A NEGOTIATED END TO THE AFGHAN CONFLICT

THE TALIBAN'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This study is a rare attempt to systematically survey rank-and-file Taliban on the question of a nonmilitary end to the conflict in Afghanistan. It draws on in-depth interviews the author conducted from June 2017 through January 2018 with thirty-two Taliban members and supporters. The project was undertaken by the author (who is now International Crisis Group's Afghanistan senior analyst) in his previous capacity as an independent researcher and was supported by the Asia Center at the United States Institute of Peace.

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CONTENTS

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Summary

- The Taliban emerged in 1994 as an army of volunteers without a formal hierarchy under a founder who led by charisma as an absolute spiritual leader until his death.

- Since 2015, two parallel trends have unfolded, an increased emphasis on centralization and increased power in the hands of local commanders, but it is too early to interpret this as fragmentation.

- The rank and file are driven by an abhorrence of the post-Taliban government—which they see as a product of its foreign supporters and as defined by corruption.

- The United States is seen as imposing Western ideals on Afghan society under the cover of democracy at the expense of traditional leaders and independent religious scholars.

- The Taliban see themselves as fighting a war imposed on them, leading a popular resistance to liberate their country and restore its sovereignty through jihad.

- Negotiation is now considered a valid pathway to an Islamic state. At the same time, Taliban say they should be the ones to offer peace talks, especially when it comes to intra-Afghan reconciliation—and jihad remains an option.

- The government's invitations to talks have so far been perceived as limiting the Taliban's options to a single undesirable path: ceasing jihad in return for integration into a system they abhor.

- Even as they assert faith in negotiations, however, Taliban fighters think that ousting foreign troops by force is the most realistic strategy. Only then, they believe, can they negotiate with the government in Kabul and other Afghan groups.

- Foot soldiers express no sense of urgency for ending the fight and say that their obedience to superiors is now condition based.

- In all, the Taliban rank and file are not enthusiastic about peace talks. No single explanation accounts for it.

Introduction

Despite widespread recognition that the only way toward ending the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan is a negotiated settlement, understanding of the Taliban's thinking on the subject is scant. Any effective strategy for finding a political solution to the conflict needs, as a key initial step, to take this into account. The Taliban have already expressed these perceptions in their public statements. Indeed, public statements have been and are almost the only source of information about the movement and its positions. Opportunities to get firsthand insight into the thinking of more diversified strands of Taliban opinions are rare. Of particular importance is the mindset of those at the grassroots level of the movement, the ordinary fighters, who make up the bulk of the movement and are the driving force behind the insurgency. Their views offer perhaps the most unadulterated insight from "inside the Taliban" because they speak from within the trenches and, unlike senior members, are less circumspect in what they say. However, given the cliquish nature of the Taliban movement, which discourages members from sharing their views in a personal capacity, and the Taliban mistrust of outsiders (not to mention the security challenges), foot soldiers have not been easily accessible to researchers.

Public statements have been and are almost the only source of information about the movement and its positions.

This study canvassed the opinions of the Taliban rank and file, members one level above the foot soldiers—that is, the field commanders responsible for the smallest units, delgeys—as well as members of communities that voluntarily support, shelter, and openly identify with the Taliban cause. The interviews with field commanders and community members were intended to supplement views of the foot soldiers, adding context to the accounts of the rank and file. This is not to say, however, that views of field commanders and Taliban supporters are not valuable on their own merits.

The report explores Taliban views along several tracks:

- Is there a genuine faith in negotiations within the Taliban rank and file? Do the Taliban seriously consider that peace talks could end the war?

- Is there a sense of urgency within Taliban ranks about negotiating a peace deal? Is there a feeling of war weariness or lack of confidence in a military victory that could make negotiations a priority for them?

- Which issues are negotiable, and what are the red lines that would prevent them from supporting their leaders in a deal?

- How does a peace process look from the perspective of the ordinary Taliban?

The views surveyed are not to be taken as representative of the entirety of the Taliban rank and file. Indeed, given the increasing diversity of opinions and policies dictated by local realities on the battlefield, it does not make sense (increasingly so) to think or talk of the Taliban's views or Taliban policies in blanket terms, especially at the field level. Still, this study aims to provide an illustrative account of the Taliban foot soldiers' perspective and to attempt to extrapolate it to the general trend within the rank and file of the movement.

Main Findings

- Interviews with the Taliban suggest that the movement is undeterred by the increase in US military pressure associated with the Trump administration's South Asia strategy. Some Taliban, while recognizing that the strategy would prolong the war, said it boosted their resolve to continue fighting.

- All respondents expressed belief in negotiation as a principle but blamed the absence of talks on their enemies, the Afghan government, and the United States, which they

accused of not being genuinely interested in peace talks and even of seeking to perpetuate the conflict. They cited the US military escalation as proof of its unwillingness to talk.

- Interviewees thought that political efforts were a passive and even unrealistic way of achieving Taliban goals. Ousting foreign troops by force was deemed the most realistic strategy. Negotiations could be then launched with other Afghan groups and the government in Kabul to arrive at a political settlement that would lead to an Islamic state.

- Taliban foot soldiers showed no sense of urgency for talks and said that they were determined to fight for a long time. Although belief in an imminent victory was not widespread, all believed it would ultimately come if the fighting continued and a political settlement was not reached.

- Political thinking beyond the fighting was minimal, inconsistent, and ambiguous. Discussions of peace were almost all about the withdrawal of foreign forces. Key elements of an acceptable deal, though, were threefold: a more ethnically and politically inclusive Islamic system based on a constitution approved by ulama they respect and not imposed by foreign powers; a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan of all foreign military forces, in any form and under any mission; and no impunity for known anti-Taliban, militia commanders, and warlords.[1] The United States should take the leading role in a peace process and be the first mover in getting the talks under way; the respondents deemed a US commitment to a timeline for the withdrawal of forces rather than actual withdrawal as a precondition for talks with the Afghan government.

- A key barrier to a peace process was the approach of the Afghan government and the United States in "humiliating" the Taliban by offering narrowly defined reconciliation and seeking the Taliban's "surrender." Most fighters articulated that one of the key pillars of their fight was to replace the current system. Any form of integration was thus tantamount to recognition of the current political order.

- Discussion among Taliban rank and file about a political settlement has been neither widespread nor systematic. Occasional discussions at a higher level were mainly intended to legitimize the notion of negotiations among Taliban commanders in order to desensitize them to potential contacts by the Taliban's political office in Qatar.

- Respondents agreed that even after a political settlement the Taliban would remain an armed group for a long time. They were skeptical about the movement's being accepted as a political force without having a military basis.

Methodology

This report draws on face-to-face, in-depth interviews from June 2017 through January 2018 with thirty-two individuals: twenty-four Taliban foot soldiers, four Taliban field commanders (*delgey mashrs*), and four supporters from Taliban-controlled rural areas who voluntarily provided shelter and food for the Taliban and sometimes helped them in logistics. Interviewees came from Kandahar, Helmand, Ghazni, Nangarhar, Wardak, Paktia (chiefly from Zurmat district), Badakhshan, and Kunduz. Each of these provinces includes significant territory under Taliban control. Five follow-up interviews with foot soldiers were also conducted in December 2017 and January 2018, in part to elicit their opinions on more recent developments.

All interviewees are anonymized to protect their security because they were not always authorized to speak on these subjects. Although the list of interviewees is almost unique in its access to the thinking of the most basic level in the insurgency on the subject of political

settlement, it is an open question how widely the views of these respondents resonate across a movement that has tens of thousands of members.[2] Although several respondents spoke with confidence that the opinions they held were quite widespread among their peers, the views in this report should not be seen as representative of the Taliban—the movement is too disparate for there to be any unity of thought beyond foundational issues such as the presence of foreign troops. Another notable limitation of this report is that interviewees responded to questions posed to them but had not necessarily articulated these views within the movement. They also cannot answer the question of how much importance the issue at hand has in internal debates on the rank-and-file level.

