

Possibilities for a peaceful political future: perspectives of leaders of five Taliban caucuses

ABSTRACT

The following are transcribed responses from the representatives of five Taliban caucuses, in conversation with Anna Larson. Groups are roughly differentiated from one another here by the geographical region in which they operate but names and other identifying statements have been removed in order to preserve anonymity. All groups currently self-identify as Taliban and belong to the central Taliban movement, but some have expressed the desire to become autonomous from it.

These conversations occurred in person over the course of several days in spring 2018 at an undisclosed location outside of Afghanistan, to which the five caucuses

concerned had travelled in order to begin talks with a group of high-level actors representing several countries, including Afghanistan and the United States, about the de-escalation of violence and potential for reconciliation with the Afghan government.

Representatives of the caucuses are senior commanders or leaders influential in their respective locations. Views expressed reflect those of the individuals concerned and are not necessarily representative of their respective caucuses. While views between caucuses differ, an attempt has been made to summarise common positions in the statements that follow the transcripts.

Group 1 –North

All three representatives in this group are high-level military commanders with field experience and religious training.

Origins and objectives

Representative A: I am a madrasa graduate at Mufti level. I was a member of the first Taliban and I am a member of the current Taliban movement. For two years I was in charge of the Taliban's foreign affairs, so in charge of the foreign fighters. I was also in charge of the charity collections commission. I had good relationships with businessmen in other countries who donated to this cause.

We were taking care of the needy families of the [Taliban] *mujahidin*. My influence in the community grew this way. But as the northern Taliban started to be excluded from the current Taliban councils [the Quetta and Peshawar Shuras] I have been fighting for the rights of the northern Taliban. These channels for influence have been getting smaller and smaller and so that is why I have been considering involvement in peace initiatives. Grassroots influence exists. If the government stands by its word, I am confident we can achieve our goals.

Relationship with the 'main Taliban'

Representatives A, B and C: We have been marginalised by the main Taliban. We were a part of the founding of the original movement and we have suffered a lot for this

movement. But now only a small group of Zadranis and Kandaharis control the movement. If a war continues for more than 10 years then either side's chances of winning diminish and it becomes something other than a war. We will not be able to provide services for people. Because of this and the marginalisation from power we are not able to solve people's problems.

The Quetta and Peshawar Shuras only appoint Kandaharis and Zadranis as leaders, even in our area, and not us, so we don't have the power in our area to serve people. These other leaders control us. There are a couple of senior ranking [members of our ethnic group] in the Peshawar Shura but even they don't have authority there. We do not even have a shadow governor [from our ethnic group].

Main blockages to ending violence in Afghanistan and how these might be overcome

Representative A: The main blockage is foreign occupation which violates the rights of Afghans. Unlawful killings, imprisonments, murders of people under the name of Taliban. Defamation of the Holy Qur'an. Not observing the religious values of our people. Widespread corruption within the government, the mafia, the patronage system. The government does not meet the actual demands of the people.

We feel the responsibility on our shoulders to remove these obstacles. Foreigners come and go. The actual victims are the Afghans. That is why we have started a process of

helping our own people and separating ourselves from the Taliban movement, to work responsibly to end this killing. We are ready to do our part.

Political vision for Afghanistan

Representative A: At the moment I see the situation as very critical. Not only war between the government and the Taliban but war within the government itself. We wish for honest foreign support for a clean, just and inclusive future government which can open its heart and can go to the Taliban with an open heart. Foreigners must stop their interference.

We believe in a just and transparent election where every vote counts – all members' votes count. And such a democratic government could get elders speaking to the Taliban. We support an election if the government is representative of all the people.

Representative B: The main problem is the lack of culture – lack of religious culture and secular culture. If someone is well-cultured they do not kill people. Westerners could have invested in improving our culture but they did not. If someone has religious or secular culture they can solve their problems through logic. Before I did my studies I was a hardliner. But as I started to learn about different perspectives and points of view I understood the real meaning of religion. We need religion and culture. Religion alone may not be able to solve our problems. A terrorist is a hardliner who does not use logic or thinking to solve differences.

