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War and peace: A Taliban view

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

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"Mullah Omar has many times ordered these people who call themselves the Pakistani Taliban [Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan] or al-Qaeda to stop the attacks in Pakistan and make their focus fighting against NATO"

KARACHI - After an often stormy relationship with the United States over the past 63 years since its independence, Pakistan is in the process of forging an all-embracing strategic relationship with Washington.

A delegation led by Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi is in Washington for meetings at the State Department with a team led by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to discuss matters ranging from the situation in Afghanistan to a civil nuclear deal to commerce and agriculture.

The American military command also specially invited a military contingent, including army chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kiani and the director general of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Lieutenant General Ahmad Shuja Pasha. High on their agenda are the recent arrests in Pakistan of senior Taliban officials, including that of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the deputy of Taliban leader Mullah Omar.

Washington and Islamabad will have their own interpretation of their emerging deeper relationship as well as the significance of the arrests: that they will lead to a peace process in which Mullah Omar and al-Qaeda will be isolated and the US will reconcile with moderate Taliban cadre through Pakistan's mediation.

The Taliban, too, have their viewpoint on these unfolding developments. A senior Taliban official contacted Asia Times Online to put their side of the story. The man cannot be identified because the Taliban, since the arrests, are very cautious. For the purposes of this report, the Talib will be called Abdullah.

Rendezvous with the Taliban

The traffic moves slowly on the main arteries of the southern port city of Karachi on weekend evenings as people search out roadside restaurants; their parked cars line the streets, clogging byways that are already overflowing with bustling pedestrians.

All the same, I make it to my appointed meeting place at 9pm. Within a minute a brand-new silver-grey imported Japanese car draws to a halt in front of me. I immediately recognize the man in the front passenger's seat; I interviewed him several years ago. He had a senior position in the Taliban government until it was forced out by the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001. Abdullah is about 50 years old, but looks much older.

I slip into the back seat behind Abdullah and exchange greetings.

"Against all the odds, given the arrests, we have come to see you," the driver and interlocutor of our meeting tells me. "But we have to follow new arrangements. You will not quote his [Abdullah's] name as since the arrest of Mullah Baradar there have been strict instructions from the ameerul momineen [commander of the faithful - a title the Taliban use for Mullah Omar] to avoid media interviews," the driver says. I have no option but to accept the condition.

The car makes its way through busy roads towards a main northern exit of the city.

"What is your take on the recent arrests of Taliban leaders and commanders?" I say, breaking a heavy silence. We are now cruising past trucks laden with goods destined for northern Pakistan.

"What arrests are you talking about?" Abdullah responds.

"Several people, like Moulvi Abdul Kabir [a former Taliban governor of Nagarhar province in Afghanistan], Mullah Abdul Salam, Mullah Mir Muhammad, Syed Tayyab Agha [Mullah Omar's secretary] and Mullah Mustasim Jan Agha," I say.

"I assure you, 300%, neither Moulvi Abdul Kabir nor Syed Tayyab Agha has been arrested. It was false reporting. Mullah Abdul Salam and Mullah Mir Muhammad were arrested at least a month before Mullah Baradar, but their arrest was shown after Mullah Baradar's. I have not been in direct contact with Mullah Mustasim Jan Agha so I cannot claim with surety about his status, but I was told by his friends that he was not arrested," Abdullah says.

"There are so many conspiracy theories surrounding Mullah Baradar's arrest, what is your understanding. Why was he arrested by Pakistan?"

"Pakistan's compulsions ... the compulsions that are now rising day-by-day," he replies mildly.

By now we were speeding along a main highway, with the city lights fast receding. All of a sudden the driver slows down and turns onto a muddy track. After a short while he draws up at an open-air restaurant frequented mostly by truck drivers. At this time it is not busy and we order a meal of chicken Karahi, a famous Pashtun dish, yogurt, fresh green salad and nan (bread).

"Mullah Baradar's arrest has opened up a Pandora's box of conspiracy theories," I venture. "Some people say he was abandoned by Mullah Omar. Some say he had been talking with the Afghan government and the United Nations and that's why he was disliked by the ISI and was arrested. There is also a theory that through his arrest Pakistan wanted to open communication with the Taliban. What do the Taliban think?"

"Mullah Baradar was part of the Taliban and there was no trust deficit between him and Mullah Omar. However, it is entirely false that he was part of any reconciliation process or that he held any talks with anybody. At the same time, keep in mind that it is a Taliban policy that the minute one of their men is arrested, they abandon all links with him so there is no chance of any communication through him or any other detained leader," Abdullah says.

