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Taliban Perspectives on Reconciliation

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Taliban Perspectives on Reconciliation

Abstract

With the Western military draw-down in Afghanistan drawing closer, attention now turns to the shape of the post-2014 political settlement. Some form of accommodation with the Taliban will be required for a stable and secure Afghanistan. This paper presents the findings of discussions with senior Taliban figures, suggesting that the Taliban and the international community may in fact have reconcilable positions. This paper works to draw out the Taliban's views on three key issues.

Keywords

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BRIEFING PAPER

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Taliban Perspectives on Reconciliation

Michael Semple, Theo Farrell, Anatol Lieven and Rudra Chaudhuri

In July 2012, the authors of this report interviewed four senior Taliban interlocutors about the Taliban's approach to reconciliation. The primary objective was to draw them out on three key issues:

1. International terrorism and the Taliban's links with Al-Qa'ida and other armed non-state actors
2. The potential for a ceasefire
3. Parameters for conflict resolution and continuing presence of US military bases.

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The interlocutors we interviewed referred mainly to the so-called Quetta Shura Taliban led by Mullah Mohammad Omar. This is, as they all confirmed, the primary vehicle driving the insurgency, and, in their view, continues to enjoy the allegiance of other key groups dotting the insurgent landscape.

The unwavering consensus amongst our interviewees was that for an agreement to hold, it would ultimately require approval by Mullah Mohammad Omar. Therefore, our focus was trained mainly on the Quetta Shura and its leadership structure. The use of the term 'Taliban' in this report refers to the Quetta Shura. Further, our assessment is that the interlocutors we spoke to present the views of the moderate wing of the Taliban leadership, centred on the Political Commission. We have less confidence in the extent to which these views may be attributed to the more hard-line section of the Taliban centred on the Military Commission.

The Interviews and the Interviewees

The interviewees spoke to us on terms of anonymity; while we present a short background on each, they are each referred to by letter. Further, their backgrounds and designations have been confirmed and cross-checked by the authors in our individual capacity. Interviews were conducted separately with each of our candidates. They lasted between three and five hours, and were conducted in Pashto, Farsi and Urdu. For three of the four interviews, at

least two interviewers spoke one of these languages, serving to cross-check the translation. The interviewees were:

Interviewee A: A former Taliban minister familiar with the workings of the Quetta Shura's Political Committee, and who has been closely associated with Mullah Mohammad Omar.

Interviewee B: A former Taliban deputy minister and a founding member of the Taliban. B was part of the group that pushed its way into Kandahar in the early 1990s. As expected, B provided the most insight into the structure and debates inside the Taliban movement. He also made clear that he was choosing his words carefully to represent, as far as possible, the general and genuine views of the movement in response to our questions.

Interviewee C: A senior former mujahedeen commander and lead negotiator for the Taliban. C has never been part of the Taliban, but fought with and even led a number of key Taliban leaders throughout the 1980s. Notably, C negotiated key deals between the Taliban and other non-Taliban groups in the 1990s. C also provided the most critical perspective of the Taliban having actually experienced negotiating with and for them.

Interviewee D: An Afghan mediator with extensive experience negotiating with the Taliban as recently as the late 2000s. D has never officially been part of the Taliban.

For the sake of methodological clarity, we developed a three-pronged approach to the interviews. First, interviewees were asked to provide a somewhat lengthy introduction to themselves as well as their association with the Taliban. Second, we asked questions on and around the three substantive issues outlined at the start of the briefing. Third, and as a control mechanism, we sought to cross-check one interviewee's perspectives with the other.

This briefing studiously avoids placing the authors' biases, views, and opinions into the main of the text. We focus more on what our interviewees had to say. Only in the introduction to each of the three sections discussed below do we establish the context that informed our line of questioning. The key findings are highlighted below, followed by more detailed analysis.

