

## THE ROAD THROUGH QATAR, A DEAD END? Opportunities Promoting and Hurdles Preventing a Political Solution in Afghanistan that Includes the Taliban

Thomas RUTTIG

*Graduated from Humboldt University Berlin  
(diploma in Afghan studies),  
currently (since 2009) a co-director and  
senior analyst at the Afghanistan Analysts Network,  
an independent think tank based in Kabul and Berlin  
(Oranienburg, Germany)*

### ABSTRACT

**W**hile a military solution in Afghanistan has failed, the search for a political solution that includes the insurgent Taliban movement has not yielded any significant results, despite initial U.S.-Taliban contacts in Qatar in 2011 and 2012 originally facilitated by Germany. All contacts with the Taliban so far have been preliminary and exploratory and have not yet reached the “negotiations” stage. No substantial progress has been made so far in 2013 either. There are several other obstacles hindering the start of constructive negotiations, mainly: the U.S. approach that often sidelines the Afghan government, the Taliban’s refusal to talk to the Afghan government and the Afghan government’s lack of a clear strategy for such negotiations, as well as the general mistrust between the potential parties in the negotiations and the failure of all sides to recognize that talks with the Taliban constitute only one element of a political solution. After a period of extremely strained relations with Pakistan, the Afghan government is hoping for Pakistan’s support to open a direct channel to the Tali-

ban leadership, a demand formulated before President Karzai’s August 2013 visit to Pakistan.

The current attempts of the Afghan and Pakistani governments to relocate, and in fact dismantle, the Taliban liaison office have, however, created an additional hurdle that will make substantial negotiations even less likely in the short term. The Taliban have already made it known that they do not want Pakistan and Saudi Arabia—both countries suggested by Kabul as a possible new location for the Taliban liaison office—to play a central role. A genuine political solution requires inclusiveness. As a first prerequisite to achieve this, the well-founded reservations of large sectors of Afghan civil society, including the organized women’s movement, many young Afghans, and much of the political opposition against any talks with the Taliban and their future role in Afghan politics need to be taken seriously. Their most valid concern is that their own government and its international allies, who have already set the date for the “handover” and withdrawal from Afghanistan, might go for a

*quick political power-sharing deal between the Karzai government and the Taliban, thereby adding just one more armed faction to the conflict and not addressing the root causes of the conflicts in Afghanistan, of which insurgency is only one.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Afghanistan, Pakistan, U.S., Qatar, Germany, Taliban, Karzai, negotiations, inclusiveness.*

## *Introduction*

A political solution in Afghanistan based on peace negotiations that include the Taliban has never taken off. Before the first substantial talks between representatives of the Taliban and the U.S. government in the Gulf Emirate of Qatar could make headway in early 2012, they were suspended again. This was the result of a mutual misunderstanding about confidence-building measures: The government in Washington indicated that it wanted to exchange the only U.S. soldier held by the Afghan insurgents, Bowe Bergdahl, and might release five Taliban leaders from Guantanamo; when the latter proved impossible in an election year, the Taliban saw it as a breach of confidence and suspended the talks.

In 2013, attempts were made to reopen this channel, but it was also unsuccessful due to a number of new hurdles.

- First, the long-delayed official opening of the Taliban office in Qatar's capital Doha took place on 18 June, 2013. But it ran into problems literally within hours. Two Taliban spokesmen, with the old Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan flag behind them and introduced by the deputy foreign minister of Qatar, gave a statement saying that the "Islamic Emirate ... never wants to pose harm to other countries from its soil, nor will it allow anyone to cause a threat to the security of countries from the soil of Afghanistan," reserved "the right to liberate their countries from colonialism and obtain their rights" and added that the office would help them have talks with "countries of the world," find a peaceful solution to the "occupation ... and the establishment of an Islamic system and true security," and to "*hold meetings with Afghans.*" The spokesmen did not mention the Afghan government by name nor did they support an "Afghan peace process."

The U.S. government tried to portray the opening of the office as the fruits of an indigenous, "Afghan-led" process. This was clearly not the case. Just one day later, President Hamid Karzai suspended talks with Washington over the planned post-2014 Bilateral Security and Defense Agreement because of what Kabul called the United States' "inconsistent statements and actions in regard to the peace process." This was all the more surprising since on 17 July, 2013, after consulting with jihadi leaders and other politicians in the Presidential Palace of Kabul, Karzai had agreed that the office could be opened, providing that the negotiations would soon be transferred to Afghanistan, an end would be put to the violence, and the office would not be misused by foreigners against "national interests." After the office was opened, the government in Kabul claimed it had been assured that the office was a liaison office for the Taliban movement, not a quasi-governmental body. But this was precisely the impression created when the office was adorned with a sign bearing the inscription "Political Office of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," the Taliban flag was raised, and the Emirate's national anthem was played. A statement by the Afghan President's office said: "The opening of the Taliban office in Qatar, the way it was opened, and the messages it contained contradict the guarantees given by the U.S. to Afghanistan..."

