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WAR BY OTHER MEANS

Is it possible to negotiate with the Taliban?

BY STEVE COLL

The former Taliban commander Abdul Salam Rocketi, now a member of parliament, ran for the Presidency in 2009. He says of the Taliban, "Their hope is to fight." Photograph by Kate Brooks.

On a recent Sunday morning, Vice-Admiral Robert Harward, the commander of Joint Task Force 435, which oversees American detention operations in Afghanistan, arrived at Kabul International Airport. He was wearing a camouflage uniform, a cloth cap, and wraparound sunglasses; a pistol protruded from the vest of his body armor. Harward was bound for Khost, a provincial capital menaced by Taliban fighters under the command of Jalaluddin Haqqanni and his son Siraj. The day's mission was to stage a parole shura—a public ceremony at which Taliban parolees would be handed over to Afghan political leaders, tribal elders, and family members under the terms of signed contracts. The shura would be the first in the Haqqannis' territory, and it promised, Harward had told me, to be "high adventure."

The Admiral, who has spent much of his career in the Navy SEALs, is an imposing figure. He has clear blue eyes and a style of speaking—juggling several conversations at once, posing questions like a game-show host, interrupting himself in midsentence to call out to aides—that cultivates an atmosphere of demanding exuberance. On his first tour in Afghanistan, which began in the late autumn of 2001, Harward led missions to capture and kill Taliban and Al Qaeda commanders. Now it has fallen to him to oversee the release of the same sorts of guerrillas; his task force aims to reintegrate former Taliban fighters into their communities, as part of a broader American effort to wind down the war by promoting Afghan political reconciliation.

Harward climbed the ramp of a gray C-130 Hercules, where his travelling party—uniformed aides, military police, civilian bodyguards, Afghan Army officers, and interpreters—had buckled themselves into orange nylon seats. Three accused Taliban prisoners sat forward on the starboard side. The prisoners, Haji Khiwajin, Juma Din, and Asil Khan, had been in American detention for ten months, fifteen months, and ten months, respectively. They wore loose brown Afghan robes and identical pairs of polished black shoes. Plastic goggles covered in gray electrical tape had been strapped across their faces; noise-muffling headphones enveloped

their ears. Bottles of Gatorade dangled from their belts.

When we arrived in Khost, the governor, Abdul Jabar Naimi, was waiting for us in a pungent rose garden within one of his walled compounds. About sixty turbaned elders sat in a semicircle before a makeshift outdoor stage. A religious scholar on Harward's task force, Colonel Mohammad Zubair, recited prayers, welcomed the prisoners and the tribal leaders, and then read a pledge to which all parties to the release ceremony had agreed:

> I will not return to the insurgency. I will live a peaceful life and support my government to the extent possible. I will explain to other Afghans that a peaceful way is preferable. This is our home. This is our ground. . . . I understand if I make any attempt to return to the insurgency, then this process will turn in a bad direction and everybody in this room will be responsible.

A poem and more prayers followed, and then the governor invited comments from the parolees. Khiwajin rose to his feet. His left eye had been closed by an injury, and his beard, grown down to his chest, was streaked with gray.

"Whether we did anything or not, we thank you for this process," he said. Then he turned to his treatment by the Afghan government: "In the middle of the night, all of a sudden, a bag was put on my head, handcuffs. That is not a good government. Under God's government, there are open spaces, wind—a place for everyone. People don't have confidence in a government where foreign forces come in the night and put you in a prison run by foreigners. What kind of government is this?"

Colonel Zubair stood to interrupt, but Khiwajin went on: "I'm going to say good and also bad—please—I haven't talked for two years. I'm not trying to hurt anyone. . . . We were hungry. We were thirsty. We've been through all this. . . . We had our dignity. That's all we had. . . . You don't know what's in my heart. You can't call me an insurgent. I'm not an insurgent. . . . If you want to win, if you want to have a good government—there are thousands of people like me in there."

Admiral Harward asked his interpreter to correct Khiwajin's facts: the United States had detained three thousand people in Afghanistan since 2001, he said, and there were fewer than seven hundred now in detention.

Several elders clamored to talk. Juma Din rose and spoke haltingly. "I'm illiterate," he said. "My head hurts. . . . Ask my brother—I'm an innocent man. I'm not going to lie. The Americans treated us O.K. They treated us very humanely there. They gave us hats. They gave us prayer rugs. That means more to me than what my government has done."

Harward's aides began to gather up their body armor and helmets; the return convoy would be departing soon. The Admiral offered brief remarks. "My whole

purpose is to support the government of Afghanistan," he said. "I'm not going to speak about the past, because our focus is on the future. . . . Our goal is to achieve peace in Afghanistan."

