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**Taliban Talks:  
The Completion of a Defeat?**

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## **Taliban Talks - The Completion of a Defeat?**

In the context of the recently opened Taliban office in Doha (Qatar), and the start of talks between the US and political representative of the Taliban movement, the following article will elaborate on the difficulties attached to the so-called 'peace negotiation' process. The article contends that any agreement on power sharing will lead to political and military resistance, which in turn will undermine democracy and nullify all achievements regarding human rights and particularly women's rights. Therefore, armed confrontation will remain the norm. The main argument is that the Taliban as an anti-systemic and anti-democratic force is trapped in its own fundamentalist ideology and, in order to keep the movement going, it has to reject Afghanistan's current democratic system of governance. Because the Taliban's major goal is to re-establish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, which is absolutely incompatible with the interests of any other stakeholder in the Afghan imbroglio. However, in order for the US to ensure a safe withdrawal, Washington will remain ignorant towards this threat. In contrast, it offers the Taliban political participation which effectively gives them the opportunity to undermine the Afghanistan's political system from within. In brief, it will complete NATO's military defeat with a political one.

### **NATO's Engagement in Afghanistan: An Unfortunate Trajectory**

'We will neither talk nor negotiate with the Taliban' was the mantra of the warring factions of the international community, at least during the first years of their engagement in Afghanistan. Even mentioning the notion of direct talks with militant oppositional forces was more or less a political taboo. In sharp contrast, on 18 June the Taliban opened its first official liaison office in the Qatari capital of Doha. This is remarkable: only 12 years after NATO (guided by the US) caused the collapse of the fundamentalist Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, which was in large portrayed as the ousting of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the 'banned fundamentalists' are now officially celebrating their come back on the international stage. The traumatic prelude to this strategically organised spectacle is well-known: The apparently victorious international community installed the regime of President Harmid Karzai who's function was to be a US controlled governor of Kabul rather than a widely accepted leader of the nation, consequently former local power centres such as warlords and militias re-emerged. But most importantly, the short-sided and unquestioned support for Karzai by the US helped to pave the way for the resurrection of the Taliban and its

associated groups (e.g. Hezb-e-Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the Haqqani Network, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) as armed opposition against the international troops and the government of Afghanistan which is perceived as an illegitimate institution. Additionally, due to the opportunity of regrouping and re-strengthening within supportive Pakistani safe-havens, Taliban and other militant groups were subsequently able to regain leverage and to establish parallel shadow governments in large parts of Afghanistan. The following inability to vanquish the Taliban, who for more than one decade have been successfully operating in flexible, tactical alliances against NATO and the Afghan security forces, made it clear that a so-called military solution in order to stabilise the country is not feasible. The occurrence of failed high profile Taliban attacks, like the one on the Kabul International Airport on 10 June 2013 or the attack on the presidential compound and a CIA office on 25 June, are still exception rather than the norm. This high level of instability is gaining momentum since the primary focus of the efforts carried out and the invested financial and human resources of the international community has been and still is on security and much less so on political-administrative institution building, civilian development and local ownership.

### **The State of Art: Causalities and Impacts**

The Worsening security situation and the increasing challenge of civil-military relations  
In result, the war is lost. The return on investments in the field of socio-economic development are pathetic (if one does not count the revenues from the drug economy), and the political-administrative system is paralysed by corruption and inefficiency. Furthermore, the institutional, political-administrative structure is getting more and more under the influence of Taliban and other extra-constitutional powers, primarily warlords and militias. Subsequently, there is a growing disillusion among the Afghans about the state of democracy in their country. On top of that, the core object of the development efforts, the build-up of a loyal and functioning army, does not seem to be achieved. This finds its expression in a disintegrating security sector characterised by growing rivalry and hostility between the different army, police and security apparatus as well as in a raising concern about civilian control over the armed forces. The fact that in the last months the armed forces booked some successes will definitely give them more confidence in their capabilities to deal with the Taliban – even without the support of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). However, this does not automatically mean that the

cohesion within the individual operating units as well as between the different branches of the security services is strengthened. If one looks at the amount of clashes between Afghan National Police (ANP) and the Afghan National Army (ANA) it seems that the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are primarily occupied with fighting each other as opposed to working on national security. There is a tremendous number of reports on so-called "green-on-green" incidents. In military's jargon 'green' refers to the ANSF, (and blue refers to the international security forces). The term 'green-on-green attacks' therefore refers to friendly fire incidences where 'friendly' forces are 'accidentally' being fired upon by their own 'comrades'. The numbers of these incidences have increased worryingly. It is important to note that respective reports stress that many of the 'green-on-green' incidents are caused by rivalries between the different branches of service or are used as a means to settle disputes in the context of illegal activities of individuals or whole units. Additionally, the emergence of struggles for power and an increase in an institutional role between the different forces is particularly worrying. Combined with an increase in the number of 'green-on-blue' attacks, which means that elements within the Afghan security forces attack US/NATO forces, this gives rise to the legitimate question how coherent and loyal Afghanistan's security services are likely to be towards any government in the post-2014 withdrawal scenario.