Key Findings

International Terrorism

- The Taliban leadership *and* base deeply regret their past association with Al-Qa'ida. Once a general ceasefire and/or political agreement are decided, the base would obey a call by Mullah Mohammad Omar – and only him – to completely renounce Al-Qa'ida
- Renunciation would need to be built into a larger agreement, allowing the Taliban to leverage their delinking themselves – step by step – from Al-Qa'ida in exchange for some form of political recognition
- Following renunciation, the Taliban would act to assure that Al-Qa'ida is no longer able to operate on Afghan soil
- The Taliban are open to setting-up a Joint Monitoring Commission staffed by Taliban representatives, ISAF and the Afghan Government to investigate reports of continued Al-Qa'ida activity
- Continuation of drone attacks both within Afghanistan and across the border in Pakistan would severely complicate the task of maintaining the base's allegiance and the leadership's ability to control popular outrage.

Ceasefire

- The Taliban would be open to negotiating a ceasefire as part of a general settlement, and *also* as a bridge between confidence-building measures and the core issue of the distribution of political power in Afghanistan
- A ceasefire would require strong Islamic justification, obscuring any hint of surrender
- A ceasefire endorsed by Mullah Mohammad Omar has the greatest potential for success
- A general ceasefire (closer to a larger plan for reconciliation) is preferred by the Taliban more than local- and district-level ceasefires (reintegrating local commanders and cadres). A general ceasefire with Mullah Mohammad Omar's backing would allow the Taliban to better deal with 'peace spoilers' and dissenters.

Parameters for Conflict Resolution and US Military Bases

- The Taliban will not negotiate with President Karzai or his administration, which is seen as corrupt and weak
- Outright acceptance of the present Afghan constitution is widely considered as a non-starter. The substance of the constitution is less a matter of dispute, and can be negotiated. The leadership perceive that acceptance would be tantamount to surrender
- The Taliban are willing to accept long-term US military presence and bases as long as they do not constrain Afghan independence and Islamic jurisprudence. In time, military presence could be transformed into mainly economic assistance
- The Taliban leadership are keen to end all attacks on teachers and health-care workers, as evident in public statements
- Modern subjects such as mathematics and sciences are encouraged in both madrasas and schools more generally, as underlined in a Taliban policy document on education circulated in early 2012
- The Taliban fully understand that their policies of the 1990s need to be re-configured in the face of rapidly changing social forces within current-day Afghanistan
- Co-education will not be tolerated, but models for both education and working environments could be adapted to accommodate strict segregation of men and women.

International Terrorism

Context

The Taliban have consistently and at different times argued that they are willing to disassociate themselves from international terrorist groups like Al-Qa'ida. Yet, and for the most part, there is little clarity as to how this may happen. We therefore focused our questions on what it would actually take for the Taliban to completely delink themselves from Al-Qa'ida and other non-state and armed groups.

Renunciation is a 'Given'

Renouncing international terrorism and the likes of Al-Qa'ida was considered 'a given' by interviewees A and B. The question, B stressed, is not whether the Taliban will delink itself from Al-Qa'ida, but rather the process by which this could be done. The Taliban is not, as B made plain, part of the government in Kabul. Hence, he stressed, 'How could it enforce action without the right authority?' Indeed, all four interviewees agreed that renunciation was a process – and not an end in itself – that would need to be built into a comprehensive peace settlement.

The speakers emphasised that the Taliban and Al-Qa'ida had quite different origins and different Sunni theologies (the Taliban belonging to the Deobandi school of South Asia, while Al-Qa'ida are Wahabis, which originates in Saudi Arabia), and that Osama bin Laden was originally invited to Afghanistan not by the Taliban, but by members of the mujahedeen regime whom the Taliban displaced from power. They all stated, in different words, that the Taliban now recognise that their links to Al-Qa'ida before 9/11 were a mistake. As