[We] decided ... not [to] take part in the Qatar negotiations.” The Qatari government removed the plaque and stated that the name agreed upon was “The Taliban Political Office in Doha”; it also removed the flagpole inside the office. The Taliban, in turn, suspended the talks again. Statements about what exactly the agreements among the different parties—the Taliban, Afghan government, U.S., and Qatar—were remained unclear.<sup>1</sup>

- Secondly, President Hamid Karzai attempted to look for alternatives to the Qatar office again after the opening incident. This related to initial requests to the Afghan government from Turkey and Saudi Arabia to host a Taliban liaison office there. Karzai pursued this during his 26-27 August visit to Pakistan, where he met the country’s new Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and pushed for direct access to the Taliban leadership through Pakistan, independent of the U.S. A first similar move in 2012, based on the roadmap prepared by Afghanistan’s High Peace Council (HPC—the main government body responsible for the peace efforts), envisaging a leading role for Pakistan, turned out to be unrealistically short-term and therefore ineffective. Also some high-flying hopes that Pakistan would help bolster the peace process after the Chequers Summit hosted by U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron in February 2013 yielded few practical results. This time, both Afghanistan and Pakistan are united in their antagonism toward the Taliban office in Qatar. Kabul’s problem is that the Qatar office provides—or was supposed to provide—a channel for direct U.S.-Taliban talks, from which it was largely excluded, despite Washington’s rhetoric to the contrary. Islamabad, on the other hand, although it was still able to control the movements of those Taliban leaders residing in Pakistan, felt that the Doha office might move the insurgents’ negotiation team beyond its reach, thus minimizing its leverage on the results of the talks. Kabul’s latest turn back toward Pakistan gives its government the opportunity to stop the Taliban from slipping out of its grip.

Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar, meanwhile, reiterated the position of his movement toward negotiations in his message to the Afghan people on 6 August, 2013: no to “illegitimate compromise or unlawful deal” with the “nominal rulers” but “an understanding with the Afghans ... when the occupation ends” about “an Islamic system based on transparency and commitment, in which all Afghans will see their full participation” and yes to “contacts and talks” with the U.S. “through the Political Office” in Qatar and good and equal relations with all countries, “whether they are world powers or neighbors or any other country of the world.”<sup>2</sup> This message makes clear that the Taliban leader presents his movement as the legitimate government of Afghanistan and a constructive actor in the international community.

## Looking Back: A Promising Start in Qatar

In 2011, channels to the Taliban leadership that are real<sup>3</sup> and promising were opened for the first time, with the potential that they could lead to substantial negotiations about a political solution to

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<sup>1</sup> For more details, see: B. Osman and K. Clark, “Who Played Havoc with the Qatar Talks? Five Possible Scenarios to Explain the Mess,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 9 July, 2013, available at [<http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/who-played-havoc-with-the-qatar-talks-five-possible-scenarios-to-explain-the-mess>].

<sup>2</sup> “Message of Felicitation of Amir-ul-Momineen (May Allah Protect Him) on the Occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr,” 6 August, 2013, available at [<http://www.shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamooona/35234-message-of-felicitation-of-amir-ul-momineen-may-allah-protect-him-on-the-occasion-of-eid-ul-fitr>], 3 September, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Earlier, there had been some imposters who showed up in Kabul claiming to speak for the Quetta shura, fooling both U.S. and British intelligence, as well as the Kabul government. Tragically, the killing of Rabbani himself was such a case (for

the current insurgency in Afghanistan. This is a new situation because it is the first time, as Michael Semple, an expert on Taliban affairs, implies, that “the Taliban movement, its leadership, have officially committed themselves to engaging in a political process. For the past ten years, we just have not been there. ... Few people appreciate how rapidly the debate inside the Taliban has changed over even the past few weeks.”<sup>4</sup>

The Qatar breakthrough was achieved with the help of German intelligence and the German government, as well as with the help of the government of Qatar, which had been called in on the insistence of the Taliban, who jointly facilitated direct U.S.-Taliban contacts.<sup>5</sup>

Former Taliban officials residing in Kabul reported in late January 2012 that “four to eight Taliban representatives had already travelled to Qatar from Pakistan to set up a political office.” There was also an unconfirmed report that relatives of the five prominent Taliban detainees in Guantanamo have arrived in Qatar; there have been reports that the U.S. is intending to release five Taliban detainees from Guantanamo, based on a demand by the Taliban delegation during earlier talks.<sup>6</sup> The Kabul government immediately denied the report and stated that talks are still going on about the modalities under which the office can open (however, it supported the release of the five detainees as a confidence-building measure).

