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## Peace gets a new chance in Afghanistan

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

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ISLAMABAD - All major anti-Taliban operations have been suspended in the southwestern Afghan provinces of Kandahar, Zabul, Helmand and Uruzgan, the Taliban's spiritual heartland, as an international reconciliation process gathers pace, an Asia Times Online investigation has found.

This was confirmed to ATol by multiple sources, including the Afghan Ministry of Interior and Taliban commanders in Kandahar.

A senior Talib also confirmed to ATol by telephone from Kandahar that under the same initiative, several senior Taliban in the custody of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) were released on Wednesday, including Mullah Mansoor Dadullah, a commander of the Taliban in southwestern Afghanistan.

When contacted by ATol, an ISI spokesperson would not verify the release of the Taliban commanders.

All concerned international and regional players have agreed that Turkey should host the next round of talks with the Taliban, possibly as early as next month. Unlike previous rounds, though, that primarily involved a few Muslim states including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, all major players including the United States, the United Kingdom and India are very much onboard for this latest reconciliation process.

A senior Afghan official confirmed to ATol on the condition of anonymity on Wednesday that plans were in place to hand over the security of Afghanistan to Afghans by the middle of this year and that foreign troops would only operate in the six north and northeastern provinces, besides still using unmanned drones for strikes against insurgents.

### **A change of heart**

"I cannot confirm whether the Taliban's top leaders have agreed for talks or not, but yes, I have observed a visible change on the ground," a senior Taliban commander told ATol on the condition of anonymity on telephone from Kandahar when asked for confirmation of the Taliban's participation in the reconciliation process.

"As a field commander, I can confirm three prominent things. Every year before April, NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] carries out a grand operation in Kandahar, Helmand, Urzgan and Zabul against Taliban sanctuaries. They aim to clear the Taliban's presence from around major highways and also intervene to disperse the Taliban. This year, NATO carried out no such operation, which surprised me," the Taliban commander said.

"Secondly, only a few months ago there was considerable congestion on the Kandahar-Chaman highway because [of a steady stream of] NATO supplies, including fuel tankers, tanks and other war machines. In the last two months, there has been no activity on such a scale as it looks that NATO has stopped its shipments to Kandahar airfield."

The commander continued, "I cannot confirm, but I have learnt from sources that Pakistan has also released eight top commanders of the Taliban, including Mansoor Dadullah [brother of slain Mullah Dadullah]. I don't know what the Taliban high command is thinking, but certainly the enemy is desperately looking for a truce with the Taliban."

The situation unfolding indicates that Western capitals have finally agreed to follow a roadmap that was first talked about between the Taliban and Western forces in 2009 to start a reconciliation process. (See [Seven steps to peace in Afghanistan](#) Asia Times Online, August 22, 2009.)

Confirming the new reconciliation process with the Taliban, a senior Afghan official told ATol that in general there was a consensus on a roadmap for dealing with the insurgency.

"Earlier, the Afghan government had lots of reservations about allowing the Taliban to operate with an office in Turkey, but the High Peace Council [Afghan body responsible for seeking peace talks with the Taliban] intervened and Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani, the head of the mission, said there should some place from where a credible peace process could be initiated, and now everybody in the Afghan government has agreed that the Taliban should be allowed to come to the surface and operate an office in Turkey," the official said.

"Then, security will be handed over to the Afghan army and police in the southern parts of the country in the middle of this year. This is again a demand of the Taliban that Western troops should leave their areas. However, NATO forces will operate bases in six provinces - Pansher,

Bamiyan, Kabul, Laghman, Kunduz and Mazar Sharif. Hi-tech, such as drones, will be applied against insurgents in the border provinces with Pakistan," the Afghan official said.

### **India jumps into the fray**

In an apparent softening of its attitude against India, Pakistan has withdrawn its opposition to New Delhi's participation in a preparatory conclave on the security and reconstruction of Afghanistan to be held in Ankara next month, the Indian newspaper the Hindu reported.

"We appreciate the Taliban as the future force in the Afghan government and therefore we want to open a channel of communication with the Taliban so that Afghanistan is not used against India in the future, like happened in the past," a senior Indian security official told ATol in February.

In this vein, as early as 2009 the Indian government mobilized its cadre in Afghanistan to open lines of communication with the Taliban.

India turned to influential figures for assistance, even though they had no direct access to Taliban commanders. These were former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, and former Afghan foreign minister Moulvi Abdul Wakeel Muttawakil. The results were positive.

"They [Taliban] did not support anyone against India. Afghanistan is weak, Afghanistan has to be neutral, India and Pakistan are no different for us...," Zaeef told Indian media outlet CNN-IBN in March 2010.

The comments by Zaeef, who lives under restriction in Kabul, upset some Taliban cadre in southwestern Afghanistan. Despite Pakistan's support for the US war in Afghanistan, they still consider Pakistan as a natural ally as it is a Muslim-majority state. This correspondent was subsequently invited in March 2010 to contradict Zaeef's statement and announce that he had nothing to do with the Taliban. (See [War and peace: A Taliban view](#), Mar 26, 2010.)

However, given Zaeef's rapport with the Taliban in the southeastern parts of Afghanistan, the Indians succeeded in getting approval of Zaeef's statement in favor of India.

Official Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said in a media release on March 30, 2010: "It's possible for the Taliban and India to reconcile with each other," he [Zaeef] told his interviewer. [Our] complaint is that India backed the [anti-Taliban Northern Alliance] and is now supporting the [President Hamid] Karzai government. He'd like you to believe that it's all a misunderstanding because "unlike the [Pakistan militant group] Lashkar which is focused on Jammu and Kashmir, the Afghan Taliban concentrate on Afghanistan. [Taliban] have never taken part in any attack in India, nor do we attack anyone at Pakistan's behest".

A senior Indian official told ATol, "We don't have any intentions to compete with Pakistan by opening a channel of communication with the Taliban, but we simply want to isolate anti-India

groups operating in Afghanistan like Ilyas Kashmiri and his associate LeT [Pakistan-based Lashkar-i-Taiba] commanders."

Since 2008, the reconciliation process has hit many snags because there has never been total consensus among the players on how to deal with the Taliban. This has now changed, although al-Qaeda's response remains crucial.