Because most of the interviewees are Taliban foot soldiers, and the few interviews with support elements and field commanders are primarily to make sense of the foot soldiers' accounts, interviewees are collectively referred to as foot soldiers unless specified otherwise. An attempt is made to locate responses of the interviewees in the setting of their accounts about their personal journeys into the insurgency. Occasionally, to locate the respondents' accounts within the larger context, comparisons are made between what interviewees said and statements that Taliban interlocutors made during previous author research. Analysis is added in part on the basis of more than half a million words of Taliban materials, mostly obtained exclusively by the author, such as transcripts of previous interviews and of other types of communication with members of the movement of various levels.[3]

Do the Views of Foot Soldiers Matter?

To even ask "what do the Taliban foot soldiers think of a negotiated end to the conflict?" is to apply in advance a certain analysis as to why their views matter. Could their antipathy to peace talks, for example, mean the end of a deal? To what extent could the Taliban leadership shape their behavior? The role of the rank and file can be better located by examining their actual influence on the trajectory of the movement rather than their position in the official structure, which is at the bottom. Historically, since the Taliban emerged as a movement in 1994, how it operates as an organization and its decision-making mechanism have changed significantly.

The Taliban began as a ragtag army of volunteers without a proper hierarchy beyond leadership and frontline commanders. The internal structure became more cohesive after 1996, when the Taliban formed the government in Kabul, but the movement still remained mostly a one-man show under its founder, Mullah Omar, who led by personal charisma as an absolute spiritual authority. Omar made major decisions singlehandedly and would regularly overrule the decisions of his senior officials. A clique of ulama and confidants around him could influence decisions in the movement far more than the formal bodies entrusted with administration. Obedience to the amir (overall leader) became a central tenet of Taliban ideology. When the Taliban staged their comeback after 2003, Mullah Omar gradually delegated authority to field commanders. The Rahbari Shura, a central leadership council, emerged as the most authoritative body making major decisions as the insurgency expanded from 2007 onward. Omar's deputies presided over the insurgency as it grew across Afghanistan, exercising full authority by invoking his name. Two of his deputies, Mullah Beradar (chiefly 2007–10) and his successor Mullah Akhtar Mansur (2010–16) institutionalized the movement, turning it from a loose collection of networks to what resembled a modern organization.[4] After the death of Mullah Omar was revealed in the summer of 2015, Taliban leaders were no longer able to invoke absolute obedience by virtue of sitting in the position of amir. Command and control suffered hugely.

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A leader's actions could be questioned, and senior members of the movement publicly criticized the amir. Outright public dissent emerged for the first time in the Taliban's history.

Since 2015, two parallel trends in the Taliban's command-and-control structure have unfolded. The first, to boost command and control, is an increased emphasis on centralization. This means stepped-up efforts to highlight and increase the role of Taliban institutions, such as the Rahbari Shura, the *ulama shura* (advisory council), and more than a dozen quasi-ministerial departments called commissions. This effort was spearheaded largely by Mansur even before Omar's death, and then taken forward, if less successfully, by the leadership following Mansur's death in May 2016. The ultimate aim of centralization is to streamline the movement in a way that ensures that every Taliban member is accountable to a clear chain of command and that members strictly follow the formal hierarchy. The result has been mixed: it has created a better organizational streamlining on paper, introduced more clarity overall, and worked in better connecting parts of the movement with the center, but has seen little success in other areas.

The failure in some areas can be explained by the second trend: in many cases, local commanders and networks who oversee the collection of revenues and the recruitment process in their areas are becoming more powerful, which often gives them more autonomy from the center. Because the local strongmen's desire for less oversight from the center is a phenomenon in the making, it is too early to interpret this trend as a fragmentation of the Taliban, particularly because the phenomenon is not nationwide. It has, however, weakened the long-cherished doctrine of obedience to the amir and emboldened members of any rank to seek more leeway for themselves. Absolute authority of the leader is a thing of the past, but open dissent or breaking away is still considered a recipe for ending up a pariah. Outright confrontation with the center is still an audacious choice (to the extent of being suicidal) because it runs against the movement's core ethos of unity, and such dissent remains a rarity. On balance, the desire by local commanders for autonomy and the ability to secure it is greater than any other time in the Taliban's history; but the movement's unraveling into fully autonomous pieces is far-fetched; the Taliban remains arguably the most cohesive political group in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, lower-level Taliban members are more assertive than ever, including foot soldiers and field commanders, who as mentioned are both the most numerous and the driving forces.

Observations from the field suggest that foot soldiers and lower-level commanders are increasingly able to influence decisions on the local level. For example, they were able in 2017 to close or open schools in a number of provinces (such as Logar, Ghazni, Paktika, and Kunduz), not based on the policies or orders from above, but chiefly in response to local social-political dynamics. The same dynamic was observed in polio vaccination campaigns. A more widespread phenomenon, reported in 2017 but not yet substantiated, was informal cease-fires between the local insurgent groups and specific Afghan National Defense and Security Force units deployed to contested areas. In most of the verifiable cases, the Taliban in upper echelons deferred to the decision of local fighters and *delgey mashrs* (field commanders).[5] The same has been true for social policies in general. The level of discretionary authority local fighters and their immediate commanders have on determining policies for their areas makes talking about universal policies almost irrelevant. Decisions are usually driven by the local context: among other things, local fighters are influenced by community demands, relationships between community leaders, and governmental or nongovernmental entities.

On major decisions, Taliban fighters claimed that they had a role and that their views counted, citing the consultations about the appointment of Mullah Akhtar Mansur and his

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successor Mullah Hibatullah. Some said they were consulted by their commanders; others said it was enough for them that their bosses were consulted.

The importance of the views of the foot soldiers can also be viewed from a Taliban zeitgeist perspective and are instructive for their insight into the meta-narrative of the insurgency in its most basic and unfiltered form. Views of the Taliban may greatly differ on issues secondary to their fight, but, as for any party in a conflict, the meta-narrative defines the bigger question about why they fight and the way out of the war. The foot soldiers, whose main source for making sense of the insurgency's larger cause is peer-to-peer interactions, and who are normally the least exposed to external influence, theoretically provide a purer understanding of the zeitgeist— the common thinking and mood within the Taliban—than their leaders. When looking beyond the individual and context-specific factors influencing the Taliban's actions, the meta-narrative arguably has the most crucial role in shaping attitudes. At the highest decision-making level, given the weakened clout of leadership and greater assertiveness of members on the battlefield, it would be a tremendous challenge for the leadership to make a decision that goes against this zeitgeist, especially on crucial issues such as negotiations for a political settlement.

Why Are the Taliban Fighting?

Deciphering the respondents' perspectives on how to end the war necessitated delving into two other questions: how they saw the war started in the first place and why they were fighting. These proved useful in eliciting the Taliban's narrative, in getting a more holistic picture the Taliban painted of the conflict in which they were involved. The focus, though, was on the macro level. Micro-narratives, such as what triggered a particular Taliban fighter's decision to take up arms, were recalled to serve the larger narrative. In the process, the respondents' attitudes to the other parties in the conflict were also explored. A proper mapping of the conflict narratives is beyond the scope of this report. Therefore, it tries as much as possible to locate the respondents' answers within a broader framework. Special focus is on attitudes to the opposite party in the conflict because these attitudes strongly colored the respondents' views on the primary question of a nonmilitary solution to the war.

How Did It All Begin?

Most respondents believed that the war began in 2001 when the US-led coalition invaded. They implied that Afghanistan under the Taliban rule was in a state of peace broken by the Western intervention. They also struggled to link the current stage of the war as an extension of a conflict under way in the late 1970s, long before the Taliban's emergence.[6] The Taliban in their collective memory interpret the relative security that prevailed in most of Afghanistan under their uncontested control as the prevalence of peace. They underplay the full-fledged civil war, in which they faced a severe resistance from the anti-Taliban forces, often referred to as the Northern Alliance. The respondents therefore almost unanimously regarded the Taliban regime as the legitimate government. They cited two key reasons. The first was that the Taliban established uncontested rule over most of Afghanistan (more than 90 percent of the country), including the capital Kabul. They described a state of relative security, manifested by the absence of chaos and violence by nonstate actors and a dramatic decline in criminality. The respondents did not count active resistance against the Taliban's rule in the north as a challenge to its legitimacy. The second criterion was that the Taliban implemented sharia (Islamic law), which on its own legitimized the movement. Some also mentioned the appointment of

Mullah Omar as the leader by more than a thousand clerics. The common narrative on how the war started is well illustrated by this response from a thirty-seven-year-old Taliban fighter from Helmand:

> We had a popular government in Afghanistan. And there was peace and security everywhere. The Islamic Emirate established a clean and honest administration. It was ruled by sharia and was therefore successful. But the infidels, the Americans, could not tolerate it. They made up false pretexts [to invade Afghanistan] and eliminated the Islamic Emirate. They installed a puppet government run by people of their mindset. So, the mujahideen had to fight back this regime to restore the rule of Islam....There will never be peace again until the true representatives of the Afghan people take the leadership of the country and kick out the foreigners.