Box 1: Insurgency Leadership

The main Taliban leadership structure is often referred to as the 'Quetta Shura', even though few of its members are located in Quetta any more; this group is made up of older-generation leaders from southern Afghanistan who were alive during the war in the 1980s and participated in the Taliban-led government during the late 1990s. Mullah Mohammad Omar is the leader of this group, although his presence and activities have been hidden since 2001. The Haqqanis – commonly referred to as 'the Haqqani network', although this is an American neologism – are a group based in southeast Afghanistan and follow patriarch Jalaluddin Haqqani and increasingly his son, Serajuddin. The Haqqanis have pledged their allegiance to the 'Quetta' Taliban leadership and take pains to restate this publicly, although there are divisions between the two. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar heads up yet another organisation, Hizb-i Islami, and he has done so since the 1980s when he led the party as one of the most prominent mujahedeen leaders; Hizb-i Islami (also known as HiG) has been engaged in negotiations with the Afghan government for several years.

the former Taliban deputy minister and founding member told us, 'We hold Al-Qa'ida responsible for wrecking our work to create an Islamic state in Afghanistan.' According to D, the Taliban are '100 per cent' convinced that 'Al-Qa'ida were behind 9/11.' He argued that the leadership was unaware of the plans when they were hatched on Afghan soil.

B argued that there is a widespread belief amongst field commanders and at least the Political Commission of the Quetta Shura that 'Al-Qa'ida was responsible for their ouster', and that this consequently interrupted 'the implementation of Sharia within Afghanistan.' In the ultimate analysis, the base would accept the leadership's call to isolate and eject Al-Qa'ida as long as the decision came directly from Mullah Mohammad Omar.

Dealing with Peace Spoilers

As expected, B was far more optimistic about the Taliban leadership's ability to control and deal with potential peace spoilers than C or D. He argued that the current jihad forced 'international jihadis' and Pakistani-based groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) to 'co-operate.' Once a settlement was in sight, 'the Taliban would spread the word not to host international terrorists.' Following an agreement with ISAF and the Afghan government, dissenters would be 'sought out' and 'dealt with.' B suggested that the idea of instituting a joint commission staffed by those chosen by the Taliban, ISAF and the Afghan Government was not wholly unrealistic. Members of the Political Commission within the Quetta Shura could be persuaded to agree to this if a final agreement were indeed in sight.

A joint commission could then deal with the Haqqanis, which, although closer to the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), 'do not have the capacity to stand-up to the combined strength of the Quetta Shura.' B also dismissed rumours that Qayum Zakir, responsible for military affairs within the Quetta Shura, had fundamental differences with the Political Commission. Zakir, B made sure to underline, is still Mullah Mohammad Omar's deputy, and would 'fall in line'. In short, B suggested, 'we think of Zakir as Nick Clegg'; challenging a coalition from within, but only to a certain tolerable extent.

As far as C and D were concerned, controlling groups like the Haqqanis would be far more difficult than current and former Taliban leaders (such as B) presume. D made clear that in the case of the Haqqanis, a lot would depend on how Pakistan and specifically the ISI played their cards. Operationalising a delinking strategy would hence depend on the extent to which Pakistan was invested in a potential peace process. Further, Haqqani opposition would in turn give Pakistani intelligence an opportunity to undermine the entire peace process if it wanted. Needless to add, whilst B forcefully pushed the idea that the leadership could succeed in delinking

the Taliban from Al-Qa'ida, the ability to shape the Haqqanis' strategic future remained hazy at best.

Drones as Instruments of Counter-Terrorism

All our interviewees said that agreeing to the continuation of drone attacks would be extremely difficult for the Taliban, even if remaining Al-Qa'ida figures were identified. Tacit Taliban agreement to continued drone strikes in Pakistan from Afghan bases would cause outrage in the Pakistani establishment, among Pakistani Islamists and in the Haqqanis. Above all, such an agreement would be seen by fellow-Pashtuns in Pakistan as deeply dishonourable.

Interestingly, whilst B argued that even the 'idea of discussing drones was a long way away', this should not necessarily be considered a deal breaker. He also stressed that condemning drone attacks should in no way be read in terms of 'defending Al-Qa'ida.' The issue had to do with 'dealing with popular discontent' and the risk to 'Afghan independence.' Inside Afghanistan, B stated, each and every drone attack would need to be carefully 'discussed and negotiated.' Across Afghanistan's borders, 'international rules should apply to the use of drones as instruments of military force.' Ideally, instead of using drones, as B and D argued, ISAF and the Taliban could use the joint commission to deal with spoilers and international jihadis. To be sure, such a commission could also develop enforcement actions against spoilers.

