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Taliban peace talks come to a halt

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

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Efforts to begin a process of reconciliation with the Taliban have completely failed as Washington has refused to give any of the guarantees demanded by the Taliban as a prerequisite to sitting at the negotiation table, a Taliban representative has told Asia Times Online.

Should the breakdown prove permanent, the coming year promises to be a very tough one in Afghanistan as well as in Pakistan's tribal areas, home to militants and al-Qaeda.

The recent strategic dialogue between the United States and Pakistan that renewed a US\$2 billion five-year security assistance package for the Pakistani army is aimed specifically at effectively fighting against al-Qaeda bases situated in the tribal areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The al-Qaeda response, Asia Times Online has learned, will be to activate sleeper cells around the world, orchestrated by a fresh team in place in border areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Talks fall flat

The moves towards reconciliation with the Taliban began in late 2008. Saudi Arabia was named in the Western media as the main component of the process; it invited some former Taliban and Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan members for dinner during the annual *hajj* (pilgrimage).

This became the first regular process of indirect American and Taliban interaction, with messages conveyed through various third parties. Interestingly, this period saw the beginning of the US's stepped-up drone war against al-Qaeda's sanctuaries in the tribal areas, with almost daily missile strikes, especially in North Waziristan.

By this October, at least two dozen important al-Qaeda members had been killed, as well as a sizeable number of newly recruited and trained European nationals. Regional franchises of al-Qaeda, including the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (Pakistani Taliban), also suffered losses, as did the Uzbek militia.

Extensive spy networks in the tribal areas ensured that the Americans fully understood the dynamics of al-Qaeda and the ground situation in North Waziristan. A case in point is Nasrullah Khan, a former member of the Laskhar-e-Taiba jihadi group who joined forces with Ilyas Kashmiri's al-Qaeda-linked 313 Brigade.

Before the beginning of the Commonwealth Games that ended on October 14 in Delhi, Khan had been selected to head a unit of the brigade to carry out an operation against the Games.

However, on September 20, he and five other men were killed in a drone attack in the town of Mir Ali in North Waziristan. Khan had an extensive network of operatives in India and Indian-administered Kashmir and his death disrupted the ground operations in India to such an extent that no operation could be undertaken.

Similar drone missile attacks in September and October brought al-Qaeda's European operational branches in North Waziristan to a halt.

Even as death was raining from the skies in the tribal areas, the peace process with the Taliban was gathering pace, with fresh overtures in August. For the first time, all parties noted some flexibility in the Taliban's approach, and it appeared they would at least sit down for negotiations with the Americans or with the Afghan government. (See [Taliban and US get down to talks](#) Asia Times Online, September 11, 2010.)

The process drew on all international players to solicit the student militia to resolve the nearly 10-year conflict. (See [Taliban soften as talks gain speed](#) Asia Times Online, September 15, 2010.) To establish rapport with the Taliban and further the process of dialogue, the Taliban's commander in Afghanistan, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, was released. (See [Pakistan frees Taliban commander](#) Asia Times Online, October 16, 2010.)

The US's top man in Afghanistan, General David Petraeus, while saying that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would remain tough in Afghanistan against the Taliban, said the peace process was welcomed. He also disclosed that NATO had even gave safe passage to a senior Taliban commander to go to Kabul for talks - a hint over the release in Pakistan of Baradar.

Publicly, though, the Taliban did not acknowledge that talks were taking place. A recent handout read:

No Taliban official has spoken to the Americans or their puppet Afghan government ... those who were arrested [Baradar], those who changed their loyalties [former Taliban foreign minister Abdul Wakeel Muttawakil and Senator Arsala Rahmani] or those who are living under Afghan government surveillance [former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan Mullah Zaeef] are not Taliban representatives. Their interaction does not have any meaning for the Taliban.

Due to the extraordinary surveillance against the Taliban, no senior leader would agree to come forward to give the real Taliban side of the story; however, eventually a middle-cadre member was sent to meet with Asia Times Online, and he confirmed the public statement.