Taking into account that Afghanistan also has a history of military-backed coups (for example Dawood Khans White Revolution which led to a suppression of all democratic elements in 1973 or the Saur revolution of 1978) one should remain sceptical about the extent in which Afghanistan civilians are able to maintain control over their soldiers. The Taliban return, rise of criminal networks, weak governance, corruption, and the growing number and strength of alternative power centres under control of warlords might be used as legitimization to take over power directly or to install a government that is backed or appointed by the military. This of course is based on the premise that the Afghan Security Forces will be able to maintain a minimum degree of cohesiveness in order to contain its tremendous fragmentation. The case of Pakistan shows that the US don't have any problems in dealing with illegitimate military governments (Ayub Khan 1958-1962, Yahya Khan 1962-1971, Zia-Ul-Haq 1977-1985 and Pervez Musharraf 1999-2002) as long as it serves their interests. Having close contacts to Afghanistan's security forces the US, apart from making some diplomatic statements, would most likely not intervene.

## **Opening of the Doha Office: Realising US dreams and Taliban facts**

Generally speaking, the opening of the Doha office marks the present peak of a trajectory which is undoubtedly working in favour of the Taliban because it will help to entrench the Taliban as legitimate actor in Afghanistan's political landscape. Furthermore, as an anti-systemic force the Taliban will be most likely able to gain a significant advantage out of an anarchical situation in the country's future. Having this in mind, the Taliban make no secret out of it that their new Doha office serves more purposes than merely acting as a meeting place for talks. In fact, the office is the most visible expression that the Taliban will have its very own agenda in the negotiation process, which will certainly follow the actual conversations, which will not necessarily match the prospects for Afghanistan as envisaged by the US, the Karzai government or the Afghan people. First of all, talking directly with the U.S. will help the Taliban gaining international prestige, recognition and legitimacy. Furthermore, it is obvious that the office will also function as a diplomatic and political site, as a main coordinating office of the political wing of the movement. Having the disposal of such a facility, the Taliban have the chance to regroup and enlarge their political representation and improve the efficiency of their political campaigns against the Afghan government. This marks a milestone in the middle-term goal to get involved in the country's official affairs without having to wait until the pull-out of NATO.

Therefore, by using the name and the banner of their old fundamentalist authoritarian regime for the facility's inauguration, the Taliban carried out a tremendous propaganda coup by gaining a window of opportunity to demonstrate the world the fruitlessness and failure of NATO's ISAF mission. All initial goals, policy directives and promises towards the Afghans from the governments of the international community involved seem to be either fluid or even invalid today. Having this in mind, one could argue that talks between the US and the Taliban imply an augmentation of the military debacle and developmental chaos. Subsequently, the Obama administration's policy to support the opening of the Taliban office as a symbol of rapprochement is pretty simple and crystal clear: to ensure a safe and smooth pull-out of US troops while creating the image of having provided an arrangement for a minimum level of stability in order to save Washington's face and to shirk the responsibility for the future developments towards the Afghan government. In sum, it marks the most visible expression of an 'official capitulation' of the international community.

## **Ten reasons why talks with Taliban will not lead to stability, peace and reconciliation:**

Just as both the military and the reconstruction and development campaigns suffered from an incoherent strategy, it seems that the start of the talks with the Taliban is missing a concrete concept (other than organizing the troop withdrawal) too. In this context, most dramatic are the emerging but misleading hopes and false premises regarding the chances to end the war. It should be stressed that there are no indications that talks will lead to an end of fighting in Afghanistan. In contrast, it will rather aggravate tensions and conflicts which will lead to a continuation of armed confrontations. This is because of several reasons which will be elaborated in detail below.

### *1. The myth of factionalism within the Taliban movement*

In order to end the policy of denying direct talks with the Taliban and to justify the beginning of them, governments involved in the Afghan imbroglio and their compliant analysts are trying hard to shape the public debate by introducing a notion of the existence of intra-Taliban factionalism. In other words, the hypothesis contends that if one is able to co-opt one faction in the negotiation process one could split and exhaust the whole Taliban movement. But based on differentiation between moderate or radical, good or bad, pragmatic or hardline Taliban one has to understand that there is no clear evidence for severe divides within the Taliban. Also the notion that one has to make a clear-cut distinction between the Pakistani Taliban and Afghanistan Taliban seems to be highly artificial. However, it seems that the decision-makers in the US are trying to portray the Taliban as a kind of a socio-political movement. That is, an exceptional one which follows a much belligerent, extremist militant path: a characteristic which is generally perceived as atypical for socio-political movements. Nevertheless, this gives Washington the opportunity to refer in its rationale that the Taliban as a 'movement' naturally suffers from the most common dilemma of socio-political movements: the schism between a moderate and radical pole. In many cases this finds its expression in a 'confrontational bipolarity' between moderates and radicals. In line with this argumentation, this would gain particular momentum in the case of the Taliban because their aggressive habitus is supposed to lead to fragmentation and heterogeneity.