Beyond the mainstream Taliban, the U.S. also held at least one direct meeting with a leading member of the Haqqani network, Ibrahim Omari, according to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.<sup>7</sup> The government in Kabul, meanwhile, has been concentrating more on another channel, with the second-largest insurgents group, Hezb-e Islami Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup>

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more details, see: K. Clark, “Death of Rabbani (5): Where is the Evidence?” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 13 October, 2011, available at [<http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=2158>], 4 September, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> R. Montagne, “Taliban’s New Political Office is a ‘Game-Changer’,” Interview with Michael Semple, National Public Radio, 18 January, 2012, available at [<http://www.npr.org/2012/01/18/145384414/exploring-peace-talks-with-the-taliban>], 4 September, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> The most precise rendering of these events comes from: A. Rashid, “Talks with Taliban Must Be Secret to Be Successful,” *The Globe and Mail*, 1 July, 2011, available at [<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/asia-pacific/talks-with-taliban-must-be-secret-to-be-successful/article2084159/>], 4 September, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> See: A.J. Rubin, “Former Taliban Officials Say U.S. Talks Started,” *New York Times*, 16 January, 2013, available at [[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/29/world/asia/taliban-have-begun-talks-with-us-former-taliban-aides-say.html?\\_r=1&ref=world](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/29/world/asia/taliban-have-begun-talks-with-us-former-taliban-aides-say.html?_r=1&ref=world)], 4 September 2013; Sh. Mutazawey, “Taliban’s Qatar Office Not Yet Officially Opened: Peace Council,” *TOLOnews*, 18 January, 2012, available at [<http://tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/5163-talibans-qatar-office-not-yet-officially-opened-peace-council>], 4 September, 2013. Background about the five Guantanamo detainees here: K. Clark, “Releasing the Guantanamo Five? 1: Biographies of the prisoners,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 21 June, 2013, available at [<http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/releasing-the-guantanamo-five-1-biographies-of-the-prisoners-first-posted-09-03-2012>], 4 September, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> The Haqqani network considers itself a part of the Taliban movement, recognizes Mulla Omar as its spiritual leader, but acts autonomously at least on the tactical level (see: Th. Ruttig, “Loya Paktia’s Insurgency: The Haqqani Network as an Autonomous Entity in the Taliban Universe,” in: *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*, ed. by A. Giustozzi, London, 2009). Ibrahim Omari is often called “Ibrahim Haqqani” in the media, but this is a name prescribed to him in the West to indicate that he is related to the network. Secretary Clinton also indicated that these contacts have stopped the latest high-profile commando-style operations in and around Kabul that have been attributed to this group: the attack on 28 June against Hotel Intercontinental, the massive truck bomb on 10 September against a U.S. base in the Wardak Province, and the attack on 13 September against the U.S. Embassy and ISAF headquarters (see: “Clinton Warns Taliban of ‘Continuing assault’,” *BBC*, 20 October, 2011, available at [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-15379332>], 4 September, 2013; “Hillary Clinton: U.S. Held Meeting with Haqqani Network,” *BBC*, 21 October, 2011, available at [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-15399820>], 4 September, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Access is easier for the government to this party: many of Karzai’s most trusted colleagues have been members of Hezb-e Islami at some point. On the Hezb position toward talks, see, for example: B. Osman, “Adding the Ballot to the Bullet? Hezb-e Islami in Transition,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 6 May, 2013, available at [<http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/adding-the-ballot-to-the-bullet-hezb-e-islami-in-transition>], 4 September, 2013.

Most of the latest progress toward open channels for talks with the Taliban was again achieved without Kabul's participation, and often with its resistance.<sup>9</sup> The agreement on the Qatar office has even led to a diplomatic crisis between Afghanistan and Qatar. President Karzai recalled his ambassador from Qatar, but later gave his consent for the official opening of the Taliban office.

All the contacts with the Taliban so far, however, have been preliminary and exploratory, as all the involved sides—including the Taliban—have stressed. They have not yet reached the “negotiations” stage. This means that both sides have opted for exploring a political solution as one option while continuing to fight at the same time.

As early as the spring of 2011, elements in the Afghan government have been undermining the contacts facilitated by Germany and Qatar, of which they must have got wind. On 20 March, the Kabul-based daily newspaper *Weesa*, which is known to be close to Karzai's chef-de-cabinet Abdulkarim Khorram, revealed the name of the leader of the Taliban contact team.<sup>10</sup> From there, the reports reached the Western media<sup>11</sup> and the interlocutor was forced underground—temporarily. The reason for this step was Kabul's insistence, as repeatedly stated before, on its own lead in any Taliban contacts, an approach to which Western governments had officially subscribed during the international conference on Afghanistan in London in early 2010, where they endorsed the Afghanistan Peace and Reconciliation Program, the Kabul government's political document on negotiations with the different insurgent groups.<sup>12</sup>

## Kabul's Unclear Interests

This raises another question: whether President Karzai is really interested in negotiations leading to a power-sharing deal with the Taliban that will almost certainly reduce his own power, or whether his “talks about talks” are just a game of procrastination for achieving control over the main channels of contacts (including the U.S. detention facility at the Bagram base where many Taliban commanders are held, which was finally achieved in 2013), as well as for making sure that U.S. financial support continues. There are many in his entourage and his family who are interested in maintaining privileged access to external resources. And those will only be flowing as long as there is a conflict going on, one that, at least from Kabul's point of view, still seems manageable.<sup>13</sup> Talks (about talks) as a delaying tactic is not a new phenomenon in world history.

