathizers and affiliates. Interviews took place in October 2018. Speaking on condition of anonymity, senior Taliban leaders interviewed for this report stated that the group's views have evolved and continue to do so in line with the rapidly changing situation on the ground. They found the situation complex, yet fragile and constantly evolving, hence it would have been premature for them to give definite and decisive answers, as decisions and policies (particularly on questions regarding how they would act in a post-withdrawal situation) can only be made once a particular stage has been reached, i.e. once they have succeeded in their demand for the withdrawal of foreign troops. However, they stressed that every decision within the movement goes through a process of consultations within the group, all levels of which will be consulted in order to reach a consensus. As one Taliban summed it up, quoting the Pashtu proverb "da ajal na makhkay me mra," "We will cross that bridge when we come to it."⁹⁷

The overall conundrum that emerges from this section is whether the Taliban is radically undemocratic and uncompromising in relation to political power-sharing and most governance questions and hence unable to engage in a political process based on elections (democracy) and power-sharing. Or is the pragmatism evident from the answers given here a reflection of a change of view in which the idea of an emirate has less significance (something that can be compromised on) than the notion of a "free Afghanistan"?

NEGOTIATIONS

From the very beginning of their struggle, the Taliban have been clear about many of their demands, though not their view on sharia law and an Islamic system in a future Afghanistan. The Taliban members interviewed for this report⁹⁸ mentioned the necessity of having a constitution based on "Islamic principles" and a country ruled by those elected to power by ordinary people. While they have included an Islamic constitution and the implementation of sharia law among their key demands, they have never elaborated on the intricacies of these demands. That is, throughout the course of their seventeen-year insurgency they have been quite clear and assertive regarding demands pertaining to themselves, namely their removal from the UN sanctions list, the release of detainees, the formal opening and recognition of a Taliban office and the withdrawal of foreign troops, but they have been more ambiguous regarding their demand for the implementation of sharia and an Islamic

constitution. In fact, all demands made by the Taliban have been brief and ambiguous. While the group has talked about “the establishment of an Afghan inclusive independent Islamic System that is acceptable to Afghans and reflects Islamic and Afghan values”,⁹⁹ it has not provided details regarding what the system will entail.



All demands made by the Taliban have been brief and ambiguous.


According to a senior member interviewed for this report, “This reticence on the part of the Taliban may be a deliberate policy, as the group is open to discussions on the future Afghan constitution as well as sharia. However, this discussion can (in his view), only come after the US withdrawal, as it has to be an internal and indigenous Afghan process.”¹⁰⁰ He went on to say that “the Taliban are evolving and more open in their thinking and outlook, as there is a realization that Afghanistan and its people have changed – hence the group cannot demand nor expect the kind of religious adherence to its interpretations it enjoyed a decade ago.” Although the Taliban talk about sharia, “there is a clear understanding within the group that, as they share religious space with other legitimate Afghan actors, any future discussions and decisions on the subject have to be amongst the Afghans. Therefore, the group is willing to negotiate and (when the time is right) even compromise on a common or mutually agreed structure or interpretation of Islam.” This stance was also echoed by members of the Taliban’s political office during the Moscow Format in October 2018.¹⁰¹ The group stated that the future Afghan constitution must be based on the “principles of Islamic religion, national interests, historical achievements and social justice, committed to human dignity, national values and human rights, and able to guarantee territorial integrity of the country and all rights of all the citizens. The draft of such a constitution should be prepared by Afghan scholars and intellectuals in an atmosphere of freedom.”¹⁰²

According to our Taliban interviewees, issues pertaining to a future Afghan constitution and to the implementation of sharia law remain tentative and subject to how events unfold regarding negotiations and a peace settlement, if at all. Until then, such matters remain elusive.