This is a major misunderstanding. Basically, the movement consists of a relatively small group of highly motivated activists which functions as the ideological leadership which

holds together the more or less loose social base on both sides of the Durand line (the disputed Afghanistan-Pakistan border). Undeniably, the Taliban consists of numerous groups and task forces both in Pakistan and in Afghanistan, with differentiation in armed organization, tactics and local interests. Therefore, one can state that the Taliban movement is not stringently organised as other political-religious movements like the Hindu-nationalist Sangh Parivar in India. But despite the highly decentralised character, the Taliban possesses a discernible organizational structure based on informal personal networks of fighters, workers, and supporters created by reputed, charismatic leaders. These networks can be found on different levels: from local to district, province and national level up to the top leadership also called the Quetta Shura. These individual leaders, who are positioned on different levels within the Taliban's 'hierarchical order', gather fighters and supporters and therefore form the scaffolding of the movement. It is important to understand that each of the subordinated level pays respect and obedience to the higher level. At the top of this hierarchical system of loyalty-based personalised structures is the spiritual leader, the Amir ul-Momineen (a position that will be discussed in further detail below) Mullah Mohammed Omar. Omar and the Pakistan based Quetta Shura, constitute the ideological centre and supreme authority of the movement. Additionally, this leadership council (besides some provincial councils) constitutes the most formal organ of the Taliban and is doing the top decision-making like the defining a 'grand strategy' how to reach the overall goal for the subordinated socio-political structures and networks as well as the military regional commands. This aim consists primarily of the establishment of a theocratic state based on their narrow interpretation of Islam and a truncated notion of Sharia law on the expense of liberal democracy based on the three democratic core values: people sovereignty, liberty and equality. It is important to note, that the subordinated networks don't defer from this ideological directive, but follow partly individual paths and patterns regarding the implementation of it. Because of this, the notion that they are a loose conglomerate of fragmented elements has to be rejected. However, some distinctions which one can make are between: a) the Quetta Shura, including the subordinated leaders (the leadership circles), and the mass of low ranking Taliban which are more paid mercenaries (full-time as well as part-time fighters) than ideologically convinced activists like the foremost political cadres and 'honorary Taliban'; b) various interests and/or pressure groups differing on issues like relationship to the Pakistani security forces, ties with international/trans-national jihadist groups (e.g. al-Qaeda); c) younger and older members, which can be interpreted as a classical generation conflict. This is not about an

ideology, it is more about the up-coming of a new generation which is gaining more influence and wants to climb up the hierarchy which causes a clash with the older leaders; d) Taliban-born or having origins in Pakistan or in Afghanistan. However, where a Taliban exactly comes from, Afghanistan or Pakistan, is in ideological terms no issue because by joining the Taliban and accepting their ideology they give up their own respective national identity. It is important to note here that the feeling of belonging to Pakistan or Afghanistan is secondary. What is more important than the national identity, which is perceived by Taliban as an abstract and vague concept, is idea of tribal identity and belonging. Especially the Pashtuns, whose tribes constitute the main recruiting base of the Taliban, feel closer to their common tribesmen on both sides of the border than to a respective nationality. This is another significant factor that proves how irrelevant the differentiation between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban is. Of course in regarding organisational structure it matters to which regional network and command they belong and as such they have a different leaning regarding the points made above. But one has to point out, that there is no evidence that such differences and clashes within the Taliban has certain geographical implications, in other words that they justify a clear distinction between Afghanistan and Pakistani Taliban.

As already indicated above, the argument made by protagonists of the Doha talks is that significant cleavages within the Taliban camp do exist and is enforcing a fragmentation which one could use to weaken the movement. Regarding this rationale, subsequent factions would emerge who will turn against other parts of the movement if one just over enough socio-economic, and/or political benefits. But this does not match the realities on the ground. In contrast, members of the Taliban top brass get immediately excluded as soon as they try to create factions or depart from the ideological line. A prominent example is Mullah Agha Jan Motasim who got excluded from the central leadership after he promoted the creation of political structures to participate in the electoral process. There is no doubt that many are joining the Taliban for the sake of having an (additional) income and/or fighting rather a class struggle than an indoctrinated Jihad. However, this makes the mercenaries, bandits or outlaws who are joining the Taliban for economic reasons are not less dangerous and do not make the movement weaker. They follow the same order, implement the same goals, and use the same illegitimate, violent methods of terrorism against the (Afghan) people like their indoctrinated comrades. Consequently, the typical phenomena within movements, such as the existence of a (bi)polarity, which several observers artificially try to apply, do not exist in a significant degree among the Taliban. In

sum, there are no moderate or good, radical or moderate Taliban and despite several differences they are two parts of the same movement, or “two sides of the same coin”.