The commonality that emerged from responses is that the United States started the war and toppled the Taliban's "legitimate government." The Taliban, then, see themselves fighting a war that was imposed on them—leading a popular resistance to liberate their country and restore Afghanistan's sovereignty through jihad.

What Is the War About?

Seeing themselves as victims, respondents used a victimhood narrative to explain the rise of the insurgency, citing the establishment of an Islamic system as the cause for which they had chosen to undertake armed struggle. When describing their broader motives, however, they seemed more driven by an abhorrence of the system—that is, the post-Taliban government—and its perceived flaws. The entire system was regarded as a product of its foreign supporters, the United States and its allies: both the government and its Western backers were mentioned together as the opposing party to the conflict. In other words, the desire to remove the current system resonated far more strongly than the passion for establishing an Islamic government, or the specific feeling of historic victimhood, although all counted in the end. In sum, these three combined were the essential meta-narrative behind the war and the nature of the enemy.

Opinions of respondents on a negotiated end to the war were to a large extent shaped by their perception of and attitudes toward the opposing party. The following section describes how they saw the internal enemy and the external enemy, as some referred to the Afghan government and its international backers.

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Government of Afghanistan

In regard to political legitimacy, respondents claimed that the Afghan government, and the post-Taliban state in general, lacked political legitimacy because it was created not on the basis of genuine mechanisms, but on sham processes aimed at generating false legitimacy. They regarded the Bonn Process of late 2001 that laid the foundation of the new political order, the subsequent constitution of 2004, and the elections as lacking popular representation and therefore unable to yield a legitimate government.[7] One respondent from Badakhshan, a twenty-six-year-old, school-educated fighter, said,

> The setup of this government, its laws, and all the elections took place under the shadow of B-52s [US aircraft] with an intention to serve the interests of the occupiers. There was nothing genuine there. They wanted to deceive Afghans with the fancy titles of democracy and election. Everybody knows that majority of Afghans, in more than 80 percent of the country, rejected them by supporting the mujahideen [Taliban].

Respondents also dismissed the government's legitimacy on religious grounds. Different respondents had different reasons, but three arguments stood out. First, the government was set up by external and non-Muslim entities, chiefly the United States, rather than by Afghans,

and included no role for ulama. Second, those in charge "on the Afghan front" were irreligious (some explicitly described them as secularists) and did not subscribe to sharia. "Too submissive to infidels" and "detached from Afghan culture" were other ways respondents described the Afghan elites, who were perceived as devoid of Islamic credentials. Third, Islamic law was not in force. No matter how Islamic the current Afghan law and constitution purported to be, the respondents could see little sign of sharia being enforced in daily life.[8]

In practical terms, the respondents cited the corruption currently prevalent in the government as its defining feature—which, in the words of one interviewee, "has become its [the government's] other name." Respondents saw the Taliban's shadow governance—namely, judiciary and security enforcement—as more effective than the government's, and asserted that "entrenched corruption" has made Afghanistan ungovernable for the government, even if there were no insurgency. As a veteran Taliban field commander from Paktia remarked wryly, "We are the ones who are fighting the corruption, that is, the puppet government. The best way to fight corruption is to fight its main symbol [manifestation]."

Interlocutors also cited the presence of predatory pro-government forces and local warlords as a dominant feature of the current government. Discussion of such forces (usually warlords, abusive police, and predatory local militias) triggered much stronger hostility to the government than anything else. Respondents branded the government as a launching pad for self-interested undisciplined warlords who habitually used violence not to defeat the insurgency, but to settle personal scores, commit robbery, and promote their careers.

Another frequently mentioned government characteristic was its relative lack of internal cohesiveness. Respondents perceived it as being pulled apart by elites of divergent interests and visions, torn into private fiefdoms with no definitive chain of command, and divided to an extent that the Kabul administration was unable to speak with one voice, especially in regard to peace talks. Those interviewed in January 2018 pointed to the standoff between the Presidential Palace and Balkh Governor Atta Muhammad Noor as an example of the government's divisions.

International Parties

When respondents spoke of the enemy, both the Afghan government and international supporters engaged in providing it with military support were mentioned usually in one breath. More educated interlocutors referred to international entities as the external enemy. However, the general blanket terms they used included foreigners, infidels, and (as one respondent put it) crusaders. Americans was also used frequently, more than any other term, as shorthand for the US-led coalition. Perceptions about the presence of the foreigners in Afghanistan varied. The most common follow.

- "They are at war with Islam." This attitude is best summarized by a fighter from Ghazni:

  > The foreigners invaded Afghanistan to destroy. Osama [bin Laden] was an excuse the Americans used to eliminate an Islamic system which was becoming an [inspiring] model for Islamic movements across the world. They could not tolerate the rule of sharia here, and therefore, started killing ulama and taliban [in the literal sense of religious students]. They target not only the mujahideen, but everyone who cares for Islam.

  Respondents thought that the United States, under the cover of democracy, was imposing Western ideals on Afghan society and promoting the "irreligious" elite at the expense of the traditional leaders and ulama. Different respondents cited specific incidents as evidence of their claim.

- "They are here to take Afghan minerals." Looting Afghanistan's natural resources was a widespread assertion for why the Americans were engaged in the war. Here, too, different respondents cited different incidents or rumors as evidence for their claims.

- "The US is after geostrategic interests." This was mentioned specifically in regard to the US military presence. Respondents, to varying degrees of consistency, linked the US stay in Afghanistan to what one fighter deemed as its "irresistible desire" to keep its rivals in the region—Russia, China, and Iran—in check. In the words of one respondent, the Americans' dream of establishing "global supremacy" is a key reason it remains engaged in Afghanistan.

Respondents who mentioned all three reasons said they did not contradict each other but instead complemented one another, making the case for the "occupation of Afghanistan" a strong one.

Do the Taliban Have Any Faith in Talks?

It was within this common conflict narrative that the Taliban respondents framed their views about negotiations and reconciliation. Their consensus was that peacemaking was ultimately a requirement for achieving peace, but the details about it varied hugely. Almost all said that negotiation, in principle, was another pathway to achieving an Islamic state, just as jihad was. Although a minority expressed interest in jihad as a more high-valued act of worship, none excluded the possibility of peace talks to end the conflict. Several respondents actively argued about the desirability of peace from a religious point of view, citing examples from the Prophet's life and the Quran. A twenty-nine-year-old fighter from the south, for example, referred to an "all-time" rule in Islam of keeping the doors of negotiation open:

> The Quran explicitly says that "If they [your enemies] incline toward peace, you must also incline toward it." Nobody should have any doubts about the peace agenda of the mujahideen. From what I understand, this is a matter of policy for the entire Islamic Emirate since it is part of the rules of jihad in Islam. If the Prophet was ordered to talk to infidels and pagans, why cannot we [talk] to infidels and Afghans today? That we do not have negotiations today does not mean the mujahideen neglected this rule. The roots [of the absence of a peace process] should be sought at the side of the enemies. They want us to surrender, which we will never do. Then it is us who get the bad name of being against peace or that we do not know anything but war.[9]

Some of the interlocutors even expressed distress as to why some people fall prey to the message of their critics, who suggested that the movement was against peace and a political solution to the war. Their concern aligned with anecdotes that the Taliban, in general, seem to be increasingly aware of the implications of being seen as disinterested in peace. They are apparently fighting such a perception among the war-weary public. In Nangarhar and Ghazni provinces, Taliban field commanders visited community events, such as funerals and tribal gatherings (jirgas), to clarify their stance of "genuine faith" in negotiations. They tried to debunk the notion that they did not believe in peace talks as propaganda of an "enemy who wanted to cover their own unwillingness by charging the mujahideen with the same accusation."