In the fall of 2011, another blow to the talks came with the assassination of the chairman of the High Peace Council and former Afghan President Prof. Burhanuddin Rabbani in Kabul. Upon closer examination, however, it was mainly opposition politicians and some government members who had

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<sup>9</sup> There are contradictory statements by President Karzai as to whether he has been briefed about these contacts or not. Ahmed Rashid reports, though, that “Mr. Karzai has been fully briefed after each round and has unstintingly supported the Taliban's desire to hold separate talks with the Americans” (A. Rashid, op. cit.).

<sup>10</sup> His name is Tayeb Agha, a very close confidant of Mullah Omar, also during the Taliban regime when he was Mullah Omar's ‘head of office’ in Kandahar. For a while, in 1999/2000, he also worked at the Taliban embassy in Islamabad, which might have allowed him to become acquainted not only with the ISI, but also with Western diplomats (see: “Taliban Have Recently Twice Held Talks with Americans under Leadership of Tayeb Agha,” *Weesa*, Kabul, 20 March, 2011, quoted from BBC Monitoring).

<sup>11</sup> See: S. Koelbl, H. Stark, “Germany Mediates Secret U.S.-Taliban Talks,” *Spiegel*, 24 May, 2011, available at [<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,764323,00.html>], 4 September, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> For an assessment of the APRP, see: K. Clark, “New Bureaucracies to Welcome ‘Upset Brothers’,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 14 May, 2010, available at [<http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=751>], 4 September, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> The resource flow will definitely decrease drastically, though, after 2014 when NATO is planning to have completed the handover of full security and political responsibilities to the Afghan government.

been against negotiations with the Taliban for a long time who declared the talks with the Taliban dead after the murder. Within the Afghan government, Chairman of the National Security Council and former Foreign Minister Rangin Dadfar Spanta declared “[t]he peace process which we began is dead.”<sup>14</sup> On the opposition’s side, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, a former presidential candidate, foreign minister, and leader junior to Rabbani of what is known as the former Northern Alliance, reflects the position of the mujahedeen opposition: “This is a lesson for all of us that we shouldn’t fool ourselves that this group [the Taliban], who [sic] has carried out so many crimes against the people of Afghanistan, are willing to make peace.”<sup>15</sup>

But to deduce from the killing that it reflected the Taliban movement’s—in its entirety—unwillingness to talk is an over-simplification at best since it is still not clear who committed the crime. It is the experience of other peace processes that progress almost necessarily brings spoilers out of the woodwork. It is possible that the assassination was a “rogue operation” from within the Taliban movement, with backing from (some in) the ISI and possibly with cooperation of non-Afghan jihadist groups. It looks rather like a master shot of sabotage.<sup>16</sup>

This discussion about the murder also often overlooked the question of how effective the HPC has been so far. Here, the verdict is negative. Despite claims to the opposite by some HPC members, among them late Rabbani himself, there is no proof that it has been able to open a single meaningful channel to the insurgents. In contrast, its attempts to do so were unprofessional. Former U.N. and EU Special Envoy for Afghanistan Francesc Vendrell assessed that “President Karzai has established no proper channel to talk to the Taliban. There are multiple channels. And it has not been done in a very professional way. ... [I]n a properly conducted negotiation, these would have happened in a third country. And the President would have appointed a particular [single] person who would have some credibility and some support in Afghan society to conduct these talks and preferably that would have been an intermediary.”<sup>17</sup> In general, there was not much of a “peace process” going on that needed to be stopped.

Despite many statements to the contrary, there has been no general change in Kabul’s “reconciliation” policy after Rabbani’s murder, there was only a temporary halt. Karzai’s first public reaction to the murder simply addressed those in Afghanistan who were strictly opposed to any talks with the Taliban and mainly the political camp led by Rabbani: the former Northern Alliance mujahedeen. Karzai wanted to wait for the recommendations of the Traditional Loya Jirga called to Kabul from 16 to 19 November, 2011. But this was a hand-picked body, and the renewal of the president’s mandate on his “reconciliation” policy in general was a mere formality.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> D. Nissenbaum, M. Abi-Habib, “Afghanistan Halts Taliban Peace Initiative,” *Wall Street Journal*, 3 October, 2011, available at [<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203791904576606921747225488.html>], 4 September, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> A.J. Rubin, “Assassination Deals Blow to Peace Process in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, 20 September, 2011, available at [<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/21/world/asia/Burhanuddin-Rabbani-afghan-peace-council-leader-assassinated.html?pagewanted=all>], 4 September, 2013. Dr Abdullah now is the leader of the National Coalition of Afghanistan (see: Th. Ruttig, “National Coalition vs National Front: Two Opposition Alliances Put Jamiat in a Dilemma,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 4 January, 2012, available at <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/national-coalition-vs-national-front-two-opposition-alliances-put-jamiat-in-a-dilemma>], 4 September, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> The Taliban have neither claimed nor denied responsibility for the killing. In a statement, the Taliban said: “Our position on this issue is that we can’t talk about it and all the media reports that claim responsibility are groundless” (quoted from: J. Boone, “Taliban Stay Quiet on Killing of Former Afghanistan President Rabbani,” *The Guardian*, 21 September, 2011, available at [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/21/taliban-stays-quiet-rabbani-assassination>], 4 September, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Quoted from: K. Clark, “The Death of Rabbani (3): Emerging Details,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 25 September, 2011, available at [<http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=2098>], 4 September, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> For more details, see: Th. Ruttig, “The Upcoming Jirga: An Agenda with Possible Backdoors,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 4 November, 2011, available at [<http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=2218>] 4 September, 2013.