## *2. Any power-sharing with Taliban will provoke resistance and armed conflict*

Taking into account how the opening of the Doha office got facilitated and the starting of talks with the Taliban were conducted; one can state that it does not matter if the interaction between the Taliban and the US are happening with or without the blessing of the Karzai administration. More concretely, a large-scale participation of the Pashtun-based Taliban in the Afghan government and the subordinated political-administrative structures will automatically incite resistance. This resistance will be especially enforced by the National Front of Afghanistan (NFA) or Afghanistan National Front (ANF) or Jabh-e Melli under the leadership of the three mighty warlords Ahmad Zia Massoud, Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq and Abdul Rashid Dostum, representing the three major non-Pashtun ethnic groups – the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras. The NFA/ANF was officially founded as a political alliance for the next presidential elections in 2014 but will undoubtedly pull together their military capacities too. In their ‘Berlin-Statement’ in January 2012, the three warlords unambiguously stated that if the process and results of the talks are not in line with their interests they would not hesitate to fight against both the Taliban and the government in Kabul. It comes as no surprise that Dostum, Massoud and Maqiq as well as other influential militia commanders either maintained their former armed groups or are in the process of regrouping them. It is important to note that Afghanistan hardly experienced any situation which can be described as intra-Afghan harmony. The relationship between the different ethnic communities were always characterised by criss-crossing lines of mistrust and suspicions. The influence of external factors made the patterns of conflicts even more complex and tricky. Therefore, incidents like the recent failed attempt to assassinate Mohaqiq on 18 June will further worsen the relations between the three warlords and the Taliban. Without a doubt, such confrontations will create a situation which is conducive to a resumption of armed struggle.

Besides the NFA/ANF, opposition will also come from the civil society and especially from Afghan women. The on-going massive harassment of female politicians and NGO workers like the ones of the Jalal Foundation of former Minister for Women Affairs (2004-2006) and the only female candidate in the Afghan presidential election in 2004, Dr. Massouda Jalal, is most likely to increase. This is because the Taliban will continue to suppress critical

voices from the country's civil society. Needless to say, a growing influence of the Taliban over judicial and social affairs as well as education will eradicate all achievements towards the improvement of Afghanistan's female citizenry. Therefore, it will be very unlikely that there will be much public (voluntary) support for reconciliation with and integration of Taliban in non-Pashtun areas. However, even if the civil society is weak and do not have many resources at their disposal they have given birth to numerous pro-democratic elements which will try to put up a political struggle to defend the constitution, especially the guaranteed rights and freedoms. Nevertheless, the question remains how much chance they have to stand up against a mighty enemy like the Taliban, especially if they receive support from defect democracies like Pakistan or autocratic theocracies like Iran. Finally, resistance or at least support for an anti-Taliban coalition in Afghanistan might also come from rival groups in Pakistan. The latest attack by Lashkar-e-Toiba, Ansar-ul-Islam and other anti-Taliban factions against the Taliban in Pakistan (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan/TTP) in the border area with Afghanistan underpins the explosive nature of the situation if the Taliban get a share in the government in Kabul. It is important to note, that the Taliban has save havens on both sides of the borders. Which one gets used and by whom actually depends on the persistently changing alliances and the primary military targets. However, since the Taliban who are operating in Pakistan receive shelter in, for example, the Afghan provinces of Kunar and Nuristan, the country's anti-Taliban forces might be allured or even encouraged by the Pakistan's security forces to cross into Afghanistan since everything beyond the Durand Line is be out of the reach of the Pakistani army. This would not only mean that anti-Taliban related violence is growing but also that pro-Pakistan groups are getting openly involved in anti-Afghan government action. Beside the fact that the Taliban are increasingly under pressure, they are also able to benefit much from such a situation since the Afghan government is forced to react to such a violation of sovereignty and territorial integrity. As a result a further increase of hostility between Afghanistan and Pakistan could appear as well as a deepening of Taliban's entrenchment into the Afghan political-administrative system.