When asked what evidence there was to show the seriousness of their claim, two interlocutors, both field commanders, pointed to what they said was training in Pakistan on matters of peace, especially during Akhtar Mansur's last year (the winter of 2015–16). Every winter as fighting subsides in most areas, field commanders retreat to Pakistan to rest. During this break, they also attend lectures by Taliban leaders and ulama that include discussions on discipline and ideology. The two field commanders, who were briefed about these discussions from their

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superiors, described the lecture on peace as useful in lifting the confusion around the concept of negotiations within the rank and file of the Taliban. One said,

> [In the past,] many fighters would take the mere entering into talks as tantamount to compromising the cause they were fighting for and abandoning jihad for the sake of power. However, our ulama and elders have [in recent years] made it clear that making peace was a Quranic injunction and that the Emirate [Taliban] will never agree to talks unless it is certain it can achieve its goals through talks without compromising any principles.

The two respondents said lectures on the validity and desirability of peacemaking continued after Mansur's death as well, but with less rigor. They both said that because the new leadership under Mullah Hibatullah did not see solid prospects for a peace process on the horizon, the emphasis on the issue diminished.

However, these lectures seem to have been aimed at introducing the idea of negotiations to the fighters as a proposition rather than with any prospect for immediate applicability. They were designed, apparently, to desensitize the fighters to possible future reports of Taliban diplomacy, specifically, contacts with the outside world that the movement's political office based in Qatar may have, so that such reports would not shock the fighters. Adding this element to the winter courses was an initiative of former Taliban leader Akhtar Mansur, who was killed in a US military drone strike in May 2016, that continued under his successor Hibatullah.

Most of the respondents took for granted the principle of talks as the Taliban's default position, meaning that the door for talks should always be kept open. Others eventually reached the same conclusion. This overall positive attitude to the notion of peace talks, particularly the religious validation for it, is a far cry from a few years ago, when the attitude was primarily negative and most within the Taliban could not even consider negotiation as a principled position. When the idea floated widely among the Taliban in the lead-up to the establishment of the Taliban's political office in Qatar in 2011, Mansur (then de facto Taliban leader) had a hard time countering the prevalent deep misperceptions. He tasked highly respected clerics with arguing for the permissibility of talks "under proper circumstances"—that is, as only in the context of the withdrawal of foreign forces. According to one senior Taliban member, in the years that followed, many Taliban gradually came to feel as if they had "discovered the topic of peace talks from Islam's perspective for the first time."[10]

What Are the Barriers to Peace for the Taliban?

Even as they claimed that they had faith in talks, respondents actively sought justifications for a military push. They had to act as if fighting were currently the only realistic option, they said, but denied that this contradicted a belief in a peaceful way to end the conflict. Interlocutors zigzagged through justifications for the lack of progress in peace talks and the dominant mood of military escalation. Most of their arguments related to the attitudes of the US and Afghan governments to reconciliation and the way the Taliban interpreted these approaches. Digging deeper into the respondents' accounts revealed the following as the key issues that, respondents said, hindered the path to a political solution and made them concentrate on warfare.

Contrasting Presumptions

The US and Afghan governments invited the Taliban to talk about ending the violence in return for accommodating them into the current system. This is, at least, how the Taliban—not only those interviewed for this study, but also many others on different levels—have understood public calls from the US and Afghan governments for negotiation or reconciliation. They

saw these invitations as confining or preconditioning the talks to ceasing jihad in return for seats in the current government, allowing the Taliban to run for election, providing them with jobs, and integrating their fighters into the Afghan National Security Forces. The respondents, categorically and with great consistency, said they were interested in none of these offers, and therefore were uninterested in such talks. Talks, as they saw them, should primarily be about the complete withdrawal of foreign forces in return for the Taliban's renouncing violence and committing to an intra-Afghan reconciliation process. This divergence in expectations about what is on the table as a deterrent to starting peace talks is in line with what senior Taliban members have also suggested in conversations with the author over recent years.

Talks, as they saw them, would primarily be about the complete withdrawal of foreign forces.

Erosion of Trust

Taliban respondents said they could not trust that the calls for negotiations were a serious offer to find a political solution to the conflict. They expressed deep misgivings about the US and Afghan governments' intentions and expressed strong convictions that neither the "Americans" nor the Afghan elite were genuinely interested in peace. In the words of one interlocutor from Kandahar,

> I do not think the Americans want peace in Afghanistan. They want to keep killing Afghans who do not like them while taking out all the mines from our country....I cannot imagine the government would really relinquish power to the Taliban. They [the government] are afraid that if the Taliban are allowed to return in a dignified way, all people will support them and the government people will lose the money they receive from foreigners and the seats.

Another interviewee, a Taliban fighter from Ghazni, said,

> They are calling for talks, but they do not mean it. These are empty calls. It is a trick to put the blame on the mujahideen. War is good for them as nobody wants them when there is peace....Ashraf Ghani, Abdullah, and Karzai want to prolong the war because peace is not beneficial for them. They are installed by foreigners and when there is peace, and the foreigners are out, they will not [be able to] stay [in power] for one day in Afghanistan.

The notion that both the United States and the pro-government elite had vested interests in war and are afraid of peace was a commonly held perception among the respondents. This theme featured heavily in the conversations about the absence of peace in general.

Respondents pointed to several developments as evidence that the US and Afghan governments were not interested in peace. They said that the extra troops sent as part of the new US South Asia strategy announced in August 2017 by the Trump administration and Washington's "messages of war" were "clear indications" that the United States wanted to perpetuate the war. A Taliban supporter and "part-time" fighter asserted that "The Americans are dead set on fighting to solve their problem [fix Afghanistan's problem]. Unless they change their militaristic attitude, nobody in the Taliban will think hard about alternatives to fighting." On the Afghan government's part, they pointed to the government's propaganda campaign against the Taliban calling them terrorists, the aborted opening of the Qatar office in 2013, and the government's "clinging" to US forces to stay in Afghanistan. Three interviewees mentioned the signing of the US-Afghan bilateral security agreement in the first week of the National Unity Government's takeover in 2014 as a "strong sign proving" that the government was interested in war rather than peace.

Objectionable Reconciliation Approach

A key issue to which many respondents strongly objected that resonated widely as antithetical to the spirit of talks was what respondents called the surrender approach. The calls, they said,

were not offers for peacemaking between two equal parties, but from a party that considers itself superior wanting the other to surrender. Some even considered the calls to be seeking what they described as sinister purposes. Bringing the Taliban to the table, on the one hand, would buy the enemies of the Taliban time to fight it, and, on the other, seek to divide and weaken the movement. They referred to a government-run integration program that catered to local Taliban groups in provinces as aiming to split them off from the movement by inviting their surrender with job offers and other dividends. Another pattern they cited as "proof" of the divide-and-weaken approach involved so-called peace programs: meetings by Afghan officials with either non-Taliban or Taliban not authorized to speak for the movement, later presented in the media as peace talks. Several interlocutors asserted that the ultimate objective of this approach was to humiliate the Taliban and make them politically irrelevant. This viewpoint was articulated by a Kandahari Talib:

> To me, all this talk about peace seems to be aimed at creating mistrust within the Taliban, so it is divided and weakened. Then, every piece of the [divided] Taliban is asked to join the government individually. Exactly, like [the way] Hekmatyar's party joined the government in bits and pieces. [Their vision is that] most of the mujahideen will surrender one after another, and a minority group which wants to continue jihad, will be rejected as irreconcilable and extremists. When the mujahideen are divided in this manner, they will join the government in a humiliated way. They do not want us to have dignity and therefore the whole game of talks is about humiliating us. They could not defeat us on the battlefield, so their plan is to defeat us through the intrigue of talks.

Many respondents considered the talk about jobs or salaries for Taliban fighters as an "utter insult" to what they were fighting for. Some mocked the notion and called it another sign of the humiliation to jihad.

