

TESTIMONY

Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and Other Extremist Groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan

Peter Bergen
Director of the National Security Studies Program
New America Foundation

May 24, 2011

Testimony presented before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee



NEW AMERICA
F O U N D A T I O N

Published 2011 by the New America Foundation
1899 L St NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036
Tel. 202.986.2700 Fax. 202.986.3696
www.newamerica.net

Senator Kerry, Senator Lugar and other members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My testimony will attempt to answer nine questions:

1. Why should the United States continue to fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan almost a decade after 9/11 and now that Osama bin Laden is dead?
2. Is progress being made in Afghanistan, both generally and against the Taliban?
3. What effect might the killing of bin Laden have on near- and long-term U.S. global security interests, and on core al-Qaeda's goals and capabilities?
4. What is the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda?
5. How might that relationship be changed by the death of bin Laden?
6. What are the impediments to "reconciliation" with the Taliban leadership?
7. Given those impediments, why try and negotiate with the Taliban and are there reasons to think those negotiations might eventually work?
8. Might the Haqqani or Hezb-e-Islami (Gulbuddin Hekmatyar) factions of the Taliban be willing to consider a settlement?
9. There is an agglomeration of extremist groups operating in the lawless region near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, including the Pakistani Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other affiliated and sectarian groups. How should policymakers prioritize which of these to work against?

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1. Why should the United States continue to fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan almost a decade after 9/11 and now that Osama bin Laden is dead?

President Obama has publicly defined the task in Afghanistan rather narrowly, as preventing the return of al-Qaeda to the country; in short, a counter-sanctuary strategy.¹ Part of the reason for this relatively narrow public description of the Afghan strategy is, of course, political: there aren't many Americans who would countenance the return of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

But there are other reasons the United States remains in Afghanistan even if they don't have the political heft that invoking the threat from al-Qaeda does. First, conceding the return of the Taliban to power in part or the whole of Afghanistan would be a foreign policy reversal for the United States. Second, when the United States overthrows a

government it has a moral obligation not to exit without setting the conditions for a slightly more stable and prosperous country. Third, when the Taliban were in power in Afghanistan they played host not just to al-Qaeda, but also to many other Islamist terrorist and insurgent groups from around the globe. Fourth, some kind of regional settlement in South Asia that encompasses Afghanistan will likely lower the risks of war between the nuclear-armed states of Pakistan and India. Fifth, and this is hard for many foreign policy “realists” to grasp: the Taliban are *the Taliban*. When they were in power in Afghanistan, their regime was characterized by its large-scale massacres of the Shia,² its incarceration of half the population in their homes, and a country that became the world capital of jihadist terrorism.

Evidence for what the Taliban are likely to do should they return to power in Afghanistan in some shape or form is provided by a controlled experiment on this question that has gone on over the past several years in Pakistan. In the onetime Pakistani tourist destination of Swat between 2008 and 2009 the Taliban imposed a reign of terror, beheading policemen whose bodies were left to rot in public, burning down girls’ schools, and administering public lashings to women for supposed infractions such as adultery.³ It was a formula that they had already followed for several years in the tribal areas of Pakistan, the home base of the Pakistani branch of the Taliban.

And the Taliban haven’t changed their spots in Afghanistan either. According to a United Nation report released in March, of the some 2,800 civilian casualties of the war in 2010, three-quarters were caused by the Taliban.⁴ The massacre at the Kabul Bank branch in the eastern city of Jalalabad earlier this year was emblematic of this trend. Footage of the February 19 attack was captured by the bank’s security cameras and shows a Taliban fighter ordering Afghan civilians to enter a room and then firing on them. At least 40 people, mostly civilians, were killed in the assault.⁵ And for those who think that the Taliban have lightened up on one of their signature policies--preventing girls from being educated--consider that a concerted campaign of chemical weapon attacks has taken place against around a dozen girls schools across Afghanistan since the spring of 2009. Afghan girls have been poisoned with organophosphates, a nerve agent used in insecticides, in schools in Balkh and Kunduz in the north, and in Kabul, Ghazni, Kapisa, and Parwan in central Afghanistan. Those attacks have sickened and hospitalized hundreds.⁶

The recent evidence from Pakistan and Afghanistan shows that the notion that should the Taliban come back to power in parts of Afghanistan that they will suddenly morph into some kind of Pashtun version of the Rotary Club is a delusion. Despite this, earlier this year, George W. Bush’s ambassador to India, Robert Blackwill, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, made the argument that a modus vivendi could and should be reached with the Taliban: “Washington should accept that the Taliban will inevitably control most of the Pashtun south and east” and therefore the U.S. should accept that the de facto partition of Afghanistan is “the best alternative to strategic defeat.”⁷ It’s strange that a diplomat who had spent years in South Asia was advocating partition in a part of the world where it is well known that the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan caused one million civilian

deaths.⁸ And not even the Taliban are calling for the partition of Afghanistan, which is an older nation than the United States. (The first Afghan state was founded in 1747).

