

Meet the Taliban: not as bad as you think

James Fergusson

Prospect, 24th August 2010, Issue 174

The west knows it can't win in Afghanistan. The only prospect for lasting peace is to negotiate with the Taliban, which we must learn to see through Afghan eyes

All counterinsurgencies, it is often said, end with negotiations with the enemy. After nine miserable years of fighting in Afghanistan, the signs are that the war there has entered this final phase. It is not before time.

Nato's strategy is visibly faltering, not least since the unauthorised release of thousands of US military documents on Julian Assange's Wikileaks website. Washington's indignation at the way these war logs were released was probably justified, but should not distract us from the painful portrait that emerged. Among other dismaying revelations we learned that, from 2004-09, Nato forces were involved in 144 blue on white incidents—army-speak for killing civilians by mistake—none of which had previously been reported. New media has brought a new era of warfare. It may never again be possible, as the US army manuals advise, to control the narrative of a counterinsurgency.

The US troop surge was supposed to put the west into a position of strength from which it could dictate its negotiating terms. Brigadier Ed Butler, who led the British deployment to Helmand in 2006, once told me that it was necessary to go through a Hobbesian cycle of violence before the tipping point of popular support for peace could be reached. You've got to go through an attritional war to exhaust those physical battles before people start to recognise that there is a political solution to be negotiated, he argued.

But that military approach is not working, and the generals can no longer spin their way to success. The paradox of Afghanistan—one that also confounded the Soviets in the 1980s—is that the more troops and resources we pour in, the more the insurgents seem determined to resist. So the more fighting there is, the more civilians are killed, and the weaker the west's ultimate negotiating position becomes as we lose ever more local hearts and minds. Afghans suffered 1m dead in their war against the Soviet Union. Compared to these losses, this insurgency has barely started. And the battles are intensifying, while the only sign of attrition is in the west, where support for the war is sliding, and leaders on both sides of the Atlantic have publicly discussed dates for their exit.

Last month in the Nad Ali district of Helmand, the venue for Nato's latest operation, residents interviewed by the BBC were unanimous in their wish for the Taliban to be in charge rather than President Hamid Karzai or his Nato backers. It is not hard to see why. The western military presence has brought little economic benefit and much civilian suffering. According to the UN, more than 1,250 civilians were killed in the first half of

2010—a year-on-year increase of 30 per cent, which made it the deadliest six-month period of the war.

The UN also noted that, thanks to Nato's 'courageous restraint' directive, designed to make its soldiers think twice before shooting, the number of civilians accidentally killed by the coalition has fallen by 30 per cent. Three quarters of the civilian deaths this year were caused by the Taliban, mostly by improvised explosive devices (IEDs). But such statistics do not prevent Afghans from observing that if Nato were to leave and the Taliban take charge again, there would be no more IEDs, no more fighting and no more civilian dead. The Taliban might be responsible for its bombs, but it is not necessarily blamed for them. Nato, in other words, is increasingly seen as part of the problem rather than the solution.

President Barack Obama may at last have seen the light. 'Here is a change of mindset in DC,' a senior official in Washington told the Guardian recently. 'Here is no military solution. That means you have to find something else.' Namely, talks with the Taliban leadership—the first step towards a negotiated settlement that, until now, Obama has defiantly refused to take. But following the firing of General Stanley McChrystal as commander of forces in Afghanistan in June, there is a sense that the military has had its day and it is time for a negotiated solution—which must inevitably end with the Taliban's re-entry into the Afghan body politic.

In truth, talks with the Taliban have been going on, intermittently and without US participation, for at least three years. There are so many talking shops in operation that one diplomat described them as 'an industry.' At different times and in different places—Mecca, Dubai, Oman, even on an atoll in the Maldives—senior members of the Taliban have sat down, sometimes in secret and sometimes not, with MPs from Kabul, UN officials, and representatives of President Karzai and all the main ethnic and political parties in Afghanistan. In addition, private or semi-private initiatives have been organised by the British, the Norwegians and the Saudis. There is so much dialogue going on, one suspects, that the energy and unity of purpose necessary for genuine progress to be made has been diluted. Only the US can provide the necessary focus for talks to succeed—which is why the change of heart in Washington should be welcomed.