However, one Taliban member we interviewed made an interesting observation regarding the group’s increasing adaptation and acceptance of changing realities on the ground.¹⁰³ Speaking about the members of the Taliban in the Doha office, he was of the view that “All the members were living in Doha with their families, and their

children, including their daughters, were going to school in Doha. A decade ago, this would have been inconceivable and unacceptable within the group. But our Amir has given them permission to do so, which shows that the Taliban are not rigid in their thinking nor in their outlook, as commonly perceived.”¹⁰⁴


Thus, the Taliban senior leaders argued that their views have evolved and continue to do so to reflect the rapidly changing situation on the ground. While they do have an idea about the kind of future they envisage for Afghanistan, they felt that questions pertaining to the imposition of sharia law “can only be addressed effectively once the appropriate time comes.” According to one Taliban official, “Such matters can only be tackled when the opportunity arises, rather than through any assumptions or hypothetical future scenarios. The situation is complex, yet fragile, and constantly evolving, hence it would be premature to give definite and decisive answers, as decisions and policies can only be made once a particular stage has been reached, that is, only once a timeframe or schedule has been decided for foreign withdrawal.” It is thus somewhat understandable that the Taliban’s demand for this first and necessary step is clear, while there is ambiguity over subsequent future decisions regarding the governance of the country, including the constitution and implementation of sharia.



There is a danger that the apparent willingness to negotiate and compromise on such issues may be a ploy on the part of the Taliban to gain time, leverage and power, thus raising doubts over whether they are sincere about changing their future policy.

According to another Taliban official, “Demands such as American withdrawal, release of prisoners and removal from the blacklist are concrete and immediately doable. However, issues such as future Afghan governance, the constitution and interpretation of sharia are inherently abstract and dependent on extensive negotiations within the group, as well as with other relevant legitimate Afghan stakeholders. As a result, they are not an immediate a priority for the group.”¹⁰⁵ However, it is important to stress that the deliberate policy of the Taliban to evade questions about future governance, sharia and the constitution raises major concerns for others. After all, there is a danger that the apparent willingness to negotiate and compromise on such issues may be a ploy on the part of the Taliban to gain time, leverage and power, thus raising doubts over whether they are sincere about changing their future policy. Regarding negotiations and peace deals, one respondent noted that “Peace could not be imposed on the Taliban, as the group has

fought too hard and long for this.”¹⁰⁶ Another went on to say that “Only the elders of the group could determine when to end their struggle and enter into peace talks.”¹⁰⁷ Asked if they personally wanted peace, their views were unanimous – they wanted to end the war and live peacefully, but a political settlement could only be determined by the elders of the group. Till then, the clear response was that they will “continue to defend their motherland.”¹⁰⁸



One obstacle for the Taliban, however, is their collaborators and funders among the drugs trade that allegedly finances most of their activity. They should not be expected to have an interest in a peaceful settlement, since they thrive on the continued conflict.

One obstacle for the Taliban, however, is their collaborators and funders among the drugs trade that allegedly finances most of their activity. They should not be expected to have an interest in a peaceful settlement, since they thrive on the continued conflict. Breaking with this nexus and dependence is hence one of the prerequisites for avoiding future spoilers.

According to another Taliban official we interviewed,¹⁰⁹ “While the group may not have shown much interest in pursuing a negotiated settlement in the past, it always wanted to see peace in Afghanistan. After the death of Mullah Omar, the new Amir, Mullah Mansoor, began to cautiously introduce the concept of dialogue and peace talks within the group, approaching the subject from a religious point of view by referring to the Quran and examples from the Prophet Muhammad’s life. Initially there was immense opposition to the notion of entering into a dialogue or peace talks, as a majority of the Taliban (senior members as well as foot soldiers) interpreted this as a sign of weakness, compromise and even surrender. However, the group has always wanted to end the war by talking directly to the Americans, and the indifferent response of the Americans has led to a delay in ending the conflict in Afghanistan”. When asked, members of the Taliban added “that they embrace a peaceful solution provided the group’s values and principles are upheld and respected and its agenda (of liberating Afghanistan from foreign control and presence) that it has been struggling for more than seventeen years is not compromised upon.”

