

AFGHANISTAN NEWS BULLETIN

Afghanistan News 02/21/2012 – Bulletin # 2783
Compiled by the Embassy of Afghanistan in Canada
www.afghanemb-canada.net
email:contact@afghanemb-canada.net

In This Bulletin:

- ✚ Afghan president: Pakistan crucial to peace talks
- ✚ Afghan officials meeting Taliban in Pakistan
- ✚ Obama, Karzai discuss Afghan reconciliation
- ✚ Talk of peace stirs up Qaeda-Taliban tensions
- ✚ US apologizes for Quran burnings in Afghanistan
- ✚ US military deaths in Afghanistan at 1,771
- ✚ Afghan Police Catch Terrorists Taking Children to Pakistan
- ✚ Afghans prepare to fight for their future in London
- ✚ Stumbling Afghan peace talks need re-think: advisor
- ✚ The Pitfalls of Negotiations in AfPak

[Disclaimer: The content of this news bulletin does not necessarily reflect the view or policy of the Afghan Government, unless specifically stated as such. The collection of articles and commentaries from Afghan and international news sources is provided for informational purposes, and accuracy of the news is the responsibility of the original source.]

Afghan president: Pakistan crucial to peace talks

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) 21 Feb 2012-- Pakistani support of negotiations with the Taliban will be "crucial" to the success of any peace talks, Afghan President Hamid Karzai said Tuesday as he repeated a call for the neighboring country to facilitate meetings.

Pakistan is considered a key player in any peace talks with the Taliban because Islamabad has a history of involvement with the insurgent group and because most of the top Taliban figures, including leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, are believed to be based there.

The Pakistani government however has always denied that its territory is a safe haven for Taliban leaders and said it has no ties to the group - a stance that may explain why Karzai's attempts to enlist Islamabad has so far been rebuffed.

The Afghan president's new appeal comes after an acrimonious visit to Pakistan last week during which he asked the Pakistani government to help bring Taliban leaders to the negotiating table. Pakistani officials called it "preposterous" to suggest that they would be able to do so.

Since that visit, Karzai has discussed the issue in phone calls with both U.S. President Barack Obama and Pakistani Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani, according to issued statements.

Gilani's office said that he assured Karzai in their call Tuesday that Pakistan "would wholeheartedly support a peace process in Afghanistan which is Afghan-owned and Afghan-led."

But Karzai's statement suggested that he was still pushing for a more concrete commitment from Pakistan to help get negotiations going. He once again invited the Taliban to take part in direct talks with the Afghan government and stressed the need for Pakistan to "support and facilitate our direct negotiation."

"Pakistan's support to the peace process will be crucial to its success, as well as a significant contribution to the security and stability of Afghanistan and the entire region," Karzai said in the statement.

Though Karzai did not give details on what sort of facilitation he was expecting, Afghan officials have previously asked for Islamabad to promise safe passage for Taliban representatives going to meeting sites outside of Pakistan. They also want access to certain Taliban prisoners in Pakistani prisons.

Afghan officials meeting Taliban in Pakistan

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan (Reuters) 21 February 2012- Afghan officials are holding talks with the Taliban in Pakistan, the head of a provincial peace council in the insurgency's heartland Kandahar said on Tuesday, in a possible signal that Islamabad is boosting its support for Afghan peace efforts.

Kandahar peace council head Ata Mohammad Ahmadi told Reuters the officials have been meeting for "some time" with mid-level Taliban commander in the southwest Pakistani city of Quetta, where the leadership of the militant group is said to be based.

"In the last 10 days, our peace council delegation have gone to Quetta three times in twos and threes," he said.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai's government has repeatedly called on regional power Pakistan to support its efforts to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table.

Ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan were strained for months after the assassination in September of Afghan peace envoy and former president Burhanuddin Rabbani.

Afghan officials blamed Pakistan's intelligence agency, allegations angrily denied by Islamabad.

But Pakistani Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar said after a recent trip to Kabul that a lot of the ill will between the neighbors had faded. She said Pakistan would encourage Afghan militant groups to pursue peace if asked by Kabul.

Karzai held talks with Pakistani leaders in Islamabad last week.