Renunciation: The Way Forward

As has been made plain, renunciation in itself is not a problem. However, getting the Taliban to actively and more persistently renounce Al-Qa'ida and international jihadis will require some form of political agreement. This need not mean a comprehensive plan inked by 2014, the point by which international forces are expected to have withdrawn the bulk of their combat troops, but rather a process that allows the Taliban to 'use', as D put it, renunciation as a lever to 'negotiate something substantial.'

According to B, a three-step process might be considered. First, a ceasefire needs to be put in place in the near future. In turn, and second, this would allow the Taliban leadership the diplomatic cover to engage both Afghan representatives in Kabul and ISAF with the view to institutionalising a joint commission. Third, complete renunciation and even enforcement measures be put in place as a potential ceasefire matures into something longer lasting like a political agreement. In essence, as B underlined, 'the Taliban can really push through promises and renounce more and more once negotiations gain steam.'

Ceasefire

Context

The Afghan government and its international allies have officially supported programmes of reintegration and reconciliation for at least seven years. Increasingly, these efforts have been based on the anticipation that conflict resolution will eventually require a political agreement with insurgents. However, at no stage has any major protagonist proposed a general ceasefire or even publicly addressed the issue of proper sequencing of moves towards a ceasefire. This section, as informed by our interviews, challenges the lazy assumption that generalised conflict must continue until a political agreement. It indicates the issues which will have to be addressed for an early ceasefire to become a viable component of peace efforts.

Ceasefire as a Prologue to an Agreement

No Taliban leader has publicly endorsed the idea of a ceasefire. However, the interviewees considered it plausible that the Taliban would support a ceasefire in the right circumstances. Indeed, being open to a ceasefire is a logical corollary of accepting that outright military victory is unobtainable. Interview D argued that the Taliban recognised that the movement had the support of about one third of the population. The leadership, according to D, was convinced that outright military victory was out of the question. This of course does not mean that some members within the movement – read the Military Commission – would not want to fight for victory. But, by and large, a ceasefire as the first step towards a settlement would have traction amongst the majority of the Political Committee and even Mullah Mohammad Omar.

The Taliban's public line continues to suggest that they will 'defeat the foreigners' but, according to C and D, they do not believe it. Instead, they acknowledge that generating military power is simply not enough. The ability to garner economic power and increase public support are imperatives they recognise, but have limited control or influence over. The leadership understands that it does not have 'holding capacity' – the ability to hold ground and wield military power over a long period. The base, however, according to D, continues to think that 'political power is possible.' To convince the base, therefore, the issue of a ceasefire will have to be carefully handled.

For the moment, discussions around a ceasefire, which in itself may serve as a substantive confidence-building measure given the requirement of each party to meet and interact, would need to be delinked from the publicly stated pre-conditions – as articulated by the Afghan government and ISAF – of laying down arms, disassociating with Al-Qa'ida, and accepting the

Afghan constitution as is. These would need to be incrementally negotiated. Indeed, to appeal to the Taliban base, a ceasefire scheme would have to incorporate a strong Islamic justification, be represented as a voluntary act of the Taliban, avoid the appearance of surrender and be tied clearly to opportunities to address practical Taliban concerns and grievances. In this, as D suggested, a ceasefire could be considered as the bridge between confidence-building measures and the substantive issues in resolving the Afghan conflict.

Choreographing a Ceasefire

There is a range of options regarding who would initiate a ceasefire and which parties it would cover. On the insurgent side, a general ceasefire could be ordered by the top leadership, by local commanders further down the hierarchy or by a faction within the movement – a forward bloc. Participants considered that a ceasefire endorsed by Mullah Mohammad Omar would have the greatest chance of success. Failure to co-operate with such a ceasefire would amount to rebellion against the authority that all Taliban recognise.