What might talks with the Taliban entail? Who should we be talking to, what are the risks, and what satisfactory compromises can be found? The positions of both sides are clear enough. 'Let us not forget why we are in Afghanistan,' the new US commander in Afghanistan, David Petraeus, said in November 2009. 'It is to ensure that this country cannot become once again a sanctuary for al Qaeda.' The Taliban, for its part, wants all foreign troops out, and a Sharia-isation of the constitution which was drawn up, with western help, after the Bonn agreement of December 2001, following the US invasion.

The 'troops out' condition should be easy to meet, since that is what the west increasingly wants as well. The reason most frequently given for staying is that al Qaeda would return if our military left. Gordon Brown was forever talking about a 'chain of terror' stretching from Afghanistan and Pakistan to 'the towns and streets of Britain,' arguing that we were fighting over there to make us safer at home. But that argument was never true. The Taliban and al Qaeda are very different beasts. Al Qaeda seeks the destruction of the west through international terrorism. The Taliban, whose agenda is exclusively domestic, has no desire to attack us. To date there has not been a

single Taliban bomb in the west. Mullah Omar, the movement's elusive, one-eyed leader, hosted Bin Laden from 1996, but took no part in the attacks his guest launched around the world—including 9/11, of which Omar almost certainly had no foreknowledge. There was a time when the Taliban was even willing to do business with the US. In December 1997, with Washington's approval, a delegation of Taliban travelled to the Texas headquarters of the oil firm Unocal, to discuss the construction of a trans-Afghan gas pipeline.

Nato's justification for staying is based on two questionable assumptions. The first is that Bin Laden actually wants to return. Yet Afghanistan is not the hiding place it once was for him. Western technology and knowledge of the terrain are of a different order compared to a decade ago. There are also much better sanctuaries available to his organisation now, notably in the Horn of Africa.

The second assumption is that a reinstated Taliban would welcome al Qaeda back. But this too is doubtful. Mullah Omar's decision to protect Bin Laden in the 1990s led to his regime's downfall, a mistake he would be foolish to repeat—and whatever else he may be, Omar is no fool. His tolerance of Bin Laden then was due less to shared ideology than to the traditional Pashtun obligation to extend sanctuary to anyone who asks for it. He also needed Bin Laden's money, because the Taliban regime, shunned by the international community and struggling under UN sanctions, was broke. The west mistakenly viewed Omar's Afghanistan as a terrorist-sponsoring state, when it was a state sponsored by terrorists.

Mullah Omar is the key to successful negotiations. It is often argued that these are impossible because the insurgents' motives are so mixed and their leadership is too split. But while there are intense rivalries within the movement's upper echelons, Omar remains the Taliban's undisputed spiritual leader, whom the country's religious scholars appointed the commander of all the faithful in 1996. The insurgency in southern Afghanistan, as well as the Taliban's shadow administration that now operates across the country, are still largely directed by his governing council, the Quetta shura. Even if his power has diminished, he is the first and best place to start.

Omar has not appeared in public for many years. Few westerners have even seen him since the 1990s, which makes opening dialogue with him difficult. There are, however, a dozen or so senior ex-Taliban figures at large in Kabul who are more accessible: the so-called 'reconciled Taliban,' a coterie of men who are likely to play a critical mediating role with the Quetta shura when the time comes. They are, at present, sadly under-exploited as a tool for forging a peace. Among them is Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, whom many people believe could prove the most useful go-between of all.

One of the 30 or so founding fathers of the Taliban and a close friend of Omar's, Zaeef served as a government minister and then as the Taliban's ambassador to Islamabad before being arrested and sent to Guantanamo Bay for four years in 2001. A gentle, bespectacled, intellectual figure with a penchant for internet gadgetry—his friends call him the technomullah—Zaeef was placed under a form of house-arrest on his return to Kabul in 2005. Until recently, UN sanctions banned him from foreign travel or opening a bank account. I asked him in March if he thought Mullah Omar would or could promise to keep al Qaeda out of Afghanistan as part of a future settlement. 'The US,' he replied, 'is only one right here: to receive a guarantee that no country will ever be

attacked from within these borders, just as we have the right not to be attacked by the US in future. Sovereignty must be respected. If there are to be negotiations, these guarantees should be their focus. Could the Taliban make such a guarantee? Mullah Omar would set it in stone.”

