

DOES TRUMP'S SOUTH ASIA STRATEGY TRUMP THE TALIBAN?

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The anniversary of the monstrous suicide attack on 31 May 2017 in Kabul¹ comes at a time when death is dealt liberally to civilians by the Taliban and the Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan. For the last five years, the level of civilian conflict-related dead and wounded has remained largely at the same level: 3,200 killed and 7,000 wounded per year.² Afghans are paying a high price for a political and military stalemate.

The United States' 2018 National Defense Strategy³ and its new South Asia strategy are now in place for six months and almost a year, respectively.⁴ Both reflect a change in the approach to the war in Afghanistan. The new elements introduced by President Trump's administration are a significantly more robust approach⁵ to Pakistan, where the Taliban and other insurgent and terrorist groups maintain their leadership, recruit, raise funds and train their fighters. The new South Asia strategy also gave new authorities for the United States forces in Afghanistan. This reverses the limitation in the rules of engagement to only to defend against direct attacks against United States personnel or installation by the Taliban, which had been introduced in 2014. Now, the international forces are again free to also deliberately target Taliban and their associates. This allowed also for attacks against Taliban revenue generation, particularly in the narcotics sector of the Afghan economy.⁶ United States diplomatic engagement with the Taliban also was accorded

1. The attack – reportedly conducted by the Haqqani Network - destroyed the German embassy building and a major Telecommunications firm's headquarters and claimed close to 600 dead. United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Annual Report 2017, Kabul February 2018, p. 2 Fn. 10. The attack killed 92 civilians and injured a further 491, the single most devastating IED attack and the largest civilian casualty event documented by UNAMA ever.

2. United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Mid-Year Update 2018, Kabul 15 July 2018.

3. Jim Garamone "National Defense Strategy a 'Good Fit for Our Times,' Mattis Says" Department of Defense 19 January 2018. The 2018 National Defense Strategy 2017 stated that the United States will "consolidate gains ... in Afghanistan ... to support the lasting defeat of terrorists ... and counterbalance Iran." See Jim Mattis, Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America - Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge (Department of Defense), Washington, DC 2018.

4. "Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia" White House 21 August 2017 and John Sullivan "The Administration's South Asia Strategy on Afghanistan – Statement Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee" Washington, DC 6 February 2018.

5. The political pressure expressed directly by the President in public was also accompanied by an American initiative through the Financial Action Task Force to scrutinize more closely the status of Pakistan's commitments in the fight against the financing of terrorism. The proposed "blacklisting" of Pakistani banks and financial service providers might be a hard incentive.

6. Jim Garamone "South Asia Strategy Already Paying Off in Afghanistan, Official Says" Department of Defense News 13 December 2017.

more freedom than in the past, allowing for talks with the movement even in the absence of negotiations led by the Afghan government.⁷ The objective of the increased political, financial and military flexibility is to push the Taliban to negotiate an end of hostilities with the Afghan government.

Sceptics ask what the Afghan Government and its international supporters can achieve with a fraction of the resources deployed earlier under the Obama “surge” of 2009-2014? It might be, that the added flexibility introduced under President Trump might result in less resources achieving more results. This flexibility comes at a time of renewed offers by Afghan President Ghani to negotiate a peace with the Taliban.⁸

POLITICAL AND FINANCIAL PRESSURE ON PAKISTAN

The most obvious innovation by the Trump Administration is the open pressure on Pakistan. Previously, Pakistan was praised as a major ally, and the current approach now does “insist that Pakistan take decisive action against militant and terrorist groups” and will “seek a Pakistan that is not engaged in destabilizing behaviour.”⁹ Given the extent to which former President Karzai had lobbied in vain for a more direct approach to Pakistan, this change might appear to him as a late vindication.¹⁰

Besides the famous twitter-diplomacy, United States actions seem to focus on financial pressure in conjunction with China.¹¹ As Pakistan reportedly is also the main conduit for the financial resources of the Taliban and various Al-Qaida affiliates, the decision made by the Financial Action Task Force to return Pakistan in June 2018 to its “Gray List” of countries “with significant deficiencies in the areas of anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing measures” is not unexpected. This decision by FATF was seen in Pakistan as a United States initiative, profiting from cooperation with Russia, China and Saudi Arabia.¹² Given that Pakistan just had managed to exit the Gray List in 2015, direct short-term costs to its exporters are expected to be limited, though it could stunt a strategic recovery, as the necessary capital for infrastructure modernization and power generation might become unavailable.¹³ The FATF plenary meeting in June

7. Mujib Mashal & Eric Schmitt “White House Orders Direct Taliban Talks to Jump-Start Afghan Negotiations” *New York Times* 15 July 2018 and Ben Farmer & Rozina Sabur “Trump sends envoys to Afghanistan to open talks directly with Taliban over peace deal” 16 July 2018. This should not be misconstrued as separate talks of the United States with the Taliban. The United States’ increased flexibility serves to facilitate and attend such talks (Alice Wells).

