

To talk or not to talk? Abdullah Abdullah's likely stance on negotiating with the Taliban

By **Bette Dam**

■ Executive summary

Until now, the painstakingly slow and heavily criticised attempts to negotiate peace in Afghanistan have involved mostly the Taliban, President Hamid Karzai and the U.S. This report suggests that the northern groups should not be forgotten in this process, many of whom are represented by the currently extremely powerful Dr Abdullah Abdullah and his political party, the National Coalition of Afghanistan.

Especially now that Abdullah has a serious chance of being part of the next Afghan government, and possibly even becoming president, it is time to take a closer look at the northerners' attitude to possible negotiations and their relationship with the Taliban.

Introduction

At the moment (August 2014) it is very difficult to predict what the new leadership of Afghanistan will look like after the as-yet unfinalised presidential elections; as a consequence, it is equally difficult to predict the directions that possible negotiations with the Taliban will take. However, it is clear that presidential contender Dr Abdullah Abdullah will play an important role in Afghanistan's future, whether inside or outside the government. It is currently predicted that Ashraf Ghani has the best chance of winning the presidential elections, but a consensus government is also possible that would include Abdullah.

This report will examine the possibility of peace negotiations with the Taliban from the perspective of the northern groups, and mainly Abdullah's National Coalition of Afghanistan. Abdullah's team – mainly comprising Tajiks – also contains Mohammed Khan, who is a representative of Hizb-e-Islami (a Pashtun grouping), and a representative of the Hazara community, Mohammad Mohaqiq. Abdullah was born in Kabul, but has a Pashtun father, which he highlighted during the election campaign to attract as many Pashtun voters as possible, although he is seen more as a Tajik politician (his mother was a Tajik) than a Pashtun representative.

Surprisingly, not much has been written about the views of northern groups like Abdullah's on negotiations with the Taliban. Are they involved in talks with the Taliban? Some say that the northerners are the Taliban's arch enemies and

assume that any contact between the two groupings is impossible. But is this an accurate assessment of the current situation?

Peace talks with the Taliban after the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan of 2001 are also a relatively new concept that has only been discussed in the West in the last three years of the Afghan war.¹ Until the U.S. government started bringing up the issue, talks were not considered an option and the Western media hardly addressed the possibility. Now, after nearly 13 years, the U.S. finds itself involved in an unpopular war that has cost billions of dollars and will go down in history as the longest war the country has ever fought, even longer than the Vietnam conflict. For opportunistic reasons the U.S. has changed its war strategy and now hopes to end the conflict by negotiating with the Taliban. While acknowledging that many parties, including neighbouring countries, are attempting to influence the Afghan negotiations, this report will first examine the Afghan domestic context, focusing on where the northerners stand in terms of possible peace talks.

Up to this point the spotlight has almost always been on Hamid Karzai's response to negotiations. His attitude to negotiations is often seen as "ambivalent" (Rashid, 2013), while peace talks have been characterised as "dangerous" because of the involved deals with Pakistan (which harbours many Taliban) (Chayes, 2012), or "secret" when Karzai has talked to the Taliban without consulting his Western allies (Ahmed & Rosenberg, 2014).

¹ For a good overview of the actors involved in peace talks, see Ruttig (2011).

But has Karzai been the most significant obstacle to contacts with the Taliban? The media quite rightly criticise the president for hampering the peace talks, but it is also important to understand that Karzai leads a coalition cabinet. Since 2001 the northerners have always been a substantial part of this cabinet, in which Abdullah has served as foreign minister. The question then becomes whether Karzai bears the brunt of the world's criticism while the northerners are secretly spoiling the process. In Western eyes Karzai is the president and is therefore responsible for what his government does; his government is thus expected to speak with one voice. But Afghanistan is not the West, and the government is extremely fragmented and filled with quarrelling groups. It is in fact surprising that the cabinet has managed not to collapse, which is something Karzai deserves credit for.