One of America’s conditions for political reconciliation is that the Taliban must agree to abide by the Bonn constitution. This condition should simply be dropped, and a new constitution drawn up, for the Taliban will never accept it as it is. This is neither as dramatic nor as dangerous as it sounds: Afghanistan has had six constitutions since the 1920s, so there is no reason to consider the present one immutable.

The original Bonn process was seriously flawed, not least by a failure to consider the interests of Afghanistan’s regional neighbours—particularly Pakistan, which was never likely to accept an Afghan government dominated by the Northern Alliance, the anti-Taliban political and military grouping which accuses Pakistan of supporting the Taliban. Bonn mark II could be held under the auspices of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (an international body made up of 57 Muslim member states), rather than under the UN as last time, since its reputation is now tainted in Afghanistan. But the Bonn process’s gravest omission—a mistake that the UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi described as its “original sin”—was that the supposedly vanquished Taliban was not invited to participate. The conservative Pashtun constituency, whose interests the Taliban genuinely represent, was therefore always bound to object to the terms of the new government.

That said, the Taliban does not wish to replace the present constitution in its entirety but—to use a word favoured by Mullah Zaeef and several other senior ex-Taliban in Kabul—merely to repair it. There are no more than 11 articles [out of a total of 160] that need to be changed,” said Haji Musa Hotak, a former Taliban planning minister who is now an MP. “These were put in by the international community, and are not in Afghanistan’s interests. These are not mountains. The Taliban wants to discuss them in a reasonable way.”

One of these is likely to be the article requiring that 25 per cent of elected representatives are women. The idealism behind it is laudable, but it was bound to cause trouble in a society as patriarchal and misogynistic as Afghanistan’s. (It was also hypocritical, given that, after this year’s general election, only 22 per cent of British MPs are women.)

The Taliban also wants a justice system based on Sharia law, the apparent harshness of which appals western liberals. And yet we do not seem to have a problem with other countries governed by Sharia, such as Saudi Arabia. In any case, who are we to dictate such things? Taliban justice is clearly offensive to some western ideas but it is easy to exaggerate the excesses. Westerners remember with horror the footage of criminals hanged from the goalposts of Ghazi stadium after the Taliban took control of Kabul in 1996. But the number of people executed in this way was fewer than initially estimated: dozens, rather than hundreds,” according to one experienced western observer, who pointed out that the hangings quickly tailed off as law and order was restored in the city.

Afghans remember that for all its faults—and they were many—the Taliban mostly kept its promises when it was in power, something the west has repeatedly failed to do. Did

Obama not promise to close Guantanamo Bay? Mullah Zaeef was especially bitter about Nato's condolence fund, from which the families of innocent Afghans killed by mistake are compensated. The average payment, he pointed out, is \$2,000 per head; in contrast, Libya paid out \$8m for each of the 270 passengers killed in the Lockerbie disaster.

If negotiations are ever to succeed, the west, and especially the US, must learn to see the Taliban through Afghan eyes. Mullah Omar's regime from 1996 to 2001 was never as bad as it was portrayed. Most westerners saw it from the start as the epitome of Islamic fundamentalism: repressive, undemocratic and backward. But that ignores the context in which the Taliban movement emerged, in Kandahar in late 1994. The Soviet retreat in 1989 was followed by five years of civil war as the mujahideen victors vied for supremacy. Some of this internecine carnage was worse than anything people suffered under the Russians. In the first six months of 1994, 25,000 civilians were killed in the crossfire in Kabul alone.

The Taliban's first *raison d'être* was to stop this violence, and it succeeded brilliantly in those parts of the country that came under its control. Even some western NGOs privately admitted that it was a boon to them. Thanks to the Taliban's disarmament of the people, it became possible for aid workers to travel to the remotest villages without fear of rape, murder or having their vehicles stolen at gunpoint.