8. Ashraf Ghani “I Will Negotiate With the Taliban Anywhere” *The New York Times* 27 June 2018.

9. Donald Trump, National Security Strategy of the United States of America December 2017 (NSS-2017), 18 December 2017.

10. Rangin Dadfar Spanta, *Siyasat-i Afghanistan - riwayati az darun [Afghan politics - a story from within]*, Kabul 2017, see in particular on page 508 the relevant section of President Karzai’s conversation with President Obama 9 January 2013.

11. The drastic announcement of the measures against Pakistan was made by Vice-President Mike Pence during his visit to United States and Allied troops in Bagram on 21 December 2017, “putting Pakistan on notice” that it “harboured terrorists for too long.” Mujib Mashal “Visiting Afghanistan, Pence Says U.S. Will ‘See This Through’” *New York Times* 22 December 2017.

12. Uzair Younus “How Will Being on the FATF Grey-List Actually Impact Pakistan? - Economically, not much. But could it force a change in Pakistan’s approach to extremist groups?” *The Diplomat* 1 March 2018.

13. Farooq Tirmizi “The FATF ‘grey list’ means more trouble for Pakistan than you think.”

2018 maintained Pakistan on the list with a substantial action plan. The list of demands is by far the longest with ten specific requirements (Serbia's action plan has seven items), and includes a request that Pakistan meet its obligations under the Charter of the United Nations.¹⁴

The United States treasury also has issued additional designations through its national financial sanctions programme, updating the entry of the Pakistan-based Lashkar-i Tayyiba organization with additional aliases.¹⁵ Lashkar-i Tayyiba is part of the Pakistan-based archipelago of militant groups which provided shelter and services to the Taliban and Al-Qaida.¹⁶ The most recent amendment now also associates two organizations, which are involved in the Kashmir struggle with Lashkar-i Tayyiba: The Milli Muslim League (its political party) and the Kashmir Freedom Movement.¹⁷

After publicly rejecting Pence's accusations, Pakistan appears to have realized that action is required, and the FATF extended the deadline until 8 June.¹⁸ This has led, according to contacts with Taliban and intermediaries, to a wave of calibrated actions by the Pakistani security services aiming to push the Taliban towards at least a token engagement with the Afghan Government. The Taliban seem so far to have resisted this pressure, as the careful calibration seems to have allowed them to evade the brunt of the action (e.g. by relocating to Afghanistan "just in time"). Despite the dismissive tone of many Taliban commentators, the pressure might contribute over time in forcing the Taliban leaders to seek relief for Pakistan by engaging in a peace process.¹⁹

Don't be fooled by those who say it will not impact the economy in the short run" Profit Pakistan Today 5 March 2018. Since the Pakistani financial industry would be considered as "high risks" partners if the country is again included in the FATF "Grey List", international financial institutions are likely to be hesitant to engage Pakistani banks in transactions.

14. The request by the G20 meeting for Pakistan to implement Chapter VII resolutions of the UN Security Council reads: *demonstrating effective implementation of targeted financial sanctions (supported by a comprehensive legal obligation) against all 1267 and 1373 designated terrorists and those acting for or on their behalf, including preventing the raising and moving of funds, identifying and freezing assets (movable and immovable), and prohibiting access to funds and financial services.* FATF "Improving Global AML/CFT Compliance: On-going Process" Paris 29 June 2018. The declaration of the G20 meeting is available online: <http://www.fatf-gafi.org/publications/high-riskandnon-cooperativejurisdictions/documents/fatf-compliance-june-2018.html#Pakistan>.

15. U.S. Department of the Treasury "Counter Terrorism Designation Update" 3 April 2018 adds the following entities as aliases of the Lashkar-i Tayyiba: Kashmir Freedom Movement, Milli Muslim League; Milli Muslim League Pakistan; Movement For Freedom Of Kashmir, Tehreek Azadi Jammu And Kashmir; Tehreek-e-Azadi Jammu and Kashmir; Tehreek-e-Azadi-e-Jammu and Kashmir; Tehreek-e-Azadi-e-Kashmir and Tehreek-i-Azadi-i Kashmir. Treasury also added the party's central leadership members, Saifullah Khalid, Muzammil Iqbal Hashimi, Muhammad Harris Dar, Tabish Qayyum, Fayyaz Ahmad, Faisal Nadeem, and Muhammad Ehsan.

16. Steve Coll, Directorate S – The CIA and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, New York 2018, p. 310.

17. U.S. Department of the Treasury "Treasury Targets Terrorist Group Lashkar-e Tayyiba's Political Party" 2 April 2018.

18. Zahid Gishkori "FATF asks Pakistan to come up with new action plan by June 8" The News 28 May 2018

19. Reportedly, Pakistani officials met in Islamabad with senior Taliban leaders (Mullah Muhammed Abbas, Amir Khan Muttaqi, Mullah Muhammed Turabi, Mullah Saaduddin, Mullah Daud, Yahya Haqqani and Latif Mansour) in mid-March 2017. Associated Press "Pakistan hosts Afghan Taliban leaders for peace talks" Dawn 24 March 2017. Taliban leaders Shahbuddin Dilawar, Jan Muhammad Madani and Abdul Salam from Qatar had travelled to Pakistan already in October 2016. Sami Yousufzai & Jon Boone "Taliban envoys travel to Pakistan to discuss Afghanistan peace talks" The Guardian 21 October 2016.

