

Taleban Fighters Divided on Peace Talks

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In eastern province, some insurgents are ready to stop fighting.

Until a few weeks ago, Mohammad Gol's views as a Taleban fighter were founded on an unshakeable belief that the war against NATO forces was sanctioned by God, so talking to them would be unthinkable.

Now his views have been thrown into doubt by news that the Taleban are opening negotiations with the United States.

"I'm at my wits' end. Foreigners have attacked this country, and I remember my friends who have been martyred – but now there are to be peace talks with the Americans," Mohammad Gol told IWPR. "I'm confused – I don't know whether this war is right or wrong."

The insurgent, from the Tagab district of Kapisa province, northeast of the Afghan capital Kabul, said news of the impending talks had come as a shock to Taleban members like him, and they were left wondering why the movement's leaders would talk to the "infidels" if the war was a jihad.

"The Taleban leadership should answer these questions," he said.

News emerged over the weekend that the Taleban had sent a delegation to establish a political office in the Gulf state of Qatar and had met US officials as part of moves towards formal peace talks. Meanwhile, the Afghan government announced it would hold its own direct negotiations with the Taleban in Saudi Arabia.

On the ground in Kapisa, which has a strong Taleban presence, news of the upcoming talks in Qatar has been circulating for some time. Some Taleban fighters seem ready to lay down arms, although others plan to carry on and reject any compromise.

"When rumours of peace talks spread, 40 Taleban members laid down their arms, and another 28 who were from abroad or from other parts of Afghanistan left," Taleban member Maulavi Tareq said, adding that to fill the gaps, insurgent commanders were "trying to rearrange the lines".

In Kapisa's Alasay district, local government chief Mullah Mohammad said the talk of peace was having a definite impact on the ground.

"Ever since news of the peace talks was broadcast, the more moderate Taleban in this area have changed completely," he said. "The attacks that they used to carry against the national army and the foreign troops aren't happening any more."

The official added that insurgent groups which had links with the "Haqqani network", or which included non-Afghans, remained resolutely opposed to talks.

The Haqqani group is a Taleban ally operating out of northwest Pakistan.

According to Abdul Hakim Akhondzadah, the district government chief in Tagab, the Haqqani-led insurgents "are not at all prepared to talk to the Americans".

While Afghans are eager to see an end to conflict, many fear the consequences of a Taleban return to the political mainstream, given the movement's harsh interpretation of Islamic rules when it was in power between 1996 and 2001.

Abdul Salam Zaif, a former Taleban ambassador to Pakistan who was later detained at Guantanamo Bay, has been quoted by Afghan media as saying the old draconian rules were a product of the times, and the movement would not now seek to impose extreme laws.

Not everyone is convinced that the Taleban can change. One Kapisa civil servant offered a grim prediction of what a deal with the insurgents could bring.

"Civil wars will resume, the Taleban will bring back extremism, and women will be kept indoors without an education," he said. "Those working for the current government will be severely punished. People will leave the country, and the achievements [of the last ten years] will be erased."

Maiwand Safi is an IWPR-trained reporter in Kapisa province.

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