This, however, according to another Taliban member we interviewed, “can only happen if the US is serious in ending its military presence in Afghanistan. From the beginning of the Taliban’s struggle, we have stuck to our principal demands, which

are the complete withdrawal of foreign forces, removal of the blacklist and the release of Taliban fighters, to name just a few. If the US is truly committed to ending the war and letting the people of Afghanistan choose their true leaders and future, there is no doubt that the Taliban are open and willing to reach some sort of agreement for peace.” There are growing signs that the Taliban are willing to compromise on the “complete removal of foreign troops”. It appears that the possibility of a future role for the US in Afghanistan, including a US presence, might be something the group can consider at a later stage. For any peace to return to Afghanistan, according to a senior Taliban leader,¹¹⁰ “the Americans have to withdraw from Afghanistan, as they came as invaders.” Subsequently, “if and when a peace agreement is reached with the Americans and the people choose their future leadership (whatever it may be), the Taliban could consider the presence of American forces. However, at this point in time it is only a consideration, and the group has yet to determine its stance on the issue.” However, it is interesting to note that, while the Taliban want the US to withdraw, at the same time “the group is willing to address any concerns, including security concerns, that the US may have.”¹¹¹ This was stated by Mohammad Sohail Shaheen, member of the Taliban’s political office in Doha, which reflects the growing shift in the Taliban’s stance and their move towards pragmatism.

In this context, it is also crucial to stress that the Deputy Chairman of the HPC, Din Mohammad, echoed a similar argument to that presented by the Taliban. Speaking to reporters in Moscow, he said that “Kabul is willing to negotiate with the Taliban, and if peace was to return to Afghanistan, there would not be any need for the US presence”. He further stated that “If peace was achieved with the Taliban, a schedule would be agreed upon for the US withdrawal.”¹¹²

According to a senior respondent, “from the beginning the Taliban have been calling for direct talks with the US, but both Kabul and the Americans opposed the idea, as they thought the group would be defeated militarily. But they underestimated the group’s resolve and capability, and even though it has taken them more than 17 years to realize that they cannot defeat the group, the Taliban welcomes the US acceptance of our demand to direct negotiations.”

However, a senior Taliban leader openly questioned the intentions of the previous Afghan government under Hamid Karzai and said that, “Although he was a fellow Pashtun, he was not sincere in pursuing talks with the group. He said there were many spoilers, including Afghans who were benefitting from the war and unrest and making blood money at the hands of innocent Afghans”. The Taliban official we interviewed¹¹³ cited and questioned Karzai’s opposition to the opening of the group’s

office in Doha and its subsequent closure in 2013. Regarding President Ghani, the Taliban leader was of the view that “While Ghani’s intentions were sincere, he did not have internal political backing or the power to negotiate or deliver a political agreement with the Taliban.”¹¹⁴

While talking about a potential peace process, one Taliban foot soldier expressed his faith and optimism in US President Trump as someone who could actually bring the war to an end and broker peace with the Taliban. He stated, “Unlike Obama, who was useless, Trump may deceive the world with his statements, but he does what he wants and means what he says, hence he is the only one that can reach an agreement with the Taliban.”¹¹⁵


Speaking about the current status of the talks, the Taliban we interviewed were of the view that “The talks are in the nascent stage, and that it is just the beginning. “It is too soon to determine where they will end up and whether they will achieve anything.” One of the Taliban leaders said that “While several positive developments had been achieved, including the inclusion of five Taliban officials in the Doha office, it was too soon to tell how successful the process will be and what outcome will be achieved (if at all) from the talks.”¹¹⁶ As another senior Taliban leader noted, “Contrary to allegations of division and divergence in views within the Taliban and among its leadership, Mullah Haibatullah has authorized our men (representatives) in Doha to negotiate on behalf of the Taliban leadership. No agreement or decision can or will be made without the approval of our Amir, which will be made through consensus and consultations with all levels of the group, from the top leadership to the commanders and foot soldiers. We have given our demands to the Americans and will see how events unfold.” However, as he also said, “It is important to highlight that we have not entered into talks due to our weakness. Rather, the Americans are weak since they are the invaders. We are negotiating from a position of strength, as the people of Afghanistan want peace, and Islam teaches us to pursue peace. While we are open to talks, we have put our agenda and demands on the table and expect the Americans’ to respect our views and demands, which are legitimate and focused on the liberation and well-being of Afghanistan.”¹¹⁷