It is a lofty aim. Afghanistan has been at war, at varying levels of intensity, for thirty-one years. After so much fragmenting violence, it is far from clear what a sustainable peace in the country would entail, or whether any party to the conflict has the political foresight to attain it.

Last December, President Obama, speaking at West Point, said that the United States would begin the transfer of forces from Afghanistan in July, 2011. "We will execute this transition responsibly, taking into account conditions on the ground," he said. The Administration's plan involved several strategies: an intensified campaign against the Taliban, supported by thirty thousand additional American troops; a redoubled effort to train Afghan security forces; and attempts to improve the performance of the Afghan government. Obama also suggested that he was open to negotiating a peace settlement with the Taliban. "We will support efforts by the Afghan government to open the door to those Taliban who abandon violence and respect the human rights of their fellow-citizens," the President said.

Within the Obama Administration and among its NATO allies, though, the question of whether to talk to the Taliban is a divisive one. In early March, David Miliband, then the British Foreign Secretary, delivered a lecture at M.I.T. in which he suggested that negotiation would be crucial to ending the war. Although some Taliban "are committed to Al Qaeda's violent extremist agenda, the majority are not," he said. Therefore, he argued, "now is the time for the Afghans to pursue a political settlement with as much vigor and energy as we are pursuing the military and civilian effort."

Inevitably, such a project would require outreach to Taliban leaders. Although the Taliban remain very unpopular in Afghanistan, they have identified their insurgency with grievances about corruption and tribal equity that are widespread among the Pashtuns, an ethnic group that accounts for about forty per cent of the country's population. The great majority of Pashtuns are not members of the Taliban, but nearly all Afghan Taliban are Pashtuns, and in areas of the south and east where Pashtuns predominate, the Taliban's armed movement is enmeshed in the local economy and tribal politics. According to U.S. military estimates, about three-quarters of Taliban guerrillas fight within five miles of their home. Afghanistan's history indicates that a durable peace will be impossible without sustainable power-sharing between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns. Since the Taliban constitute a substantial element of Pashtun politics, it would be difficult to construct such a settlement without at least attempting to include some of their leaders.

This presents difficulties for the United States. Every President since Ronald

Reagan has insisted that he would not negotiate with terrorists, and though each of them has made exceptions, a political stigma remains attached to even the hint of compromise. In the Taliban's case, these constraints are compounded by its record of violently suppressing minorities and women. Since the overthrow of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, two million girls have returned to school there, and it is difficult to imagine that any U.S. Administration would sanction a peace bargain that reversed those gains. At a press conference last week, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, "It is essential that women's rights and women's opportunities are not sacrificed or trampled on in the reconciliation process."

Miliband acknowledged that negotiation might seem unpalatable. But, he said, "dialogue is not appeasement." According to Western officials, Miliband and other British officials have urged the Obama Administration to authorize the C.I.A. to open a secret channel of communication to the Taliban. This channel would not necessarily be designed to initiate negotiations right away but could be used to build confidence through exchanges about more routine issues, such as the status of Taliban prisoners. The British officials have pointed out that their intelligence services established secret communications with Irish Republican Army leaders in 1972—about twenty years before comprehensive peace talks with the I.R.A. gained traction.

When I asked senior U.S. military officers in recent weeks who would ultimately take responsibility for sorting out whether and how to talk with the Taliban's highest leaders, all named Richard Holbrooke, President Obama's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Holbrooke has a record of negotiating with unsavory militia commanders; he helped to formulate the 1995 Dayton Accords, which settled Bosnia's multisided conflict, and later wrote a book about it, "To End a War." In appointing him, Obama seemed consciously to float the possibility that Holbrooke would participate in a similar bargain in South Asia.

This February in Kabul, Holbrooke told reporters, "We are watching this. We are talking to people." And since last autumn Obama and Clinton have made several public declarations of support for Afghan-led talks with Taliban leaders, if they will break ties with Al Qaeda. But, as Holbrooke put it in February, "The United States is not in direct contact with Taliban leadership. Why not? Because they aren't renouncing Al Qaeda."

According to the Pentagon's counterinsurgency doctrine, victory in Afghanistan cannot be achieved solely by military force. Yet the Obama Administration has not developed a clear and consistent political strategy for the war. It has alternated between denouncing Afghan President Hamid Karzai and embracing him, and, like the Bush Administration, it has veered between supporting Afghanistan's anti-Taliban warlords, who have been useful as military proxies, and repudiating them because their abuses strengthen the Taliban.

The policy review last fall did produce several conditions for negotiating with the

Taliban; that the Afghan government take the lead, and that the Taliban renounce Al Qaeda and accept the legitimacy of the Afghan constitution. As a practical matter, though, the Afghan government has displayed little leadership in this area, and so the de-facto policy has been passivity.