### *3. The Taliban movement is anti-democratic and anti-systemic in nature*

There are no doubts that the Taliban categorically reject democracy, negotiations, and especially consensus-based political decision-making. In other words, deliberative political processes which require finding of compromises and making of exceptions are out of the

scope of a fundamentalist Taliban mind-set. Thinking and acting based on extremist ideologies do not allow any room for dissensions because disagreements and disputes, which are inherent to the democratic process, are seen as a threat that can weaken the power and efficiency of the ideology that holds the Taliban together. Therefore, democratic contestation would deteriorate the movement's coherence and give room for fragmentation. Hence, it is in the nature and a matter of survival for the Taliban to fight democracy.

In this context one has to state that regarding their socio-political worldview, a system to organise human co-existence must not only be based on Sharia law but also structured by a strictly entrenched 'leader's principle' as it was during the Taliban regime of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (1996-2001). In this form of governance all significant decision-making is centralised in the position of the Amir ul-Momineen (or commander/leader of the faithful). Needless to say, the concept of a religiously legitimated Amir ul-Momineen as the country's highest authority recognizes neither general elections nor an elected government with a (secular) head of state. It is important to note that the idea of Amir ul-Momineen as supreme power is not restricted to a particular nation, people or state. Rather, it provides for pan-Islamic nation building and identity construction. For example, the Amir ul-Momineen Mullah Mohammad Omar sees himself not as a spiritual leader of the Afghan or Pakistan Taliban, he rather identifies himself as head of the whole Taliban movement which does not geographically limit itself to the 'AfPak'-region only. Even if Taliban spokesmen deny that their activities are only focused on Pakistan and Afghanistan, ideology and recruitment patterns do not reflect these claims.

Therefore, the movement's operational aim is to end any democratic system in Islamic societies by all means. In other words, not only the Taliban operating in Pakistan want to diminish all democratic structures, but the Taliban in Afghanistan too follow the same agenda. If not, the 'Pakistani Taliban' will make sure that the 'Afghan Taliban' will not forget the overall goal of establishing region-wide Sharia law. Having this in mind, regarding their own logic, they can't share power with 'infidels' (meaning everybody who does not adhere to their reading of the Koran and oppose strict implementation of the Sharia) or seriously participate in democracy (the 'system of infidels') without undermining their own collective identity. Due to their relatively loose network of individual factions, it is most important to keep their basic codes (building blocks) of identity construction functioning. Otherwise they would deconstruct their own ideological base and collective identity; consequently, they would lose the glue of their whole movement and fall apart in a bunch of unorganised (extremists) elements. Therefore, they do not only oppose democracy but also identify it as

an existential threat because this system's norms and provide for diverging opinions. As such it would allow the opportunity to question Taliban ideology. This undoubtedly marks an existential problem for the Taliban since their ideological foundation requires absolute adherence from the whole Muslim community. In sum, in order to maintain its own identity and to hold the movement together, and as such to survive, and not being absorbed by other extremist groups, the Taliban have to erase all structures and agents of democracy in their area of influence and beyond.

For the very same reason the Taliban will not stop at the border of Afghanistan or Pakistan. Since the aim is to establish Sharia law in all Muslim societies, it is very likely that they extend their operations beyond the 'AfPak region.' The statement that the Taliban are only interested in Pakistan and Afghanistan might reflect the current interest of the West, but definitely based in a misunderstanding or ignorance of Taliban ideology. Taliban are fundamentalists who apply a universalistic 'catch all' approach. In this direction one could even make the argument that the Taliban are more dangerous than al-Qaeda, at least in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Where al-Qaeda content themselves with sporadic attacks on symbols and significant icons and representatives of the hostile Western world, predominantly the US, the Taliban is attacking the roots, structures and, most worryingly, the normative foundations of whole societies to carry out a total transformation and subsequently elimination of its enemies. In this context, one must state that obviously the described threat perception above refers purely to the 'AfPak' region, since at the moment this is the main area of Taliban activities. However, in other world regions which are suffering from terrorism, al-Qaeda with their local Jihadi alliances (e.g. Ansar Dine in Mali, Al Shabaab in Somalia, and Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen) determine the greater challenge.

Nevertheless, in the face of all logic, it seems that the current US leadership owns a quite selective memory. As it stands, the Doha negotiation process will most likely lead to the partial integration of the Taliban into the Afghan government. But the crux of the matter is (besides the fact that the Taliban will get imposed on the system by the Obama administration and probably without being elected by the Afghan people) that the Taliban rather interpret the 'talks' as a broadening of the armed struggle than a 'peace negotiation'. In brief, talks are seen as an extension of their activities into the political arena. In other words, through 'Doha' they will get an additional opportunity to undermine Afghanistan's democracy from within. To sum up, allowing the Taliban to participate in Afghanistan political-administrative structure is like "doing not only a pact with hypocrisy but also with the devil in order to set the Wolf to guard the sheep".

