A Review of Reconciliation Efforts in Afghanistan

By Joanna Nathan

To achieve stability in Afghanistan, there is a growing emphasis on political solutions with insurgents. The reality, however, is that such efforts so far have been fragmented and often contradictory. There remains no agreement within the Afghan government and international community, or between them, on what the concept is, who it is aimed at, and most importantly its place within wider stabilization strategies. Amidst an increasingly violent insurgency, the temptation has been to attempt local or grand bargains with insurgent leaders. Even if desirable, this strategy is unrealistic because amorphous anti-government elements show no desire for such deals. It further dangerously distracts from enduring political solutions—aimed at the Afghan people rather than at insurgents—of ensuring better governance and more equitable representation.

This article offers a short summary of post-2001 “reconciliation” and “outreach” efforts. It examines how since 2001 the international community and Afghan government have failed to pursue a coherent policy even in deciding which strata of the Taliban should be targeted, isolated or engaged. Furthermore, reconciliation efforts have for the most part been narrowly premised on a paradigm of amnesty and surrender rather than true peacebuilding. Moreover, operating distinctly from wider nation-building programs, they have failed to tackle underlying dynamics. Given that the insurgents are widely perceived to have the strategic momentum, having a demobilization program for fighters as a centerpiece of such efforts is redundant at best. Political solutions must not be treated as a quick exit strategy when the aim is ongoing stability. Success will require a far greater commitment to coordination by all players, a nuanced understanding of the complex nature of the insurgency and political system, and a focus on strengthening broader governance activities to cut off potential community support for the insurgency rather than rewards for violent actors.

The Early Years: Lack of Coherence
In 2001, the treatment of individuals associated with the Taliban regime proved remarkably arbitrary. In many cases, the use of airpower or arbitrary detentions was the result of information provided to U.S. forces by new allies seeking to settle old scores, the very randomness (and/or inaccuracy) of action contributing to early alienation. Taliban camp cooks were reported to be on trial while a former international spokesman went to Yale. Some former Taliban leaders were detained at Guantanamo Bay, while others worked for the government with no transparent criteria for such decisions.

There was never a legal bar on regime members taking public roles. For example, a former Taliban deputy minister and a former envoy of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (a former Taliban rival whose faction of Hizb-i-Islami has joined the insurgency in a loose alliance) were appointed to the Senate. In the 2005 National Assembly elections, at least two former regime members were elected to the lower house. Soon afterward, a group of Hizb-i-Islami leaders claiming to have split with Hekmatyar registered as a political party (Hizb-i-Islami Afghanistan), boasting more than 30 supporters in the lower house (of 249 seats). Many other “former” members of Hizb-i-Islami, a grouping always dominated by professionals and technocrats, took powerful positions in the administration. These examples highlight the complex web of overlapping identities and shifting allegiances that has characterized the post-2001 government.

Amidst a highly personalized, patronage-based system, the administration has jealously guarded its primacy in “reconciliation” efforts, but has failed to provide a serious strategic approach to more equitable and responsive systems. Instead, there has been continued public rhetoric offering succor to the Taliban’s top leadership and attempts at opaque behind-the-scenes deal-making with individuals. The disjointed programs—such as the Allegiance Program and “Takhim e-Solh”—often seem largely aimed at capturing donor funding or entrenched favored networks rather than strengthening government institutions and tackling sources of alienation.

Members of the international community have also not acted cohesively. They have undertaken a series of unilateral, bilateral and multilateral efforts despite the theoretical lead of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). The latter holds a specific mandate to provide good offices to support, if requested by the Afghan government, the implementation of Afghan-led reconciliation programs, within the framework of the Afghan Constitution with full respect for the implementation of measures introduced by the Security Council in its resolution 1267 (1999)."
In fact, Resolution 1267, which institutes a travel ban, asset freeze and arms embargo on listed members of the Taliban, has remained cut off from efforts on the ground. Originally created in response to al-Qaeda-directed bombings in Africa and the Taliban’s refusal to hand over the suspects, it is now unclear whether it is supposed to be a fixed list of past regime members under continuing sanction or, as the current 1267 committee chair wants, “a dynamic list that addresses the evolution of the threat posed by Al-Qaeda and Taliban.”

Currently it is neither, with many member states not ensuring enforcement nor aiding its update. Hekmatyar was listed in 2003, but there has been only minimal change to the Taliban entries. Of the major powers, only Russia has demonstrated a definite policy—blocking the removal of any names, even the dead. Today, the list of 142 individuals associated with the Taliban is disconnected from both the current fight and the current political framework. Abdul Hakim Monib, who acted as Uruzgan governor in 2006-2007, and others who have long worked with the government remain on the list while a new generation of fighters is largely absent. By October 2007, only two listed individuals were in the top 12 wanted insurgent figures on separate lists developed by international and Afghan security agencies and only 19 among the 58 considered current “key leaders.”