"We are very optimistic about President Karzai's recent trip to Pakistan and that may have opened the door," Arsala Rahmani, a senior member of Afghanistan's High Peace Council - tasked with reaching out to insurgents - told Reuters.

In a statement released on Tuesday, Karzai said:

"While emphasizing the importance of Pakistan's support for the peace process, I hereby request our brotherly government of Pakistan to support and facilitate our direct negotiation efforts as part of the peace process."

Afghanistan is known to want access to Taliban leaders belonging to the so-called Quetta Shura, named after the city where it is believed to be based.

The Kabul government believes they would be the decision makers in any substantive peace negotiations aimed at ending the war now in its eleventh year.

Pakistan, seen as critical to efforts to stabilize Afghanistan, has consistently denied giving sanctuary to insurgents and denies that any Taliban leaders are present in the southwestern city of Quetta, near the Afghan border.

It is unlikely that any meetings between Afghan officials and Taliban commanders could take place in Quetta without the knowledge of Pakistan's pervasive intelligence agencies.

Pakistan may have stepped up its cooperation with the Afghan government by allowing what Ahmadi said were meetings in Quetta. Pakistani officials were not immediately available for comment.

It was unclear if the reported Quetta meetings were part of broad Afghan government efforts to bring the Taliban into peace talks under the 70-member High Peace Council set up by Karzai.

Obama, Karzai discuss Afghan reconciliation

WASHINGTON (AP) 20 Feb 2012-- President Barack Obama has spoken to Afghan President Hamid Karzai to discuss efforts to reconcile with elements of the Taliban, including his meeting last week with Pakistani and Iranian leaders.

The White House says Obama and Karzai on Monday discussed regional support for reconciliation in Afghanistan. The conversation came in the wake of a three-day summit in Islamabad among Karzai and Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The call also followed Karzai's assertion last week that the U.S., the Afghan government and the Taliban had held three-way talks aimed at moving toward a political settlement of the war.

Karzai on Saturday met with a Taliban-linked Pakistani cleric, Maulana Samiul Haq, in an effort to secure his help in bringing the militant movement's leadership into peace negotiations.

Talk of peace stirs up Qaeda-Taliban tensions

AFP, 20/02/2012-The Taliban's decision to talk to the United States is stirring up tensions with Al-Qaeda as the Afghan militia comes under pressure to dump its terror allies in the name of peace.

Times are hard for Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The network has been weakened significantly by US drone strikes on their hideouts, last May's killing of founder Osama bin Laden and by finances drying up.

And since the Afghan Taliban declared themselves in favour of talks with the United States in Qatar that could help end a decade of war in Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda has felt increasingly abandoned in its fight against the West.

As far as it's concerned, talking to the Americans is treason.

"Al-Qaeda blames us. They tell us 'why are you letting us down, as we helped you when you were down?'" an Afghan Taliban official told AFP.

"We're not happy with the Doha process," a source close to Al-Qaeda confirmed to AFP. "We want the war to continue in Afghanistan and Pakistan."

After taking power in 1996, the Taliban regime allowed Al-Qaeda to base itself in Afghanistan, taking advantage of fierce codes of hospitality and alliances made during the 1980s jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan.

But the alliance cost the Taliban dear. They refused to hand over bin Laden to the Americans after the September 11, 2001 attacks, the United States invaded and their regime collapsed within weeks.

The Americans ruled out any negotiations and the Taliban fled across the border into Pakistan's lawless tribal belt, where they found support among Al-Qaeda fighters, giving birth to a new stage in their relationship.

Al-Qaeda strengthened its links with Pakistani extremist groups, including the umbrella Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which pledged allegiance and in 2007 launched a bloody insurgency against the US-allied government in Islamabad.

In Afghanistan, the conflict only worsened, making it increasingly evident that there could be no military victory for anyone.

US President Barack Obama's announcement that NATO combat troops would withdraw in 2014 opened the door to a possible return to power for the Taliban.

But Washington has conditioned peace on the Taliban cutting all ties with Al-Qaeda. Saudi Arabia has also made its involvement in peace efforts conditional on the Taliban renouncing Al-Qaeda.