That has suited Obama's military commanders, who see little point in rushing to high-level peace talks while they are still pouring new forces onto the Afghan battlefield. "There's no one I've spoken to, at least on the American side—or, actually, on the coalition side—that doesn't think we need to proceed from a position of strength," Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said. "We're not there." The military's preference has been for a "bottom up" approach to negotiating with the Taliban, in which local defections help to gradually change Pashtun attitudes and alter the war's momentum. To that end, General Stanley McChrystal's plan for the next six months is to attempt to seize control of Kandahar Province, the Taliban's birthplace. At a press conference with Karzai last week, Obama affirmed this thinking: "The incentives for the Taliban to lay down arms, or at least portions of the Taliban to lay down arms, and make peace with the Afghan government in part depends on our effectiveness in breaking their momentum militarily."

For many Afghans, however, recent American policies seem notable for their internal contradictions. An announced date to begin troop withdrawals is accompanied by a pledge not to leave hastily; Obama's hints of willingness to talk to the Taliban are coupled with a military campaign that seems to belie any such interest.

For the Administration, one problem rests in its own uncertainty about the Taliban's place in Afghan politics. Almost nine years after the 2001 invasion, after more than a thousand American deaths, the United States remains undecided about the essential question of whether the Taliban can be reformed, and unable to conclude whether Karzai's government should ultimately seek to defeat the Taliban or learn to share power with them.

"I don't see a strategy or a coherent line between the actors on our side," said Thomas Ruttig, a Kabul-based analyst who has written extensively on the nascent Afghan peace process. "Karzai is saying one thing, the international community is saying another, the Brits are saying different things from the Americans."

At the end of a muddy road in a residential neighborhood of Kabul, plainclothes policemen with AK-47 assault rifles stood guard on a recent weekday morning. Behind them was a two-story concrete house, painted a conspicuous shade of green, the traditional color of Islam. Inside was more green: emerald walls and curtains, a lime-hued wall hanging fashioned from a *musullah*, or prayer rug, and green light fixtures shaped like tulips. Wispy-bearded teen-agers practiced their English as they showed me to a study on the second floor, where glassed-in bookcases held several copies of the householder's recent

memoir, "My Life with the Taliban."

The author, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, is a full-bellied man with a billowing black beard. He joined the Taliban's first ruling shura in 1994 and later served as Ambassador to Pakistan; he was imprisoned after the September 11th attacks. Since 2005, when the United States released him from Guantánamo and allowed him to resettle in Kabul as a guest of the Karzai government, Zaeef has emerged as a much scrutinized interlocutor. Obama Administration officials regard him as a potentially important intermediary with the Taliban, although his credibility with them is unclear. On the morning I visited him, Zaeef wore a traditional Afghan robe, sandals, and a shiny silver watch. He sat on a couch and chatted engagingly for a while about books, but when I turned to the peace process in Afghanistan he sounded weary of the subject.

"I've met with a lot of important figures and with the government here—with Americans, too. Most people—especially the people of Afghanistan—they want to stop war. They do not believe fighting is fruitful," he said. "I think the European countries are interested in stopping war and finding an alternative. It's just the Americans. . . . Yes, they talk about reconciliation, but, really, they are not ready to do anything yet. And when the United States doesn't want to do something the other countries hesitate."

I mentioned that some in the Obama Administration seemed reluctant to engage with the Taliban because of its record on human-rights issues—the mistreatment of minorities, the destruction of Afghan cultural monuments, the harsh administration of justice, and the banning of female education as a violation of Islamic law. I asked Zaeef if he believed the Taliban's views had changed.

"It belongs to the people of Afghanistan as to what to implement," he answered. "If we are making Islam to the interpretation of America, then we are destroying Islam. The people of Afghanistan, they are Muslims, and nobody is rejecting Islam here. We have scholars. This is very easy for the people of Afghanistan, to come together and solve this. America came here for what? They came for women? No. They came for education? No. They came because they were attacked from Afghanistan and they sought security. That is their right. But they should not occupy or interfere with Afghanistan." Zaeef's complaints draw upon a narrative of the Afghan war common among Pashtuns. In this telling, American policy unnecessarily excluded the Taliban from political participation after September 11th and, by doing so, fed the insurgency's revival.

After the invasion of Iraq, the United States purged high-ranking officials of Saddam Hussein's ruling Baath Party, while lower-level functionaries were allowed to plead their case or simply to carry on in their government jobs. This policy of de-Baathification proved to be catastrophically misguided, but it was at least explicit. In Afghanistan the Bush Administration enunciated no clear policy toward the defeated government or its military commanders—other than by issuing

a mandate backed in many cases by reward money, to capture or kill any senior Taliban leader who could be found. The fates of particular leaders were often decided by regional Afghan warlords installed by the United States, who tracked down local Taliban enemies, sold them to international forces for incarceration, or chased them into Pakistan, sometimes seizing land they left behind.