One should not expect too much too soon. Engaging with the Afghan Government would be contrary to the Taliban ideology. Starting with engaging the Afghan Government in negotiations would be destroying the idea of a “national liberation struggle” directed exclusively against a foreign invader, which forms part of the core legitimacy narrative of the Taliban.²⁰ Several analysts have portrayed the Taliban as a pawn in the hands of Pakistan, which would be the principal spoiler, sabotaging every attempt by the Taliban to enter negotiations.²¹ These views usually assume Taliban commitment to talks, and overestimate the Taliban leadership’s ability to overcome the deeply rooted convictions of their base.

The expected value of Pakistani contribution might therefore be less likely to result in a meaningful structured peace process, but to degrade the Taliban narrative and cohesion. On the other hand, the militant infrastructure between Taliban and Lashkar-i Tayyiba is seen by many in Pakistan as a key element supporting national security.²² The decision by FATF in July 2018 to keep up the pressure and come up with an agreed action plan demonstrates the commitment by the United States and others to stay the course.

NEW MILITARY RESOURCES AND AUTHORISATIONS

In the framework of the new strategy and in agreement with the Afghan Government, the United States have committed additional forces with enlarged rules of engagement to Afghanistan “to convince the Taliban that they cannot win on the battlefield.”²³

The commander of the United States Forces in Afghanistan (USFOR-A) and of Mission Resolute Support General Nicholson announced early signs of possible success.²⁴ Citing several indicators (a decrease in Taliban-initiated attacks by 10-30%, and the public offer by Taliban to negotiate with the United States), the military picture seems to look better than six months ago. The Taliban offensive started on 25 April, and targeted the provincial capital of Farah, which was defended after initial gains of the insurgents. The Marine-supported Taskforce South-West in neighboring Helmand Province has pushed the Taliban away from the main population centers, together with a reinvigorated Afghan National Army. The Afghan National Army underwent a

20. Anand Gopal and Alex Strick van Linschoten, *Ideology in the Afghan Taliban*, Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), Kabul June 2017. Michael Semple, *Rhetoric, Ideology, and organizational structure of the Taliban Movement*, Peaceworks (USIP), Washington DC 2014.

21. A sample of this approach can be found in the account of Norwegian contacts with the Taliban from 2007 onwards. See Mujib Mashal “How Peace Between Afghanistan and the Taliban Foundered” 26 December 2016. In the Norwegian account by former ambassador Alf Arne Ramslien, the Taliban meeting attempts were stalled at every approach by security incidents in Pakistan. Ramslien does not entertain the thought that these events might have been used as an excuse to break contact by his contacts, but accepts them at face value. This is hard to believe, as the arrest of Mullah Baradar came at the initiative and intelligence of the United States, not the Pakistani counterparts, who did not understand who they had picked up. See Steve Coll, *Directorate S – The CIA and America’s Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, New York 2018, p. 467.

22. In military doctrine, the idea of a militant network as the best way to counter Indian conventional force superiority appeared in the 1950s. See Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End – the Pakistani Army’s Way of War*, Oxford & New York 2014, p. 227

23. Donald Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America December 2017 (NSS-2017)*, 18 December 2017.

24. Terri Moon Cronk “South Asia Strategy in Afghanistan Shows Results, Nicholson Says” *Department of Defense News* 30 May 2018.

generational renewal²⁵ over the winter at the leadership level. A similar exercise just concluded in the Ministry of Interior.²⁶

The fight is far from over, though, and the 2018 season is just gearing up. Partly in response to the Pakistani attempts to achieve greater control over the insurgency, the Taliban seem to have diversified and built up additional support channels from Iran.²⁷ While the stated aim of the Taliban – capture of provincial capitals – has been denied to them, the running occupation of district capitals, and their ability to strike in up to 70% of the Afghan territory with about half the Afghan population is effectively denying the Afghan Government civilian outreach and economic development.²⁸ The Taliban governance has also improved in these areas which they secured.²⁹

President Ghani recognized that provision of security, rule of law and balanced economic development was interrelated.³⁰ The additional resources provided have little hope to drive the Taliban back to a state like in 2012, where they had to withdraw to the extreme periphery. As General Nicholson declared, the military inputs serve to deny military victory to the Taliban, provide room for the Afghan government to reform, and create an opportunity for a negotiated end of the hostilities.

TALKS WITH THE TALIBAN?