The group is quite clear on its stance and whom it would like to negotiate with. When the question of the UN and the potential role it could play in the process is raised, the Taliban are not hopeful. According to the Taliban we interviewed,¹¹⁸ the common view was that “The UN has failed to bring stability to the world. One must simply look at what is happening in Palestine, Kashmir and to the Muslims in Myanmar to understand the ineffectiveness of the organization.” According to one Taliban respondent, “The UN has failed to help the people of Afghanistan, who are poverty-

stricken.”. He emphasized that “Time and again the group has stated that the issue is between the Taliban and the Americans. Hence the Taliban will negotiate with the US first, and if the talks are successful, the group will engage with the government in Kabul.”¹¹⁹

POLITICAL PARTY

While the Taliban are in the initial process of pursuing a negotiated settlement, questions pertaining to the group’s future identity as a political party and its political program in respect of the issues of governance, an Islamic constitution and the implementation of sharia law remain ambiguous, to say the least. According to one Taliban respondent, the group takes the view that “Such issues will only be determined and declared once some headway is made with the US in reaching a peace agreement.”¹²⁰ According to another senior respondent, “The group is consciously not talking about such issues because firstly, it is too early in the process to be discussing future governance, and secondly, the group itself is in the process of contemplation and has yet to determine its future political identity and outlook.” However, at the same time, according to respondents, “The Taliban view themselves as a united social and political group and hence consider themselves a social and political party that aims to provide governance and relief to the masses.”¹²¹ In this regard, the overall outlook and conduct of the Taliban have gradually undergone a major shift. Many of the Taliban members who were interviewed for this report say the change was brought by Mullah Mansoor, who wanted the group to transform itself by abandoning practices that estranged them from ordinary people: “Although the Taliban continues to rely on warfare, at the same time, the group has opposed the killing of children, women, and the elderly, and has ordered its soldiers to avoid such deaths. Hence the Taliban view themselves as a legitimate part of the Afghan political and social arena,” as one senior Taliban member stated.¹²²



Many of the Taliban members who were interviewed for this report say the change was brought by Mullah Mansoor, who wanted the group to transform itself by abandoning practices that estranged them from ordinary people.

The group prides itself in following a defined hierarchy and chain of command, with an Amir, his close aides or deputies, governors, ministers, commanders and fighters.¹²³ The Taliban portray themselves as “democratic, since they are governed

by the principle of consensus".¹²⁴ Some interviewees gave the example of the selection of the group's leadership through consensus. According to a senior Taliban respondent, "The Taliban are very similar to the Afghan parities and institution. The late Amir, Mullah Mansoor, as well as the current Amir, Mullah Haibatullah, were both selected as a result of consensus amongst the members of the group. While the leader may be the one to announce a decision, the decision or policy is not made single-handedly or in isolation but as a group and as a whole."¹²⁵

According to a senior respondent of the group,¹²⁶ "The aim of the Taliban continues to be what it was from the day the US invaded Afghanistan: the liberation of Afghanistan from foreign control and the implementation of Islamic law. Despite having fought and suffered on the battlefield and having been offered various positions in the government,¹²⁷ from the beginning of the struggle under Mullah Omar until today, under the leadership of Mullah Haibatullah, the group has not deviated from its path. Rather, it has stuck to its principal demands and continues to do so. While initially there was a reluctance to enter into dialogue, this has now become an issue where compromises can be made."¹²⁸ However, the Taliban's dependence on the drugs trade and their alliance with criminal networks are still major obstacles.