So far, Zaeef said, it had been impossible to explore how much common ground there might be between the Taliban and the United States. “The Taliban are isolated,” he said. “The Taliban are on the blacklist. The Taliban have no address. So they say as long as the foreign forces are in Afghanistan we should attack, because there is no realistic alternative.”

The Obama Administration’s model for talking to the Taliban is based on the experiences of the U.S. military in Iraq, where negotiations with Sunni leaders in Anbar Province gradually produced a change in the war’s direction. In a long series of meetings with tribal sheikhs, beginning in 2004, American commanders developed a peace process that was “probably more intuitive than objective,” a high-ranking officer who served in both Afghanistan and Anbar recalled. In local and informal settings, “we were able to show them that we were their best friends—that we owned them—and they would come over. Now, we were a largely Christian, all-American force in a part of the world where that doesn’t go over well. So we were under no illusion about the difficulty. But even during the worst fighting we kept talking.”

In Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke argues, peace talks must be preceded by a similar effort to win defections from mid-level commanders. “If we could peel off twenty, thirty, forty per cent of the Taliban—by groups, based on local-commander arrangements, and deals in which they get land or jobs or security or share political power—that would be a fantastic step forward,” he said. “It would save NATO lives. It would demoralize the Taliban leadership—it would tell them that they better negotiate while they can.”

This sort of district-by-district strategy would require leadership and support from the Afghan government, however, and there has been little evidence that Karzai is willing to provide it. At an international conference in London earlier this year, he seemed ready to talk to the Taliban; he called them “disenchanted brothers,” and pledged that his government would pursue reconciliation. The United States and its allies promised to fund programs to entice Taliban defectors, and American officials invited Karzai’s reconciliation team to flesh out detailed plans. They did so, in a series of meetings in the United Arab Emirates. But the draft proposal they produced languished on Karzai’s desk. It wasn’t until last week, while Karzai was visiting Washington, D.C., that the result of the meeting was introduced: the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program, a hundred-and-sixty-million-dollar plan to reconcile low- and mid-level Taliban fighters.

This new plan is the latest in a series of often abortive efforts to erode the Taliban

from the bottom up. During the past several years, Karzai has staged a handful of peace *jirgas*—assemblies of delegates handpicked by his government—but these have not offered the kinds of convincing programs of jobs and security that might attract wavering Taliban. More typically, according to independent analysts, Karzai's government has manipulated international donors into funding reconciliation programs, then shored up his political position by doling out appointments and patronage. For savvy Afghan officials, programs for reintegrating militia members have created lucrative contracting opportunities. "A lot of it is about acquiring new funds," Ruttig, the analyst, said. "Many of these funds have been dealt with the same way—without strict oversight." The Japanese government has poured tens of millions of dollars into United Nations-supervised disarmament initiatives, with names like the Afghanistan New Beginnings Program. At best, these programs have converted anti-Taliban militia members into soldiers or found them jobs in the country's booming private-security industry. Meanwhile, the insurgency has grown worse.

In January, Karzai announced another peace *jirga;* he later postponed it until late May. Abdullah Abdullah, the Afghan opposition leader who finished second in last year's fraud-tainted Presidential election, described Karzai's outreach to the Taliban as "all noises here and there." He said, "There hasn't been any thought into these things. . . . There is no doubt that this creates confusion—it has created confusion already in the political environment."

Karzai has a long, ambivalent history with the Taliban. In the mid-nineteen-nineties, after the mujahideen took power in Afghanistan, he lived in exile among Taliban leaders in Quetta and Kandahar. "They were my buddies," he told me shortly after he took office. "They were good people." Later, Karzai and his family broke with the Taliban and worked against them. Taliban assassins gunned down his father, a former Afghan senator, in 1999. As President, though, Karzai has suffered chronic political insecurity, and relies upon southern Pashtun tribes as part of his political base. Some of those tribes identify with the Taliban's grievances, and so Karzai has adopted more accommodating public rhetoric toward the movement. During one recent outburst against Western policy, he even threatened to join the Taliban, and though few took the claim seriously, it was an indicator of how unsettled his position has become.

Former Taliban leaders claim that when Karzai was installed as Afghanistan's interim leader, late in 2001, many of them were prepared to work within the new political order. When Karzai and U.S. Special Forces first entered Kandahar, "the Taliban cabinet met with him and said, 'You are our President,' " Arsala Rahmani, who was then the Taliban government's minister for pilgrimage and religious affairs, recalled. Karzai pledged coöperation, Rahmani said, but failed to deliver. Northern ethnic groups dominated the government, particularly its security services. These groups had spent much of the previous decade at war with the Taliban, and were not particularly interested in the political rehabilitation of their

enemies

At the same time, American Special Forces and intelligence paramilitaries "gave no trust to the Taliban," Rahmani said. "Some Taliban were killed. Some were arrested and placed in different prisons. Those Taliban who were alive had reward money on their heads. That means you pushed them to join Al Qaeda." When Karzai tried to reach out to Taliban commanders, telling them, as Rahmani put it, "Oh, my brothers—come and lay down your guns and join us," Taliban leaders sensed a trap. If a commander "has a five-million-dollar reward on his head . . . how can he come forward?"