General Nicholson even hinted at already ongoing confidential contacts through a variety of channels.³¹ The Taliban were quick to negate the existence of any such contacts, pointing out that their diplomacy would not include “secret layers.”³² In another rebuttal published three days later, the Taliban attempted to correct Nicholson’s “twisted picture” of the situation, claiming to control seventy percent of the country, and benefiting from wide popular support. The Taliban announcement denied any legitimacy to the “corrupt Kabul Administration” and presented the Taliban as the only representatives of Afghanistan, with whom the United States should negotiate its withdrawal.³³

At the same time Hekmatyar’s spokesman unveiled the newly established channel through his

25 “162 Senior Army Generals Retire from the Afghan Military” Khaama News 4 April 2018 and “Defense Ministry retired another 61 Generals from Service” Ariana News 21 May 2018.

26. “President Ghani approves retirement of over 140 MoI Generals” Ariana News 29 May 2018.

27. Pamela Constable “Days after Taliban assault in western Afghanistan, allegations of an Iranian role” Washington Post 6 June 2018.

28. The ongoing stalemate is noted by the United Nations. See United Nations Secretary-General, The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security (2014A/72/888–S/2018/539), 6 June 2018.

29. The Taliban have proven adept at co-opting resources provided by the Afghan State and make them function under their control. Ashley Jackson, *Life under the Taliban shadow government*, London (Overseas Development Institute) 21 June 2018.

30. Independent Directorate of Local Governance, *Islamic Republic of Afghanistan: Citizen-Centered Governance - A Roadmap for Subnational Reform*, Kabul May 2018, p. 3.

31. “Resolute Support Mission Commander Holds News Briefing” Department of Defense DVIDS 30 May 2018.

32. “Remarks by spokesman of Islamic Emirate concerning claims of General Nicholson” Taliban Website Voice of Jihad English 31 May 2018.

33. “General Nicholson should declare truth to America” Taliban Website Voice of Jihad English 3 June 2018.

party to the Taliban.³⁴ Nadir Afghan, a representative of Mr. Hekmatyar's party is proposing the establishment of a Taliban office in Kabul as well as sanctuaries in the Afghan countryside. The bureaucratic entity supposed to lead on such talks, the High Peace Council, declared that while no official talks had started, the "signs of increasing inclination among the Taliban leaders to start such talks," they would have to be conveyed by the High Peace Council.³⁵ Not only Nicholson can be forgiven for thinking of a similar situation to the "talk and fight" stance of FARC guerrilla of Colombia in this context. A book-length compilation of writers – all well acquainted with the Taliban – finds a multitude of channels operating on several levels between the Taliban and the Afghan Government.³⁶

The legitimacy of the fight against both the Islamic State and the Afghan Government is contested within the Taliban. Would the Taliban agree to engage the Afghan Government, they fear to become "just another Afghan faction" and lose out over recruits, donors and prestige to the Islamic State.³⁷

At the same time, a significant part of the movement leadership does yearn for a stop of the fighting. The leadership is – since the acknowledgment of Mullah Omar's death – struggling to live up to its own ideology. Religious credentials of the current leadership are under debate, and are weighed against actual leadership in the military campaign and proximity to Mullah Omar as a dynastic principle of succession. Al-Qaida and affiliates remain embedded³⁸ with the Taliban, and their protection continues to dominate the discourse. Most Taliban rank and file recently interviewed by an Afghan researcher are indifferent or opposed to an idea of cessation of hostilities. The invitation to cease a sacred obligation (jihad) in return to be integrated into a system conceptualized as sinful in the extreme holds no appeal. While the previous Taliban commander in chief Akhtar Muhammad Mansour introduced the concept of negotiations as an equivalent way to introduce an Islamic system in the winter of 2015-16, it remained largely theoretical and limited to senior leaders.³⁹

Taliban internal and external communication is still dominated by an ideology in line with the global jihadist movement. Media productions celebrate heroes of Al-Qaida by placing the martyr Osama Bin Laden's picture next to the picture of deceased Mullah Omar. However, they also stress their separate corporate identity. The Taliban Arabic magazine "Al-Somood" is edited by

34. Husain Haydari "Hizb-i islami: guft-u guha-yi sirri-yi sulh-i Taliban wa Hekmatyar ba asas-i tarh-i ma jiry-an darad [*The secret peace talks between the Taliban and Hekmatyar take place based on our proposal*]" Hasht-i Subh (8AM) 2 June 2018.

35. Interview with High Peace Council spokesman Sayed Ehsan Taheri in "Insurgents Talked Peace With Afghan Govt" episode of Mehwar programme, Tolo TV 1 June 2018 minute 3.

36. Anna Larson and Alexander Ramsbotham (eds.), *Incremental Peace in Afghanistan*, Conciliation Resources Accord 27, London June 2018.

37. Interviews with current and former Taliban leaders over the first half of 2018.

38. Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, Ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2255 (2015) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan (S/2018/466), 30 May 2018.