By approving talks with the United States, the elusive one-eyed Taliban leader Mullah Omar has dissociated himself from Al-Qaeda.

Considerably weakened, foreign fighters in Al-Qaeda number no more than a few hundred in Pakistan and only dozens in Afghanistan, observers say.

On February 9, Pakistani officials said Badar Mansoor was killed in a US drone strike in Waziristan. He was described as the "de facto leader of Al-Qaeda in Pakistan" and coordinator between Al-Qaeda and local Taliban.

"Afghan Taliban think they have done enough for Al-Qaeda and bin Laden. Links between Al-Qaeda and Taliban got weaker after bin Laden's death," said Rahimullah Yusufzai, a Pakistani journalist and expert on the Afghan war.

Mullah Omar recently asked the Pakistani Taliban to distance themselves from Al-Qaeda and no longer attack Pakistan, considered vital in any peace process in Afghanistan, said the Afghan Taliban official.

TTP factions committed to a ceasefire, but the only commander who refused to comply was Hakimullah Mehsud, he added. Young and impetuous, the TTP leader says there will be no end to attacks until Washington stops drone strikes.

Mehsud is part of a new generation, graduates of ultra-radical movements from Punjab with a sectarian agenda and veterans of particularly brutal bombings, leading to fears about a new "Pakistani" version of Al-Qaeda.

Attacks have declined in recent months in Pakistan, which officials put down to the Taliban being weakened by drone strikes and Pakistani offensives.

But as long as the drone strikes continue and the army continues to attack, "the threat won't dry up," particularly in the tribal belt -- the main recruitment hub for militants, Yusufzai warned.

US apologizes for Quran burnings in Afghanistan

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) 21 Feb 2012-- The U.S. apologized Tuesday for the burning of Muslim holy books that had been pulled from the shelves of a detention center library adjoining a major base in eastern Afghanistan because they contained extremist messages or inscriptions.

The White House echoed military officials in saying that the burning of Qurans and other Islamic reading material that had been tossed in a pile of garbage was an accident.

But more than 2,000 Afghans protested the incident outside the Bagram Air Base that stoked rising anti-foreign sentiment and fueled Afghan claims that foreign troops disrespect their culture and Islamic religion even as the Americans and other NATO forces prepare to withdraw by the end of 2014.

Demonstrators who gathered outside Bagram Air Field, one of the largest U.S. bases in Afghanistan, shouted, "Die, die, foreigners!" Some fired rifles into the air. Others threw rocks at the gate of the base and set tires on fire.

U.S. Gen. John Allen, the top commander of American and NATO forces in Afghanistan, said the books had been mistakenly given to troops to be burned at a garbage pit at Bagram, a sprawling U.S. military base north of the Afghan capital, Kabul.

"It was not a decision that was made because they were religious materials," Allen said. "It was not a decision that was made with respect to the faith of Islam. It was a mistake. It was an error. The moment we found out about it we immediately stopped and we intervened."

The Quran is the most sacred object in the daily lives of Muslims and burning it is considered an offense against God. The Quran is so important in the faith that Islamic teaching spells out how it should be handled, including directing anyone who touches it to be in a state of ritual purity. Muslims can only dispose of Qurans in very specific ways, including burning or burying those that have been damaged or corrupted to prevent God's word from being defiled.

A Western military official with knowledge of the incident said it appeared that the Qurans and other Islamic readings in the library were being used to fuel extremism, and that detainees at Parwan Detention Facility, which adjoins Bagram, were writing on the documents to exchange extremist messages. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to release the information.

The military official said that several hundred Islamic publications, including Qurans, were removed from the library. Some of the publications had extremist content; others had extremist messages written on their pages by detainees, the official said. The official said the documents were charred and burnt, but none of them were destroyed.

"We will look into the reason those materials were gathered," Allen said. "We will look into the manner in which the decision was made to dispose of them in this manner."

Allen issued a new directive ordering all coalition forces in Afghanistan to complete training in the proper handling of religious materials no later than March 3. The training will include the identification of religious materials, their significance, correct handling and storage, he said.