The Blackwill plan was the most extreme expression of a now-common sentiment amongst the American foreign policy establishment: Let's just get it over with in Afghanistan, which is predicated on the belief (hope, really) that the Taliban are just 'sum' plain' ol' country folks who may not have the best manners in Central Asia, but nonetheless are men we can and should do business with because they represent our best exit strategy from the Afghan morass.

American liberals, who were vocal in their opposition to Taliban when they imposed a theocratic reign of terror on Afghanistan before 9/11, have been strikingly silent on the issue of what a return to power of the Taliban in some shape or form in Afghanistan would mean for the rights of women and ethnic minorities.

For those who say that Afghanistan is a conservative Islamic country and that therefore the Taliban's social policies just aren't that unusual, it's helpful to note that when the Taliban were in power there were one million kids in school and almost none of them were girls, while today there are 7 million kids in school and 37 percent are females.⁹

2. Is progress being made in Afghanistan, both generally and against the Taliban?

In addition to the seven-fold increase in the number of kids in school, positive developments in Afghanistan over the past several years have included the following: GDP growth was a robust 22 percent between 2009 and 2010;¹⁰ access to some form of basic healthcare was available to around nine percent of the population a decade ago and is now accessible to 85 percent;¹¹ the phone system barely existed before the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan, now one in three Afghans has a cell phone;¹² the Taliban had banned almost all forms of media other than their own *Voice of Sharia* radio network, while there are now "scores of radio stations, dozens of TV stations and some 100 active press titles," according to the BBC;¹³ around six million Afghan refugees have returned home since the fall of the Taliban; and so crowded with cars and people has Kabul become that the city's epic pollution is now killing more Afghans than are dying in the war.¹⁴

Because of all the tangible ways that their lives are getting better 59 percent of Afghans say their country is going in the right direction.¹⁵ By comparison, that metric is exactly reversed in the U.S. In a *New York Times* poll released in April, 70 percent of Americans said their country is going in the wrong direction.¹⁶ The positive feelings a majority of Afghans have about the way things are going help account for the surprisingly high marks that they continue to give the U.S. military after nearly a decade of occupation, which scored a 68 percent favorable rating among Afghans in a BBC/ABC poll released in December.¹⁷ (In Iraq at the height of the war in 2007 BBC/ABC found that only 22 percent of Iraqis voiced support for the U.S. military presence in their country.)¹⁸

Afghans' faith in their future can be explained by the fact that they know that, despite all the problems that they face today--the corruption of the central government and the police and the resurgence of the Taliban--their lives are far better now than during the brutal Soviet occupation of the 1980s, the devastating civil war of the early 1990s, and the theocratic rule of the Taliban that followed.

This past fall U.S. military officials publicly asserted that many Taliban safe havens in Helmand and in Kandahar had been eliminated.¹⁹ This is not only the assessment of the Pentagon, but the judgment of the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS), a think tank that has done field work in southern Afghanistan for many years and has long been critical of Western policies there. ICOS issued a report in February observing, "NATO and Afghan forces now control a greater number of districts in Helmand and Kandahar than before," including key Taliban strongholds such as Marjah in Helmand and Arghandab in Kandahar.²⁰

General David Petraeus told the Senate Armed Services Committee in March that in one recent three-month period 360 insurgent leaders were killed or captured.²¹ According to a wide range of observers, as a result the average age of Taliban commanders has dropped from 35 to 25 in the past year.²² Some U.S. military officials believe this is a good thing, as the younger commanders are "less ideological," while Thomas Ruttig, one of the world's leading authorities on the Taliban, says that the reverse is the case: the younger Taliban are more rigid ideologically.²³

The sharply stepped up military campaign against the Taliban has caused some hand-wringing that Petraeus isn't following counterinsurgency precepts, which have been grossly caricatured as winning "hearts and minds" (see *Three Cups of Tea*), as if counterinsurgency is some kind of advertising campaign to win loyalties. In reality, counterinsurgency is a set of commonsense precepts about how to avoid the kind of ham-handed tactics and repressive measures that will turn the bulk of the population against you, while simultaneously also applying well-calibrated doses of violence to defeat insurgents.