For this reason, B and D argued that a general ceasefire would be preferable to local efforts. B argued that the ‘problem with local ceasefires is that it cuts off the leadership.’ Moreover, even if the chances of a general ceasefire are bleak, it would be valuable to invest in the process. B argued that if the top leadership were involved, and if some form of ceasefire proposal was agreed, ‘an order from the top would be implemented immediately.’ Mullah Mohammad Omar’s word, according to B, ‘is still accepted 110 per cent.’ If a general agreement was not reached, Mullah Mohammad Omar would back away from lending his name, taking with him a moral commitment needed to convince the base.

To be sure, whether or not Mullah Mohammad Omar would back ceasefire negotiations – as opposed to endorsing a final agreement – was disputed. Interviewee A in fact argued that Mullah Mohammad Omar could well be an obstacle to achieving a ceasefire. However, as A made clear, this should not distract a forward bloc from negotiating the same without Mullah Mohammad Omar’s approval. The idea, in this case and according to A, would be to essentially hustle Mullah Mohammad Omar into endorsing a ceasefire that has been negotiated outside of his authority.

According to C, and apart from the fact that Mullah Mohammad Omar may not immediately endorse ceasefire negotiations that may take effect anytime soon, the reality is that he and the Taliban leadership based in Pakistan would not be able to be a part of these negotiations. C argued that extricating the Taliban leadership from Pakistan, and cutting their relationship with sponsors there, may be necessary in order to put them

in a position to endorse a ceasefire. The main conclusion to be drawn from this discussion is that once a general ceasefire is on the agenda, there is a range of options as to who will advocate it and who will become a party to it. Even if a comprehensive ceasefire is initially unattainable, an incremental approach may serve to build up support.

C also pointed to his experience of dealing with Taliban ceasefire negotiations in the 1990s. This experience highlighted the importance of efforts to ensure that the top leadership was publicly invested in any ceasefire. C was witness in the 1990s to a number of agreements ‘made and broken’ by the Taliban with the likes of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Ismail Khan. However, in C’s view, ‘it is possible that the Taliban has changed.’ Given the fact that American forces are on Afghan soil, and that the opposition to the Taliban is formidable, ‘it is not un-hopeful that the Taliban will negotiate and honour an agreement signed by Mullah Mohammad Omar.’

However, as a cautionary note, C underlined that getting the Taliban to both enter and abide by a ceasefire agreement would need ‘sustained engagement to keep them in a negotiated mode.’ As for B, this process could only really begin as and when the Afghan government and ISAF agree to ‘protect the leadership.’ After all, he argued, the government would need working partners led from the ‘top-down’ rather than ‘the bottom-up.’

Parameters for Conflict Resolution

Context

Following the discussions around the potential for a ceasefire and renouncing terrorism, we explored the latent parameters for conflict termination. Here, we tested the extent to which the publicly declared statements about rejecting the constitution and American military presence holds true. Overall, we found that the interviewees projected a far more pragmatic picture of the Taliban than otherwise believed. Further, the Taliban’s approach to education and health also demonstrated a degree of revision and pragmatism in sync – to an extent – with international priorities and those of the Afghan government. In this context, there were some positive indications that the Taliban have amended policies which worked to the detriment of education and health during the 1990s.

Afghan Constitution

All four interviewees made clear that there was no buy-in whatsoever for accepting the Afghan constitution as it is currently lettered and represented: a document that is widely seen by the base as lending authority to the present Karzai regime. However, both B and D argued that this issue could be dealt with if the narrative around acceptance – presently seen as one akin

to surrender – is changed, and if the constitution were to be approved by a Loya Jirga or an assembly of sorts with representation from the Taliban.

Importantly, D underlined, the Taliban more or less agreed with the substance of the constitution, which is premised on Islamic jurisprudence. The problem for the leadership is one of perception. C also agreed that ‘there is nothing in the constitution that the Taliban actually oppose’; it is more a matter of ‘interpretation.’

In short, a solution would need to be found by which accepting the constitution would not in any way hint at surrender.