On these grounds, interlocutors said that accepting the existing offers of talks would drag the Taliban into a trap that would only fracture the movement's ranks or at least undermine internal trust. One respondent worried about the consequences of entering talks he said would have no outcome:

> In recent years, there are reports about peace talks every day. These are false. Therefore, the Islamic Emirate spokesmen have regularly rejected them. If these rumors were accurate, they would have showed the Taliban are desperate for a deal and that they face difficulties in continuing the jihad. [Should these reports be true], it would have badly damaged the credibility of the Emirate's leaders among the common members because it would be unwise to waste time on schemes which do not yield any result.

Another respondent shared similar thoughts, but referenced history:

> In Afghanistan, at the end of the [anti-Soviet] jihad, the mujahideen factions failed to establish an Islamic government because each was involved in secret deals and talks with its erstwhile enemy; when the communist regime collapsed, the mistrust stemming from the secret deals and talks tore the ranks of the mujahideen. At the end of the day, no faction considered it shameful to ally with those who had once fought them.

Is Fighting Just Business as Usual?

The foot soldiers interviewed expressed no sense of urgency for ending the fight. All respondents tried to sound relaxed about the continuation of jihad as long as it might take. Their attitude toward a prolonged war was "business as usual" and contrasts markedly with that of many senior Taliban members dealing with political and civil affairs, who have been increasingly concerned about the war taking longer than they expected. In private, they seem to realize the consequences and challenges of maintaining a high-intensity insurgency for too long. In public, however, and when speaking to the fighters, they display little sign of such worries. A fighter from Badakhshan spoke for many respondents in saying,

The calls, they said, were not offers for peacemaking between two equal parties, but from a party that considers itself superior wanting the other to surrender.

> We are not desperate for a victory. It is not our responsibility [to achieve victory]. The end result is in the hand of God. The duty of a mujahid is to continue fighting until the rule of Allah prevails. We will fight until the foreign forces are out and an Islamic system is established. No matter how long the fighting takes, we have to consider it our duty and we are rewarded by God for our struggle and steadfastness....Whether it is fighting for many years, getting martyred or victory, they are equal to us. Of course, a victory is a good tiding in this world, a sign of the acceptance of our jihad before God. But, equally important is martyrdom. It is the wish of every mujahid to die as a martyr....Yes, all the options of [sustained] fighting, martyrdom, and victory are equal to us. Important thing is to keep our intentions pure from materialistic desires.

The respondents mostly attributed their equanimity to theology, but also suggested a military victory simply because they did not see hard prospects for a political solution. However, confidence in an imminent victory was not strong among all respondents. As to where the movement might be headed, most said it was most likely bent on a "long war," but that victory was not inevitable if the other side continued fighting. This assertion contrasted sharply with the mood on the battlefield in 2015 and 2016, in which many fighters believed victory was imminent. The faded confidence in an imminent victory during this research period is understood, at least by a few, to be a direct result of the ramped-up US military posture after the Trump administration announced its new strategy in the summer of 2017. (These views were gathered mostly in autumn 2017, possibly reflecting the mood about the battlefield trends at that time. Anecdotal accounts from the battlefield in spring 2018 suggest greater confidence among the Taliban rank and file in their ability to neutralize the pressure from the US military.) Most respondents tried not to attach any importance to whether the new US strategy had an impact on how they thought the fight would end. Four of them, including a commander, did suggest that it has prolonged their battle for a military victory but that it has not affected their resolve to continue fighting. Some even said the intensified campaign by US and Afghan forces boosted their resolve to fight.

At the same time, increased US pressure on the battlefield seemed to have had little impact on the Taliban's inclination toward a political settlement. According to a Helmandi Talib,

> [The arrival of] more foreigners makes us more determined to fight and gives us a stronger reason to keep up jihad....The Americans are strengthening the authenticity [legitimacy] of our jihad. They will eventually leave humiliated. They will never make us compromise even an inch of the jihad's principles. We might have a longer jihad ahead now with more occupation forces, but we are fully ready for it. We already know that enmity against Islam and mujahideen is ingrained in their minds, so they will never withdraw through logical [peaceful] ways, unless they are forced.

Respondents warned that the increased US military posture provided fodder for radical elements within the Taliban who saw the presence of foreign forces as an opportunity: fighting them was not business as usual; instead, they looked forward to it. This warning was articulated by, among others, a field commander from Kandahar:

> With the current state of affairs and the emphasis of the Americans on war, I cannot see signs of peace even with a telescope. With the new Americans coming [to Afghanistan], I see a spirit among some of my comrades who are celebrating the opportunity to continue jihad with the infidels. I have a friend, who is a madrassa teacher in [Spin] Boldak [district of Kandahar]. He was telling his students, "I wish this rumor of more Americans [soldiers] coming to Afghanistan will turn true, so we can fight them directly." I can see some sort of nostalgia for reemergence of foreign soldiers among many younger fighters who missed the opportunity to fight head-on against the Americans.

The spirit of prolonged war and indifference toward a political settlement among the rank and file put them at odds with a number of nonmilitary Taliban leaders. The latter seem to be worried that if the status quo were to continue with no clear military victory or reconciliation, the movement would gradually lose its relevance given that its near monopoly over the insurgency

is already threatened by smaller groups that compete with it over territory and recruitment. Additionally, senior members of the Taliban are concerned about preserving discipline as the insurgency grows in size. Their main concern is to project a public image as a government in waiting.

What Are the Potential Deal Breakers?

One set of interview questions gauged the extent to which concessions by the Taliban leadership might render a deal unacceptable for the foot soldiers. This issue arises from the premise that obedience to the leadership among the Taliban is a feature that has made the movement arguably the most cohesive and stable among Afghan political groups, despite the increasing tendency of some local commanders toward greater autonomy. Obedience to superior ranks is part of the fabric of the Taliban's political psychology. Adherence to this principle is strict mainly because it is an essential element of the movement's theological training. Given the erosion of absolute authority following the death of Mullah Omar, however, it is widely understood that a peace deal will lead to, at least, one splinter group breaking from the leadership and continuing to fight. As to what scenarios might make the foot soldiers not amenable to a leadership-brokered deal, respondents offered varied opinions. They seemed, in fact, to have considered such scenarios. Even when prompted, many found it difficult to imagine the leadership signing a deal that would ignore their essential demands. Most of the initial responses to questions in this regard were meant to emphasize their trust in the leadership. The most common deal breakers for the foot soldiers were as follows:

- **Accepting the presence of foreign forces.** Interviewees were unanimous that any agreement that allows foreign forces to keep a foothold in Afghanistan would be unacceptable. They opposed not only a troop engagement for combat operations, but also any residual force that maintains a military facility on Afghan soil. Respondents generally recognized, however, the need for a gradual withdrawal of foreign troops. Several even demanded that the foreign troops should not leave abruptly and should facilitate a smooth transition. Interestingly, several based their arguments for the unacceptability of foreign military bases, among other reasons, on grounds that their presence would remain an obstacle to peace given that no other major players in the region—such as Russia, China, Pakistan, or Iran—wanted them.

- **A government that is not sufficiently Islamic.** Consensus was also firm on the Islamic-ness of the government as another key condition. Surprisingly, respondents did not advocate for the revival of the Islamic Emirate, or even for the government that the Taliban had established during its rule. Any system endorsed by ulama who are widely respected by the movement (independent and allied with the Taliban) would be accepted. Most respondents did not have definitive opinions on the technical aspects of the form of government and left the question of election to the leadership and ulama. Their emphasis was mainly on sharia and its application. Most highlighted three elements they saw as absent in current legislation that rendered the system un-Islamic: hudood (the sharia penal code of severe punishments for adultery, fornication, rape, robbery, and theft), fewer freedoms for women, and fewer freedoms for the media.

- **Acceptance of the current constitution.** The 2004 constitution was deemed un-Islamic for several reasons. First, it was not made and endorsed by ulama, rendering it inherently incompatible with sharia. It tried to satisfy the ideals of its framers more than those of Afghans and allowed Western ideals to prevail. It was dictated by

Their main concern is to project a public image as a government in waiting.

foreigners. In the words of one interlocutor, leaving the constitution untouched "will be a perennial stigma for future generations. It will be called a made-in-America constitution, exactly like Pakistan's English law."

