

# Afghanistan: Growing talk of a political deal with the Taliban

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Seven years after the invasion of Afghanistan, the discussion in US political and military circles is increasingly focusing on some form of political settlement with insurgent organisations, including leading figures of the former Taliban regime.

Over the past week, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates; General David Petraeus, previously the commander of the Iraq occupation and now head of US Central Command; and General John Craddock, the current commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, have all advocated talks with the Taliban. Senior British military commanders have made similar calls.

The discussion is motivated by a number of factors. The insurgency itself has expanded rapidly over the past two years, driving up US and NATO casualties and giving rise to warnings that the war could last at least another decade. US commanders have repeatedly stated that they need thousands more troops but few are available, due to the ongoing occupation of Iraq. European NATO members have made only token responses to Washington's appeals for additional combat forces.

The model being invoked is the Iraq "Awakening," which involved the recruitment of Sunni Arab insurgents into US-paid and protected militias. From the end of 2006, as many as 100,000 Iraqis signed up to the militias. They assisted the US military to secure Sunni districts and hunt down more hard-line elements that refused to stop fighting. Buying off the Sunni insurgency was a significant factor in the sharp reduction in US casualties since the end of 2007 and the relative stabilisation of the occupation.

Arguing that a similar tactic could be applied in Afghanistan, Petraeus stated last week: "I do think you have to talk to enemies. You've got to set things up. You've got to know who you're talking to. You've got to have your objectives straight. But I mean, what we did do in Iraq

ultimately was sit down with some of those that were shooting at us. What we tried to do was identify those who might be reconcilable."

It appears that the initial steps have already been taken to woo sections of the Afghan insurgency.

Last Thursday, Qayoum Karzai, the brother of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, confirmed that he had taken part in informal talks in Saudi Arabia with representatives of the Taliban in late September. The meeting, which could only have taken place with Washington's blessing, involved the Saudi king and the former Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

The Taliban leadership was asked to repudiate the Al Qaeda network and inform the US military if they knew the location of Osama bin Laden and other prominent terrorists. In exchange, they would be given a full amnesty and be free to seek political positions in Afghanistan, including standing candidates in next year's election.

Talks are not only taking place with the Taliban. The British *Independent* reported last week that it had information of other meetings between the Afghan government and representatives of Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin—the insurgent organisation in eastern Afghanistan led by Pashtun warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Hekmatyar was a favourite of the CIA during the Afghan-Soviet war in the 1980s. His movement received the lions' share of American military and financial aid. During the civil war in the 1990s, his forces carried out wholesale atrocities in a murderous campaign to install himself as prime minister. He was finally driven from power by the Taliban in 1996. Since 2002, he has formed an uneasy alliance with the Taliban based on their mutual opposition to the ethnic Tajik and Uzbek warlords and non-Islamist Pashtun powerbrokers that dominate Karzai's government.

Currently, he is on the US list of wanted terrorists, along with Taliban leader Mullah Omar and Taliban military commander Jalaluddin Haqqani.

The *Independent* reported: "Some of President Karzai's advisors believe that a truce, in which he [Hekmatyar] will be rewarded by being given a government post, may encourage other militant leaders to consider negotiations."

Thus far, there are no indications that either Hekmatyar or the Taliban are being won over by the overtures. Hekmatyar issued a statement on the seventh anniversary of the invasion, restating his call for an ongoing war to drive out the occupation armies.

Representatives of Mullah Mohammad Omar have denied that he is seeking a deal. Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, told Radio Free Afghanistan: "As long as there are foreign forces in Afghanistan and they control our land and airspace, we don't think peace negotiations will have any effect. It will only distract us so that they can continue spilling Afghan blood."

The conditions in Afghanistan are not identical to Iraq. The Iraq Awakening began only after more than three years of intense fighting in urban areas in which the insurgency had been bled white. In Anbar, tens of thousands of men had been killed in the US assaults on cities, such as Fallujah, Ramadi, Hit, Haditha and Al Qaim, and much of the province reduced to rubble. Facing utter ruin, a faction of tribal chiefs determined that their interests would be best advanced by allying themselves with the occupation.

A major factor behind the extension of the Awakening from Anbar to other Sunni areas of Iraq was the murderous sectarian conflict throughout 2007. Sunni communities were being devastated by military, police and militia forces linked to the Shiite fundamentalist parties that dominate the pro-US Iraqi government. In many respects, Sunni insurgents enlisted with the American military in a desperate bid to gain protection from Shiite death squads.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban has suffered thousands of casualties over the past seven years. But the more rural character of the country, the smaller number of occupation troops compared with Iraq and the existence of safe havens over the border in Pakistan has enabled the Taliban to avoid being trapped in urban centres and slaughtered by overwhelming American firepower.

Far from being on the back foot, as was the case with the

Iraq Sunni insurgents in 2007, the Taliban is by all reports on the ascendancy across southern Afghanistan. It operates a parallel government in many areas and is alleged to have forged close links with various drug syndicates, assisting in heroin smuggling in exchange for as much as \$US100 million a year.

Over the weekend, some 200 Taliban militants were intercepted as they prepared to storm the British base at Lashkar Gah, in Helmand province, with the aim of releasing hundreds of detainees from the town prison. While the attack was prevented and some 60 of the insurgents killed, the incident suggests a growing confidence in taking the war directly to the occupation forces. Hekmatyar's forces are carrying out operations on the outskirts of Kabul and are becoming increasingly aggressive, as shown in the recent ambush of French troops just 50 kilometres from the capital.

Further complicating any deal with the Taliban or Hekmatyar is the reality that ethnic Tajik- and Uzbek-based powerbrokers hold sway over northern Afghanistan and control key ministries in the US-backed government. Whereas Karzai and other Pashtun factions may be able to negotiate a place for themselves in a Taliban-dominated south, the northern warlords are unlikely to accept a power-sharing arrangement with the very movements they fought for well over a decade.

Reflecting the general pessimism, the British military historian and journalist Max Hastings wrote in Monday's *Guardian*: "The highest aspiration must be for controlled warlordism, not conventional democracy. A civil war may prove an essential preliminary before some crude equilibrium between factions can be achieved. If this sounds like a wretched prognosis, it is hard to find informed westerners with higher expectations."

The aim of the US invasion was never to bring democracy to Afghanistan, but rather to transform it into a US client state and base of operations into energy-rich Central Asia--a perspective shared by Republicans and Democrats. That ambition is as far from being realised today as it was seven years ago.



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