Taliban commanders also contacted the United Nations and declared, "Look, I want to be on the inside of this process," Michael Semple, who was a U.N. political officer in Kabul at the time, recalled. "Tell me what the guarantees are: How do I know I won't be dragged off?" Semple consulted his superiors and relayed their answer: "There is no answer and there are no guarantees." In 2002, the former Taliban foreign minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil approached the Afghan government in Kabul; he was arrested and imprisoned for eighteen months.

Taliban leaders in Pakistan and Afghanistan inhabit a world of legal and military ambiguity. A hundred and thirty-seven individuals—including formally reconciled figures such as Zaeef and Rahmani—remain subject to economic and travel sanctions under U.N. resolutions that date back to the late nineteen-nineties. In 2007, the Bush Administration assembled a separate list of former Taliban whom it judged ineligible for rehabilitation; the Obama Administration abandoned use of that roster, but never made its contents public. An additional list, maintained by McChrystal's command, designates Taliban who are subject to capture or death; the names on the list are classified, so no particular Talib can be certain of his status. American policy asserts that Karzai's government should take the lead in negotiating with Taliban leaders, yet Karzai is powerless to offer the Taliban a secure place to negotiate.

Moreover, the United States has sent mixed signals to Karzai about his family's contacts with Taliban commanders. Karzai's younger half brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, who heads the provincial council in Kandahar, is said to direct the President's political strategy in the south. In the past year, the U.S. military received unsubstantiated reports that Ahmed Wali had negotiated non-aggression pacts with Taliban commanders around Kandahar. According to senior military officers, McChrystal's command warned him that if he was caught making contact with Taliban insurgents, he would be placed on the U.S. target list, subject to capture or death—a position that surely does not encourage Karzai to take the lead in negotiating with the Taliban.

To support Karzai, McChrystal has appointed a retired British general, Sir Graeme Lamb, as a senior adviser to his command. Lamb, who worked on reconciliation efforts in Northern Ireland and Iraq, has outlined for the American commanding

general a potential end-game in Afghanistan that would seek to accommodate the interests of the United States, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, as well as sections of the Taliban. His planning, however, is not yet linked to any concrete strategy for high-level talks with Taliban leaders. Nor is it clear how or when such a strategy will be devised. Lamb described his approach as "working through chaos," by seizing opportunities to negotiate as they arise on the battlefield and then improvising a pathway toward high-level talks. "We don't want to rush to failure," Lamb said. "People's wishes have to be tempered by getting to something that is favorable to the Afghans, favorable to the international community, and long-lasting."

Karzai has tended to run his engagement with the Taliban "out of his hip pocket," as a Western diplomat in Kabul put it. Ibrahim Spinzada, Karzai's brother-in-law and the second-highest official in the Afghan intelligence service, has overseen much of his outreach. Beginning in 2005, Spinzada hoped to use Afghanistan's Embassy and Consulates in Pakistan as induction centers where Taliban could securely negotiate reconciliation deals. That effort failed, but gradually, after 2006, Karzai's government did open channels to members of the Quetta Shura, the Taliban's ruling council, headed by Mullah Omar. The two sides held informal conversations during religious pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia, culminating in a Ramadan dinner in Mecca in the fall of 2008. Qayuum Karzai, the Afghan President's older brother—a Baltimore restaurateur and occasional peace envoy—met with representatives from the Quetta Shura; they broke the fast together and talked abstractly about the possibilities for peace.

These contacts, though, have amounted to little more than talks about talks, with each side speculating about sequences and concessions that might lead to serious negotiations. After the Ramadan meeting, Mutawakil, Zaeef, Rahmani, and other reconciled Taliban drafted an unsigned document, titled "Peace Step by Step," which outlines a zigzagging but not implausible series of negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban, supported by the United States. The first step would be to create an environment where emissaries from the Quetta Shura could talk without fear of arrest by the United States or intimidation by Pakistan. In an initial round of discussions, the Taliban might negotiate over the status of their prisoners and the Afghan government could address the Taliban's attacks on schools, roads, and national infrastructure. Later talks, perhaps under United Nations auspices, might create a timetable for the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan and address the scope of the country's constitution.

The former Taliban leaders have submitted their blueprint to NATO, the Saudi government, and the Afghan government. But Karzai has been unable to respond to the blueprint, since he cannot speak for the Western powers. Nor has he advocated forcefully for it; his attitude about the peace process has been characteristically indecisive.