Parliament, Elections and ‘Partners’

Interviewee B stated that the Taliban have no problem with the idea of parliament or elections. What they may want, if and when an agreement is negotiated and primarily to satisfy the base, is some form of clerical role in Afghan government, but without executive authority. Further, the Taliban would want a centralised and undivided state, and would oppose a federal structure.

With regards to forming a post-conflict government, B argued that the Taliban felt ‘there was no real foundation for elections in Afghanistan.’ President Karzai was ‘utterly corrupt’, and could not be relied upon to deliver ‘clean elections.’ Interviewee A also underlined that ‘the Taliban cannot support a government run by Karzai.’ If an agreement was to be reached, B suggested that an interim period of three years – he specifically mentioned three years – would be needed between a nominal agreement and elections, which Taliban representatives would campaign like any other candidates.

According to C, this need not mean ‘bringing in’ hardcore elements of the Taliban currently based in Pakistan, but endorsing ‘peaceful and moderate’ Taliban that would silence the radical wing, whilst being acceptable to the international community and the Tajik minority. In C’s personal view, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef (the former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan) and Mullah Mutawakkil (the former Taliban foreign minister) would be acceptable to members of the Political Committee. A argued that these could simply be men who ‘enjoy prestige’, ‘our people of standing’, and need not necessarily hail from within the movement. Ideally, A made clear, the Taliban would want one vice president and five cabinet ministers

Given that the Taliban would at best serve as minority representatives, B and C were clear that they would have to work with other members of parliament. However, ‘there was no chance’ of associating with those who had a proven record of corruption. Looking forward to the 2014 elections, the Taliban, according to C, would not accept any member of the Karzai family,

including Quayum Karzai. Interviewee B emphasised that a key imperative for the Taliban in government would be to root out corruption. Hence, as B put it, the question is not 'who the Taliban will work with', but 'who is willing and able to work with the Taliban.'

According to D, those around Karzai and far removed from his family would be acceptable to the Taliban. In the 'last few months', D maintained, 'there have been some positive movements towards peace, and there is visible buy-in from the Taliban'; 'consensus figures exist.' Salahuddin Rabani, the son of the late Burhanuddin Rabani, and current head of the High Peace Council (HPC) would be one such actor. Importantly, A disagreed with this. In the view of this former minister, Rabani and the HCP could not be taken seriously in its current form. However, there are others who could deliver peace. A suggested that the Taliban were open to working with opposition groups,, and specifically with Ahmed Zia Massoud, the younger brother of Ahmed Shah Massoud.

Further, if returned to power, A and B firmly argued that the Taliban would focus more on bureaucratic professionalism and less on matters of piety. D captured a view prevailing among all interviewees that the Taliban leadership do have a vision of peace, but that has 'nothing to do with the US vision', – this is 'one centred on recognising the constitution.' Rather, it revolves around 'correcting the mistakes of the previous political rule and remaining engaged with the international community.' This, however, as C made clear, would require constant vigilance and monitoring. Given a little space, the Taliban may well be tempted to advance the views and practices of the more radical wing of the Quetta Shura.

US Military Bases

The Taliban are prepared to accept a long-term US military presence in Afghanistan. B provided the greatest insight. The guiding principle, according to him, was that US military bases and continuing presence of soldiers would be acceptable to a level 'that does not impinge on our independence and religion.' When pushed, B suggested that the prospect of the US military operating in Afghanistan up to 2024 and out of five primary military bases – Kandahar, Herat, Jalalabad, Mazar-e-Sharif and Kabul – could be agreed 'through negotiation.' However, the Taliban would need to consider this in the context of what is best for Afghan national security.

The US's presence would be acceptable if it contributed to Afghan security, but not if the Americans launch attacks against neighbours – such as Iran and Pakistan – from Afghanistan. B went on to say that this did not mean that the Taliban wanted to shield either Iran or Pakistan, but that it would impact their national security and invite 'trouble.' If the Americans wanted to attack Iran, B continued, they could do so from somewhere in the Persian Gulf.