One of the ways the Kabul government is now exploring is through the government of Pakistan. It was stated that this would happen immediately after Rabbani's killing, after the president had consulted with Jihadi leaders and his internal circle of advisors: "Now that the Taliban is being used as a tool by Pakistan's ISI, Afghanistan should consider Pakistan as the other side in the negotiation."<sup>19</sup> Muhammad Omar Daudzai, the then Afghanistan's ambassador to Pakistan and a former head of the Karzai office, explained: "We want to go through Pakistan for any dialog with the Taliban."<sup>20</sup> The then deputy NSC head Shaida Muhammad Abdali added that "[f]rom now on to us, the *main* party for peace in Afghanistan is Pakistan, not the Taliban" (italics mine.—*Th.R.*).<sup>21</sup> This approach has been renewed by President Karzai's latest visit to Pakistan.

The agreement on opening a Taliban office in Qatar has also removed the so far powerful argument that the "lack of an address" was a major obstacle to the talks. This, however, was nothing more than a rhetoric figure of speech. The ISI knows exactly where to find the members of the Taliban leadership, the so-called "Quetta shura" (in fact, Rahbari Shura, Leadership Council). During the wave of "arrests" in early 2009, after the capture of the then Mullah Omar-deputy Mulla Baradar, the ISI had no difficulty in rounding up a large number of Taliban leaders within a few weeks to get its message across: "Talks only through us." It is also well known—and has been described repeatedly—how closely the Taliban commanders are led by ISI members who, among other things, decide whether interlocutors have access to them and in what timeframe. It is known, with Taliban commanders as the source, that ISI people (not necessarily Pakistani citizens, but also Pakistani) sit in the Taliban shuras. The Taliban—as members of other Jihadi outfits—move openly in Quetta and elsewhere. It is known that the insurgents have access to special vehicles or permits that allow them to pass through checkpoints and that the Frontier Corps does not prevent them from crossing the Pakistani-Afghan border.<sup>22</sup> *The New York Times* wrote, with reference to "military and political analysts who follow militant activity in Pakistan" that the Haqqani family "maintains several town houses, including in Islamabad and elsewhere, and they have been known to visit military facilities in Rawalpindi, attend tribal gatherings and even travel abroad on pilgrimage."<sup>23</sup> Ergo, the problem with talking to the Taliban is not so much an issue of not knowing where to find them but of access to them, which is controlled, restricted and orchestrated by Pakistan. It is a matter of political will, on Pakistan's part, to allow talks to happen.

<sup>19</sup> "Karzai Calls Crucial Meeting on Peace Process, Strategic Partnership with U.S.," *TOLOnews*, 28 September, 2011, available at [<http://tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/4045-karzai-calls-crucial-meeting-on-peace-process-strategic-partnership-with-us>], 4 September, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> J. Partlow, K. Brulliard, "Afghan Government Seeks Pakistan's Help in Stalled Peace Process," *Washington Post*, 8 October, 2011, available at [[http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/afghan-government-seeks-pakistans-help-in-stalled-peace-process/2011/10/08/gIQAxLo0VL\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/afghan-government-seeks-pakistans-help-in-stalled-peace-process/2011/10/08/gIQAxLo0VL_story.html)], 4 September, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> D. Nissenbaum, M. Abi-Habib, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example: Q. Butt, "Kharotabad: A Taliban Safe Haven," *Express Tribune*, 17 October, 2011, available at [<http://tribune.com.pk/story/275651/kharotabad-a-taliban-safe-haven/>], 4 September, 2013; M. Waldman, *Dangerous Liaisons with the Afghan Taliban: The Feasibility and Risks of Negotiations*, USIP Special Report 256, October 2010, available at [<http://www.usip.org/files/resources/SR%20256%20-%20Dangerous%20Liaisons%20with%20the%20Afghan%20Taliban.pdf>], 4 September, 2013; D. Rohde, "Inside the Islamic Emirate," *New York Times*, 19 October, 2009, available at [<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/19/world/asia/19hostage.html?fta=y>], 4 September, 2013; R. Moreau, M. Hosenball, "Pakistan's Dangerous Double Game," *Newsweek*, 22 September, 2008, available at [<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2008/09/12/pakistan-s-dangerous-double-game.html>], 4 September, 2013; I. Khan, *Pakistan's Afghan Policy in Post-Taliban Period*, Paper presented at the seminar "Future Trends of Afghanistan," organized by the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), Beijing, November 2002, manuscript with the author.