The White House also apologized, with press secretary Jay Carney saying it was a "deeply unfortunate incident" that doesn't reflect the respect the U.S. military has for the religious practices of the Afghan people. Carney did not address details about what occurred.

U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta added his voice, saying he disapproved of the conduct. He promised to review the results of the coalition's investigation to ensure that all steps are taken to prevent it from happening again.

In a statement, Afghan President Hamid Karzai condemned the incident and appointed a delegation to investigate. He said initial reports were that four Qurans were burned.

Early Tuesday, as word of the incident spread, about 100 demonstrators gathered outside the base in Parwan province. As the crowd grew, so did the outrage.

One protester, Mohammad Hakim, said if U.S. forces can't bring peace to Afghanistan, they should go home.

"They should leave Afghanistan rather than disrespecting our religion, our faith," Hakim said. "They have to leave and if next time they disrespect our religion, we will defend our holy Quran, religion and faith until the last drop of blood has left in our body."

Ahmad Zaki Zahed, chief of the provincial council, said U.S. military officials took him to a burn pit on the base where 60 to 70 books, including Qurans, were recovered. The books were used by detainees once incarcerated at the base, he said.

"Some were all burned. Some were half-burned," Zahed said, adding that he did not know exactly how many Qurans had been burned.

Zahed said five Afghans working at the pit told him that the religious books were in the garbage that two soldiers with the U.S.-led coalition transported to the pit in a truck Monday night. When they realized the books were in the trash, the laborers quickly worked to recover them, he said.

"The laborers there showed me how their fingers were burned when they took the books out of the fire," he said.

Afghan Army Gen. Abdul Jalil Rahimi, the commander of a military coordination office in the province, said he and other officials met with protesters, tribal elders

and clerics to try to calm their emotional response. "The protesters were very angry and didn't want to end their protest," he said.

Later, however, the protesters ended the rally and said they would send 20 representatives from the group to Kabul to talk with Afghan parliamentarians and demanded a meeting with Karzai, Rahimi said.

The governor's office in Kandahar province in southern Afghanistan called the incident a "shameful move by some stupid individuals."

Zia Ul Rahman, deputy provincial police chief, said between 2,000 and 2,500 protesters demonstrated at the base.

"The people are very angry. The mood is very negative," Rahman said while the rally was going on. "Some are firing hunting guns in the air, but there have been no casualties."

Police said a similar protest on Tuesday just east of Kabul ended peacefully.

In April 2011, Afghans protesting the burning of a Quran by a Florida pastor turned deadly when gunmen in the crowd stormed a U.N. compound in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif and killed three staffers and four Nepalese guards.

Also on Tuesday, NATO said four NATO service members were killed in southern Afghanistan - three in a roadside bombing and one in a non-battle related injury. The international military coalition did not give any other details about their deaths. So far this year, 47 NATO service members have been killed in Afghanistan.

US military deaths in Afghanistan at 1,771

AP- As of Tuesday, Feb. 21, 2012, at least 1,771 members of the U.S. military had died in Afghanistan as a result of the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001, according to an Associated Press count.

The AP count is six less than the Defense Department's tally, last updated Friday, Feb. 17, 2012 at 10 a.m. EST.

At least 1,479 military service members have died in Afghanistan as a result of hostile action, according to the military's numbers.

Outside of Afghanistan, the department reports at least 104 more members of the U.S. military died in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Of those, 12 were the result of hostile action.

The AP count of total OEF casualties outside of Afghanistan is six more than the department's tally.

The Defense Department also counts three military civilian deaths.

Since the start of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, 15,343 U.S. service members have been wounded in hostile action, according to the Defense Department.

Afghan Police Catch Terrorists Taking Children to Pakistan

TOLOnews.com, Monday, 20 February 2012-Afghan police have captured a group of terrorists taking 41 Afghan children to Pakistan to receive insurgent training, the Afghan Ministry of Interior said on Monday.

Speaking at a press conference in Kabul, a spokesman for the Interior Ministry, Sediq Sediqi, said that the terrorist group was captured in the Watapor district of eastern Kunar province by Afghan police.

"They wanted to take Afghan children to other side of the border and bring them back to conduct terrorist activities against the Afghan people," Mr Sediqi said.