Interviewees A, B and C could foresee a long-term US role in Afghanistan. All three said that the Taliban would accept this, provided it served the interests of Afghanistan. B stressed that there was and is no natural enmity between the Taliban and the Americans. He claimed that the Taliban originally looked for advice from the Americans (citing experience from three international conferences in the late 1990s), and on all occasions Taliban advances were spurned. C offered the view that a core concern for the Taliban in any future government is to avoid the country fragmenting, and in this context the Taliban would need US assistance in order to hold the Afghan National Army together. C also noted the Taliban's concern on Iran (echoing B's sentiments), and in this regard continued US military presence could serve Afghan national security. A also clearly saw a long-term role for America, but suggested that this should transition from the current focus on military assistance to economic assistance.

Schools, Teachers and Healthcare

From the outset, B made clear to assert that the Taliban should 'not be considered as anti-education.' Attacks against schools and teachers have significantly decreased following several iterations of explicit orders from the senior leadership. The same holds for healthcare, where the polio campaign has benefited from letters of support from Mullah Mohammad Omar, to cite just one example.

A new six-page policy on education was circulated earlier this year, moreover, which appears to be a serious attempt to outline the current official stance on education. It takes it as a given that education is a necessity. It states: 'understanding the sacred Islamic disciplines and modern educational concepts are greatly needed.' It allows for considerable flexibility in terms of different levels of education; rural communities accustomed to religious education have access, but urban communities also have their needs provided for. In many ways, it is a description that fits with the current educational activities of the Afghan government.

It also allows for the presence of 'contemporary subjects, such as science, chemistry, physics, biology, mathematics, geography, history.' The policy does not envision starting from scratch, but rather seeks to reform from within, noting that schools that already are operating should 'not be closed [but] controlled and supervised.' Even on education for girls and young women, the policy offers relative flexibility, albeit with some vagueness regarding post-pubescent girls. The document is addressed to the West as well as to the Taliban's own constitution, trying to walk the slim line between not alienating the more conservative parts of the movement and pushing too much onto them, while showing significant movement and coherence with current policy of the Afghan government and its Western allies.

Other senior-level statements issued in recent months unambiguously reflect and endorse this new policy. Attacks against education and health are subject to sanction from the leadership if fighters are caught doing so. Indeed, B made plain that apart from the fact that the Taliban have learnt from their mistakes in the past – when its stance on education and curricula was anything but flexible – the leadership also realises that supporting education is a genuine ‘counter-propaganda’ tool. The truth is, he argued, ‘people want modern education.’ However, B underlined that ‘the Taliban would never agree to co-education.’ In essence, the approach to schooling would need to be negotiated.

With the view to demonstrate their eagerness to promote education, B stated that, in areas where the Taliban retain a strong presence, their commanders have been asked to encourage students to apply for and take the concord examination for university entrance. ‘Our policy’, he noted, ‘allows for the killing of government officials but not teachers.’ Further, he argued that the Taliban had ‘given permission to national and international NGOs to work on healthcare projects.’

C offered a broader perspective, and the suggestion that the problems with education and healthcare provision were not purely those relating to the Taliban. An example was given of a district in northern Afghanistan where the Taliban had taken over a school as a base, but where the local government representative had also done so. Issues relating to the salaries of teachers and health workers, and corruption, he said, were the real problems where reform was needed.

Following our interviews, we also contacted Zabiullah Mujahed, one of the senior spokesmen of the Taliban, to confirm the movement’s official approach to education and health. He made the following statement:

You know well that these two [government] ministries are working for the people to make educational and health facilities for the people. We want to help both of these things too, so we are trying to make good facilities and a calm and secure environment for the general population of Afghanistan to be able to have access to education and health.

Interviewees offered few specifics for moving forward on health and education beyond continuing to support the moves that had already been taken by the Taliban, and perhaps finding a way to build them in as part of the Qatar process.

The interviewees offered the suggestion that education and perhaps healthcare were relatively neutral issues that could be built into the Qatar process, perhaps even as confidence-building measures.

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