Despite claims by the Kabul government that the group is divided and has split into numerous factions, the Taliban remain relatively united, with Mullah Haibatullah as the group's Amir and supreme leader. As one of the interviewees said, "The three-day Eid ceasefire announced by our leader and witnessed by the masses is a testimony of the unity of the group. No Taliban reverted to using violence in those days, as was announced by our Amir. There is no doubt that some Taliban have defected, but these defections have been minor and insignificant."¹²⁹ Another senior Taliban leader noted that "The group was confident that those who had left would soon be back as part of the Emirate. The group's military and political commissions are under him. The ceasefire was hence an example of the group's unity, [and] despite minor and insignificant defections, the group is united under the leadership of the Amir, Mullah Haibatullah."¹³⁰


According to another Taliban member, "The commanders and especially the foot soldiers continue to follow a very disciplined chain of command, so much so that they blindly adhere to and accept the views and policies of their seniors." As another fighter put it, "If our seniors ask us to fight, we will fight; if they ask us to put down our arms, we will do so without a blink of an eye. We will never oppose or betray our elders. They have sacrificed too much for us and the liberation of Afghanistan. We will never abandon them. Although Mullah Omar is no longer with us, his ideology,

struggle and love for Afghanistan continues to drive us. Mullah Haibatullah is as much a leader to us as were Mullah Omar and Mullah Mansoor.”¹³¹

It emerged from the interviews that the Taliban envisage a free and stable Afghanistan that is governed under Islamic principles and ruled by those elected to power by ordinary people. Contrary to the common understanding of the group’s views, one Taliban member noted that “The Taliban want Afghanistan to be prosperous, as the people have suffered for far too long at the behest of foreign invaders.”¹³² According to a senior Taliban leader, “We do not want Afghanistan to lag behind in any field, we want to have good relations with our neighbors and the international community, but based on mutual respect and equality. However, this can only be achieved once the US withdraws from our country.”¹³³

POWER-SHARING

All the Taliban members interviewed for this report were of the view that electing a government acceptable to the Taliban will only be possible in the absence of foreign forces and (foreign) interference. That way, the people will be able to elect their true representatives. “The group believes in the will of the masses, and elections, if free and fair, can translate those wishes.”¹³⁴ Similarly, “The notion or possibility of a (future) coalition government and the group’s stance on it can only be determined once that stage has been reached (if at all).”¹³⁵ Taliban respondents reiterated their stance that “Such matters can only be determined and implemented after a negotiated settlement has been reached which is acceptable to the group.” However, one senior member, when probed, said: “If an open and fair election (accepted by the group) resulted in the election of a number of political parties, in such an eventuality, the Taliban would be open to discussing a power-sharing framework, but only with recognized Afghan factions.”¹³⁶ The question of who these recognized factions are remains unclear.




The Taliban have been forging alliances and recruiting members from other ethnic groups, primarily Uzbeks and Tajiks, as well as many from the Hazara ethnic group.

In the course of this interview, it emerged that the Taliban have been forging alliances and recruiting members from other ethnic groups, primarily Uzbeks and Tajiks, as well as many from the Hazara ethnic group,¹³⁷ in order to spread their influence and

present themselves as representatives of all of Afghanistan, and not just the Pashtuns, as was the case a decade ago. Although the Taliban claim to have support from all corners of Afghanistan, clearly the group is making a conscious effort to reach out to other ethnic groups to gain influence and is visibly thinking of its own future in terms of elections.

While the Taliban do not accept the Kabul regime, as it is “illegitimate and imposed by the Americans,”¹³⁸ they have been in touch with other political parties in Afghanistan that enjoy the support of the masses. According to a senior Taliban respondent, “Once the Americans declare a timetable for their withdrawal, the group will then be open to discuss the future of Afghanistan, i.e. elections, future government and constitution, with these Afghan political parties that are supported by the masses and have influence over them. But at this particular juncture, issues revolving around future governance and alliances are not a priority for the Taliban, and therefore the group does not feel the need to declare its stance on them.” He reiterated that, “This is something the group will need to discuss and ponder over and will only present its stance when the time is right. Whatever decision is to be taken in this regard, again, like all other issues pertaining to the future of Afghanistan, it will be done by means of a consensus within the group.”¹³⁹ It should be noted that the Taliban have not recently rejected the idea of their taking part of elections with reference to their religious interpretations or opposition to democracy, but with reference to the “US occupation”, and the allegation that major political and military decisions are “taken by the occupiers.”¹⁴⁰



The Taliban have not recently rejected the idea of their taking part of elections with reference to their religious interpretations or opposition to democracy.