39. interviews conducted June 2017 into January 2018 with 32 contacts - Borhan Osman, *A Negotiated End to the Afghan Conflict - The Taliban's Perspective*, Washington (United States Institute of Peace) 18 June 2018.

veteran “Afghan Arab” Mustafa Hamid a.k.a. Abu Walid al-Masri.⁴⁰

The ongoing military confrontation is a key factor providing cohesion, and no positive answer should be expected soon to Ghani’s peace offer of 28 February 2018. The Taliban remain committed to only discuss peace with the “invading forces” of the United States.⁴¹

THE CEASE-FIRE

The Taliban answered to Ghani’s declaration of an eight-day ceasefire over the Eid al-Fitr days at the end of Ramadan, which was made on 7 June 2018.⁴² The Taliban declared a three-day cease-fire, exempting attacks on foreign troops.⁴³ The resulting three days of actual cessation of hostilities led to scenes of fraternization among Taliban and Government forces, but were also accompanied by suicide attacks on these events.⁴⁴ Former Taliban who reconciled with the Afghan Government greeted the process enthusiastically.⁴⁵ Longstanding analysts emphasize however, that the Taliban refer to negotiations only in connection with their “victory”, without any reference to power-sharing or other accommodation.⁴⁶ Both in its Pashto and Persian, the Taliban leadership presented their truce as a gesture of respect for the holy days, claiming that they had also in previous years issued similar directives (through without offering any proof). In its Arabic propaganda, the Taliban leadership presented the cease-fire as a temporary truce with unbelievers (*hudna*) and avoided the technical term (*waqf i‘tilaq an-nar*) or the word peace (*sulh*).⁴⁷

CONTACTS VIA POLITICAL PARTIES AND NOT THE GOVERNMENT

One venue the Taliban leaders have explored in the last decade was outreach to former mujahidin parties, who now form part of the Afghan Government. As the political system as such is an abomination, the Taliban do not want to be registered as a political party, but rather recognized

40. Mustafa Hamid “La nuridu dumu‘ an nuridu sawamikh – hamla askariya salibiya ala ta‘lim ad-dini fi Afghanistan [*We do not want tears ... we want rockets – the Crusaders’ attack on religious education in Afghanistan*]” Al-Somood 146 (April 2018). For his background as an “Arab in Afghanistan” in the orbit rather than as a member of Al-Qaida see the recent book Mustafa Hamid & Leah Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan*, London 2015.

41. Several statements can be found on the Taliban-controlled Al-Emarah English website: “Statement by Political Office of Islamic Emirate concerning latest comments by US Department of State” 26 February 2018; “Letter of the Islamic Emirate to the American people!” 14 February June 2018; “Open letter of Islamic Emirate to the American President Donald Trump” 15 August 2017; “Open letter by the Spokesman of the Islamic Emirate to the American President Donald Trump” 25 January 2017; “A Few Frank Points to Ponder for the New American President” 23 January 2017.

42. The unilateral Afghan cease-fire encompassed the period 11-19 June 2018 and comes after a conference of about 2,000 Afghan clerics, which concluded on 3 June in the capital. “Afghan Govt Announces Ceasefire With Taliban” ToloNews 7 June 2018.

43. “Da Akhtar pa warcokay mujahidinuta da mishrtaba hidayat [*Guidance from the leadership to the mujahidin over the Eid al-Fitr Days*]” Taliban Al-Emarah Pashto website 9 June 2018, and “Directives of the Leader for the Mujahideen during Eid days” Taliban-controlled Al-Emarah English website 9 June 2018.

44. Frud Bezhan “Feasts, Hugs, And Selfies: A Tantalizing Glimpse Of Possible Afghan Peace” Radio Free Europe 24 June 2018.

45. Abdussalam Zaeef was Taliban ambassador in Pakistan up to the end of 2001; “Optimism Grows Over Govt-Taliban Ceasefire” Tolonews 12 June 2018.

46. Thomas Joscelyn & Bill Roggio “Analysis: A misbegotten ‘ceasefire’ in Afghanistan” *The Long War Journal* / *The Weekly Standard* 8 June 2018.

47. “Hudna al-‘id” [*Holiday Cease-fire*]” Al-Somood 148 (June 2018).

as a political actor.⁴⁸ While this might be a genuine attempt to circumvent the Taliban public position on talks, it also might be an attempt to circumvent the current Government and weaken its cohesion. The tension between on one side the publicly asserted rationale of the Taliban to not engage with the Afghan Government and on the other side the regularly reported contacts of Taliban leaders with some of its members has not yet been resolved. Rank and file members also are weary of the Taliban leaders reaching out to offers of international talks – be they offered by the United States or Russia.⁴⁹ These radicalised members are likely to desert the Taliban if the leadership agrees to engagement, and join ISKP.