He said that despite problems that remain within the Afghan National Police - such as illiteracy and the lack of professionalism - the force had performed well recently. In the past 11 months, 481 terrorists have been killed and 147 others have been wounded by the Afghan police. Another 295 were captured, Mr Sediqi said.

Afghans prepare to fight for their future in London

Reuters, Feb 21, 2012-The sounds produced by the three Afghan athletes going to the London Olympics are fierce: elongated wails ricochet off the chipped and dilapidated walls of the taekwondo centre, while leather smacks and slaps at the boxing gym.

In a country wrenched by decades of war, perhaps it is no surprise that all three, a taekwondo male duo including the Beijing bronze medallist Rohullah Nikpai, and the teenage female boxer Sadaf Rahimi, followed fighting sports.

They were born into a conflict that still rages, and chronic insecurity and poverty mean they train in spartan spaces with little financial support, and currently freezing cold in the country's worst winter for 30 years.

"The difference between me and others is I want to show other countries that an Afghan girl can fight," the 17-year-old Rahimi said, squinting from a protective face mask that pinches her cheeks and black kohl-lined eyes.

Like Nikpai, Rahimi and her family fled to neighbouring Iran to escape the violence and brutal oppression of the Taliban, who were toppled just over a decade ago.

The austere Islamist group had publicly stoned women to death for charges of adultery at the Ghazi stadium, where Rahimi, her two sisters and the rest of the country's first team of female boxers, set up in 2007, practice today.

Her muscular shoulders rippling as she readies to throw punches at her coach, Rahimi said she feared the Taliban, who banned women from education, sports and most work, would regain a share in power through early talks with Afghan and US officials aimed at ending the Nato-led war.

"I hope the Taliban don't come back and take over," she said, wincing and starting to untie pink shoelaces over her knuckles, used instead of hard-to-get strapping. "But if they do, I urge them to let women engage in sports and go to school".

Mohammad Saber Sharifi, her coach and a former professional boxer and advocate of Afghan women's rights, especially through sport, said Rahimi had been given a wild card to compete at the Olympics, so she can sidestep further qualifying rounds. She will soon leave Kabul's rutted and snowbound streets for London to train for the Olympics, where women's boxing is debuting as a sport, he said.

On the other side of Kabul from Ghazi stadium, in an equally barren practice space, 24-year-old Nikpai and fellow taekwondo Olympic contender Nesar Ahmad Bahawi kick and punch in preparation for competition at London's ExCel centre in August. Wearing red chest and back guards made from the material used in bulletproof vests, the pair make high-pitched screeches as they take aim, typical of the sport. But despite winning Afghanistan's first Olympic medal at Beijing four years ago, Nikpai bemoaned the lack of support given to sport in his country.

"Nesar and I don't have a good place to train, facilities, or even a regular transport system and proper electricity," he said, his breath steaming in the frigid air of the training centre, whose small heater did little to combat the frozen white landscape outside.

Poor conditions are not limited to taekwondo, whose national team members get a monthly stipend of between \$10 (Dh 36.7) to \$14.

Sharifi, whose team have never trained in a ring, said tiny budgets severely limit their success.

"We can't really compare ourselves to the world," said Nikpai, who was lured to taekwondo after watching hours of action films as a refugee in Iran. He returned to Kabul in 2004.

Nikpai received a hero's welcome upon his return from Beijing and was summoned to meet Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who presented him with a brand new flat, money and a car.

General Mohammad Zahir Akhbar, the head of the Afghan Olympic Committee, said he hopes more athletes in wrestling, judo and athletics will qualify for London. "We are war-torn, our athletes face economic and security problems, but we are aiming for medals," he said.

First-time Olympian Bahawi, who took up taekwondo at the behest of his family because he kept kicking his friends, said triumph at international competitions could be a way to lift security at home.

"Sport brings a message of peace and stability in the country," said the 25 year old from the country's eastern Kapisa province before knocking flat a teammate with two quick kicks on his side.

Stumbling Afghan peace talks need re-think: advisor

Reuters, Sun Feb 19, 2012-Afghan government efforts to bring the Taliban into peace talks are stumbling and bold steps were needed to ensure that a council spearheading the reconciliation process can win the trust of insurgents, said a presidential advisor Sunday.