For example, after the 2001 invasion, the northern leaders were not known for regularly reaching out to the Taliban. Karzai's vice president, Mohammad Qasim Fahim (who died in March 2014), was known as an anti-Taliban figure who was respected for his bridging function between the northern groups and Kabul, but also for his opposition to the Taliban. The same holds true for Burhanuddin Rabbani, the former president of Afghanistan who was appointed by Karzai to head the Peace Council and was killed in a suicide attack in 2011 soon after his appointment, whom the Taliban regarded as their arch enemy. Logically, Rabbani's appointment as head of the Peace Council was the outcome of a deal-making process with the northern powerbrokers, but was unlikely to further the council's stated aim of making peace.

Previous Taliban-northern links

Although currently the Taliban and the northerners frequently oppose each other, recent Afghan history paints a different picture not necessarily characterised by continuous hostility. There have been occasions when they were much closer, occasions that are important to understand, especially in 2014, when circumstances in Afghanistan are rapidly changing and new shifts of power likely lie ahead. New alliances and shifts in power are always a possibility in Afghanistan. This is profoundly confusing to foreigners, but Afghan alliances shift quickly and in the context of ongoing war the goal is more to survive than to stick rigidly to ideologies. In such a situation it is best to keep one's options open, especially in light of the fact that many families have members inside both the Taliban and Karzai's government, or have a Tajik/northern connection.

In the last 20 years power has shifted several times at key moments – in 1994 and 2001, for example – and undoubtedly will once more after the 2014 elections have finally been decided. History tells us that these political shifts are

important and can create new deals that could result in peace efforts or not, according to circumstances.

The deal making among the northerners, the Taliban and Hamid Karzai – the current political players in Afghanistan – started to take shape in 1994. As a Pashtun, Karzai is known for his regular contacts with individuals in the predominantly Pashtun grouping in the Taliban. Also, Karzai hails from the city of Kandahar, where the Taliban movement was born, which automatically results in his having connections with the Taliban movement;² indeed, Karzai joined the Taliban when the new movement took over almost all of Afghanistan in 1994. At that time the Karzai family was not as powerful as it used to be, so joining the Taliban was an opportunity to improve the family's position once more. In 1997 Mullah Omar refused to appoint Karzai as ambassador to the United Nations, because of the objections of some members of the Taliban who were suspicious of Karzai's foreign contacts.³

Significantly in the present context, the northern groups also joined the Taliban when the Islamic students rose to power in 1994. At that time an extremely bloody civil war had been in progress since the early 1990s and no one seemed to be able to stop it. The leadership at the time (Rabbani was president – see above) was seen as being responsible for tens of thousands of deaths, widespread rape and a state of complete lawlessness (Fisk, 2001).

The “new kid on the block” – the Taliban – managed to secure large parts of Afghanistan, mainly by fighting an enemy of the Tajik-dominated north of the country, i.e. Hizb-e-Islami. Because at the time they had the same interests as those of the Taliban, the northern leaders opportunistically supported the Pashtun movement of religious students. The Taliban managed to drive the Pashtun-dominated Hizb-e-Islami from province after province. As a consequence, Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud called Mullah Omar “the angel of peace”⁴ and together their forces took Kandahar, Zabol, Uruzgan, Helmand, Pakista and Paktika (Murshed, 2006). (As an indication of the extent to which Afghan alliances fluctuate, currently a Hizb-e-Islami representative is Abdullah Abdullah's vice presidential running mate, while Karzai's government is heavily influenced by Hizb-e-Islami.)