REMOVING RELIGIOUS LEGITIMACY FOR THE WAR

Incremental and local agreements are more likely to deliver lasting impact. The partners in such deals are likely to be considered dissidents, and might be cast out of the Taliban movement and targeted for assassination. A nation-wide debate for peace, and a religious declaration withdrawing the status of holy war (jihad) might provide moral support for such dissidents.⁵⁰ The gathering in Kabul follows after a similar gathering in Pakistan declined to withdraw the label of “holy war” for attacks. The Pakistani religious scholars only went so far as to declare suicide attacks against the Pakistani government un-Islamic, and to provide the Pakistani government with the sole authority to declare holy war.⁵¹ This prompted prominent Islamist parties to request the Pakistani government to formally launch a jihad in Indian-held Kashmir, as well as in Afghanistan.⁵² In support of the Afghan initiative, Saudi Arabian scholars passed a resolution on 11 July 2018, which also implicitly denied the character of holy war to the conflict, and explicitly described the Afghan Government as Islamic.⁵³

It will become increasingly difficult for the Taliban to dismiss all these religious scholars as stooges of the “Western Occupiers” unless they employ the language of the international jihadist movement and Al-Qaida, and attack all regional Islamic establishment figures as “stooges” of the United States and Israel.

48. Khalil Safi & Thomas Ruttig “Understanding Hurdles to Afghan Peace Talks: Are the Taleban a political party?” Afghanistan Analysts Network 27 June 2018.

49. “Taliban controls more than half of Afghanistan’s territory - Russian diplomat” TASS 16 July 2018.

50. A suicide attacker already attacked on its closing day the conference of religious scholars, scholars in Kandahar and Laghman were assassinated in the following days. The Taliban “cultural commission” already denied all legitimacy and substantive grounds to the conference. See: “Da Kabul ghund aw jaali fatwa [*The Kabul meeting and the fake fatwa*]” Taliban Al-Emarah Pashto website 7 June 2018, “With what proof did palace scholars abrogate Jihad against warring infidels?” Taliban-controlled Al-Emarah English website 6 June 2018.

51. The “Paigham e Pakistan” fatwa was passed at a gathering of the Islamic Research Institute at the Islamic International University in Islamabad on 16 January 2018. The declaration’s Urdu text is not posted on the university’s website, but can be found under: <https://www.pdf-archive.com/2018/01/17/paigham-e-pakistan/>.

52. Kunwar Khuldune Shahid “Jihad decree triggers demands for holy war on Kashmir” Asia Times Online 30 January 2018.

53. Syed Zabiullah Langari “Ulema At Saudi Summit Call on Taliban To End The War” ToloNews 11 July 2018. The text of the “Makkah Declaration” was also published in English by the High Peace Council of Afghanistan and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (http://www.iinanews.org/page/public/news_details.aspx?id=235953#.W1md6C35xLA).

PRESSURE ON TALIBAN REVENUE STREAMS

The Taliban budget is financed to a major part from revenue generated from the Afghan opiate production. Military success has led to the capture of almost the entire poppy-growing areas by the Taliban.⁵⁴ Starting in November 2017, the United States and Afghan air force have attacked heroin laboratories in Afghanistan which financed the Taliban. The amount of damage caused by the first wave of attacks (Operation Jagged Knife) is debated.⁵⁵ The United States Forces in Afghanistan estimate that the operation as well as more conventional operations carried out by the Afghan Counter-Narcotics Police resulted in a loss of Taliban income of US \$16 million, which is likely to be an overstatement. While the content of the labs in most cases was only based on intelligence reports, the doyen of Afghan narcotics studies, David Mansfield, concludes that the figure for the air raids on the heroin labs should be closer to US \$1.4 million only.⁵⁶ Mansfield's figure is derived from known interlocutors with contacts to the Taliban, who had an interest to downplay the numbers to the researcher. The true damage to Taliban revenue might be in between the two estimates, and likely to be closer to Mansfield's assessment. The attacks have undoubtedly disrupted Taliban revenue gathering patterns and forced the relocation of heroin-processing facilities.⁵⁷

A fresh round of United States Treasury designations⁵⁸ also targeted Taliban and Haqqani Network financiers, and increasing scrutiny is being paid to the Taliban taxing legal and illegal mining operations.⁵⁹ The initial financial pressure on the Taliban launched by ISAF's Afghan Threat Finance Cell in 2011 had largely subsided by 2014. As the designations show, the Haqqanis could even aspire to become donors in the Syrian theatre of war. Through the handling of the Kabul Bank crisis, oversight mechanisms against terrorist financing suffered. Little wonder that the Islamic State found ways to transfer money into Afghanistan under the nose of the Afghan Central Bank.⁶⁰ The United Nations sanctions committee remains underutilized, with no new listings since more than 24 months, while current senior Taliban leaders (e.g. Mullah Shirin, chief of intelligence; Abdul Rahim Manan, shadow governor of Helmand; Muhammad Ibrahim Sadr; Abdul Qayum Zakir) do not feature on the List. Also, several states seem to be ignoring the

54. "Taliban appears to have taken control of Afghanistan's heroin industry" AFP 8 August 2017.

55. "Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Bunch via teleconference from Kabul, Afghanistan" Department of Defense 12 December 2017 claimed to have destroyed since 20 November 2017 25 laboratories. Together with joint operations with Afghan forces in other parts of the country, a total of US \$80 million worth of drugs was estimated to have been destroyed, of which 15 million would have gone to the Taliban.

56. David Mansfield "Bombing Heroin Labs in Afghanistan - The Latest Act in the Theatre of Counternarcotics" London School of Economics January 2018.