In contrast to the widespread understanding of the Taliban as anti-democracy, the Taliban members we interviewed expressed their “faith in the people of Afghanistan and know that after suffering decades of war and conflict, the people will choose their leaders wisely if they are given a free chance to do so.”¹⁴¹ Those Taliban we interviewed were confident that the people of Afghanistan have faith in the group’s political and social structure of governance. If that were not the case, they claim, then the group would not have been able to remain so active and in control throughout the country. According to one Taliban respondent, “The masses have faith in us. That is why they keep on coming to us, whether it is for security, or to provide them with health facilities, education, relief and justice.”¹⁴²

AUTONOMY

According to a senior member we interviewed, “We (the Taliban) as a group have always given immense importance to the concept of Afghan autonomy and consider Afghanistan as one nation and state where the leadership structure is determined by the will of the people. As a result, any future settlement does not involve separate autonomous sections of the country based on ideological differences but on the process of (open and free) elections.”¹⁴³ According to another Taliban respondent, “If the masses elect different political groups or factions, the Taliban would be open to discussing a power-sharing framework, but only with legitimate Afghan factions. However, to reiterate, these conversations can only take place when the time is right, both within the group and among various future political stakeholders.”¹⁴⁴ By using the phrase “legitimate factions”, the Taliban member is indicating that the present powerholders are occupier-backed and hence not legitimate Afghan factions.

The Taliban’s aim, when they express it themselves, is “to see a sovereign and independent Afghanistan liberated from foreign control and presence”. As one of the interviewees said, “We, like any other country, aspire to be free and independent.”¹⁴⁵ As stated earlier in the report, according to the Taliban, the group’s struggle is against an illegal and illegitimate regime in Kabul, which is amongst the biggest hindrances to peace in Afghanistan. It has become evident that, more than anything else, Kabul is a major obstacle to the peace process, and the Taliban question Kabul’s seriousness and commitment to the process. According to a senior Taliban official we interviewed, “Kabul’s intentions are half-hearted [and] rather insincere, as it has opposed the Taliban’s participation in all matters pertaining to the peace process, be it opposition to the opening of our Doha office, participation in peace meetings and conferences, or even in our demand to negotiate with the US.”¹⁴⁶

Another point that was made by those Taliban we interviewed was that “The Taliban’s struggle is not against any country. In fact, the Taliban want to have good relations, especially with their neighbors, as well as the rest of the world, including the big powers. Similarly, despite baseless reports, the Taliban have no intention of interfering in other countries. Our mission is limited to the liberation of our homeland. Despite unfounded concerns, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan will not let its soil be used against any of our neighbors, nor against the West, including America, which invaded Afghanistan.”¹⁴⁷ This sentiment was also expressed during the Moscow Format by Sheer Abbas Stanakzai, who stated that “The Taliban were not against

any country and aspired to have good relations, particularly with their neighbors, as well as the rest of the world, including the big powers. The Taliban have no intention to interfere in other countries and would not let Afghanistan's soil be used against any neighbor, nor against the West, including America."¹⁴⁸