It is important to be aware that until March 1995, power was more important than ideology. Only when the Taliban reached Kabul in February 1995 did the real challenge begin, i.e. that of sharing power. The various Afghan groups were unable to find a political settlement to this problem and the result was another war lasting until September 2001. The rise of the Taliban initially involved other groups because they all needed each other – until the moment when one party became the strongest. The northern

2 He still has such direct contacts today, either directly or through his Pashtun allies, although such contacts are often about practicalities like prisoner exchanges.
 3 Author interviews with associates of Mullah Omar.
 4 Author interviews with Abdull Hakim Mujahed, former Taliban UN representative, and Farouck Azam, former negotiator on behalf of the Northern Alliance. See also De Neufville (1995).

leaders never expected the Taliban to grow so fast and become so powerful. When the Taliban arrived in Kabul they and the northerners stopped talking and started fighting.

After cooperation collapsed, the Taliban started openly accusing the northern leaders of committing crimes during the civil war. When a Taliban victory was ensured, Mullah Omar said that the northern leaders had blood on their hands: “I don’t want to share power with men like these”, he said to his secretary in 1995.⁵ So the war started again and was dirtier than many realise: almost daily attacks took place in the northern provinces and hundreds of civilians were killed.⁶

In 2001 an unexpected new factor appeared on the Afghan horizon with the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, DC of September 11th and the U.S. support for the Northern Alliance that resulted in the toppling of the Taliban. A new distribution of power opened up and new possibilities for deal making became evident. Once again, the same groups aimed to share the spoils.

Hamid Karzai immediately hammered out another deal with several high-level Taliban in the hope of obtaining their support for his second attempt to take power (see Dam, 2014; Gopal, 2014). In this period – mainly October, November and December 2001 – the Taliban leadership left the fighting after guarantees from Karzai that they would not be threatened. The danger of an unstable Afghanistan was minimal by that time because of the deals struck among the various Pashtun groupings. In theory the transition of 2001 could have ended with a grand political deal that included other groups as well.

But the conflict took a different turn, and this time the Northern Alliance did not join Karzai and the Taliban as it had done in 1994, because on this occasion it was not necessary to cooperate in an inclusive Afghan government. After the September 2001 attacks the U.S. joined the Afghan game in force. It did not agree with Hamid Karzai’s deal making and obstructed his attempts to broker a peace. “They are our brothers”, Karzai said several times, referring to the Taliban, but the U.S. was not interested. It had been attacked by Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda and the Taliban offered Bin Laden shelter – but had also tried to deliver him to several Islamic countries for prosecution. Preliminary research results indicate that it is clear that many Taliban did not know about Bin Laden’s plan to attack the U.S. – including Taliban leader Mullah Omar – but that miscommunication and mistrust between the U.S. and the Taliban resulted in an impasse about Bin Laden’s future. As a consequence, the war on terror effectively started in Afghanistan in October 2001.

It is possible that at that time – when they had not yet been enlisted in the war on terror – the northerners would have been willing to work in a shared government with the Taliban, but this question was never raised by any of those involved. The northerners, and especially Abdullah Abdullah (who became more prominent after Northern Alliance leader Ahmed Shah Massoud was murdered, allegedly by al-Qaeda), were willing to fight, and became the natural allies of the U.S.: they wanted to take revenge on the Taliban and retake power, so they started a war against the Taliban. As a result the U.S. supported and empowered them and any possibility of a consensus government evaporated. After September 2001 it was difficult to halt the northerners’ comeback, and before anyone knew it they had occupied Kabul. Any hope that they would give up such a strong position was simply naive.

Ideology or power?

To the West, after September 2001 leaders like Dr Abdullah Abdullah seemed to be “good” secular modernists, while the Taliban were the “bad” Islamists. Hamid Karzai’s plans to negotiate peace were considered ridiculous and nobody was prepared to talk about talks.

But is this good-versus-evil approach an accurate reflection of the realities of the situation in Afghanistan, both then and now? I believe it not only to be wrong, but also to be leading those involved away from the Afghan reality. From the perspective of the prospects for negotiations, it is important to have a better, more detailed (historical) understanding of the way in which power in Afghanistan works.

As described earlier, the Afghan conflict is easier to understand when one accepts that it is driven by the desire for power and not by ideology. Many Afghans first supported the communist regime, then the jihad against the Russians, then President Rabbani, then Mullah Omar and now Hamid Karzai. Alliances shift constantly and ideologies are the first to fall away when political choices have to be made.