I interject: "I heard from the Punjabi camp [non-Pashtun militants] as well as from al-Qaeda that Mullah Omar was communicating through Mullah Baradar with [Saudi intelligence chief] Prince Muqrin, who then passed on messages to Washington and the Afghan government. Arsala Rahmani [a former Taliban minister now part of the political process in Kabul] also told me that those talks collapsed only because the Barack Obama administration pushed for a troop surge in Afghanistan."

"There is not a shred of truth in this statement. Neither the Punjabis nor al-Qaeda could know about the Taliban's internal affairs. It is all gossip or their speculation - like the speculation that there were talks in Dubai between Mullah Baradar and Abdul Qayyum [Afghan President Hamid Karzai's brother]. People speculate like this because Karzai and Baradar come from the same tribe [Popalzai Durrani], but it is all speculation. And people like Arsala Rahmani could not be aware of the situation. Whether it is Arsala Rahmani or Abdul Wakeel Mutawakil [a former Taliban minister recently taken off a United Nations list that had banned him from traveling and frozen his assets], the Taliban don't want to keep any contact with them. The Taliban do not even have anything to do with Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef [the Taliban's former ambassador to Pakistan]," says Abdullah.

His comment on Zaeef surprises me. Zaeef was arrested by Pakistan and handed over to the US soon after the Taliban's defeat in Afghanistan in 2001. He spent many years at the US's Guantanamo detention facility in Cuba before being released. He now lives in Kabul but under tight security; officially, he cannot leave the city without informing the local administration. He is widely believed to be an important go-between for the Taliban and the Afghan government. He publicly says he is still loyal to the Taliban.

Abdullah disagrees. "He moves to Saudi Arabia. He goes to Dubai frequently, and you call him a detainee? Mullah Omar sent him a message, telling him to run away and join the resistance. He

turned down the order, which means he defied Mullah Omar. We are fully knowledgeable that he is in a position to dodge his security and he could have come to us, but he refused and now he is issuing statements as if he is still a Talib. He is not a Talib. We have nothing to do with him, and neither are we responsible for any of his statements," Abdullah says.

I move the conversation on, asking about supposed talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

"I will tell you exactly what happened. You know that the Taliban had close ties with Saudi Arabia, so we received a message from there. Ameerul Momineen [Mullah Omar] sent Syed Tayyab Agha to Saudi Arabia as he is in charge of political affairs. Tayyab Agha met with Prince Muqrin, but you could not call it dialogue for reconciliation," explains Abdullah.

"Prince Muqrin emphasized that there should be a dialogue process between the Afghan government and the Taliban so that foreign forces could leave Afghanistan. Tayyab, on behalf of Mullah Omar, asked Muqrin why Saudi Arabia was interested in such dialogue. Was it because of Osama bin Laden? Muqrin said this was not the case. Then Tayyab asked him whether Saudi Arabia had any particular agenda. He denied this too. Tayyab returned from Saudi Arabia and briefed Mullah Omar. Later, Mullah Omar sent a message to Muqrin, saying that it appeared Saudi Arabia only wanted dialogue with the Taliban on somebody else's behalf. The Taliban do not want to hold such dialogue, so that was the end of the communication," Abdullah says.

"When did Tayyab go to Saudi Arabia?"

"About four to five months ago."

"And nobody spotted Tayyab traveling to Saudi Arabia?"

"Has anybody traced me moving here and there? It is the same with Tayyab."

"But no pictures of you are available. Tayyab's pictures and video footage are available in abundance, especially in the Western media as after 9/11 he delivered dozens of media conferences in Kandahar as the Taliban's spokesperson," I argue.

Abdullah smiles, "While he was in Iran he made a significant change to his appearance. He is completely different from how he appeared in the video footage. He is completely unidentifiable."

"Now you are telling me that Mullah Omar's secretary was in Iran. Did he live there in hiding or was he given shelter by the Iranian government?"

"He was given refuge by the Iranian government in 2002, he lived there for about a year. Even in the past years he has visited Iran occasionally."

"Why did he not go to Pakistan?"

"He feared being arrested because he was close to al-Qaeda."

We fall silent for a while as we enjoy our dinner.

"Do you appreciate that al-Qaeda and the Punjabis carried out attacks on Pakistan's security forces after the arrest of Mullah Baradar?" I ask.