- **Presence of irreconcilable (neo-)warlords.** Many respondents said they could not imagine joining a government in which known anti-Taliban strongmen either shared power or were granted impunity. They identified warlords known locally or nationally for using strong-arm tactics against the Taliban and for allegedly committing crimes during their fight against the Taliban. The respondents' definition of warlord included security, military, and other government officials who gained power within the post-2001 political order and established a reputation as heavy-handed Taliban hunters; militia leaders who came of age after the Taliban's fall; and leaders from the mujahid era who had regained power. Views differed about what should be done with such warlords, but the consensus was that they should not have a role, any role, in the future government and that reconciling with such (former) sworn enemies was impossible. It was generally understood that a political settlement removing these warlords from the political-military scene would be acceptable, even if they were not immediately persecuted.

Respondents said that if any Taliban leader crossed these red lines, he would no longer be followed. Most interviewees maintained that their obedience to their superiors was condition based: as long as their superiors respected the core values that defined the movement, they would be obeyed. Most respondents said though they were certain the collective leadership of the Taliban would not commit to any of those deal breakers, it was likely that the Americans or the Afghan government would tempt individual leaders into such deals. Their reaction would then be to remain with those "following the original line" of the movement, as defined by its founders, especially Mullah Omar. According to a fighter from Paktia,

> The reason we like our leaders so much and that the mujahideen insist on obedience [to superiors] is that they represent the high ideals of jihad. It is impossible that our overall leadership will compromise these values. However, if a certain commander, God forbid, commits such a mistake, I am confident that he will automatically lose the support of his mujahideen. He will be left alone….I cannot compare the Islamic Emirate to Hekmatyar, but even he was abandoned by those of his followers who were genuine mujahideen after he surrendered to the government. Such leaders are then no different to us than those whom we are fighting all these years.

As long as their superiors respected the core values that defined the movement, they would be obeyed.

Where Is the Path from Negotiation to Reconciliation?

How does a political settlement look from the perspective of the Taliban? The aim of this question is to understand how Taliban foot soldiers envision a peace process. Few concrete ideas emerged. Despite respondent statements that they believed in a negotiation and that a negotiated end to the conflict would be desirable, they had not thought about what such a process would look like. Here, too, they left the details to the leadership. Quite a few said simply that they did not know, or that they were not required to think about it. Others said because a political process was not a solid prospect, they did not need to discuss it. Those who did talk about it were clear and consistent on a few elements of a process:

- **The first mover should be the United States.** Because the Taliban had already announced its readiness for negotiations, respondents said, as a matter of principle, it was now up to the United States, which they considered as the principal enemy, to announce its plan for direct and unconditional talks. When asked whether—as a

precondition to starting talks with the United States—they could openly commit to breaking alliances with external jihadist groups, most respondents denied any such links. They considered al Qaeda to be their brothers but denied that it existed inside Afghanistan. Four respondents, who admitted that the Taliban have worked with al Qaeda or that they allowed it to operate side by side with them in Afghanistan, said that al Qaeda was not interested in keeping a presence in an Afghanistan in which an Islamic system is established. They meant when the foreign troops are out and the Taliban are part of a new Islamic government, al Qaeda will stop operating in Afghanistan out of respect for, or in agreement with, the Taliban. No other jihadist groups featured in their conversations, and, when prompted about specific names, all denied that the Taliban had any such links.

- **First talks should be on the US exit.** No talks on other issues were possible, respondents said, until the full withdrawal of the foreign troops had been settled. Talks with the United States on this withdrawal was indeed the primary interest for interlocutors in discussing prospects of transition to a postconflict situation. They considered the military presence of international troops to be a key hindrance that blocked discussions about resolving political differences with the incumbent government and the nature of political setup. Interviewees displayed a great deal of attention, almost obsession, with the foreign occupation, some describing it as the "mother of all woes" or "root cause of the conflict" in Afghanistan. Without getting a clear signal from the United States and its allies about the full withdrawal of their troops, they argued, there was no logic in discussing other issues. Using an analogy from classic fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) books, one respondent, a mullah, from Kunduz, likened the occupation to a dead rat in a well that contaminates the water.

  > The first step to cleaning the water of the well is to take out the rat. Only after that, there are rules about a certain number of buckets of water to be taken out so the water is considered clean. How much [effort] it takes to clean the well depends on the situation. If the rat remained in the water for long and was swollen, then the number of buckets of water is higher. This is now our situation with the occupation as well. Later issues about government [power-sharing etc.] could be settled once the main contaminator [i.e., foreign troops] is out.

- **Reconciliation will follow the withdrawal of foreign troops.** When the issue of the withdrawal of international forces is settled, respondents said, the Taliban leaders will talk with other Afghan political forces, including the government, on the creation of an Islamic system. Most interviewees implied that this will happen in such a way that the Taliban will have an upper hand, and that their terms will form the basis of the political settlement. One in four respondents said that the Taliban may need to establish its clear military superiority on ground before serious talks about reconciliation begin, even if it involves a showdown on the battlefield. Others took the acknowledgment of the Taliban's superiority by rival political groups for granted and did not predict a new wave of fighting. However, almost all respondents envisioned that the political settlement would culminate in granting the Taliban a leading role in the political setup that will emerge from it. They envisaged the Taliban's role in the future state as a dignified return to power, where their armed struggle is acknowledged as a legitimate jihad. However, the respondents denied that they were seeking a monopoly over power and offered varying views about how much share others

should hold in such a system. Nonetheless, they all recognized the need for a more ethnically and politically inclusive system than the 1990s government.

- **Ulama from both sides will define what is an Islamic state.** Respondents, by consensus, said the current political system and laws have to change. An Islamic system with sharia as its official law will have to be formed. Afghan ulama from all sides will determine the correct interpretation of what an Islamic system based on sharia law actually is.

Taliban: A Future Without Guns?

Prospects for disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of the foot soldiers were briefly discussed with the interlocutors. It seemed that given the Taliban's preoccupation with fighting, this was a far-fetched scenario. Respondents struggled to imagine a Taliban without guns, a Taliban fully transformed into a civil group, at least any time soon. Most thought it was the Taliban's military might that made the movement's "popular agenda" heard nationally and internationally, and it would be unwise for them to strip themselves of the very tool that guaranteed the people a strong voice. Such convictions were based on an assumption that self-interested elites in Afghanistan and regional and international powers would deny Afghans their right to dictate their fate and live in peace. In line with official Taliban propaganda, they projected themselves as the "true representatives of the Muslim nation." They held that the Taliban needed to remain strong, not only politically but also militarily.

One fighter from Wardak, thirty years old and madrassa-educated, who joined the insurgency in 2014, said this:

> Substituting military power with purely political would prove disastrous for the mujahid nation. The modern world powers are inherently biased against Islamic movements. Even if they are chosen by the people to rule, they will not be allowed by the Americans and other enemies of Islam to remain in leadership. If our [the Taliban's] popularity was put to the test in a transparent way, I am fully confident that an overwhelming majority of the people would choose us....But let me make it clear that it is not about who needs to be in power; it is not that we want to rule. What matters is to get Islamic sharia rule, and that is what all the people [in Afghanistan] actually want. So, if it is about what people choose, we are absolutely sure they choose to be ruled by Islamic sharia, by a system that is not only Islamic on paper, but also taken serious in practice. The Islamic system is what makes sense for Afghans. They despise un-Islamic systems, such as [Western] democracy. But we now know very well that neither popularity nor logic determines who have to rule when it comes to Muslims [Islamists]....So, we need to be careful about giving up our military force. There is actually no need for doing so.

A second respondent, a fighter from Ghazni, argued that military capability is what makes the Taliban a force to be reckoned with, and that giving up that power should be considered only when it is fully guaranteed that the deal would lead to a new government based on sharia.

> The reason everyone is talking about peace and reconciliation with the Islamic Emirate today is that we have got unique [military] power. We are already liked by the Islam-loving ordinary Afghans, whom we represent, but that does not make us count before our enemies. If people [Taliban's rivals] listen to us because of this force, this clearly encourages the mujahideen to keep up this strength. Imagine if we reached out for talks ten years ago, nobody would have taken us seriously. Without the [massing of] force, we would not have been able even to convey our message to the people, to speak freely, let alone to put our Islamic sharia into practice.

Respondents struggled to imagine a Taliban without guns, a Taliban fully transformed into a civil group, at least any time soon.