It should also be pointed out that Islamic fundamentalist ideas are not the sole prerogative of the Taliban. It was not Mullah Omar, but President Rabbani who was in power when Osama bin Laden arrived in Jalalabad, and by then he was already wanted by the U.S. for attacks on its interests. When he was in power Rabbani had released a Taliban-like decree that restricted women, forbade them to make “noise” in the streets with the wearing of high heels and forced them to wear the burka in public at all times.⁷ On the other hand, from the start of his regime in 1994, Mullah Omar wanted to have a good relationship with the U.S., while he was open to the possibility of appointing a Taliban representative at the United Nations, which Osama bin Laden considered to be un-Islamic.

5 Author interview with Omar’s former secretary, who preferred to remain anonymous.

6 See the archive of the Afghanistan Islamic Press for more details.

7 According to a decree of the “Islamic Government of Afghanistan” in a private archive.

Although differences can be discerned in the backgrounds of Afghan leaders (especially Abdullah Abdullah's, who, unlike his predecessor, Rabbani, is not a religious leader, but studied medicine and is considered to be more a diplomat, like Hamid Karzai), but it should not be forgotten that all these political leaders are a product of Afghanistan and have to cope with the Afghan reality. For the purposes of possible negotiations over the country's future, it is also important to understand that Islam has always been at the centre of the lives of the Afghan people; indeed, few Muslims observe the rituals of Islam with such regularity as the Afghans, whether Taliban or not Taliban, while it should be noted that no political figure in Afghanistan has ever defended the right of a Muslim to leave his/her faith for another, which would be an act of apostasy that carries the death penalty in Afghanistan (Barfield, 2012).

Furthermore, it is also important for future negotiations to acknowledge that all the country's political players have their "dirty" past and no group can claim the moral high ground of a flawless reputation. Every group that plays a role in contemporary Afghanistan carries the wounds of war and all can be accused of atrocities. Massoud massacred Hazaras in Kabul in 1995, Hazaras massacred the Taliban in 1997, and the Taliban massacred them in return in 1998.

Currently, history is being rewritten once again in Afghanistan and another power transition lies ahead. What will the outcome be? Will it bring the warring parties together once more? Could we have another situation like the one in 1994 when many groups worked together (see Van Linschoten & Kuehn, 2014)? And is this likely to last? Afghan politics is extremely difficult to predict – especially because alliances shift so easily, but it is a positive development that the most recent transition did not involve violence, as it did in 1994 and 2001: after over a decade of war the elections happened in a relatively quiet environment.

The question this report now wishes to focus on is: what will Dr Abdullah Abdullah do in these new circumstances? In 1994 the Taliban were in control, in 2001 Karzai, and now it might be Abdullah (possibly together with his main opponent, Ashraf Ghani, a Pashtun from eastern Afghanistan, in a unified government). If this happens, is another deal possible? Many Pashtun are sceptical about the possibility of Taliban cooperation with the northerners if Abdullah comes to power. "If he becomes the president, talks are over", said a prominent Pashtun leader, who was Mullah Omar's secretary in 1994.⁸ Members of the Abdullah camp still believe in the myth that the Taliban are not an Afghan organisation, but a Pakistani grouping that has no social base in Afghanistan.

Currently, some observers expect the conflict to become more ethnic in nature. In a situation where the Tajiks feel that they are in a strong position and win the elections, they might want to move away from power sharing, exclude

their rivals and take exclusive power themselves. Early initiatives for talks undertaken by Karzai led to their re-arming themselves because they felt excluded.

The northern leaders feel they are in a strong position at the moment, some with large bank accounts (funded by U.S. contracts for roads and other construction), and they wield considerable influence in the army, for example. Due to the lack of Pashtun support for the army, its higher ranks are ethnically unbalanced, with Tajiks dominating the officer corps, which is a source of great concern to the international community. This situation does not encourage northerners to engage in talks, simply because there is no need to do so.