<sup>23</sup> P. Zubair Shah, C. Gall, "For Pakistan, Deep Ties to Militant Network May Trump U.S. Pressure," *New York Times*, 31 October, 2011, available at [[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/01/world/asia/haqqani-militants-act-like-pakistans-protected-partners.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1&ref=world](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/01/world/asia/haqqani-militants-act-like-pakistans-protected-partners.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1&ref=world)], 4 September, 2013.

The office in Qatar also moved the Taliban mediating team<sup>24</sup> out of Pakistan's immediate control. Until now, most leading Taliban members have their families living in Pakistan, where they are de facto hostages for the "good behavior" of those leaders. Of course, the Taliban interlocutors would not have been able to leave Pakistan without the consent of the ISI.

A former high-ranking Talib, Mullah Qalamuddin, who was the head of their "morale police," is quoted as saying that if Pakistan did not approve of the talks, it would have arrested the Taliban delegates to Qatar, just as it did with Mullah Baradar in 2010. According to Arsala Rahmani, the acting HPC head, the Taliban interlocutors boarded planes in Pakistan. This would not be possible without ISI consent and it shows that Pakistan is on board the Qatar channel, but, at the same time, it has made sure that it retains some influence on the Taliban.

## What Do the Taliban Want?

One major question that has not yet been satisfactorily answered is what do the Taliban want politically. The exploratory talks held by the U.S., Germany, and Qatar were to explore exactly what the political positions and demands of the Taliban were.

Indeed, the Taliban have never issued a detailed political program document, neither during their rule (1996-2001), nor during the subsequent insurgency phase. As earlier as 2009, Mullah Agha Jan Mu'tassem, the then head of the Taliban political committee, said that "an Afghan strategy" for the future system of the country should be determined "in consultation with all the Afghan groups."<sup>25</sup> The same year, Mullah Omar stated that the Taliban "did not have any agenda to harm other countries, including Europe, nor do we have such agenda today"; this was more or less reiterated in his 2013 Eid-al-Fitr statement.<sup>26</sup> In January 2010, the Taliban Leadership Council stated that "[t]he Islamic Emirate want[s] to have good and positive relations with the neighboring countries in an atmosphere of mutual respect and take far-reaching steps for bilateral cooperation, economic development and prosperous future."<sup>27</sup> The use of the IEA title itself is a strong indication that the Taliban still see themselves as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, illegally toppled from power by a foreign invasion. The diplomatic tone used in these statements over the past years in-

<sup>24</sup> The names mentioned as Qatar office staff, besides Taliban top interlocutor Tayeb Agha, include Sher Abbas Stanekzai, a former Taliban health minister, Shahabuddin Delawar, their former ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Hafiz Azizur-Rahman, the Taliban's third secretary in their Abu Dhabi embassy before 2001, and Sohail Shahin, who worked as an unrecognized Taliban representative in New York and for their official newspaper *Shariat* in Kabul until 2001. The three Taliban members mentioned first belonged to their Political Commission, their movement's quasi-foreign office (see also: K. Clark, "The Taliban in Qatar (2): Biographies—Core and Constellation," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 24 June, 2013, available at [<http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-Taliban-in-qatar-2-biographies-core-and-constellation-amended-with-more-details>], 4 September, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> S. Salahuddin, "Taliban Say Want Peace with Afghans, NATO Troops Out," *Reuters*, 26 February, 2009, available at [[http://www.rferl.org/content/Taliban\\_Say\\_Want\\_Peace\\_With\\_Afghans\\_NATO\\_Troops\\_Out/1499836.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Taliban_Say_Want_Peace_With_Afghans_NATO_Troops_Out/1499836.html)], 4 September, 2013; "Message of Felicitation of Amir-ul-Momineen (May Allah Protect Him) on the Occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr," 6 August, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> See: *Statement of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan on the Occasion of the Eighth Anniversary of the American Attack on Afghanistan*, 7 October, 2009, available at [<http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/nefaTalib8anniv1009.pdf>].

<sup>27</sup> *Statement of the Leadership Council of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan regarding the London Conference*, available at [<http://theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Oct09/Statement%20of%20the%20Islamic%20Emirate%20of%20Afghanistan%20on%20the%20occasion%20of%20the%20Eighth%20Anniversary%20of%20the%20American%20Attack%20on%20Afghanistan.htm>], 4 September, 2013.



dicates that the Taliban want to be recognized as an official party to the Afghan conflict.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, it has almost been forgotten under the impact of the current military escalation that the Taliban movement sent signals that they were ready to negotiate immediately after the fall of their regime and again in 2007 and 2008, even expressing that they were realizing that they cannot win against the U.S.-led troops.<sup>29</sup>

This situation has not changed much since, although Strick/Kuehn<sup>30</sup> point out what was detailed in two messages from Mullah Omar on the occasion of Islamic Eid festivals (issued on 8 September, 2010 and 28 August, 2011), who said that this “comes as close to an outline of their domestic policies as we have.” These documents include good governance criteria like “administrative transparency,” government positions distributed “on the basis of merit” and “professional cadres and national business men [sic; being] encouraged, without any discrimination.” Minority fears are also addressed by stating that “all ethnicities will have participation in the regime.” Although it is stated that “the policy of the Islamic Emirate is not aimed at monopolizing power,” it is also emphasized that the Islamic system intended by the Taliban is based on the implementation of “Shari‘a rules.”