#### *4. The contradiction of reliability and fundamentalism*

Looking at the development of the numerous talk initiatives as well as subsequent agreements and their 'implementation' it is legitimate to question the credibility of Taliban commitments. The example of Pakistan shows the unreliability of the Taliban who have repeatedly reneged on peace agreements with the Pakistani army. Taking into account that the Taliban are actually continuing their attacks besides getting the chance to open an office indicates that the current and future negotiation partners of the Taliban will have a similar negative experience. Instead of starting with confidence building measures the Taliban responded by intensifying their attacks on Afghan and foreign forces. The fact that this coincided with the official handover of the full security responsibilities from the international forces to the Afghan authorities gives ample proof of the fact that the Taliban are not interested in any political reconciliation and integration. Instead, forced assimilation, humiliation, oppression and elimination continue to be the main the strategies of the Taliban in areas under their control. In result, besides the fact that the Taliban are not seriously interested in peace, this deep mistrust will definitely function as an additional major roadblock regarding the achievement at least of a future 'non-war' scenario in Afghanistan.

#### *5. The 'dual approach': Combining political and military struggle*

As already pointed out above, there is no conflict between pragmatists, primarily from the 'political wing', and hardliners from the military leadership. The pragmatists will continue what they do best in order to achieve the movement goals – fighting at the political front to undermine the political system from within. Having been banned by the international community for a long time, the Doha office has given the Taliban an important platform to gain international legitimacy and acceptance as an actor in its own rights not only towards the west but also within the 'whole Islamic world'. For, Qatar is not only a US ally but also an actor which tries to establish itself as a patron and promoter of all kinds of Islamic movements. The Taliban's enhanced standing will undoubtedly go at the expense of the Karzai government's reputation because it has essentially been reduced to an unnecessary appendix in the whole process of finding a settlement. In addition to the, the Doha office gives the political wing of the Taliban with many more opportunities to challenge the Afghan state than before.

However, using political instruments does not mean that the military wing will stop their armed operations against the Afghan state and its people as well as the remaining foreign troops. Consequently, the democratic forces in the country will probably have to deal with two kinds of warfare: a political and a military one. The statement that there are serious grievances between 'two camps' (pragmatists vs. hardliners) is artificially made in order to create false prospects of realistic opportunities for talks. This is a negligent misrepresentation. The Taliban will use the Doha talks to achieve results, which will enable them to implement a 'dual approach' in order to intensify the conflict. Therefore, the Taliban's 'strategic worldview' is simple and clear: either you try to re-establish the Islamic Emirate through 'words' or by 'guns' – or both.

*6. The US and Afghan government do not operate from a position of strength.*

Due to the fact that much of the US resources were bounded in Iraq and some ominous strategic decisions that contributed much to the unfortunate course of the war, the military situation in Afghanistan can be best described as a stalemate. This is well portrayed by the extraordinary raise in Taliban attacks over the last years and the subsequent noticeable deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan. Regarding the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office, attacks by the Taliban and associated groups in the first quarter of 2013 went up 46% compared to the same period in 2012. A similar dramatic increase in militant attacks was recorded by ISAF, stating that Afghanistan witnessed twice as many incidents compared to 2008 before NATO significantly built-up its troop level. In this context, one should mention that the Taliban became not only in militarily but also economically much stronger. This is not only because of the growing production and trade of narcotics which is largely controlled by the militants, but also because they were able to participate and gain benefits from the country's regular economy via 'straw men'. Important in this direction is that Afghan companies and especially those that operate in Taliban controlled have to pay 'taxes' to the Taliban in order to steer clear of Taliban attacks. Levies on general trade and agricultural production form one of the most important sources of revenue for the Taliban. On top of these internal sources of financing, there is also large scale external support from countries like Pakistan and Iran. There will be most likely no change in the foreign policies in this direction despite the election in both countries. In Pakistan the army as well as the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and in Iran the country's leading clergy will most likely not stop their support for the Taliban as long as they identify common goals beyond

the Shia-Sunni divide. In this context, the opening of the Doha office will help the Taliban to gain more popularity among internal state and non-state actors willing to support and finance militant extremists. This in turn will increase chances to successfully attract more financial resources. In addition, there are several other domestic factors contributing to the expansion of the Taliban's might: they were able to catch many of the unemployed, disenfranchised, frustrated youth in remote rural areas which get recruited and indoctrinated in large numbers. Also the Taliban were able to convince many tribal elders to join the movement which gave them access to the villages. Of course, the elders were eventually side-lined or killed. This is a recurring strategy of the Taliban to gain foothold in Pakistan's FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas). However, it also helped either to co-opt the anti-Taliban clergy or to eliminate them like the tribal elders. Finally, by having access to the villages the Taliban were able to create another 'inroad' into local Afghan communities: via arranged and forced marriages.

