

"Taleban Surrenders" Not All They Seem

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In northern Afghanistan, many of those claiming rewards for giving up the fight were never insurgents in the first place.

While the Afghan authorities say hundreds of insurgents have surrendered since a new peace mechanism was established last year, others are less than convinced.

Sources interviewed by IWPR in northern Afghanistan say many of those coming over to the government are not insurgents at all. As long as the real Taleban stay away, analysts say there is little point to this aspect of the peace process.

A 70-member High Peace Council started work last autumn with a mandate both to bring the Taleban's top leaders to the negotiating table and to encourage individual combatants and commanders to give up the fight. Speaking in October, the council's spokesman Qiyamuddin Kashaf said militants might be offered money, jobs and housing if they renounced violence.

Sher Zaman Saberzada, the peace council's secretary in Mazar-e Sharif, the administrative centre of Balkh province, has confirmed to IWPR that individuals will be provided with a package consisting of a one-off sum of money – which he would not name – a stipend of 80 US dollars a month, rented accommodation, food and clothing. He also said they would be offered counselling and employment.

Since the council was set up, there have been a series of news reports on members of insurgent groups coming over to the government side in various parts of Afghanistan. In northern Afghanistan, officials say around 300 insurgents have done so.

In Samangan province, for example, the surrender of insurgent commander Mohammad Ismail and around two dozen of his men in early February was hailed as a success. Provincial governor Khairullah Anosh said, "There are other discontented individuals in this province, as well, and they will all surrender if they receive the benefits."

Mohammad Ismail said his group wanted the money and other perks they believed were due to them, "otherwise my men will distance themselves from the government again".

The principal targets of the process are the Taleban movement itself and its smaller ally Hezb-i Islami, an armed faction led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Logically, most of those surrendering should come from one of the groups at war with the government and its western allies, but IWPR's sources suggest this is not the case in the north, at least.

According to officials and local commentators, many of those surrendering in fact belong to a number of armed groups that have nothing to do with the insurgency. They seem motivated by a desire to take advantage of the concessions, financial and otherwise, offered to surrendering militants.

Militia groups attached to political factions, many of them originally part of the mujahedin who fought the Soviet-backed government in the 1980s, were supposed to have disbanded under the post-Taleban administration from 2001 onwards. To achieve this, the United Nations sponsored a Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration process, and when that ended in 2005, a second programme called Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups specifically targeted the large number of informal units that remained.

Gol Rahman Hamdard, a tribal elder in northern Afghanistan, said he knew of individuals "surrendering" when they were not Taleban members, but paramilitaries loyal to militia commanders and senior political figures.

"The various militarised factions are doing this to win all kind of privileges for their militias, and then incorporate them into the local police as a way of ensuring their own survival and also of gaining leverage against the government," Hamdard said.

A senior officer with the Afghan National Army, ANA, confirmed that individuals who surrendered were being recruited into the police force, after a three-month period in which their behaviour was monitored and they were paid 400 dollars a month.

The officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity, was pessimistic about the outcome of reintegration, saying these men were unreliable.

"These individuals have committed crimes for years; they belong to the old factions. If they join the army and police, they will think only of personal and factional gains," he said.

He questioned the integrity of the process, arguing that some of the High Peace Council's members were regional politicians whose loyalty to central government was uncertain and who were packing the ranks of the "surrendered" with armed militiamen associated with them.

General Zalmay Weesa, commander of the ANA's 209th Shahin Corps in Balkh, said the armed factions far outnumbered the Taleban in the region he covered, and were playing both sides according to how it suited them.

"These individuals play the role of Taleban, the opposition, whenever they perceive the government to be weak, but they immediately join it when it is control of their area. They surrender and claim the benefits," he said.

Unlike these opportunistic groups, General Weesa said, genuine members of the Taleban and al-Qaeda would never give up the fight.

A spokesman for the Taleban, Zabihullah Mojahed, denied government claims that men were surrendering, and also that the movement as a whole was prepared to talk peace.

"It's all just lies," he told IWPR in a telephone interview. "No Taleban member has surrendered. It's all their own people, who are corralled into this for propaganda purposes. It's a media performance."

He finished with a threat of renewed violence, saying, "This spring, it will become apparent whether or not the Taleban really have surrendered."

Ataullah Ludin, deputy head of the High Peace Council and a former Hezb-i Islami commander, said he was unaware of people pretending to be insurgents joining the reconciliation process, but added, "The government should welcome anyone who has a weapon and who will end his opposition to the government."

General Daud Daud, commander of the Afghan National Police's Pamir zone, acknowledged that some of those signing up to the peace process were militia members rather than Taleban, but added that a screening system was in place.

"We investigate these individuals. Those who really have fought against the government on several occasions count as genuine opposition members, whereas those who use the process just to obtain benefits will never be included in this category and they won't get anything," he said.

Analysts critical of the way the reconciliation process is being handled say it is not targeting the insurgents in the way that has been claimed.

Fahim Hamdard, a political expert in Balkh, noted that this is not the first reconciliation effort from President Hamid Karzai. The High Peace Council's predecessor was the Peace and Reconciliation Commission, set up in 2005. But he argues that it achieved little of note.

"The commission similarly announced that thousands of opposition members had come over to the government in those years," Hamdard said. "Meanwhile, the number of opposition members was increased day after day, rather than falling."

He said only political engagement with the Taleban would work, as its ideology-driven footsoldiers would never surrender just to get money and housing.

"If the peace council and the Afghan government want reconciliation, they will have to talk to the leaders of the Taleban," he said.

Aref Musawi, a political expert in Balkh Province agreed that ordinary Taleban members "will never go over to the government just like that".

"They will do so only when their leaders join the government," he said.

Musawi drew a historical analogy with the late 1980s, when President Najibullah's government attempted to reach an accommodation with the mujahedin following the Soviet military withdrawal.

Initially, the plan seemed to be working as hundreds of fighters ostensibly from mujahedin groups pledged allegiance to Najibullah. But it ended badly in 1992, with the same mujahedin factions overrunning Kabul, ousting the government and embarking on a bloody internecine conflict.

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Location: [Afghanistan](#)