While expressing their views on autonomy, the Taliban members we interviewed raised the issue of the autonomy of the mass of the population and said that the group had wrongly been accused of mistreating women. As some of the Taliban interviewees said, "Contrary to popular belief, the Taliban give the highest respect and honor to the women of Afghanistan. Islam, which the group abides by, gives the utmost respect to women."¹⁴⁹ According to a senior Taliban official, "The holy Prophet, peace be upon him, has said 'that paradise lies under the feet of a mother', and 'Blessed is the house where a female is born'. Islam has given women so many rights, even their right to choose their spouse. How can we go against the rights God Almighty has given to them? Our women have suffered at the hands of foreigners, starting from the Soviets to the Americans. The majority of them are widows, with children to feed and living in extreme poverty. When the US and its allies invaded Afghanistan, it said it would liberate the masses, but where is the liberation? The Taliban have wrongly been portrayed for not respecting women and abusing them. If anything, the group is a victim of western propaganda."¹⁵⁰

According to another senior Taliban leader, "The group did not fire women who were government employees. In fact, because the group was supportive of women rights and their welfare, it asked them to come to work once a month due to the fragility of affairs in Afghanistan and continued to pay their salaries until the movement could. The Taliban respect and support the role of women in every aspect of public life, be it their protection, right to choose their spouse, right to inheritance right to education, to work, and to serve their nation."¹⁵¹


Hence, in their own view, the Taliban do not represent a conservative version of Islam, which is incompatible with the view that other parties might hold in Afghanistan. One can, of course, disagree with their self-portrayal, but it can certainly be asked to what degree other parties and individual members of the GoA have a liberal view of women rights. The point is that the overall obstacles to development and the emergence of a democratic culture that can be found in Afghanistan's political climate, culture and other parties as well should be separated from Taliban-specific challenges in the search for a settlement with the movement.



The background of the slide is a blurred photograph of a dry, rocky landscape. In the foreground, there is a large, light-colored, textured rock formation. In the middle ground, several people are standing on a dirt path, their figures softened by the blur. The background shows a vast, open area with sparse, dry vegetation and a clear sky. A dark, rectangular structure is visible in the upper center of the background.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD

While most of the past seventeen years have been devoid of progress towards a negotiated settlement, the Taliban's most recent moves warrant some recognition. They represent something erstwhile inconceivable that has now turned into a positive development that undoubtedly indicates a change within the group's thinking and strategy. At the same time, however, the developments also reveal the complexities and spoilers involved in the peace process. For instance, certain fringe elements within the Taliban are opposed to the peace talks, but this also applies to officials within the Afghan political class who refuse to recognize the Taliban as a party to the conflict that can be negotiated with, let alone one with which they can share power. It is often overlooked that within the current Afghan administration there is strong opposition to initiating peace with the Taliban, and many oppose the inclusion of the movement in the political process. In fact, President Ghani has struggled to galvanize domestic support from forces within his administration that are opposed to the peace process.¹⁵² One of the explanations for this is that many officials in the Afghan administration hold their jobs (and security) thanks to international support, a situation that is dependent on the ongoing conflict. For many of these officials a peace deal would put them individually at a loss and make them vulnerable, which for many of them most likely means no lucrative posts, jobs and a lack of security for themselves and their families.



It is often overlooked that within the current Afghan administration there is strong opposition to initiating peace with the Taliban, and many oppose the inclusion of the movement in the political process.

Similarly, while the Taliban have been able to present a largely strong and united front, differences within the movement have resulted in internal divisions, with many joining the ISKP. The Taliban have been engaged in a bloody conflict with the ISKP, fighting over influence, territory and resources. Despite its limited presence and influence, the ISKP has been able to lure away many Taliban fighters and commanders to the point where the Taliban set up a recruitment commission to win back defected members.¹⁵³ Hence the ISKP has become a grave strategic threat to the Taliban.¹⁵⁴

The Taliban must realize that they cannot operate in isolation indefinitely. For the group to capture any form of political power and counter the threat posed by ISKP, they will have to reach a political compromise at some point, as war is no longer the solution by the group's own admission.¹⁵⁵ Subsequently, the Taliban will also have to


ensure a visible reduction in their violence and attacks against the state. They have openly renounced the targeting of civilians¹⁵⁶ and have asked their fighters to avoid killing innocent people, including women, children and the elderly, as well as causing damage to public property.¹⁵⁷ At the same time, however, the group continues to target the Afghan security forces in order “to liberate Afghanistan from foreign control.”¹⁵⁸ However, internal discussions show that it is no longer justifiable for the group to do this since they are not fighting a foreign enemy, but rather fellow Afghans who make up the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).¹⁵⁹