These are all worrying developments because the US as the prime negotiator has nothing really to offer to the Taliban to make them stop their aggressive 'forward policy' besides putting pressure on the Afghan government to share power and to exchange prisoners. The Afghan government, which is evidently the weakest actor in the whole process has most likely just a 'rubber-stamp-function,' i.e. to provide official Afghan legitimacy for potential upcoming negotiations and arrangements. Last but not least, one must mention that there is no need for the Taliban to offer clear proposals by addressing the demands of the international community, to strike an actual deal, as well as to keep one own words. With the increase in economic and military power the Taliban were also gaining more confidence over the last view years. Today, the Taliban are convinced that they are capable of overcoming any challenge from NATO.

### *7. Worrying scope of Taliban interests*

There are no doubts in the current debate on the Doha talks that the Taliban are interested in gaining political influence in Afghanistan. But what is largely ignored is that regarding their ideology, the Taliban can't be satisfied with 'just' controlling Kabul. In other words, it is in the nature of the Taliban to look beyond the Afghan soil. If they have the opportunity they will not restrict themselves to Afghanistan. In this context, one can state that the Taliban's promise not to use Afghan territory to create threats to any other country is not plausible regarding their mind-set. There is no doubt that they will have no problem to distance

themselves from international terrorism and even might agree to give a statement that they distance themselves from al-Qaeda: dropping the notion of carrying out terrorist activities means just giving up on one instrument out of many. But distancing from one instrument does not imply that the Taliban abandon their goals. Therefore the US must be aware, that is not the path in which the Taliban attempt to achieve their aim but the aims as such constitutes the real threat for the region as well as the international community.

#### *8. The Taliban are already a 'state within the state' in waiting*

Over the last decade the Taliban were able to establish parallel structures in large parts of Afghanistan. This is done by specialist political-administrative cadres like 'preachers' responsible for spreading ideas and carrying out propaganda and spy tasks across the country and 'agents' in charge of recruitment and building up networks and structures. The latter is usually done through the 'appointment' of 'shadow' governors, judges, tax collectors, establishing (communication) networks for supply of food, accommodation etc. – all to challenge the authority of the state in the periphery. In many cases, they are able to co-opt local strongmen, and (community) militias to support the Taliban movement with men power. Furthermore, the 'agents' or 'Taliban commissars' were also able to arrange deals with the security forces (especially police) either to get indirect their support or able to convince them to defect directly to the Taliban camp. According to some reports, the Taliban claim that they can draw on at least 100.000 rank-and-files of all different types, which sounds actually more like a publicity coup than a real figure. Nevertheless, at the very least it gives a basic idea of the envisaged manpower which the Taliban want to build-up for the post-2014 scenario. Besides the fact that the persistently growing 'shadow state' of the Taliban is seriously undermining the already endemic corrupt and inefficient state institutions, it gains special attention since Taliban 'agents' and 'preachers' are not only identifying supporters but opponents too, which are either eliminated or forcefully assimilated. Additionally, having the support of the military wing, political cadres of the Taliban get usually not harassed by carrying out their activities. The (political) pro-democracy forces and civil society organizations are seriously hampered in their work and daily lives which means that the already unfair competition between the Taliban and non-Taliban groups is likely to get even worse after the pull-out of foreign troops and a potential power-sharing with the Taliban. However, one of the most interesting findings in this context is: the Taliban are able to re-establish their influence and power in areas in which

they lost their control despite the presence of NATO troops in the country and the build-up of Afghanistan's security forces. Furthermore, the process of re-establishing the Taliban's Islamic order has already begun in the areas that are under their reign.

#### *9. The post-2014 residual force conundrum*

There will be no complete withdrawal of foreign forces of the around 100.000 troops from 48 involved countries (including 66.000 US troops), as demanded by Taliban and associated extremists. How many forces NATO will leave in the troubled country behind and if these are only going to operate as trainers and advisors is questionable. Despite some current successes, one must remain sceptical about the ability of the Afghan security forces to ensure a necessary minimum of security in order to maintain at least the status quo for the political-administrative system. The fact that the US is likely to keep a substantial troop level and retain military bases on strategically important areas in the country will also be a source for future armed confrontations. There are too many geopolitical interests attached to the Afghanistan engagement, which are going far beyond destroying al-Qaeda, ousting the Taliban, or taking care of the well-being of the Afghan people and their system of governance. Strategic interests regarding monitoring hostile Iran as well as ambitious and forceful expanding China, and keeping an eye on Central Asia's vast natural resources are enough arguments for the major non-regional players to stay engaged in Afghanistan. Therefore, the Doha talks will not mark an 'End-Game' towards peace and reconciliation but probably set conditions for a continuation of political instability and political instability. In the unlikely event that the Taliban leadership accept any presence of foreign troops this would mean that they forfeit their *raison d'être* and everything they have struggled for. Undoubtedly, this would have a disastrous effect on internal cohesion of the movement. The central leadership would lose credibility in front of their sub-ordinated rank-and-files and also affect recruiting processes negatively as well as fund raising processes among the international donors of jihadist activities.