57. Memphis Barker and Sami Yousafzai "Taliban commander orders closure of opium labs in towns and cities - Recording suggests movement fears local discontent as US airstrikes target facilities in built-up areas" The Guardian 28 May 2018.

58. U.S. Department of the Treasury "Treasury Sanctions Taliban and Haqqani Network Financiers and Facilitators" 25 January 2018 subjected the following individuals to domestic US financial sanctions: Abdul Samad Sani, a Abdul Qadeer Basir Abdul Baseer, Maulawi Inayatullah, Faqir Muhammad, Gula Khan Hamidi and Hafiz Mohammed Popalzai. The named individuals handled tens of millions of US dollars on behalf of the Taliban.

59. Transparency International, "At any price we will take the mines" – the Islamic State, the Taliban and Afghanistan's White Talc Mountains, London May 2018.

60. Yusuf Zarif "Dar amaliyat bar khana-yi rais-i Da Afghanistan Bank dar zun-i sharq 3 tan kushta shudand [*Three killed in operation in the house of Afghan Central Bank Director for Eastern Zone*]" Pajhwok Afghan News, 29 March 2017.

travel ban on Taliban individuals, allowing them to travel and receive funds.⁶¹

Among the Taliban interviewed recently by peace researchers, interlocutors in every region expressed a desire to end the violence and voiced resentment against the Kandahari and Zadran (Haqqani Network) leadership.⁶² Partly this seems to be due to difficulties over the distribution of funding. The factions even within Helmand and Kandahar are arguing over revenue, and over the money taken in a personal capacity by previous leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour, which was never restored to the Taliban movement, but kept by his family.⁶³

FURTHER STEPS REQUIRED

Externally generated pressure on the Taliban, as well as pressure on Pakistan, although exerted more discretely than today, generated windows of opportunity already in the past. This time the pressure is generated with far fewer resources than previously, addresses financial resources of the Taliban more directly, and challenges publicly Pakistan's commitment to counter terrorism.

The almost simultaneous declarations of a cease-fire might be limited in time, but might be resumed in September, when the next Muslim holiday of the Sacrifice ('Id al-Adha / 'Id-i Qurban) is due. By that time, the international contacts might evolve into talks with a Taliban leadership in delegation in Doha. The Taliban seem to harbour genuine fears to open up themselves for further splintering if they react too directly to the offers of engagement. At this critical juncture, the international community, notably the United States, Russia and China, France and the United Kingdom could support the process by asking the Taliban and the Afghan Government **whether they would agree to mediation through a Special Envoy of the United Nations. The envoy could coordinate the different parallel formats** (Doha Taliban Office, Moscow Group, Quadilateral Contact Group, International Contact Group).

The United States and its allies should resist the temptation to increase troop levels further. In addition to support for security institutions and a few highly visible signature infrastructure projects (particularly urban housing development for security personnel and re-integrating former combatants) might draw also the right lessons from the previous experience with a highly diverse basket of programs, and success measured in the amounts of money spent.⁶⁴ **Projects in connection with urban spaces will be easier to realize with adequate oversight, and will directly**

61. Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, Ninth Report (loc. cit.), paragraph 64.

62. Anna Larson "Possibilities for a peaceful political future: perspectives of leaders of five Taliban caucuses" in: Larson and Ramsbotham, op. cit. p. 57-62.

63. The Taliban media exhorted Mansour's network to restore the funds by publishing the exemplary conduct of a previous Taliban leader, who has taken great pains to ensure that all funds from the Taliban "bayt al-mal" would be returned to it in case of his death.

64. See the excellent observations in the report from the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (<https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/stabilization/index.html>): Unrestricted funding can exacerbate local conflicts, drive corruption, and distort local economies, particularly if compressed timelines are driving spending. The stabilization effort in Afghanistan was derailed as money spent became the metric of success and programming drove wedges within communities and between communities and the government, rather than between insurgents and the population. The experience in Syria with the provision of housing in central locations to officers has shown that the experience of living together creates a community of interest even between officers from diverse ethnic and sectarian background. This urban development maintained the Syrian Arab Army's cohesion. Kheder Khaddour "Assad's Officer Ghetto: Why the Syrian Army Remains Loyal" Carnegie Middle East Center 8 November 2015.

benefit the part of the population within the Government's reach.