Analysis: Making Sense of the Taliban's Attitudes

A key conclusion from conversations with the Taliban is that they are not particularly enthusiastic about peace talks. No single explanation accounts for it. Instead, a combination of factors contribute to their caution.

Reluctance to Negotiate Rooted in History

The shadow of Afghan history looms large in the absence of a strong faith among the Taliban about the potential fruitfulness of negotiations. Since the Afghan conflict started four decades ago, not a single inspiring example of negotiations resulting in a lasting political solution is to be found, which has eroded confidence in the effectiveness of talks among Afghan political forces. Antigovernment groups and insurgencies unvaryingly sought to overpower the incumbent regime as attempts to reach a political settlement failed, whatever the reasons. Achieving political goals through military power has become the norm. Each of the four major regime changes since 1978 was nothing more than a new stage in a cycle of violent conflict. Only once, in 1992, was the transition from one regime to another close to taking the shape of a negotiated surrender. Suspicions about the ability of negotiations to deliver have always been prevalent among warring sides. The Taliban are no exception. By opting for negotiations as a realistic way to power or to achieving their stated goals, the Taliban would be breaking with the tradition of armed opposition groups treating the military force as the game changer. The Taliban may not find it easy to set a precedent by considering talks as conducive to a political settlement.

The Taliban's own history also looms large in the minds of those fighting today. The Taliban phenomenon predates 1994, when it rose up against the rule of warlords in southern Afghanistan and became a well-known unitary movement. Before 1994, the taliban were students of religious schools (madrassas) mobilized in the fight against the 1980s Soviet occupation in fronts called the taliban (religious students). They mostly stayed away from the factionalism of the Afghan mujahideen and the civil war that followed the mujahideen takeover in 1992. The Taliban phenomenon, then, was born as a force during wartime and has remained fighting ever since. In the 1990s, high-ranking individuals tasked with running the government, such as ministers, bothered little about their ministerial positions, which carried less significance than military operations. Indeed, given the increased importance of warfare and the conflict, many ministers divided their time between their offices and the battlefield. The day-to-day military campaigns remained the main preoccupation of the Taliban government until its last days in 2001, despite a gradual evolution toward acting more like a bureaucracy in the later years. This history of warfare being considered of prime importance does not encourage politics over fighting today. As an organization, the Taliban is still primarily a military group: warfare is its modus operandi and diplomacy is neither its comfort zone nor its strong suit. Departing from its default mode of activity will be a radical shift. Difficulty in detaching from violence seems to be a problem for any group accustomed to it but is particularly challenging for a group that has defined jihad as its core value and raison d'être. For many Taliban fighters, the mere acceptance of negotiation means halting jihad without certainty whether that will lead to the achievement of collective or personal goals. Accepting any offers of negotiations revives the specter of a peace process, which will force its transformation from a military group to a political one. Odds are against a transformation dictated by external needs rather than internal convictions.

The recent history of negotiations with the Taliban has also been a stumbling block. The way the government and its international backers presented negotiations has only made the

insurgents more resistant to them. The offers of, and calls for, talks have often been cast as "without preconditions," but then the subject of discussion has been predefined as power-sharing, integration of the Taliban, jobs for them, and ways to address their local grievances. The presumption that underpins these calls for negotiation reduces the Taliban's struggle to purely financial and worldly objectives. For a religious movement in which the entertaining of material gains, at least in public, is considered a sign of impurity, describing its cause in materialistic terms is counterproductive in opening talks. Calls for peace talks have not acknowledged the Taliban's fundamental demands: withdrawing foreign troops and restructuring the Afghan state. Limiting the subject of talks to what Taliban consider peripheral issues and consistently ignoring their main demands have (understandably) made the Taliban more dismissive of negotiations as a meaningful exercise.

Self-Image as the Moral Authority

Personal history also plays a role that is frequently overlooked. Many figures in the Taliban had a strict religious upbringing that shapes their attitudes toward others, including on the question of negotiations. The Taliban are trained to maintain a high sense of dignity. This idea is based on a religious narrative that both those seeking Islamic knowledge and Muslim scholars are the heirs of the Prophet. They apply this status primarily to those grounded in madrassa education. It holds that their status as seekers of religious knowledge should invoke respect in society. This self-image of moral distinctness has implications on the question of reconciliation because it pits a group with a strong sense of self-righteousness against a rival it deems "secular" or "secularist" and hence not on equal footing with it, regardless of its political popularity or military strength. This is a paradoxical combination with the Taliban training in the Sufi ethos, which proscribes any sense of superiority. Still, the feeling of self-righteousness informs the Taliban's attitudes—even toward their supporters in the villages, the Taliban's base constituency. The prevalence of such an attitude has forced Taliban leader Hibatullah to emphasize in his instructions to the fighters the need to respect village supporters. He has argued that the Taliban's rural supporters, in providing food and shelter, were essentially in the same trench with the mujahideen.[11]

This mental construct has implications for both peace talks and reconciliation. The offers of negotiation are issued by the Afghan and US governments, which presume a position of recognized authority. The Taliban find these offers demeaning. What the Taliban hear as a patronizing tone and a call for reintegration clashes with their sense of dignity. The Taliban's claim to legitimacy, today as well as during the 1990s, is as much a product of this self-righteousness as of political clout. The connotation of ascendancy inherent in the governments' rhetoric of "reconciling the Taliban" or "bringing them to the table" is a major irritant for the insurgents. The Taliban find these calls particularly objectionable when coupled with the request of allegiance to the post-Taliban constitution and patronizing offers of jobs in return for renouncing violence.

What further hinders such requests is the war that runs alongside calls for peace. The same entities that extend an olive branch to the Taliban condemn them as terrorists and criminals. Television and radio broadcasts are interspersed with foreign-funded messages aimed at "countering extremism," which the Taliban consider an insulting effort to reengineer social values. American warplanes still roar across the skies, a daily reminder of the Taliban's narrative about foreign invasion. The mobile phones of Afghan teenagers are filled with materials considered immoral by most Afghans as mobile connectivity spreads across the country. Warlords flaunt their war profits with luxury vehicles. The war itself, and the foreign influences that

rushed into Afghanistan along with the international troops, continue to deepen the Taliban's sense of self-righteousness.

Desire to Negotiate from a Position of Strength

From the Taliban's perspective, they should be the ones to offer peace talks. In the event that their opponents make the offer, the opponents need to openly recognize the Taliban's legitimacy and the validity of the Taliban's struggle. For the same reason, Taliban respondents could conceive of a reconciliation process only after a US plan for withdrawal is announced. Their rationale is that the mere agreement to fully withdraw will automatically make the Taliban a hegemonic force with no need to threaten rivals into compliance. As soon as the announcement is made, rival political forces in Afghan society would reach out to the Taliban for reconciliation. It was such a scenario that the Taliban respondents in this and previous research were thinking of when they talked about reconciliation. They could not imagine a Taliban negotiating from an inferior position.

In their political imagination, Taliban fighters view themselves as working to secure a recognizable upper hand in the lead-up to a reconciliation process. They would also, of course, want a leading role in the future state that would come out of such a process. This semi-hegemonist tendency appears to be dominant among the Taliban rank and file, but civil and political leaders have expressed more leniency toward working with rivals. Some have openly admitted that they were mistaken to be dismissive of their political opponents during the 1990s, claiming that they have moved a long way from that attitude.[12]

However, the mentality of moral-political authoritativeness among the Taliban grassroots may pose a challenge for the movement's leadership should it decide to enter a peace process. The nature of a deal in its initial stages, and especially in its final outcome, would be gauged against the Taliban members' self-image of dignity. The leadership may find it difficult to sell anything to the foot soldiers that they see falling short of granting the movement a superior status, symbolically or substantially. Against this backdrop, any approach of bringing the Taliban to the table that risks being seen as humiliating would be counterproductive.

Underdeveloped Thinking

The Taliban's vision for the future is highly ambiguous, especially on transitioning from the current phase of conflict toward peace. For the foot soldiers, trust in the leadership means that they are not required to focus on anything beyond the moment—fighting, which is the benchmark of excellence. Additionally, because most of the Taliban engaged in fighting have come of age during the insurgency period, they have seen the movement only in the fighting mode, and therefore find it hard to imagine a Taliban that would cease to fight. Many also have personal or shared experiences of suffering at the hands of the government or foreign forces, which immerses them in fighting as an act of revenge. A number of fighters have always been driven not by larger political goals, but instead by the grievances and grudges stemming from their suffering.