#### *10. Taliban belief of being the only legitimate ruler of Afghanistan*

Today, the Taliban portray the US concession to maintain an office in Doha as a victory but also as a significant step towards the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Portraying the NATO engagement as a continuation of the Soviet occupation,

Taliban officials are making no secret out of the fact that they feel ousted by an undue 'foreign hand'. Therefore the Taliban continue to perceive themselves as the only organisation that can make a legitimate claim to government power in Kabul. The fact that the US arranged for President Karzai to form the government and to stay in power under massive truncation of all democratic norms, values and procedures, is playing into the hands of the preachers of Taliban ideology. Therefore, the use of the Taliban flag, anthem and the name "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" leave no doubts about that the Taliban are still following their strict radical idea of establishing its terror regime in Afghanistan based on their own interpretation of Islam and religious Islamic codes. This also means that they will do anything to end the democratic project in the country and revoke all socio-political achievement of the female citizenry. It will also be just a matter of time, until the rudimentary elements of Afghanistan's civil society will be totally eroded. It is a process which started already some years ago through massive harassments and target killings of NGOs, activists, and journalists who were all presenting alternatives to the Taliban's worldview. It is interesting to note, that Pakistan offers some indications for a potential Afghan future. Despite the fact that Pakistan's judiciary is getting stronger and more independent compared to other state institutions, it shows also a disturbingly high level of ignorance towards religious radicalism and militancy and an unwillingness to intervene. For example, the inactivity of the country's judiciary when it comes to the repressive blasphemy laws and the protection of the religious minorities or the active support for religious conservatives notions (e.g. internet censorship in 2010 which led to the blocking of numerous online based social networks, including Facebook and YouTube in 2010) proves how easy it is for fundamentalists to gain influence over the state institutions. But until the aim of Taliban state is not achieved, being a stakeholder in a democratic system is not an option for any Taliban.

## **Conclusions**

It seems that the Obama administration either did not learn much about its enemy during the last twelve years of fighting, or they just ignore out of a matter of convenience how the Taliban function, and what their goals and intentions are. The Taliban are neither amenable for peace nor willing to compromise on their radical ideology and deeply held beliefs. Political accommodation and consensus politics are alien concepts to them. But a multi-ethnic state like Afghanistan -with its strong decentralised power structures- can only

function when the respective national and regional leadership circles have the political skills and capacities to work out a 'balance of power' that is satisfying to all major actors involved. However, there are no indications that the Taliban are interested to take on this task and will follow any deal they agreed on. Especially the US should know that one can't trust talks with the Taliban. Not only the Pakistani Taliban have the habit of not sticking to agreements. The initial denying of the fact that the Taliban were hosting Bin Laden and the myth that they were not maintaining terrorist training camps after they took over power in Kabul in the late 1990s as well as that they are interested in good relations with US can be seen as a proof thereof. Having this in mind, the pledge not to use Afghanistan as a base to threaten other countries is probably merely a rhetoric manoeuvre.

To sum up, the talks will not lead to peace and stability in Afghanistan. Instead, it marks the defeat of the international community and the nullifying of all grand goals like the establishment of a stable democratic order, and dashes hopes of the Afghan people for more political and civil rights and improved socio-economic living conditions. It also marks the return of the Taliban, their international and local rehabilitation and the legitimised entrance into the political system of Afghanistan. Consequently, the pro-democratic forces in Afghanistan will have to defend the achievements on two fronts: on the military front by facing the much stronger Taliban forces and, second, on the political front by having to struggle with the Taliban which after a power sharing agreement will have the chance to deconstruct the political-administrative system from within by gradually overtaking ministries and other state institutions. Therefore, it will be only a matter of time until the 'vivisection' of the constitution will begin. However, the anti-Taliban forces especially the NFA/ANF will not accept the hand-over of substantial resources and power of the state towards the Taliban. Therefore, the militant, non-state anti-Taliban forces are already preparing militarily for the post-withdrawal scenario. The Taliban will not give in to the US demand to disarm and will continue fighting. The fact that Taliban did not stop this year's "Spring Offensive" despite getting an office and the start of talks is a sign that armed conflicts are remaining the norm rather than the exception in Afghanistan. To sum up, the Doha talks are the ticket back to a pre-9/11 styled square one.

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