The Taliban, for their part, have not accepted American and Saudi demands that

they publicly renounce Al Qaeda. But last September Mullah Omar, or someone writing under his name, issued a statement that hinted at such a concession; the statement described the Taliban as an "Islamic and nationalist movement," which seemed to draw a subtle distinction between its goals and the international agenda of Al Qaeda. American military commanders have taken note. Mullen told me that he sees various players in a prospective Afghan endgame, including the Taliban, "positioning themselves as best they can, with an uncertain outcome, an uncertain strategy, and an uncertain timeline. So there's a lot of activity, but I don't see it as determinative, decisive activity."

NATO's mantra of peace through strength has frustrated Taliban negotiators, as, perhaps, is its intent. "Increasing pressure on the Taliban, trying to negotiate from a position of strength—that is the wrong policy, the wrong idea," Zaeef said, because, like the blacklists, it has sown mistrust about whether America would ever seriously consider negotiations. There are already too many barriers to successful talks, he argued, and yet "the Americans are putting more and more obstacles. These obstacles—the Taliban cannot remove them. You have to remove them."

Until January, the United States housed Taliban detainees in a makeshift facility at Bagram Air Field. In 2002, two Afghan prisoners died there from abuse by their American guards and interrogators, in episodes that the Taliban have exploited in their propaganda. As a good-faith effort, the American military has recently begun overhauling Afghanistan's military detention regime. Under Admiral Harward's supervision, Bagram has been replaced by a sixty-million-dollar facility next door, which was designed to meet international humanitarian standards, and Harward intends to transfer all prisoners there to Afghan government control by 2011. In the meantime, Task Force 435 has revised guidelines to hasten the release of accused Taliban; the parole rate has risen during the past several months from about ten per cent to fifty per cent.

Harward works from an air-conditioned, windowless trailer about a hundred yards from General McChrystal's command center in downtown Kabul. When I visited him there, he said that the American policy he had inherited was informed by "a counterterrorism perspective. . . . It was all driven by U.S. intelligence," which emphasized capturing or killing as many commanders as possible. "I'm not saying U.S. intelligence is myopic, but sometimes it can bear a narrow lens," he said. Harward said that General McChrystal asked him to think more broadly about how to distinguish reconcilable Taliban in the prison populations he oversees, and to aid the Afghan government in doing so. Among other things, Harward will help issue identity cards, with biometric data such as fingerprints, to every person in the country over age fifteen. His hope is that identity cards will help hold violent Taliban accountable while protecting the innocent from false accusations, and will deter recruitment and guerrilla activity.

Harward said that programs like his, aimed at stabilizing Afghanistan one Talib at a time, can be dismissed in political circles as merely "tactical." But, he argued, "so

far I think we have had a much more dramatic and strategic impact" than any other track of American political strategy. That seems an expansive claim; the United States has yet to turn the Afghan war favorably through negotiations of any kind.

One way for the Obama Administration to avoid the taint of direct talks with the Taliban is to approach them indirectly, through the Pakistani Army and its Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence, or I.S.I. Enticing Pakistan to act as a negotiating agent for the Taliban in Afghan peace talks has considerable potential. In the best case, it could help wind down the war. In the worst, though, it could exacerbate the ongoing violence.

Pakistan has long supported the Taliban, to project influence in Afghanistan and to help control its own large Pashtun population. During the past six months, the Administration has pursued a deepening engagement with Pakistan's security services—a "strategic dialogue," as the two governments have labelled it, of widening scope and ambition. At the heart of these talks lies the question of whether Pakistan can and will use its leverage with the Taliban to bring them to a political settlement.

Last November, General James Jones, the national-security adviser, delivered a letter from Obama to the Pakistani President, Asif Zardari. The letter invited Pakistan to define its national interests in the Afghan war, so that the United States could address these interests directly. The United States has long demanded that Pakistan coöperate against the Taliban, and the implied message was that any new arrangement would require greater efforts to do so. Jones also sought to make clear that although Obama had announced that U.S. combat forces would begin to change their role in 2011, this did not mean that the United States would withdraw altogether. "We will not leave Afghanistan without finishing our job," Jones told Zardari, according to an official who was present. Asked to define that job, Jones replied, "Ending the Taliban as a credible threat."

In the next two months, high-ranking Pakistani officials met with Holbrooke, Mullen, McChrystal, and General David Petraeus, and, at the invitation of the U.S., submitted a fifty-six-page briefing on its security interests in the region. The paper, according to officials familiar with its contents, reflects one overriding concern: India.