Given the threat from the ISKP, and with it the danger that the conflict will become even more internationalized, neither the Afghan government, the US nor the Taliban can afford to miss this opportunity of starting a dialogue process. Recent moves by Kabul, the US and the Taliban suggest a willingness on all sides to enter immediately into some form of trust-building engagement, which is engendering some cautious optimism, despite several potential spoilers and challenges in this process. This might provide a historic momentum that needs to be grasped wisely, and peace-building efforts at all levels of society, with different social stakeholders, need to be supported by international donors.

When it comes to traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms, this report shows that whether the Taliban are looking for autonomous rule either in parts of Afghanistan or in the whole country can be questioned. On several occasions they have embraced the idea that they are not against power-sharing, nor elections per se. Their resistance to the GoA is based on their resistance to foreign influence in internal Afghan affairs. At the same time, the Taliban have been involved in unofficial meetings with different parties in Afghanistan and until now have insisted that the Afghan reconciliation process should be separated from their dialogue with the US. In 2018 they succeeded in that demand.

The US administration has an interest in making peace with the Taliban first due to the decade-long war (and its costs), but more importantly because of the new threats emerging from Afghanistan. As the Islamic State movement has been pushed back militarily in Iraq and Syria, it has simultaneously popped up in Afghanistan, and since the global threat from transnational jihadist movements is more important for the US than locally oriented movements, their new strategy makes sense. This might, however, imply that the US needs to announce an end to its engagement in Afghanistan, downscaling its role in support of the present government and stopping all operations targeted against the Taliban in a trade-off that will allow them to continue to carry out targeted operations against the ISKP

(which is also an enemy of the Afghan Taliban) and Al-Qaeda. This is a point where a settlement can be imagined, though the Taliban would have to compromise on their demand of a complete withdrawal, and the US would have to restrict its mission and mandate considerably.



If peace efforts are to succeed, it is important that the Taliban remain a unified force. While fomenting fragmentation can be a feasible intelligence strategy to defeat a group militarily, unity is important in reaching a negotiated deal that will last.

If peace efforts are to succeed, it is important that the Taliban remain a unified force. While fomenting fragmentation can be a feasible intelligence strategy to defeat a group militarily, unity is important in reaching a negotiated deal that will last. The danger in the present situation is that of two sets of policies working against each other, one continuing CT efforts, including enhancing fragmentation, the other trying to negotiate a settlement that has the backing of the entire Taliban organization. The three-day ceasefire by the Taliban in 2018 and the impression we have obtained from speaking with different levels of the Taliban for this report confirms that the movement is still a unified force to a high degree, one that is organized hierarchically but that recognizes the principle of consensus among their ranks. At the same time, this report has shown that the Taliban as a movement have undergone a significant change in their perceptions and policies compared to when they were in power in Afghanistan. The Taliban of today talk about the need for peace, national unity and a future Afghanistan based on the “principles of Islam, national interests, historical achievements, social justice, commitment to human dignity, national values and human rights, the territorial integrity of the country and all rights of all the citizens.”¹⁶⁰ Subsequently, the “Qatari Taliban” have children who are receiving a secular education in Doha, including their daughters. New influences and new generations will undoubtedly have an impact on how the Taliban’s views develop in the future. As the Taliban have never had an ideological or religious manifesto, a high degree of pragmatism can be traced in their responses to issues pertaining to democracy, sharia law, a future Afghan constitution and women’s rights. This implies that the Taliban have evolved and will continue to do so, making them a legitimate actor in the Afghan equation, as well as demonstrating their ability to evolve, adapt and be compatible with changing dynamics and a changing Afghanistan.

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