"Saleem! You need to understand that Pakistan arrested Mullah Baradar under compulsion and we have a compulsion as well, that no matter how Pakistan jacks up its actions against us we cannot sanction attacks on Pakistan, or for that matter against any Muslim country. Mullah Omar has many times ordered these people who call themselves the Pakistani Taliban [Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan] or al-Qaeda to stop the attacks in Pakistan and make their focus fighting against NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Afghanistan], but these people don't listen," Abdullah says.

"But don't you think that such attacks put pressure on the Pakistani military apparatus and force them to stay neutral?"

"I will put the situation in a different way. Suppose from tomorrow we made our entire focus to attack the Karzai administration and gave up our resistance against foreign troops. What would you think of us? Would the Muslim world consider us a legitimate resistance? These Punjabis and al-Qaeda are obsessed with targeting the Pakistani security forces and their contribution to fighting against NATO is limited."

"But there are several big Punjabi commanders, like Ilyas Kashmiri, in the al-Qaeda camp. Do you question their wisdom as well?"

"There is a weird situation in North Waziristan [tribal area in Pakistan]. If you spend just 20 days there you will talk the way they talk and you will start declaring certain Muslims as heretic and issue decrees of murder and assassination. This is not the Islamic way. The Taliban cannot accept that."

"They have pledged their allegiance to Mullah Omar, even Osama bin Laden and [his deputy] Ayman al-Zawahiri have, then why don't they listen to you?" I ask.

"Neither Osama bin Laden nor Ayman are on the surface. The only person who seems to be in command is Sheikh Saeed [alias Abu Mustafa al-Yazid], but people under him do not listen to him. Al-Qaeda is not a very disciplined body. Unlike the Taliban, where Mullah Omar's order is followed by all, in al-Qaeda and among Punjabis everybody has their own policies. Now in defiance of Mullah Omar they have started taking the baith [pledge of allegiance] to different people. We are not in a position to constantly stay in touch with them and talk to them on all those affairs," Abdullah says.

I switch topics. "Do you think the conflict in Afghanistan will just go on, and that there is no point in talks?"

The Taliban leader looks into my eyes for a while before answering.

"This all comes from real intentions. They want our defeat, not reconciliation. This talks issue is not a new one. The Taliban talked to the Americans, the Saudis and to the Pakistanis even before 9/11. The Taliban wanted to avoid the war [on Afghanistan in 2001] but we felt that the Americans were bent on a war and wanted to dislodge the Taliban government, and they were looking for some excuse.

"They made an issue of Osama bin Laden's presence in Afghanistan and tightened the noose around the Taliban government. We said that Osama bin Laden was just an individual. For argument's sake, say that tomorrow he died. Would the Taliban government then be acceptable to you? The Americans responded with other issues, women's rights and human rights in Afghanistan, as well as education.

"We replied, 'OK, we will work on mechanisms under which we will take steps for women's education and the improvement of human rights.' What then? The Americans raised another issue, about holding elections. At this point we realized the Americans were only concerned about waging war on Afghanistan for whatever reason. Had 9/11 not happened, they would have found any old excuse to wage war," says Abdullah.

He continues, "Even now, if you go through all their arguments concerning talks with the Taliban, their bottom line is 'surrender arms first and then sit at the table for talks'. This is a non-starter. It does not show any serious American intention of talks. Why should we surrender? Recently, they attacked Marjah [in Helmand province in Afghanistan], but within days the Taliban took back control of some areas of Marjah and Nad-e-Ali. There is no intention on their part to initiate talks, so there is no reason for us to start [talks]."

"Not even through Pakistan?"

"If you mean [President] Asif [Ali] Zardari's government. It is impossible that we would talk to it."

"What if the army offers dialogue?"

"So far we have not received any signal that the army wants any dialogue with the Taliban."

I add my observation, "What I gather is that Washington aims through Pakistan to arrest top Taliban leaders and commanders, isolate Mullah Omar and then either force the commanders to change their path or create a situation for Mullah Omar to sit down for talks."

"Those who hatched this plan do not understand the Taliban or Mullah Omar. Whoever among the Taliban is arrested becomes zero. No Talib would listen to his [a captured person's] advice. You know Mullah Omar only interacts with a very few select people. In the last eight years he has not seen his wife or his children or any relative, except if they happen to be a Taliban commander and he meets them in that capacity.

"Once he asked Mullah Baradar to meet him, but Baradar replied that he operated in the field and might one day be arrested, and that would compromise Mullah Omar's position. Remember, nobody can isolate Mullah Omar. Everything in the Taliban starts and ends with Mullah Omar's orders," Abdullah says.

This ends the interview of several hours. I am dropped off on the outskirts of Karachi, left alone at the roadside as the car speeds off into the night to an unknown destination.