For years, Pakistan has maintained that India has used its Embassy and Consulates in Afghanistan to foster separatist insurgencies inside Pakistan. The Indian government rejects this accusation as paranoia, and, in reality, the official Indian presence in Afghanistan is not formidable; it includes about a hundred Embassy and Consulate employees, plus local hires, a security team, and a construction team that is erecting a new Afghan parliament building. But India has opened two consulates near the Pakistan border, in Jalalabad and Kandahar, which I.S.I. officers believe have been used to aid anti-Pakistan groups.

Since the early nineteen-nineties, I.S.I. has cultivated the Taliban and other Islamist militias, in the hope that they would provide what Pakistani generals refer to as "strategic depth": if India invaded from the east, Afghanistan could provide territory into which Pakistani forces could retreat and regroup, as well as mountains suitable for hiding nuclear weapons. On September 11th, this vision collapsed, but the idea of a friendly Afghanistan remains an attractive one.

In recent months, the Indian government suggests, Pakistan has been emboldened by signs that the United States and Europe are tiring of the war. Its Army is "convinced that the West has lost" in Afghanistan, a senior Indian official told me. As a result, Pakistani generals believe they can extract favors by helping the United States and its European partners "leave with dignity," while also pushing India back.

In March, two Pakistani generals—Ashfaq Kayani, the Army chief, and Ahmed Pasha, the head of I.S.I.—met with Karzai in Islamabad, and signalled that they could help cool down the Taliban insurgency. In exchange, Kayani said, the Karzai government must "end" India's presence in Afghanistan. According to a senior Afghan intelligence official, he said, "There cannot be any type of Indian presence in Afghanistan—any type." (A senior Pakistani official said that the generals' message was more restrained, demanding only that India not use Afghanistan as a platform for guerrilla war against Pakistan.)

In the recent talks with American officials, Pakistan hinted that it could deliver the Taliban to a settlement if the terms were satisfactory. "We have a potential reconciliation strategy to sell," the senior Pakistani official said. "But we want a few things in return."

American officials are trying to manage this negotiation to create a sustainable balance of power. General McChrystal told me, "I think it's reasonable for Pakistan to want an effectively governed Afghanistan, one which can control its own borders." He also thought it would be fair for Pakistan to insist that Afghanistan not be used as a launching pad for covert war—"and, of course, we know that they have concerns about India," he said. But, he suggested, Pakistan should not seek to "keep Afghanistan weak," and that "it would not be legitimate" for it to engage in covert guerrilla warfare against any of its neighbors.

Kayani and Pasha have insisted to their American counterparts that their influence on the Taliban is often overestimated. Pakistan's Taliban—a distinct organization from the Afghan Taliban, though the two groups maintain ties—has intensified its violence and begun to collaborate more with terrorist groups operating from Pakistani soil, including Al Qaeda. As the case of the would-be Times Square bomber, Faisal Shahzad, suggests, some of these Pakistani groups have global links and ambitions. The Pakistani generals point out that their Army has lost hundreds of soldiers since 2007 fighting the Taliban inside Pakistan, and that I.S.I. offices in Lahore, Peshawar, and elsewhere have lately been targeted by Taliban suicide

But American officials believe that I.S.I. has considerably more leverage with the Afghan Taliban than it is willing to admit. Pakistan has recently arrested several important Taliban leaders who were residing on its soil, including Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a close aide to Mullah Omar. Afghan and American officials have interpreted the arrests as a conspicuous attempt by Pakistan's Army and the I.S.I. to position themselves as intermediaries in any negotiations with the Taliban; the goal is to protect Pakistan's interests in any peace deal and to extract concessions from Washington and Kabul. Two of the Taliban leaders caught in the recent sweeps were directly involved in Karzai's occasional efforts to hold talks with the Quetta Shura. The senior Pakistani official said that the arrests were "an 'F you' " to the Afghan government; they were designed to make clear that Pakistan knew which Taliban were talking with Karzai's interlocutors, and that no significant negotiations could proceed without Pakistan's involvement. A senior U.S. military officer put the matter more delicately. The arrests were "a matter of controlling the dialogue" with the Taliban, he said. The purpose was to signal that Pakistan must "have a role—a principal position—in negotiating the end of the conflict."

On March 28th, during a visit to Kabul, his first as President, Obama met over dinner with about a dozen key Afghan Cabinet ministers and other officials. President Karzai invited each of his colleagues to speak for a minute or two. When his turn came, Amrullah Saleh, the chief of the principal Afghan intelligence service, rose to comment on the recent talks between the United States and Pakistan. According to an official who was present, Saleh told Obama, in essence, that the Pakistan Army can "see the division between Europe and the United States. They see division within Europe and within the United States. They see these mild approaches to the Taliban. They see the West agreeing to discuss Pakistan's fifty-six-page demand list. We have to change their perception to say, 'We have not lost, and you are too weak to defeat us.' If we do not do that, which is achievable, then we lose."