Another common critique of the stepped-up campaign against Taliban commanders is that the U.S. should not be killing those commanders at the same time it is saying that we should talk with them. This critique bears little relation to the history of the last two decades of Afghan warfare, in which all sides have constantly fought and talked with each other simultaneously. Indeed, the Karzai government has had substantive contacts with elements of the Taliban since as early as 2003, according to a former Afghan national security official familiar with those discussions.

An additional approach putting pressure on the Taliban are what the U.S. military terms Village Stability Operations, in which small teams of American Special Forces live permanently "among the population" in remote areas of provinces such as Uruzgan and Zabul where the insurgents once had unfettered freedom of movement. There the U.S. Special Forces are helping to train local community militiamen known as Afghan Local Police (ALP). The government of Afghanistan has technically authorized 10,000 of them,

but American officers believe that the numbers will rise to something more like 24,000.²⁴ One says, “ALP is the development that the Taliban most fear, we see it in the intelligence.”

When Petraeus first arrived as the commander in Afghanistan last summer setting up the ALP was his first big fight with Karzai, who was concerned quite reasonably that arming tribal militias might replicate some of the warlordism that has plagued Afghanistan since the early 1990s. Karzai agreed to the program in July, and there are a number of measures in place that make it avoid some of the obvious pitfalls of setting up even more armed Afghan groups.²⁵ The program is not administered by the U.S. military but the Afghan Ministry of Interior, which keeps tabs on it through district police chiefs who are responsible for issuing guns to the community policemen. Candidates for the local police are selected by the local village shura (council), while everyone admitted to the program has to submit to biometric scans.

3. What effect will the killing of Osama bin Laden have on near- and long-term U.S. global security interests, and on core al-Qaeda’s goals and capabilities?

After the fall of the Taliban, bin Laden didn’t, of course, continue to exert day-to-day control over al-Qaeda, but statements from him have always been the most reliable guide to the future actions of jihadist movements around the world, and this remained the case even while he was on the run. In the past decade bin Laden issued more than thirty video- and audiotapes.²⁶ Those messages reached untold millions worldwide via television, the Internet and newspapers. The tapes not only instructed al-Qaeda’s followers to continue to kill Westerners and Jews; some also carried specific instructions that militant cells then acted on. In 2003, bin Laden called for attacks against members of the coalition in Iraq; subsequently terrorists bombed commuters on their way to work in Madrid and London. Bin Laden also called for attacks on the Pakistani state in 2007, which is one of the reasons that Pakistan had more than fifty suicide attacks that year.²⁷ In March 2008 bin Laden denounced the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in a Danish newspaper, which he said would soon be avenged. Three months later, an al-Qaeda suicide attacker bombed the Danish Embassy in Islamabad, killing six.

Materials recovered from the Abbottabad compound in northern Pakistan where bin Laden was killed paint a picture of a leader deeply involved in tactical, operational and strategic planning for al-Qaeda, and in communication with other leaders of the group and even the organization’s affiliates overseas.²⁸

Bin Laden exercised near-total control over al-Qaeda, whose members had to swear a religious oath personally to bin Laden, so ensuring blind loyalty to him. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the operational commander of the 9/11 attacks, outlined the dictatorial powers that bin Laden exercised over his organization: "If the Shura council at al-Qaeda, the highest authority in the organization, had a majority of 98 percent on a resolution and it is opposed by bin Laden, he has the right to cancel the resolution."²⁹ Bin Laden’s son

Omar recalls that the men who worked for al-Qaeda had a habit of requesting permission before they spoke with their leader, saying, “Dear prince: May I speak?”³⁰

The death of bin Laden eliminates the founder of al-Qaeda, which has only enjoyed one leader since its founding in 1988, and it also eliminates the one man who provided broad, unquestioned strategic goals to the wider jihadist movement. Around the world, those who joined al-Qaeda in the past two decades have sworn *baya*, a religious oath of allegiance to bin Laden, rather than to the organization itself, in the same way that Nazi party members swore an oath of fealty to Hitler, rather than to Nazism. That *baya* must now be transferred to whoever the new leader of al-Qaeda is going to be.

Of course, even as the al-Qaeda organization withers there are pretenders to bin Laden’s throne. The first is the dour Egyptian surgeon, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who is the deputy leader of al-Qaeda, and therefore technically bin Laden’s successor. But Zawahiri is not regarded as a natural leader, and even among his fellow Egyptian militants Zawahiri is seen as a divisive force and so he is unlikely to be able to step into the role of the paramount leader of al-Qaeda and of the global jihadist movement that was occupied by bin Laden.³¹ There is scant evidence that Zawahiri has the charisma of bin Laden, nor that he commands the respect bordering on love that was accorded to bin Laden by members of al-Qaeda.

Another possible leader of al-Qaeda is Saif al-Adel, also an Egyptian, who has played a role as a military commander of the terrorist group, and since 9/11 has spent many years living in Iran under some form of house arrest. Adel has been appointed the “caretaker” leader of the terrorist organization, according to Noman Benotman, a former leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, a militant organization that was once aligned with al-Qaeda, but in recent years has renounced al-Qaeda’s ideology.³²

Benotman, who has known the leaders of al-Qaeda for more than two decades and has long been a reliable source of information about the inner workings of the terrorist group, says that based on his personal communications with militants and discussions on jihadist forums, Adel has emerged as the interim leader of al-Qaeda as it reels from the death of its founder and eventually transitions, presumably, to the uncharismatic Zawahiri.

A wild card is that one of bin Laden’s dozen or so sons-- endowed with an iconic family name--could eventually rise to take over the terrorist group. Already Saad bin Laden, one of the oldest sons, has played a middle management role in al-Qaeda.³³

One of the key issues that any future leader of al-Qaeda has to reckon with now is dealing with the fallout from the large quantities of sensitive information that were recovered by U.S. forces at the compound in Abbottabad where bin Laden was killed. That information is likely to prove damaging to al-Qaeda operations.

Jihadist terrorism will not, of course, disappear because of the death of bin Laden. Indeed, the Pakistan Taliban have already mounted attacks in Pakistan that they said were revenge for bin Laden’s death,³⁴ but it is hard to imagine two more final endings to the

“War on Terror” than the popular revolts against the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and the death of bin Laden. No one in the streets of Cairo or Benghazi carried placards of bin Laden’s face, and very few demanded the imposition of Taliban-like rule, al-Qaeda’s preferred end state for the countries in the region.

If the Arab Spring was a large nail in the coffin of al-Qaeda’s ideology, the death of bin Laden was an equally large nail in the coffin of al-Qaeda the organization.

4. What is the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda?

There is plenty of evidence for the continuing cozy relationship between al-Qaeda and important factions of the Taliban: For much of the past decade al-Qaeda has been harbored largely by the Haqqani network, the ferocious Taliban militia based in Pakistan’s tribal regions. According to a July 2009 WikiLeaks cable from the U.S. consulate in Peshawar, which abuts the Pakistani tribal regions, Jalaluddin Haqqani, the veteran jihadi commander who has been the longtime head of the Haqqani network, is “considered to have a close relationship” with Mullah Omar. Haqqani’s relationship with bin Laden stretches back to the mid-1980s, according to the Palestinian journalist Jamal Ismail who worked with bin Laden during this time period. Another Palestinian journalist, Abdel Bari Atwan, who spent days interviewing bin Laden in 1996, points out that bin Laden did Mullah Omar a big favor when he introduced the Taliban leader to his old buddy Jalaluddin Haqqani, who later rose to become arguably the Taliban’s most feared military commander.³⁵

Cooperation between the Taliban and al-Qaeda can be seen in the suicide bombing that killed seven CIA officers and contractors in the American base at Khost in eastern Afghanistan on December 30, 2009. The suicide bomber, Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi, was a Jordanian doctor recruited by al-Qaeda.³⁶ Two months after Balawi’s suicide attack al-Qaeda’s video production arm released an interview with him videotaped some time before he died in which he laid out how he planned to attack the group of Agency officials using a bomb made from C-4.³⁷ In another prerecorded video, the chief of the Pakistani Taliban, Hakimullah Mehsud, appeared alongside Balawi saying the attack was revenge for U.S. drone strikes directed at the Taliban.³⁸

The Taliban began to re-emerge as a serious threat in Afghanistan in 2006, launching a serious campaign of suicide bombers and IED attacks. Sami Yousafzai, a leading reporter on the Taliban, has documented that they were taught these techniques by Arab jihadists. That same year Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah explained his links to al-Qaeda. “Osama bin Laden, thank God, is alive and in good health,” he told CBS. “We are in contact with his top aides and sharing plans and operations with each other.”³⁹ Three years later, Mustafa Abu Al-Yazid, one of al-Qaeda’s founders, described his group’s rapport with the Taliban during an interview, “We are on a good and strong relationship with them,” he said, “and we frequently meet them.”

US officials such as CIA director Leon Panetta have publicly said that there are only a few dozen members of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.⁴⁰ In addition, U.S. officials point to

other “foreign fighters” operating in Afghanistan in particular in the east and to some degree in the north of the county; for instance, Uzbeks affiliated with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which is deemed a terrorist group by the U.S. government.⁴¹

A briefing slide prepared by the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), which leaked out in January 2010, showed a map of insurgent groups operating in Afghanistan in which the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan was shown to have a presence in five provinces in northern and southern Afghanistan. The leaked DIA briefing asserts that al-Qaeda “provides facilitation, training and some funding” to the Taliban in Afghanistan, while the Taliban also maintain a “mutually supportive relationship” with Chechen and Central Asian fighters.⁴²

On April 26 NATO officials announced that the Saudi al-Qaeda leader, Abu Hafs al-Najdi, had been killed in an airstrike in Kunar province in northeastern Afghanistan. The NATO announcement noted that Najdi was one of 25 al-Qaeda leaders and fighters who had been killed in the past month.⁴³ This suggests that there are still a small but not insignificant number of al-Qaeda militants as well as other foreign fighters who continue to operate in Afghanistan.

A nuanced account of the Taliban-al-Qaeda relationship is provided by Anne Stenersen, a research fellow at the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment. In a paper for the New America Foundation last year she pointed out that al-Qaeda functions mostly in the east of Afghanistan because of its longstanding ties to the Taliban Haqqani Network that is prevalent in this region, while al-Qaeda and the Quetta Shura in southern Afghanistan have diverged strategically in the past decade.⁴⁴ Some of this is an accident of geography; when al-Qaeda leaders fled Tora Bora in eastern Afghanistan after the fall from power of the Taliban during the winter of 2001 they moved into the adjoining tribal regions of Pakistan, many hundreds of miles from the Quetta Shura’s base in southwestern Pakistan, and into the welcoming arms of the Haqqani network. In short, al-Qaeda is embedded with the Haqqani Taliban, but not with the Mullah Omar Taliban.

5. How might the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda be changed by the death of bin Laden?

Now that bin Laden is dead, there is a real opportunity for the Taliban to disassociate itself from al-Qaeda, as it was bin Laden who, sometime before the 9/11 attacks, swore an oath of allegiance to Taliban leader Mullah Omar as the *Amīr al-Mu'minīn*, “The Commander of the Faithful,” a rarely invoked religious title that dates from around the time of the Prophet Mohammed.

Mullah Omar could now communicate to his followers that the new leader of al-Qaeda does not need to swear an oath of allegiance to him as “The Commander of the Faithful.” This would be an important step for the Taliban to satisfy a key condition of peace talks with the U.S. and Afghan governments; that they reject al-Qaeda, something that hitherto the Taliban has not done. If Mullah Omar does not take advantage of this opening in the near future, it is hard to imagine that he ever will.

6. What are the impediments to “reconciliation” with the Taliban’s leadership?

There are nine significant problems.

First, who is there exactly to negotiate with in the Taliban? It’s been a decade since their fall from power and the “moderate” Taliban who wanted to reconcile with the Afghan government have already done so. They are the same group of Taliban who are constantly trotted out in any discussion of a putative Taliban deal: Mullah Zaeef, their former ambassador to Pakistan; Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil, their foreign minister; and Abdul Hakim Mujahid, who was the Taliban representative in the United States before 9/11. This group was generally opposed to bin Laden well before he attacked the United States. Bin Laden told intimates that his biggest enemies in the world were the United States and the Taliban Foreign Ministry, which was trying to put the kibosh on his anti-Western antics in Afghanistan. And today the “moderate” already-reconciled Taliban don’t represent the Taliban on the battlefield because they haven’t been part of the movement for the past decade.

The key Taliban figure is still their leader, Mullah Omar, a.k.a., “The Commander of the Faithful.” The title indicates that Mullah Omar is not just the leader of the Taliban, but also of all Muslims, suggesting that Mullah Omar is not only a religious fanatic, but also a fanatic with significant delusions of grandeur.⁴⁵ Negotiations with religious fanatics who have delusions of grandeur generally do not go well. Almost every country in the world -- including the Taliban leader’s quasi-patron, Pakistan -- pleaded with Mullah Omar in the spring of 2001 not to blow up the giant Buddhas of Bamiyan, Afghanistan’s greatest cultural patrimony. But he did so anyway. After 9/11, Mullah Omar was prepared to lose his entire regime on the point of principle that he would not give up bin Laden to the U.S. following the attacks on Manhattan and the Pentagon. And he did.

Since his regime fell, Mullah Omar has also shown no appetite for negotiation or compromise. He is joined in this attitude by some senior members of his movement, such as Maulavi Abdul Kabir, a Taliban leader in eastern Afghanistan, who said in January, “neither has there been any peace talk nor has any of the Islamic Emirate (the Taliban) shown any inclination towards it.”⁴⁶

Second, the Taliban has had ten years to reject bin Laden and all his works, and they haven’t done so. For this reason, Saudi Arabia, which has hosted “talks about talks” in Mecca between Afghan government officials and some Taliban representatives,⁴⁷ has soured on the process. For the Saudi government, which is squarely in al-Qaeda’s gun sights, a public repudiation of al-Qaeda by the Taliban is a non-negotiable demand. And it hasn’t happened.

Third, “the Taliban” is really many Talibans, and so a deal with one insurgent group doesn’t mean the end of the insurgency writ large. It’s not clear that even Mullah Omar can deliver all of the Taliban that he nominally controls in southern Afghanistan, because

they are often fissured into purely local groups, many of whom are a long way from Taliban headquarters across the border in Quetta, Pakistan. As Ambassador Richard Holbrooke commented three months before he died, “There’s no Ho Chi Minh. There’s no Slobodan Milosevic. There’s no Palestinian Authority.”⁴⁸ Instead, there are several leaders of the various wings of the insurgency, from the Quetta Shura in southern Afghanistan, to the Haqqani Network in the east, as well as smaller insurgent groups, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hezb-e-Islami in the northeast.

Fourth, the history of “peace” deals with the Taliban in Pakistan shows that the groups can’t be trusted. Deals between the Pakistani government and the Taliban in Waziristan in 2005 and 2006 and in Swat in 2009 were merely preludes to the Taliban establishing their brutal “emirates,” regrouping and then moving into adjoining areas to seize more territory.⁴⁹

Fifth, the arrest in Pakistan last year of Mullah Baradar, the Taliban number two who had been negotiating directly with Karzai, shows that the Pakistani military and government wants to retain a veto over any significant negotiations going forward.⁵⁰ That isn’t necessarily a bad thing, as certainly Pakistan’s legitimate interests in the post-American Afghanistan must be recognized, but it also demonstrates that negotiations with the Taliban will not be as straightforward as just having the Afghan government and the insurgents at the negotiating table.

Sixth, another key player in any negotiations with the Taliban are the former leaders of the largely Tajik and Uzbek Northern Alliance who fought a bitter several-years war with the Taliban and who now occupy prominent positions in Afghanistan, for instance, the Minister of the Interior, Bismullah Khan, and Dr. Abdullah, Karzai’s main rival for the presidency in 2009, who is -- at least for now -- the most likely candidate to succeed Karzai in the 2014 presidential elections. These leaders are not going to allow all they fought for to be reversed by a deal with the Taliban that gives them significant concessions on territory or principle. Dr. Abdullah is withering in his assessment of Karzai’s olive branches to the Taliban who Karzai has described as his “brothers,” saying to me that this simply confuses “our own soldiers which are fighting” the Taliban.

Seventh, the several meetings over the past three years between Afghan officials and Taliban representatives to discuss “reconciliation” in Mecca and in the Maldives have hitherto produced a big zero. A senior U.S. military officer dismissed these talks as “reconciliation tourism,” while an Afghan official joked with me that in landlocked Afghanistan, “Everybody wanted to go to the Maldives for a meeting.”

Eighth, the debacle involving Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour last year shows how much of a fog surrounds the whole reconciliation process.⁵¹ Mullah Mansour was portrayed as one of the most senior of the Taliban leaders who was allegedly in direct negotiations with the Karzai government in the fall of 2010. Except it then turned out he wasn’t Mullah Mansour at all, but a Quetta shopkeeper who had spun a good yarn about his Taliban credentials so he could pick up what a British government report characterizes as “significant sums.”⁵²

Finally, and most importantly: what do the Taliban really want? It's relatively easy to discern what they don't want: international forces in Afghanistan. But other than their blanket demand for the rule of sharia law, the Taliban have not articulated their vision for the future of Afghanistan. Do they envision a democratic state with elections? Do they see a role for women outside the home? What about education for girls? What about ethnic minorities?

Richard Barrett, a British diplomat who heads the United Nations' group that monitors al-Qaeda and the Taliban, pointed out at a conference at the New America Foundation last year that "it's difficult to deal with an insurgent group, which doesn't actually put forward any real policy." A similar point was made by Mohammad Stanikhzai, the point person in the Afghan government dealing with the Taliban, when I met with him in December, who explained, "For the governance, I don't think they [the Taliban] have a clear plan."

7. Given these problems, why try and negotiate with the Taliban, and are there reasons to think those negotiations might eventually work?

Reaching an accommodation with the Taliban is going to be quite difficult, but that doesn't, of course, mean that it isn't worth trying. Even if peace talks are not successful immediately, they can have other helpful effects, such as splitting the façade of Taliban unity. Even simple discussions about the future shape of negotiations can help sow dissension in the Taliban ranks, while if such discussions do move forward in even incremental steps more intelligence can be garnered about what exactly is going on inside the shadowy Taliban movement. Also, getting the Taliban to enter into any negotiations means that they will no longer get to occupy the moral high ground of fighting a supposed holy war, but are instead getting their hands dirty in more conventional political back-room deals.

Audrey Cronin of the National Defense University has systematically examined how and why terrorist/insurgent groups come to some kind of peace deal and has laid out some general principles about what that usually takes, which are worth considering in the context of Afghanistan.⁵³ First, there must recognition on both sides that a military stalemate has been reached. (In the early 1980s the American academic William Zartman coined the term a "mutually hurting stalemate" to describe the moment when combatants will start considering a peace settlement.)⁵⁴ That recognition may now exist to some degree, given that over the past six months or so the Taliban have taken heavy losses in their heartlands of Kandahar, while the U.S. public has increasingly turned against what is already America's longest war. In March, 64 percent of Americans said the war was "not worth fighting," up from 41 percent in 2007.⁵⁵

An important shift in the Obama administration's stance on Taliban negotiations was recently signaled by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. While giving the Richard Holbrooke memorial lecture at the Asia Society in New York on February 18, Clinton said that previous American conditions for talks with the Taliban -- that they lay down

their arms, reject al-Qaeda, and embrace the Afghan constitution -- were no longer preconditions that the Taliban had to meet *before* negotiations could begin, but were “necessary outcomes” of the final peace process.⁵⁶ Judging by the lack of media attention in the States at the time to this shift, this subtle but important distinction was probably also not well grasped by the Taliban, but it does represent a somewhat more flexible American position about dealing with the Taliban. Indeed, U.S. officials are already in some kind of talks with Taliban representatives, according to reports in the *New Yorker* and *Washington Post*.⁵⁷

Similarly the Afghan government has now adopted “reconciliation” as its official policy, setting up a “High Peace Council” in the fall to help facilitate those negotiations, a body that is made up, in part, of a number of leaders from the former Northern Alliance who are less likely to act as spoilers of a peace process if they feel they are a part of it.

Successful negotiations often require a capable and trusted third party sponsor. This condition seems also to be lacking right now: the Saudis are, at best, lukewarm about facilitating talks with the Taliban; the Pakistanis are not really trusted by any of the parties in the conflict, even by much of the Taliban, and while the United Nations may have some role to play in negotiations, Taliban attacks on U.N. personnel in Afghanistan last year don’t suggest this avenue has much immediate promise. (Murmurings about a role for Turkey in facilitating a deal may have some potential given that Turkey has an Islamist government and is also a key member of NATO.)

A peace deal also generally requires strong leadership on both the government and insurgent sides to force a settlement. Neither Hamid Karzai nor Mullah Omar fit this particular bill. Finally, Cronin explains that the overall political context must be favorable to negotiations for a deal to succeed. Here there is some real hope: While fewer than one in ten Afghans have a favorable view of the Taliban, a large majority is in favor of negotiating with them. Nationally, around three-quarters of Afghans favor talks, while in Kandahar the number goes up to a stratospheric 94 percent.⁵⁸

All that said, the bottom line on the Taliban reconciliation process is that nothing of any real note is currently happening. According to a Western official familiar with the record of discussions with the Taliban, the chances of a deal with the Taliban similar to the Dayton Accords that ended the Balkans war in the mid-1990s or the Good Friday Agreement that ended the IRA campaign against the British government are “negligible” for the foreseeable future. The official says that Mullah Omar needs his council of *ulema* (religious scholars) to sign off on a peace deal and there is “no sign of this right now.” Senior U.S. military officials tell me that it is their view that Mullah Omar is living at least some of the time in the southern Pakistani megacity of Karachi.

8. Might the Haqqani or Hezb-e-Islami (Gulbuddin Hekmatyar) factions of the Taliban be willing to consider a settlement?

This is relatively plausible given that *Hezb-e-Islami* (Party of Islam) has long shown a far greater inclination to engage in conventional politics than the other insurgent groups.

Hezb-e-Islami has a more nuanced take than other insurgent groups about what its preconditions are for talks with the Afghan government; while much of the Taliban want foreign forces out before real talks can begin, Hezb-e-Islami has indicated that talks can begin in parallel with a timetable for withdrawal being agreed upon. For the moment, the Haqqanis are probably irreconcilable as they are too close to al-Qaeda.

9. There is an agglomeration of extremist groups operating in the lawless region near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, including the Pakistani Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other affiliated and other sectarian groups. How should policymakers prioritize which of these to work against?

Policymakers should prioritize those South Asian groups that now threaten the West. One of bin Laden's most toxic legacies is that even terrorist groups that don't call themselves "al-Qaeda" have adopted his ideology. According to Spanish prosecutors, the late leader of the Pakistani Taliban, Baitullah Mehsud, sent a team of would-be suicide bombers to Barcelona to attack the subway system there in January 2008. A Pakistani Taliban spokesman confirmed this in a videotaped interview in which he said that those suicide bombers "were under pledge to Baitullah Mehsud" and were sent because of the Spanish military presence in Afghanistan.

In 2009 the Pakistani Taliban trained an American recruit for an attack in New York. Faisal Shahzad, who had once worked as a financial analyst in the accounting department at the Elizabeth Arden cosmetics company in Stamford, Connecticut, travelled to Pakistan where he received five days of bomb-making training from the Taliban in the tribal region of Waziristan. Armed with this training and \$12,000 in cash, Shahzad returned to Connecticut where he purchased a Nissan Pathfinder. He placed a bomb in the SUV and detonated it in Times Square on May 1, 2010 around 6 p.m. when the sidewalks were thick with tourists and theatergoers. The bomb, which was designed to act as a fuel-air explosive, luckily was a dud and Shahzad was arrested two days later as he tried to leave JFK airport for Dubai.⁵⁹

Also based in the Pakistani tribal regions are a number of other jihadist groups allied to both the Taliban and al-Qaeda, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Jihad Union that have trained dozens of Germans for attacks in Europe. Two Germans and a Turkish resident in Germany, for instance, trained in the tribal regions and then planned to bomb the massive US Ramstein airbase in Germany in 2007. Before their arrests, the men had obtained 1,600 pounds of industrial strength hydrogen peroxide, enough to make a number of large bombs.⁶⁰

The Mumbai attacks of 2008 showed that bin Laden's ideas about attacking Western and Jewish targets had also spread to Pakistani militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which had previously focused only on Indian targets. Over a three-day period in late November 2008 LeT carried out multiple attacks in Mumbai targeting five-star hotels housing Westerners and a Jewish-American community center. The Pakistani-American David Headley played a key role in LeT's massacre in Mumbai, traveling to the Indian

financial capital on five extended trips in the two years before the attacks. There Headley made videotapes of the key locations later attacked by the ten LeT gunmen.⁶¹

Sometime in 2008, Headley hatched a plan to attack the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, which three years earlier had published cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed that were deemed to be offensive by many Muslims. In January 2009 Headley traveled to Copenhagen, where he reconnoitered the *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper on the pretext that he ran an immigration business that was looking to place some advertising in the paper. Following his trip to Denmark, Headley met with Ilyas Kashmiri in the Pakistani tribal regions to brief him on his findings. Kashmiri ran a terrorist organization, Harakat-ul-Jihad Islami, closely tied to al-Qaeda. Headley returned to Chicago in mid-June 2009 and was arrested there three months later as he was preparing to leave for Pakistan again. He told investigators that he was planning to kill the *Jyllands-Posten*'s cultural editor who had first commissioned the cartoons, as well as the cartoonist Kurt Westergaard who had drawn the cartoon he found most offensive; the Prophet Mohammed with a bomb concealed in his turban.⁶²

One of the more predictable foreign policy challenges of the next years is a "Mumbai II": a large-scale attack on a major Indian city by a Pakistani militant group that kills hundreds. The Indian government showed considerable restraint in its reaction to the provocation of the Mumbai attacks in 2008. Another such attack, however, would likely produce considerable political pressure on the Indian government to "do something." That something would likely involve incursions over the border to eliminate the training camps of Pakistani militant groups with histories of attacking India. That could lead in turn to a full-blown war for the fourth time since 1947 between India and Pakistan. Such a war would involve the possibility of a nuclear exchange and the certainty that Pakistan would move substantial resources to its eastern border and away from fighting the Taliban on its western border, relieving pressure on all the militant groups based there, including al-Qaeda.

The Pakistani Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Harakat-ul-Jihad Islami, the Islamic Jihad Union and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan are all based or have a significant presence in Pakistan's tribal regions and have track records of trying to attack Western and/or American targets and should therefore all be considered threats to American interests.

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