But the other, more likely outcome is that in Afghanistan one has to make political deals (as Karzai has done for 12 years) in order to form a new government and stay in power – which will likely be another Islamic government, as has been the case since 1991. And especially now, with U.S. and NATO troops leaving, the northern leaders might feel less confident and safe. If Abdullah Abdullah signs a strategic agreement with the U.S., as he has promised, some U.S. troops will stay to "train, advise and assist", and will support his government. But by the end of 2014 it is expected that the majority of the foreign soldiers will have left. It is said that a maximum of "several thousand troops" will stay, compared to the 30,000 in preceding years, which will dramatically change the power play after 2014, and parties will feel less protected without foreign troops to enforce at least a semblance of "peace".

The 2012 visit of northern leaders to France to hold talks with the Taliban was promising in a way, although poorly managed by the foreign countries involved (France and the U.S.). Prominent figures from the north and supporters of Abdullah Abdullah attended a meeting in Chantilly (France) in December 2012, where they met prominent members of the Taliban. Never before had the Taliban sent such high-level representatives to such a meeting. The northern representatives had previously been government ministers and officials, but had been excluded from key positions in Karzai's government. Seeking for new opportunities for power, they had formed an opposition movement and were reaching out to potential new allies. This event did not initiate formal talks, but signalled that there is always a possible willingness among Afghanistan's different factions to enter into dialogue. The crucial and naïve mistake of those who organised the meeting was not to invite Hamid Karzai and his supporters, who obviously felt sidelined, which made the president abandon a second meeting scheduled in Tajikistan.

Questions are also being asked in Kabul about why Abdullah did not face severe Taliban resistance during his election campaign. Although the Taliban were able to attack a very secure target – the Serena Hotel in Kabul –

⁸ See note 5, above.

they only once targeted Abdullah's campaign caravans as they travelled throughout the country. Some analysts claim that this is because of Taliban weakness (Semple, 2014), while others say that the risk of Karzai cancelling the elections because of a major incident and thereby remaining in power was not what the Taliban wanted. It is also possible that talks have been held already and that Abdullah's team promised certain members of the Taliban a share of the national cake in return for security. One of the political advisers of General Dunfort, the current NATO commander, says that he is "100% sure" that deals have been made: "It's obvious to us that it was on all levels, and much more than the elections in 2009." In an interview Abdullah hinted at this, saying: "In local terms, in some areas, they [the Taliban] have assured us not to disrupt the elections, but I am not 100% sure this will be the case" (*Wall Street Journal*, 2013).

At the moment there is not much more to say. These latest developments seem to indicate some signs of minimal contacts with (some of) the Taliban. Taliban sources in Dubai told me that representatives of Abdullah's camp visited the city to talk to them, but mostly about prison exchanges or the opening of routes for logistics (in return for money). Obviously, these activities are not reported, but need to be taken into account.

Conclusion

If the West wants to be involved in negotiations on the future of Afghanistan, it has to be aware of the country's history and the past relationships of all the groups involved in the current conflict. The simple perception that one group is "good" and the other "bad" should be abandoned, because it simply does not reflect how Afghan politics works.

If negotiations are to be considered, it is essential to include all Afghan political entities and groups, including those from the north. Although members of the international donor community based in Afghanistan are heavily restricted in their movements because of the security situation, Western negotiators should keep themselves informed about how contacts among all these groups (and sometimes individuals) evolve. In 1994 no one really knew that the northerners helped the Taliban, while in 2001 the same thing occurred: Karzai's offer of negotiations was kept secret. On both occasions there was an opportunity to try to build up alliances and push stakeholders into a power-sharing deal. In late 2014 the international community should also be ready for unexpected deals that could suddenly occur in circumstances of shifting power. In this sense, 2014 could be a crucial year for those who want peace in Afghanistan.

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