Assadullah Wafa also expressed concern that Afghans, who have been subjected to one conflict after another, were losing hope that peace was possible from a process that so far has been shrouded in secrecy and conflicting views of likely success.

The government has made some contacts with the Taliban, who have made a strong comeback after being toppled by a U.S. invasion in 2001, but there are no signs that full-fledged peace talks will happen anytime soon.

U.S. diplomats have also been seeking to broaden exploratory talks that began clandestinely in Germany in late 2010 after the Taliban offered to open a representative office in the Gulf emirate of Qatar, prompting demands for inclusion from Kabul.

"The talk about peace talks is just futile," said Wafa, an advisor to President Hamid Karzai and a former governor in some of Afghanistan's most volatile provinces. Karzai set up a 70-member High Peace Council two years ago, with Wafa as a member, to try and negotiate an end to the war, now dragging into its eleventh year. It is meant to represent all ethnic and political alliances in a bid to reach out to the Taliban leadership, as well as convince grassroots insurgent fighters to join the government.

Wafa, however, questioned its effectiveness, and said its wide makeup actually made it difficult for the government to reach out to militant groups.

"I have told President Karzai and he promised that there would be repair of the peace council. I am not afraid to speak out, but it doesn't much bear fruit. There must be a review," he told Reuters in an interview.

"I think genuine people aren't part of the peace council, or there are individuals who the Taliban fought in the past or some communist baqaya (remains) in the council, because of whom the Taliban aren't interested in talks."

SUSPICIOUS OF PAKISTAN

Wafa, one of the Afghan government's most experienced bureaucrats, said a reorganization of the council could help kick-start talks in Qatar, where the Taliban has set up an office to build contacts with the United States, or elsewhere.

The stakes are high. Failure to lure the Taliban to the negotiating table could mean perpetual instability, or even another civil war, once NATO combat troops withdraw in 2014.

Wafa's skepticism extends far beyond the High Peace Council.

He accused regional power Pakistan -- seen as critical to efforts to end the war -- of playing a double game, promising to work for peace while using the Taliban and other groups as proxies to advance its interests in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is known to want access to Taliban leaders, including Mullah Omar, belonging to the so-called Quetta Shura, named after the Pakistani city where it is said to be based.

They would be the decision makers in any substantive peace negotiations.

"They (Pakistan) say one thing and do another. There is no doubt that Taliban leadership and Mullah Omar are in Quetta. They recruit, fund and people to create instability on this side," Wafa said.

"We have been deprived of peace in the country for the last 30 years and it is because of our neighbors."

Pakistan has consistently denied giving sanctuary to insurgents and denies the existence of any Quetta Shura, or leadership council.

Karzai told the Wall Street Journal last week there had been three-way "contacts" between U.S. officials and the Taliban, as well as his government, which the insurgents have previously refused to deal with, calling it a U.S. "puppet."

Wafa said while there had been infrequent and indirect Taliban contacts at a low level, he was "not aware where Karzai has made any contact," and large international bounties on Taliban leaders made reconciliation seem impossible.

"How can they become confident and ready for talks? I think the world does not want peace in the country. They just throw dust in the eyes," he said.

Wafa said part of his job was to hear complaint petitions from across the country and be a conduit to Karzai, and the message from the Afghan people was that they had begun to lose faith in the reconciliation drive.

The Pitfalls of Negotiations in AfPak

The National Interest, By Marvin Weinbaum, James P. Farwell -Over the last year, relations between Pakistan and the United States have been driven to ever-lower depths. The leaderships of both countries are struggling to rebuild the semblance of a working relationship, especially regarding Afghanistan. Pakistan has long been convinced that the United States and its allies were bound to fail in Afghanistan and that the American war on terrorism is responsible for the threats Pakistan faces from its own extremists. Meanwhile, the United States regularly complains that Pakistan plays a double game, providing logistical and intelligence assistance while also protecting and sometimes facilitating the Taliban insurgency.