While the political outreach towards the insurgency through Vice-President Khalili and Gulbudin Hekmatyar is promising, the cohesion of the constitutional Afghan polity remains threatened by rumors about attempts to force through this year's parliamentary elections.⁶⁵ The failure by the National Unity Government to reform the electoral law towards party-based proportional representation as promised in the Abdullah-Ghani agreements⁶⁶ advises against going ahead with this election. In 2005 and 2010 the winning candidates only received an average of 35% of the votes cast, leading to an unresponsive cast of parliamentarians not beholden to anyone but themselves.⁶⁷ This core failure looms large, and proceeding to elections will certainly expose this weakness. Holding the elections in the middle of a still very challenging military campaign seems to be debated within the Trump Administration.⁶⁸ The International Election Support Group also has concluded that urgent steps are required to safeguard the integrity of the electoral process.⁶⁹

The Afghan Constitution provides ample opportunity to postpone elections due to security concerns. Taliban attacks against registration centers have already started. Diverting the limited security resources of Afghanistan away from fighting the Taliban to a defensive protection duty might not be the best strategic decision. The newly elected Chair of the Afghan Electoral Commission already has asked for a postponement of the elections.⁷⁰ Based on the Afghan Constitution, **a postponement of the elections would provide time for the execution of the required steps to conclude electoral reform, keep security resources focused on the Taliban, and possibly allow for a reform of the political system to make it acceptable for the Taliban, so the Taliban could present candidates to district and provincial councils and parliament if they so choose (given that the Makkah Declaration certified the Afghan Government as Islamic).** Holding the elections on 20 October 2018 with only the candidates currently registered might preclude such an invitation.

Pressure on the Taliban cannot remain the task of the international community and an Afghan security force operating at arms length from the political leadership, it should be **owned by the Afghan Government**, which would make it also harder for the Taliban to dismiss it as a partner in negotiations.

65. Masood Saifullah "Insecurity, fraud undermine upcoming Afghan elections" *Deutsche Welle* 31 May 2018.

66. United Nations Secretary-General, The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security (A/69/647-S/2014/876), 9 December 2014, paragraph 6 mentions "comprehensive electoral reform" among other commitments of President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah.

67. Thomas Johnson "The Illusion of Afghanistan's Electoral Representative Democracy: The Cases of Afghan Presidential and National Legislative Elections" *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 29 (2017) p. 1-37.

68. President Trump explained that he "will no longer use American military might to construct democracies in faraway lands, or try to rebuild other countries in our own image" - "Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia" White House 21 August 2017. On the other hand, Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan emphasised that "is vital that parliamentary and presidential elections take place this year" - "The Administration's South Asia Strategy on Afghanistan - Statement Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee" Washington, DC 6 February 2018.

69. Statement by the International Election Support Group, 17 July 2018; See also pr/ma "Oct 20 polls key to future international support: ESG" Pajhwok Afghan News 17 July 2018.

70. United Nations Secretary-General, The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security (A/72/768-S/2018/165), 27 February 2018.

There is ample space for action: prosecutions of Taliban, Al-Qaida and affiliated terrorists remain limited to low-level fighters. No cases have been brought against members of the Taliban leadership, no INTERPOL warrants issued. The most prominent Taliban individual in Afghan custody Anas Haqqani (from the Haqqani Network) was caught by the United States. Under direct pressure of the United States, he was prosecuted, and received the death penalty, but has so far remained incarcerated in Bagram. **The Afghan Government would be well advised to publicly indict and prosecute senior Taliban leaders for their crimes against civilians, and issue INTERPOL arrest notices where appropriate.**

The Afghan Financial Intelligence Unit (FinTRACA) remains under-resourced and kept at arms length from the Central Bank. The staff is also selected from among young civilian applicants without prior experience in the security sector. The staff is easily intimidated, lacks security awareness, has difficulties cooperating with security agencies, and has lost important leverage over the informal money market (*hawala*) centered at Sarayi Shahzada in downtown Kabul. **The Afghan Government and key donors should convene a multilateral task force, and appropriately staff FinTRACA by retraining veteran officers of the Afghan security and defense forces and to ensure that FinTRACA is closely cooperating and exchanging information with the various Afghan security services.**

The *hawala* system has – as a result of the mass migration of Afghans to Europe, notably Germany – assumed an even greater economic importance, and volumes of transfers have risen. Closer oversight through an adequately resourced FinTRACA would maintain the low-cost and high-trust remittance services but weed out the terror financiers and money launderers. **In particular European countries' Financial Intelligence Units (Egmont Group) would be well placed to study in detail together with the Afghan FinTRACA these transfers and increase their multilateral cooperation potentially by exchanging information via the Egmont Group mechanism to which FinTRACA is a member.**⁷¹

The dearth of capable civilian administrators is all the more glaring in Afghanistan's provinces. Due to security constraints it is hard to find new candidates for field-based administrative positions. In order to provide the Afghan state with a long-term outlook, donor nations who invested in the education of Afghan security officers and non-commissioned officers should launch **alumni programs**, which would provide the Afghan state with an alternative and less corrupt cadre to **support the ongoing generational change in the security institutions and in the civil service.**

The South Asia Strategy of President Trump, the sacrifices of the Afghan security forces and their allies have created an opportunity. President Ghani's offer to negotiate anywhere and without any conditions opens an unprecedented invitation to the Taliban. While it would be desirable to see them accepting such an invitation and conclude the conflict, preparations are required for the likely dismissal of the proposal as a whole, or an intra-Taliban split over the issue. Giving additional time to the electoral process scheduled to take place on 20 October 2018 would send a signal to the Taliban that the door remains open to reintegrate into the Afghan political life.

71. <https://egmontgroup.org/en/membership/list>.