"The much-hyped reconciliation strategy was a trap and we never actually considered it as an option," the Taliban envoy - who had traveled from Kandahar in Afghanistan - said.

"The Americans never wanted reconciliation with the Taliban. They never approached us directly. If we were approached by third parties, like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan or the UAE [United Arab Emirates], we did not consider it anything serious," the envoy said.

This did not fit with a general understanding that Naseeruddin Haqqani, the son of commander Jalaluddin Haqqani and brother of Sirajuddin Haqqani of the most powerful Taliban network, had been at the Saudi Embassy in Islamabad in September. Further, the embassy had arranged for him and his family to go on pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia. (Naseeruddin Haqqani had been arrested in 2009 by the Pakistani security forces and then released in exchange for Pakistani soldiers. The swap was brokered by now slain Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud.)

I gave my understanding, "That was the real clandestine interaction of the Haqqani network with the American or the Afghan government through Saudi Arabia, not the contacts mentioned in the Western media."

I continued, challenging the envoy's version of events, "The fact of the matter is that the Taliban did show flexibility for talks, so I wonder why they abruptly failed?"

The Talib responded, "On the one hand they were offering an olive branch and from the another hand they were tightening the noose around us. We could see that the whole game of reconciliation was not aimed at offering us power, but on inflicting serious damage on us."

He explained, "On the one side they were looking to establish a channel of communication with the Haqqanis, yet now [in October] they are gathering troops in Khost [province in Afghanistan across the border from North Waziristan]. There has been extraordinary troop mobilization in Khost. For what?" he asked, then answered the question.

"Pressure is mounting on Pakistan to carry out a military operation in North Waziristan against the Haqqani network. It is clearly evident that they want to place the Haqqani network between a hammer and a hard rock [NATO forces in Khost and the Pakistan army in North Waziristan]."

The Talib concluded, "There is more. For the first time, we see extraordinary movement in Chaman [a border town in Pakistan's Balochistan province across from the Spin Boldak-Kandahar area in Afghanistan]. This makes us wonder what the reconciliation process is really all about. In this whole situation, Pakistan's role is central. If it takes NATO's side, the Taliban will have a tough time as we see a serious battle ahead behind this smokescreen of the reconciliation process."

Ali al-Shamsi, a special envoy of the UAE for Pakistan and Afghanistan and the main person who arranged high-profile Taliban meetings in Dubai at the US's behest to initiate the dialogue process, submitted his resignation this month. (Shamsi was the UAE's ambassador to Pakistan during Taliban rule in Afghanistan - 1996-2001.)

However, the UAE government requested him to continue his assignment until a peace conference in Dubai on Afghanistan scheduled for late next month. The conference is an initiative by the Afghan government.

Shamsi's move followed the Americans stating that Washington could not give any guarantees for meeting any conditions set by the Taliban in the leadup to dialogue and that it backed out of earlier promises. (See [Taliban and US get down to talks](#) Asia Times Online, September 11, 2010.)

Al-Qaeda, meanwhile, realizing all along that it is the US's main target, is regrouping after all the losses it has sustained.

Early this year, al-Qaeda finally had 16 of its members released by Iran. (See [How Iran and al-Qaeda made a deal](#) Asia Times Online, April 30, 2010. Prominent among them were Saad bin Laden (one of Osama bin Laden's sons), Saiful Adil, Suleman al-Gaith and Abu Hafs al-Mauritani.

They settled in the tribal areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, since they had spent almost eight years in detention in Iran, al-Qaeda kept them away from operations, they were not even allowed to attend *shura* (council) meetings.

In the face of al-Qaeda's losses, though, al-Qaeda decided to embrace them for operations. Saiful Adil is likely to be the new face of al-Qaeda in 2011, with operations emanating in Pakistan and spreading to Somalia, Yemen and Turkey to pitch operations in Europe and India.

As matters stand now, going into 2011, the Taliban will continue the struggle in

Afghanistan with the help of al-Qaeda's new team, which in turn will also plan attacks in Europe and India.