Obama did not reply directly. During dinner, though, according to a second official present, he remarked that he intended to press U.S. drone attacks against Al Qaeda and Taliban inside Pakistan; the pace of such attacks has risen sharply during his time in office. The President seemed to be saying that if I.S.I. did not force the Taliban's leaders to choose between peace and marginalization, the United States would do so on its own. (A White House official denied that the President spoke about the drone attacks.)

Even the most skeptical Afghan leaders recognize that stability in their country will require Pakistan's coöperation and some accommodation of its Army's desire for a friendly government in Kabul. But they worry that the United States, in its rush to withdraw, might give Pakistan too great a share in Afghan politics, spurring a backlash from northern ethnic groups. At worst, this could revive the civil war of the nineteen-nineties, at much greater intensity.

All the recent maneuvering between the United States and Pakistan has created an atmosphere of mistrust and confusion, in which many Afghans fear that a new political order might be constructed without their consent. Referring to the way outside powers are jockeying to secure greater influence in Afghanistan, Qayuum Karzai told me, "Peace is now war by other means."

Not even the most ardent advocates for talking to the Taliban are certain that negotiations can succeed. Before and after September 11th, American negotiators, working directly and through Pakistan, tried to persuade Mullah Omar to hand over Osama bin Laden; those talks failed. There are Taliban leaders today, such as the Haqqannis, whose appetite for political negotiations appears very doubtful. And cases such as that of Faisal Shahzad are likely to make the prospect of talks even more controversial in the United States.

The most convincing idea, endorsed by some State Department analysts, is that important members of the Quetta Shura may now be tired of war, straining to be free of Pakistani manipulation, and prepared to share power. Whether talks succeed or fail, the very act of opening serious negotiations could touch off divisions and confusion within the Taliban leadership. Hypotheses of this sort can be proved or disproved only by testing; it is hard to understand why the United States, with so many lives and so much treasure at stake in the war, would refuse to even try.

One morning, I wound south from downtown Kabul, through crushing rush-hour traffic—green police pickups, the ubiquitous Toyota Corollas, and the double-cabbed Hilux trucks favored by local warlords—to a walled compound next to a sprawling lumberyard. At the gate stood Abdul Salam Rocketi, a black-turbaned, fleshy man with hands like oven mitts and a boxer's flattened nose. He welcomed me into his home, a one-story concrete structure with plastic sheeting over the cracked front windows. Rocketi is a former Taliban corps commander who served in the southern Zabul Province and, later, in the strategic eastern city of Jalalabad. He defected to the Karzai-led government in 2002 and is now an independent member of parliament; he finished eighth as a candidate in last year's Presidential election. When we settled in his reception lounge, I remarked that "Rocketi" seemed like an unlikely family name, and asked how he had earned it.

"When the Communists—the Russians—invaded, there were a lot of tanks. I became an expert with rocket launchers," he explained. "We have doctors, engineers, other titles, but when you can use rockets better than others, you receive this name."

We talked about the twisting history of Afghanistan's recent wars, and some of the personalities Rocketi had come to know as participants. He described his former supreme commander, Mullah Omar, as "not a person to deliver a speech. . . . When we would advise him to do something, he would often reply, 'No, I am doing this other thing, as Allah and Allah's Prophet require.' If we said that a particular

strategy would bring damage to us, he would say, 'I am doing what Allah and Allah's Prophet require, so I do not worry about the damage.' " Surprisingly, Rocketi added, Omar could at times be hilarious. "He would make jokes and laugh loudly."

I asked Rocketi how he assessed the Taliban's attitude toward peace negotiations. "Their hope is to fight," he answered. "They will have fame and support if they fight, they think. They think if they come here and surrender they will have nothing."

The Taliban, he said, "have become students of Pakistan's two-faced strategy: some of them talk, some of them fight. Karzai has no one message to them—he has hundreds of messages. . . . Karzai is not doing realistic work for peace. He is just receiving checks from the international community, and he is sending bills to them."

Rocketi removed his turban and rubbed his balding head. As we spoke about how a stable peace settlement involving the Taliban might be constructed, he remarked that the subject literally made his head hurt. "The Taliban are not settled with the idea that the Americans would leave, step by step—they want Afghanistan for themselves," he said. "If the Americans stay, the Taliban will fight. . . . If the Americans leave, the internal fighting will begin."

He said he hoped that I would not be offended if he told a Pashtun joke to describe the situation now confronting the United States and Afghanistan. The story involved a patient who goes to the doctor, complaining of internal pains. The doctor makes a diagnosis, opens the patient for surgery, and stitches him up again—only to realize that he has left his scalpel in the patient's gut. Rocketi volunteered a moral for his story: "America must not leave the scalpel in Afghanistan." ♦

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