For fighters driven by ideology, the divine rewards to be gained through jihad and martyrdom make political struggle a less rewarding and therefore a less desirable activity. The end of warfare to them means the end of an opportunity. Continuation of jihad and being martyred becomes a personal goal. Martyrdom becomes highly desirable. The literature of jihad that has flooded Afghanistan since the early 1980s and the anti-Soviet war is deeply imprinted in

The end of warfare to them means the end of an opportunity.

the minds of many Taliban foot soldiers. Turning jihad and martyrdom into issues of personal salvation, these fighters easily lose sight of the Taliban's political goals. At this stage of armed struggle, the Taliban need this discourse of divine rewards because it gives the fighters a strong incentive for sustained fighting. Unfortunately, this discourse also weakens the Taliban's ability to have internal conversations about politics.

Being consumed with war and lacking clarity about a postwar vision is not a new phenomenon among the Taliban. The absence of contingency planning and the tendency to decide about future plans as they unfold has arguably been part of the movement's political culture since its inception. In the 1990s, when the Taliban started its campaign from the south, they projected no clear, long-term political vision until after capturing Kabul in 1996. Only at that point, when faced with the immediate task of forming a government, did they have to think about how to govern. For a group that emphasized warfare and cared little about civilian responsibilities and politics, steering the government was a formidable challenge. The former administration and civil employees they inherited from the mujahideen continued running the bureaucracy. The Taliban struggled to conceive of the state they needed to form and how to deal with political rivals beyond fighting.

Policy Implications

The United States is widely seen by the Taliban as the primary enemy, and the insurgents consider this bilateral relationship the focus for ending the war. The Afghan government would not survive without US backing, and the Taliban mistrust the Kabul administration as a negotiating partner. This should inspire the United States to take a more prominent role in initiating negotiations directly with the Taliban. Waiting for the Taliban to initiate talks from a position of strength would prolong the war and risks instability in the region.

An American effort to start negotiations with the Taliban could take many forms, but the Taliban views reflected in this report suggest a few notes of caution and optimism.

Do not exclude major controversial issues from discussions. Given the obsession of the Taliban on the matter of foreign occupation, it is hard to persuade the Taliban that negotiations would be meaningful without clear signals that full withdrawal of foreign forces would be on the discussion agenda. A political settlement would also require, at some point, acknowledging the necessity of reconfiguring the current political order, its constitution, and its laws. The Taliban will not accept a political settlement that merely integrates them into the current system; they see the entire war as being about their political legitimacy.

Negotiators should also feel prepared to address issues of transitional justice, as conceived by the Taliban. Insurgent fighters have deep-seated grievances against abusive warlords and militia leaders, and these should not be ignored by an elite-level deal. Overlooking such concerns among the Taliban grassroots would risk leaving out significant numbers of foot soldiers, leading to a possibly huge fragmentation of the insurgency.

Seek a grand bargain instead of deals with breakaway groups. Obedience to the leaders among the Taliban is no longer absolute, as it was under Mullah Omar. Compliance with a leader's orders is condition based. Any approach that seeks to split off individual Taliban commanders or leaders risks making them pariahs, threatening the credibility of the entire process. The Taliban attitudes expressed in this report should serve as a clear warning against the effectiveness of a bottom-up approach in reconciliation. In fact, such an approach may prove counterproductive. The Taliban reject the model offered by the agreement that reconciled Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of Hezb-e Islami, viewing that deal as a surrender

of Hekmatyar. Respondents warned that if their leaders followed the same path, the fighters would no longer follow them.

Start by offering respect. Narratives and propaganda campaigns casting the Taliban as terrorists or criminals make them, understandably, more resistant to talks. Such demonization exacerbates misgivings about Kabul's peace agenda and makes members of the Taliban think that the government wants to humiliate them. In a society that holds personal honor and dignity in the highest regard, an endgame cannot ignore some positive acknowledgment of those condemned for so long as illegitimate belligerents. Even symbolic nods to the Taliban's role in and contribution to society could be effective.

Give a greater role to religious leaders. Independent ulama and religious scholars with influence on the Taliban would need to be prominent players during the entire peace process, from the start of negotiations to the formulation of a future political setup. Given the ubiquitous emphasis on the ulama's role, they could serve as entry points for resolving many of the complex issues at the table by bringing the religious perspective to them. The Taliban are politically obdurate, but the extremely high value Taliban put on clerics can also be an opportunity. It gives the ulama from all sides, but particularly independent religious scholars, the opportunity to play a key role in a peace process. This may be especially crucial in the later stages of intra-Afghan reconciliation. It would be ulama who would need to play an outsized role in defining the Islamic nature of the future state in a way that satisfies all sides.

Conclusion

The Taliban's views about peace will not be easily digested in Washington, DC, because years of war have made the conflict an entrenched part of the mindset on both sides. Steps toward a negotiated settlement are possible, however, with an open-minded approach based on respect and understanding of the insurgents' basic motivations. This will involve listening carefully to the Taliban and speaking to them directly. Such talks could ultimately deliver what both sides want: the safe return of foreign troops to their homes and the stability of South Asia.

Notes

1. Throughout this report, ulama refers to religious scholars who are independent from the state and internal as well as external entities that are somehow an actor in the conflict. Pro-state and state-sponsored ulama have long been treated by the Taliban informally as an enemy and are seen as sellouts. They could be part of an effort for clarifying religious positions on certain issues during the negotiation process but would have zero leverage on the Taliban. The ulama with highest influence on the Taliban are those from the Taliban's own communities.

2. The Taliban foot soldiers' views have been solicited previously by researchers such as Alex Strick, Felix Kuehn, and Graeme Smith. This study, however, is the first systematic survey of the Taliban rank and file on the specific question of reconciliation.

3. The analysis benefited from two recent publications by the author, a coauthored paper for the Center on International Cooperation of New York University published in 2016 and an unpublished report for the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution, both of which were derived from similar surveys of Taliban views.

4. Borhan Osman, "Taleban in Transition 2: Who is in charge now?," Afghanistan Analysts Network, June 2016, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/taleban-in-transition-2-who-is-in-charge-of-the-taleban/.

5. This is based on both interviews conducted for this study as well as the author's research for other studies.

6. Similar reading of the conflict history seems to be quite common among young Afghans other than the Taliban. According to a respected researcher looking into youth politics, a "narrow scope" in which the current conflict is seen to have been started with the Taliban's insurgency is "quite widespread" among many urban educated youth who have come of age during the post-2001 period (interview with the author). The main difference with the Taliban's reading is that their starting point of the current conflict is the reemergence of the Taliban as an insurgency from 2003 on. They deem the brief period from 2002 through the summer of 2003 of an absence of violent opposition to the government after the fall of the Taliban as a new era of peace disrupted by the Taliban insurgency.

7. Most respondents did not mention the Bonn Process explicitly, but referred generally to the process of the formation of the post-Taliban order.

8. Although many respondents throughout interviews used what they called the absence of sharia rule in different contexts, they did not provide substantial evidence for their claim.

9. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, trans., *The Quran: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 8:61.

10. Communication with members of the Taliban political office, 2015.

11. From the collection of Mullah Hibatullah's speeches and lectures, obtained exclusively by the author, 2015–17.

12. See Borhan Osman and Anand Gopal, *Taliban Views on a Future State* (New York: Center on International Cooperation, New York University, 2016).

Despite widespread recognition that the only way toward ending the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan is a negotiated settlement, understanding of the Taliban's thinking on the subject is scant. Any effective strategy for a political solution needs to take this into account from the start. This study systematically examines the opinions of the rank and file of the Taliban on the question of a nonmilitary end to the conflict, drawing on interviews in the field with foot soldiers, field commanders, and local supporters. Although these views cannot be taken as representative, they are revealing. The focus of this report is to develop an illustrative account of the foot soldiers' perspective and to extrapolate it to a general trend within the rank and file. Why are the Taliban fighting? What issues are negotiable? Do they have faith in negotiation as a way to peace? Is any sense of war-weariness prevalent? What would a peace process look like?

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