Security is everything to Afghans, a people who have known nothing but war since the late 1970s. The repression of women and the assault on certain freedoms was a small price to pay if it stopped the wholesale rape and slaughter that preceded the Taliban. The real source of their success, the US assistant secretary of state Robin Raphael told the UN in November 1996, has been the willingness of many Afghans, particularly Pashtuns, to tacitly trade unending fighting and chaos for a measure of peace and security, even with several social restrictions. It is not in the interest of Afghanistan or any of us here that the Taliban be isolated. Her words are still true. Security, law and order, corruption, even poppies: the Taliban arguably dealt with all these things better than the west has done since 2001. No wonder so many Afghans see a return of the Taliban as the lesser of two evils.

And there is support for compromise in unexpected places. Shukria Barakzai, a Pashtun MP and a women's rights campaigner, told the Guardian recently: "I changed my view [of the Taliban] three years ago when I realised Afghanistan is on its own. It's not that the international community doesn't support us. They just don't understand us. The Taliban is part of our population. It has different ideas—but as democrats we have to accept that." She said this despite the fact that in 1999, when the Taliban was still in power, she was beaten by the religious police for going to the doctor without her husband. If Barakzai is now ready to give them the benefit of the doubt, ought not the west to do the same?

Much has been made of the Taliban's assault on girls' education. But it was never against it *per se*—the Prophet himself was in favour of female enlightenment. What it objects to is the corrupting influence of co-education. Granted, it was sexist to send home the girls from co-ed schools in the 1990s, rather than the boys. But the Taliban intended to build new, girls-only schools—it just never had enough money to.

Even so, girls' education did not stop. A handful of girls schools stayed open during the years of Taliban control. The headmaster of one, Qari Barakatullah Salim, employed 26 teachers who taught over 700 girls aged seven and over. This was no madrasa but a regular school, with a curriculum that included maths, English and biology. "Islam says girls should be educated," Barakatullah told me. "The Taliban leadership understands that no nation can survive without education. It is essential to humanity. We are as beasts without it."

Of course the west would be taking a risk by deciding to trust our present opponents. Serious questions remain about their return to the political fold, above all over how the Pashtun-dominated Taliban would treat the non-Pashtun minority—particularly the Hazara Shias, who account for 9 per cent of the population, and who suffered serious abuses during the Taliban years. Crucially, Mullah Zaeef—while arguing that the extent of the Hazaras' maltreatment was always exaggerated—is candid about the "political mistakes" the regime made before it was ousted in 2001. "We didn't know what we were doing then," he said. "We learned a lot. It will be different next time."

There are good and bad people in every village, as they say in Afghanistan. Even Hamid Karzai said in 1998 that "there were many wonderful people in the Taliban." He was right, and there still are. We need to reverse the years of demonisation. Early this year in Islamabad, the US defence secretary Robert Gates described the Taliban as a " scourge" and a " cancer." Yet the following day, he said that they were " part of the political fabric of Afghanistan."

It is time for Washington to come off the fence—and for the British government to nudge them in the right direction. As the second largest troop contributor to the campaign, no US ally is better placed to influence Obama. Britain could also have a useful role to play in any talks with the Taliban, for there is a degree of trust and understanding between the British and the Afghans—including some Taliban—that the Americans can never hope to achieve. "The British are special to us," Haji Hotak said. "Our relationship with you was so good during the jihad. You have been coming here for 170 years. We feel we know you."

At the end of July, Mullah Zaeef and a few other former Taliban officials were at last removed from the UN security council sanctions list. The move was supported by President Karzai and, hearteningly, Washington did not object. Zaeef is now permitted to open a bank account and to travel abroad. Small things, perhaps; but for reconciliation to work, hatred, fear and suspicion must first be replaced by respect, trust and good faith. The lifting of Zaeef's pariah status is of immense symbolic value—evidence that the west is finally ready to start treating the Taliban as human beings again, a critical first step towards peace.