Importantly, the recent opinion about the talks indicates that the Taliban might not just want to wait out the Western troop withdrawal by the end of 2014 and then try to overthrow the Kabul government and re-establish its pre-9/11 Islamic Emirate. Michael Semple, for example, points out that “responsible elements in the Taliban leadership” have finally realized “that they are doing themselves and their country no favor by ... agreeing to host a battlefield for the world’s jihadists and also the United States [and] decided that the prospect of another round of civil war that could easily ... drag on another decade, [is] so horrendous that they are prepared to take some risks to avoid it.” Afghans familiar with the talks say that Mullah Omar’s approval of the Qatar office shows that, for the time being at least, the “doves” in the Taliban leadership have regained the upper hand over the “hawks.”

## *Conclusion:*

### *More Hurdles*

Despite all the good news, there is still no guarantee that negotiations will start, let alone lead to an end to the conflict.

- First, the Taliban has erected several hurdles. Despite the statements quoted, it is not clear, however, whether the Taliban are ready to accept a pluralistic Afghanistan in which other political groups (including secular ones) can play a role. The same goes for women’s rights and individual rights in general, among them being equal access to education and health. Although there have been clear shifts in their positions on the latter issues,<sup>31</sup> it is not clear

<sup>28</sup> See their 2009 “Open Letter of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to Shanghai Summit,” 14 October, 2009, available at [<http://theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Oct09/Open%20Letter%20of%20the%20Islamic%20Emirate%20of%20Afghanistan%20to%20Shanghai%20Summit.htm>], 4 September, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> See: A. Gopal, “The Battle for Afghanistan: Militancy and Conflict in Kandahar,” New America Foundation, November 2010, available at [[http://www.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/kandahar\\_0.pdf](http://www.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/kandahar_0.pdf)], 4 September, 2013; letter to an Afghan MP seen by the author in 2005.

<sup>30</sup> See: A.S. van Linschoten, F. Kuehn, “Islamic, Independent, Perfect and Strong: Parsing the Taliban’s Strategic Intentions, 2001-2011,” *AHRC Public Policy Series*, No. 3, January 2012, available at [<http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/News-and-Events/Publications/Documents/Lessons-Learnt-Parsing-the-Taliban%27s-Strategic-Intentions.pdf>], 4 September, 2013, pp. 10-11.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example: A. Giustozzi, Ch. Reuter, “The Insurgents of the Afghan North: The Rise of the Taliban, the Self-Abandonment of the Afghan Government and the Effects of ISAF’s ‘Capture-and-Kill’ Campaign,” *Afghanistan*

whether these shifts are merely tactical and local; there have definitely been no turn-arounds yet. At the same time, they show that the Taliban both react to international criticism and pressure by the local population. If the annual immunization campaigns and the Peace Days organized by U.N. organizations, linked to unofficial temporary ceasefires, can be used as a yardstick, the Taliban have shown that there is a relative high degree of compliance on their side.

In January 2012, they also have made it clear that their approval of the talks does not automatically mean that they recognize the current Afghan constitution, still a red line for both the U.S. and the Kabul government: “[T]his understanding does not mean a surrender from Jihad and neither is it connected to an acceptance of the constitution of the stooge Kabul administration.” Less clear is whether they are rejecting any direct contacts with the Karzai government. When the president claimed as much in mid-February, they swiftly rejected this claim: “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan strongly rejects Karzai’s claims and adds that the representatives of Islamic Emirate have not talked with the puppet administration anywhere and have not even yet decided if they want to hold talks with the administration of Kabul.”<sup>32</sup>

- Secondly, the time for posturing, not least between Kabul and Washington, is not over yet. This does not bode well for the sincerity needed for getting substantial talks underway—which would be difficult enough even without the new political sniping.
- Third, Pakistan might continue to play its double game if it does not feel satisfied with any of the arrangements concerning the post-2014 regime in Kabul.
- Fourth, the U.S. still follows its approach of talking and fighting at the same time, an approach copied by the Taliban. This military-centered strategy has not worked. It is both leading in the wrong direction—escalating mutual violence rather than alleviating it—and deepening the causes of the crisis, not least because its we/good versus they/bad logic helps the Karzai government to block reforms that would improve its own performance and, thereby, take away the motivation from many Afghans who join the Taliban because of alienation and because there is no neutral political middle ground. Whether or not there has been a substantial “degrading” of the Taliban, by killing their “leaders and facilitators,” and whether or not there were fewer insurgent attacks last summer, the Taliban still control, directly or indirectly, large swathes of Afghanistan’s landscape and much of the Afghans’ mindset. Also, there is a growing number of voices in the U.S. that either oppose any talks with the Taliban or claim that they are too fragmented to be able to “deliver” on any agreement should one be reached.
- Fifth, and most importantly, there are substantial reservations, if not full-fledged rejection, of any talks with and involvement of the Taliban in the future Afghan political landscape. This includes large sectors of civil society, the organized women’s movement, many young

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*Analysts Network*, Thematic Report 04/2011, May 2011, available at [<http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=1679>], 4 September, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> “Taliban: Peace Talks don’t Signal End to Hostilities,” *CNN*, 12 January, 2012, available at [[http://articles.cnn.com/2012-01-12/asia/world\\_asia\\_afghanistan-taliban-talks\\_1\\_zabiullah-mujaheed-peace-talks-islamic-emirate?s=PM:ASIA](http://articles.cnn.com/2012-01-12/asia/world_asia_afghanistan-taliban-talks_1_zabiullah-mujaheed-peace-talks-islamic-emirate?s=PM:ASIA)], 4 September, 2013; “The Majority of the Afghan People Support a Strategic Partnership with the U.S. (Interview with Hamid Karzai),” *Wall Street Journal*, 15 February, 2012, available at [[http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204059804577225693527935200.html?mod=WSJ\\_World\\_MIDDLENewsIntl](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204059804577225693527935200.html?mod=WSJ_World_MIDDLENewsIntl)], 4 September, 2013; “Zabihullah Mujahid: We Strongly Reject Karzai’s Claims,” *Shahamat* (Taliban website), 16 February, 2012, available at [<http://www.shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamoona/28824-zabihullah-mujahid-we-strongly-reject-karzai%E2%80%99s-claims>], 4 September, 2013.

Afghans, much of the political opposition that includes the former mujahedeen and the sympathizers of their current political parties, as well as small pro-democratic groups. The most valid concern is that their own government and its international allies, who have already set a date for the “handover” and withdrawal, might go for a quick political power-sharing deal between the Karzai government and Taliban, thereby adding just one more armed faction to the other armed factions already in power and not addressing the governance problems causing much of the insurgency. Some of those political forces do not want a power-sharing deal with the Taliban because they would lose even more of their influence. There is also a tendency among many of them to give a simplistic (or propagandized) description of the whole Taliban movement as alien to Afghan society and/or nothing more than puppets of Pakistan and/or al-Qa’eda terrorists. This controversy might even sharpen during Afghanistan’s upcoming election campaign; the presidential election will be held on 5 April, 2014, although candidate registration began as early as 16 September, 2013.

The reply to these arguments might sound simplistic: a military solution has not worked. The Taliban may have been weakened (although there is even doubt about this) but they are far from being beaten. Weakening the Taliban and preventing them from taking over Kabul (or Kandahar) will not be sufficient to end the conflict because they will remain a power factor that will likely continue armed resistance, since there will still be Western soldiers in Afghanistan after 2014.<sup>33</sup>

There is no other alternative to a political solution. This, however, should not be a narrow political deal, just adding the Taliban, as another armed faction, to the current governing coalition of the Karzai camp and other armed (mujahedeen) factions. Any political settlement needs to be comprehensive and inclusive, and it will not be viable unless it is supported by the majority of Afghans across the political and social board. And this will only happen if the Afghans begin seeing that the major causes of Afghanistan’s conflicts—from growing social inequality and poverty (which, among other things, block a genuine re-integration of fighters) to predatory government behavior and impunity—are being addressed again. This requires establishing a genuine consensus, first, that a political solution is necessary and, second, what it must entail. At the same time, it has to be made clear that negotiations with the Taliban do not mean capitulation.

Searching for a political solution would also necessitate maintaining the current high level of international political attention toward Afghanistan. The international community’s role would be to guarantee that all relevant Afghan political forces—the Karzai camp, the diverse mujahedeen groups, the Taliban, civil society, including women’s and youth organizations and professional associations, and democratic parties—sit together with equal rights and address the basic issues of Afghanistan. No solution, however, should be imposed again from the outside, but nor should it come from the Afghan power holders either. This would also require that the West finally recognize that it has made a significant contribution to the current quagmire in the country. No negotiations can ultimately solve Afghanistan’s problems.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See: K. Clark, “War without Accountability: The CIA, Special Forces and plans for Afghanistan’s Future,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 10 February, 2012, available at [<http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=2502>], 4 September, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> See: *2014 and Beyond: U.S. Policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan*, Part I, Testimony by Ashley J. Tellis, Senior Associate, South Asia Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 3 November, 2011, available at [[http://carnegieendowment.org/files/1103\\_testimony\\_tellis.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/1103_testimony_tellis.pdf)], 4 September, 2013.