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9 The list was always fairly ad hoc, focused on those who held administrative rather than military positions in the regime. For instance, Mullah Dadullah, who destroyed the Bamiyan Buddhas and massacred local Hazara communities, became the Taliban’s southern commander after 2001, yet he was never included on the list. 
15 “Amnesty Offer to Taliban Leader,” BBC, May 9, 2005.
18 Ibid., p. 13.
20 It continues: “Initially when the PTS Commission was established in May 2005 a bank account was opened but donors instead preferred to provide funding in case in U.S. dollars. This has resulted in many problems with accountability and transparency.” See “Information Relating to British Financial Help to Afghan Government in Negotiations with the Taliban,” p. 8.
Both the Allegiance and PTS programs suffered an absence of monitoring and follow-through. Long-standing conspiracy theories in southern Afghanistan that the Taliban are working with the Americans appear to have been fueled by English-language identification cards, provided to at least some reconciliants, presumably useful in case of returning to the battlefield. Otherwise, given the prevailing security situation there has been little real incentive, with around 1,500 afghanis (about $30) on offer to individuals to give up arms. Senior PTS staff have been keen to extend this to housing, cars and salaries, although how this could be achieved without pushing more people to take up arms in the hope of such rewards and alienating those who have chosen not to is unexplained.21

Conflicting Programs, Lack of Links
To mitigate against such perverse incentives and the perception of special rewards, it is crucial that such programs be linked with wider disarmament efforts. For example, Mujaddedi’s PTS has been entirely autonomous of the Disarmament and Reintegration Commission (DRC) headed by Vice President Karim Khalili. The latter offers community development projects in districts where (non-insurgent) “illegal armed groups” are deemed to have disarmed, although in reality is all but moribund. This is largely because of the reluctance by other groups to disarm in the face of the insurgency—yet another reason for harmonization.

Reconciliation efforts for insurgents have also been largely premised on a militarized/security agenda, developing separately from transitional justice initiatives emerging from a human rights perspective. For instance, the wide-reaching but largely overlooked Peace, Reconciliation and Justice Action Plan launched in December 2006 actually has reconciliation as its fourth pillar. It is stated that

as a first step, the transitional justice strategy aims to realize peace and national reconciliation, to restore co-existence and co-operation, to heal the wounds and pain of the victims and to reintegrate citizens into a peaceful life in society.

In seeking a more cohesive approach across all eras of violence, an obvious focus would be common standards of vetting. Currently, even as it is widely agreed that impunity and a lack of justice contribute to the insurgency, the only standard for deal-making with insurgents appears to be potential “co-optability.”

Such complete impunity was explicitly stated in the 2007 Amnesty Resolution by the Afghan parliament, driven largely by those members who as (former) warlords and commanders feared for their own fate. Extraordinarily, this held out full, ongoing amnesty to those individuals and groups who are still in armed opposition with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and who will end their opposition after this charter is in effect, join the national reconciliation process and respect and observe the Constitution and other laws of the country.22

Fighters could simply continue the battle until they felt it was not in their interests, secure in the knowledge that there would be no consequences. While there was widespread international condemnation of the National Assembly, in reality this remains the conceptual framework for such efforts. As stated by one analyst,

the worst of all worlds would be to not only employ violent and predatory commanders to wage the war on terror, but also to welcome back—without conditions—the most violent Taliban commanders in order to “win the peace.”24

Finally, the most recent grassroots effort outreach, the 2008 Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP), similarly lies outside broader governance efforts. ASOP, launched in Wardak and Helmand provinces, appoints district councils to

ensure stability and security through addressing the gap between people and the State and to strengthen traditional leadership roles and relations to the government and help prevent the destruction posed by insurgents.25

ASOP, however, is not part of the overarching governance framework of the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), despite being overseen by the very same agency.26

Nationwide constitutionally-mandated district council elections, which could allow representative local voices to be heard and provide legitimate outlets for opposition, are currently scheduled for 2011, although few of the necessary preparations appear to be underway. In contrast, these parallel ASOP councils, appointed by the district governors “temporarily” in “priority” provinces,27 appear a continuation of top-down patronage rather than true outreach. Afghan respondents to an assessment of the program in Wardak also questioned the wisdom of starting such projects in the most violent areas, pointing out that “the gap between people and the state is widespread and it is not only limited to insecure areas of the country.” They urged that the initial focus be “to rescue the semi- and relatively secure areas from falling into the hands of insurgents.”28

22 Personal interviews, senior PTS officials, Kabul and regional offices, 2007 and 2008.
24 Van Bijlert, “Unruly Commanders.”
27 The assessment notes: “In two such instances even the very high ranking government officials (ministers or higher) were involved in recommending the Community Council members. Based on the political sensitivity of the issue and the nature of the report they have not been named here.” See “Assessment Report on Afghanistan Social Outreach Program.”
28 Ibid.
What the people are highlighting is the broader issue that the insurgency is being treated as the disease rather than as a symptom of wider malaise. Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic, multi-regional state that has been in an almost perpetual state of conflict driven by, and exacerbating, multiple fissures and fractures for more than three decades. The current focus is too much on reacting to violence where it manifests itself rather than tackling the underlying conditions.

It is often stated that in fighting an insurgency military efforts must focus on protecting the population and not the insurgents. The same logic of concentrating outreach and empowerment efforts on local communities rather than violent actors has yet to be applied to so-called political approaches.

Joanna Nathan has been based in Kabul since 2003 working first for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) and then as senior analyst for the International Crisis Group (ICG). She has focused on security sector reform and the state of the insurgency. Ms. Nathan has just started a Master of Public Policy at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University. The views expressed in this article are her own.