While the strategic interests of Washington and Islamabad have so often clashed over Afghanistan, their interests have lately converged on an endgame for that embattled country. Their common strategic approach aims to negotiate a grand bargain with senior Taliban leaders. But it faces heavy odds and as presently conceived threatens to exclude other important stakeholders in Afghanistan—including the Karzai regime itself.

The Push for Negotiations

As U.S. and allied troops depart, there is a growing lack of confidence in the transition to Afghan security forces, resulting in a desperate diplomatic push by Washington to find a political solution to the conflict. A coalition government would provide a soft landing for a post-2014 Afghanistan and allowing the orderly exit of foreign forces. And a negotiated settlement of the conflict would ensure that the country's constitutional and political framework was left intact and hard-won human-rights gains protected.

Pakistan is similarly anxious for a power-sharing agreement. Without one, Afghanistan could easily slip into a proxy civil war that draws in Iran, Russia and India on one side and Pakistan on the other. Pakistan's military has held the Afghan Taliban in reserve as a force to secure Pakistan's interests in the wake of a failed NATO counterinsurgency and a collapsing Afghanistan. But Pakistan's generals are realists: they recognize that once in power, the Taliban will resist their manipulation. An outright Taliban victory might be undesirable and even dangerous

for a Pakistan battling its own Taliban insurgency. The preferred outcome for Pakistan is instead rule by a coalition in Kabul. The Taliban's presence would serve to blunt Indian influence while its governing partners curb any contagion of radical Islamist adventurism in Pakistan and the region.

Flawed Talks in Qatar

A previously reluctant Taliban has opened an office in Qatar. Both the United States and Pakistan see the decision as a significant breakthrough. American diplomats are convinced that conditions are ripe for talks and that pragmatists will prevail over dogmatists in the leadership circles around Mullah Muhammad Omar's Taliban and his major allies, the Haqqani network and Gulbudin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami. With the right confidence building, insurgents can presumably be induced to sever their ties to international terrorist groups—including, above all, al-Qaeda.

Fearing being left out, Pakistan had previously scuttled direct contact between Taliban leaders and potential American interlocutors. Deep suspicions exist between the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani intelligence services (ISI), as was confirmed by a recent NATO report based on interrogations of captured insurgents. Yet the ISI now feels confident, having helped to bring the Taliban to Qatar, that it can ensure that Pakistan's interests will be represented in any negotiations.

The door should always be left open for talks with an adversary. But negotiations have the greatest likelihood of making progress when there is either a serious stalemate or one of the combatants—convinced it cannot prevail—seeks the best peace terms it can get. Neither of these conditions is present in the current Afghan conflict. There seem few incentives for the Taliban to have to compromise, given their goal of imposing sharia rule in Afghanistan. With NATO military operations scheduled to end in 2014, if not earlier, the Taliban has more reason than ever to believe that it has time and God on its side. Meanwhile, although Afghans and the international community may have doubts whether there can be a strictly military solution to the conflict, they are not willing to accede to the Taliban's basic designs for an Afghan state.

The looming talks in Qatar threaten to set back the counterinsurgency being waged by Afghan and international forces and increase chances for a new civil war. An exhausted Afghan people approve of serious negotiations for peace. But the prospect that an unreconstructed Taliban may again wield domestic power drives most Afghans to hedge their loyalties toward the Kabul regime and cooperation with foreign forces. A coalition of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras will fight rather than submit to any significant concessions to the Taliban.

Recognition of the Taliban in Qatar effectively accords the insurgency unearned legitimacy. More seriously, by taking the lead role in bringing the Taliban to the table, the United States and Pakistan have made it possible for the Taliban to exclude the Afghan government from participation in negotiations. Any peace process that fails to be inclusive of the Karzai government and all of Afghanistan's major political stakeholders can never succeed. It will instead divide Afghans and set the stage for a protracted civil war.

Marvin G. Weinbaum is a scholar in residence at the Middle East Institute and former intelligence analyst in the U.S. Department of State. James P. Farwell is the author of *The Pakistan Cauldron: Conspiracy, Assassination & Instability*, and he is a

Senior Research Scholar in Strategic Studies at the Canada Centre for Global Security Studies, Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto.