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## Why is it Important to Talk to the Taliban?

Ali Iqbal

As an international military student in Fort Leavenworth, I am constantly exposed to public, US Government and international opinion on how to succeed/just stay afloat and not sink in the quagmire of that perilous place called “Afghanistan”. Ranging from complex solutions like rebuilding the entire state on the western paradigm, to the irresponsible suggestion of adapting the “*It is what it is*” policy by creating “Chaositan” - they are all out there on the table. However, as already concluded by many intellectuals, the permanent solution to Afghanistan will be the solution which the Afghans want, not what we sitting many a mile away keep conjecturing about. The harsh reality is that the situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated as the Taliban are continuously spreading their influence and cashing in on the frustrations of the people - an ideal force multiplier for the insurgents to leverage for furthering their designs. The main reason why the situation has become so precarious is that the bulk of the country, more precisely east and south east consisting of Pashtuns, is convinced that the Taliban are their real saviors and not the apathetic government in Kabul or ISAF forces. Let us consider why these poor, religiously inclined and simple people favor the “Dark Side” rather than us “Knights in Shining Armor”:

- *The Taliban are skillfully surfing on the emotional waves of the people.* As they have no recognized writ and resources at present and are busy focusing their strengths to fight the so called “infidels” to regain the glory of Afghans, the mere promises and claims for achieving “*Utopiastan*” is their best tool for gaining support. As they are not held accountable for the current miseries of the people, they get a clean check and the Afghanistan Government along with ISAF gets all the blame.
- *Since October 7, 2001 the Pashtuns have been punished for the acts of the Taliban.* In fact, Pashtuns and Taliban have been synonymously termed as the enemy, especially by some ill wishing Afghans who wish to side line this biggest ethnic group. The Taliban have cashed upon this sentiment and continue to build upon this feeling of being socially, politically and economically rejected by not only the Government but also by the international community. The Taliban promises Afghans prosperity, peace and equality to live their lives the way which they deem appropriate. As the Government and ISAF have done nothing to eradicate these notions, so the bloody saga continues.
- The locals believe that Taliban are only fighting to safe guard their religious and traditional values. They earnestly believe that the Taliban do not want to rule and if their terms and conditions are met, they will denounce militancy and restore peace in their area. As mentioned earlier, due to lack of manifested efforts to address this wrong notion, the locals continue to side, both passively and actively, with the Taliban.

So after having looked into the root cause of the issue, where does the solution lie? The solution is simple, talks, parleys, overtures and concessions to the Taliban (Kudos to the Karzai establishment and international community for considering this option). I know that it sounds defeatist in its very nature and that all the efforts of almost a decade may be considered going down the drain, however, it is essential. It is essential, firstly, only for the reason that if the Taliban are actually serious in bringing peace, then what else do we wish for (***Best form of Victory is winning without fighting – Sun Tzu***).

Secondly and most probably, if the Taliban are not serious in bringing peace and have greater designs for their totalitarian rule and hegemony, then their maliciousness will be unveiled to the people. The sincerity of ISAF in giving peace a chance, at the cost of undue concessions and compromising on a few core beliefs would bring a change of heart by the locals. The insurgents after being offered a chance to give people their long awaited shot at tranquility and then losing it through self serving interests would stand alone with little to no popular support.

Sounds like an effective targeting of enemy's ***Centre of Gravity***, doesn't it? This sounds too easy and probably unreal as well, but it has been successfully done before. Although no two case histories in counterinsurgency may be applicable to one another, there are some parallels that can be drawn to accrue relevant lessons. All of us would remember the peace overtures which the Pakistan Government made with Sufi Muhammad in the Swat Valley in mid 2009 and all of us would especially recall the alarm bells which started ringing in the international community, as a consequence of that. What was missed by everyone was the result which those talks brought, which I will dwell upon later in this article. The counterinsurgency operations in Swat commenced in late 2007 and though the militancy was defeated tactically the end-state was not met, which resulted in a nagging protracted insurgency gaining strength with each passing day.

The root cause of the militant campaign in Swat was the imposition of Shariah (Islamic Law), which was the demand of a considerable part of the populous as well. The popular sentiment of the locals was that the ***“Taliban are only asking for the imposition of Shariah and nothing else, so what is all the fuss about”***. This sentiment was hijacked successfully by the Taliban and they were able to bandwagon public support for their cause and thus portray the Government and law enforcing agencies as the offenders. Delay in conclusive talks and imposition of Shariah gave birth to a number of conspiracy theories which further complicated the issue and the provided strength to the militants. Then came the talks, and imposition of Shariah in Swat. In spite of much international apprehension, Pakistan made a bold and calculated decision, with a view towards bring peace through implementing a popular demand ***or*** unveiling the malicious designs of the militants' i.e. selfish interest of establishing their own writ and parallel governance.

As anticipated, the latter came to the fore for the people to see the real intentions of the Taliban and they not only parted ways but also encouraged the Government to take decisive action to rid them of this nuisance. A wave of local and national sentiment rose against the Taliban and the armed forces, and with the backing of the citizens the Government was able to rout /eliminate the militants from the valley. Having seen the true identity of the Taliban and the resultant distress which accompanies their dogmatic school of thought, the locals of Swat and adjoining districts played an active role in eliminating all foot prints of militancy from their area. By raising “Lashkars” (village/clan fighting teams) and active support of law enforcing agencies by giving

Human Intelligence (HUMINT), etc. to hunt down the remaining/fleeing militants, people manifested their abhorrence for the miscreants who had deprived them of their peaceful lives and hijacked their emotions for furthering own maliciousness.

So what lessons can be drawn from the case study and hold relevance for Afghanistan.

- ***Talking with the Taliban*** is a “***Win Win Situation***” - if the talks succeed and the terms are implemented in all sincerity, peace will be brought without bloodshed. If the talks fail – and the terms are not implemented by the Taliban, their local support will diminish and they would stand alone in their fight.
- Parleys and concessions might be a hard pill to swallow - but if the overarching aim is achieved then it is worth it.
- Local inhibitions and demands must be addressed, even if they do not fit into the paradigm which “we” are comfortable with.
- Operating with a *moral high ground, as judged by the locals*, is *extremely important* in fighting militancy, especially the one which fosters and gains strength on indigenous support.
- Peoples’ support is not possible by just winning hearts and minds through reconstruction and development etc., while the root cause remains unresolved. *Let them decide* on what course of action has to be adopted after giving them a clear and fair picture of your sincerity and the other side’s ambitions vis-à-vis addressing the core issue.
- *Involve the locals* in parleys with the militants. Let them have a say and then they will feel responsible if the militants do not measure up to their commitments. Their active participation would either make the militants buckle under pressure or turn them against each other.

***To summarize***, merely killing the bad guys, winning tactical battles and conducting hearts and minds winning campaign as per our own paradigm will only protract the war and turn the masses further against the Afghan Government and ISAF. A military and / or civilian agency surge without first engaging the Taliban in talks and giving the Pashtuns an opportunity to see the sincerity on behalf of their Government and ISAF to bring peace peacefully, will hardly give a long lasting solution to these myriad of problems facing Afghanistan. The planned surge should be held up till the outcome of talks and if they fail, then, operate with a moral high ground with the people’s backing/support.

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