Before, our people were not represented, we didn't have a 'listening ear'. But then we connected with [this initiative towards talks] and we were able to express our lack of representation. This was a way that we could start to represent our community.

Implications of early talks and a possible agreement between the government and the Taliban caucuses

Representative B: Assuming that an agreement happens, we would reduce the threat level towards the Afghan government – eg towards police and the National Directorate of Security, etc – in [the six north and north-eastern provinces in which we have influence]. This is a real process. We will be able to deliver real results, we are not faking them. We wouldn't have bothered to come here if we couldn't deliver.

Representative C: My political vision is that the conflict stops, that slowly, slowly the fighting comes to an end. That a government is created that is Islamic with a popular base, that it is inclusive and participatory, including all ethnic groups.

Relationships between leaders and people in my area are close but we want to make them closer. There have been some issues between leaders and their people, and this is the case with Taliban and non-Taliban leaders. Through our involvement with the peace process we will invite people to participate, and we will try to solidify some of the fractures in the community. We want to make relations closer. We also want the participation of our community in the political process, in elections, government and parliament, inclusion in structures such as ministries, in military and political decision-making.

The process is not over. We are not sure of the outcome yet. The result will become clear at some point, and then there is the question of whether it is implemented.

Recently there has been a de-escalation of violence in the Taliban movement and this has led to high expectations about peace from my people. We are hoping to emerge on the political scene as an organised group. These meetings have helped us to develop in this way.

Group 2 – West/north-west

Representative D in this group does not self-identify as part of the Taliban but as an influential local figure has been working with Taliban commanders and other armed groups local to the west/north-west of Afghanistan and at this meeting acted as a representative on their behalf. Representative E is a Taliban field commander from the north-west.

Motivation

Representative D: Our collective area of influence is largely [in north-western provinces]. The main problem for us is Pashtuns' lack of civil rights. Not even one per cent is respected. There are certain case by case examples where Provincial Reconstruction Teams may have helped the area but nothing from the government. In Badghis and Faryab we have 70 per cent Pashtuns. In Faryab even the Uzbeks accept that Pashtuns are 35 per cent of the population. Historically we have been victimised under different names – in [Uzbek commander Ahmed Rashid] Dostum's time, for example. If this political marginalisation continues it will not help the peace process. In the parliament there are four representatives from Badghis, and all of them are Sunni Hazaras, who are Jamiat-affiliated [Jamiat-e Islami] and who all come from Qala-e Naw.

Ten years ago a survey was conducted and it confirmed that Qala-e Naw has 10,000 people, but that [another] district with a 100 per cent Pashtun population has 120,000 people. In the Provincial Council it is the same story: there is just not enough representation. One solution might be to add administrative units, ie more districts. One reason why the

government is not able to bring peace in these areas is the imbalance of ethnic tensions. Armed groups (Taliban and others) then use the opportunity to mobilise in the spaces where the government, whose representatives are from a different ethnic group, have no authority. For example the distance between Bala-e Muqab and Qala-e Naw is about 100 kilometres. But there is no administrative district there.

What the Taliban are struggling for

Representative D: My friend here [Representative E] is a commander in [X] province. We want to end the war, to bring peace, and we want to maintain that peace. We have already spoken with our people on the ground. There are three groups of Taliban. The first group want to continue fighting, the second group weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of fighting, and the third group want peace. We are working with the second and third groups. The first group are afraid for their own safety. We want our civil rights, we want jobs to be created so that people don't have to go to Iran for work, we want more schools, education. And we can have mullahs teaching in our schools. [Talibs in all three groups] often say that they want a shari'a government but I believe that this is more about maintaining a consistent image than their knowledge of the actual substance of shari'a.

The current laws, if implemented correctly, can reflect shari'a already. I strongly believe it is possible to keep the current constitution. The Taliban are motivated from outside to fight, but we can give them a new motivation to re-orient themselves. The puzzle is that, Taliban, government, international actors all want peace, so why is it not happening? Investment in the peace process is not even one per cent of the investment in war. If we have a clear vision then it is possible.

Political system that can best sustain peace

Representative D: Civil and political rights and rights of representation are crucial. Any system that helps to maintain this is important. Jobs and lack of discrimination in my province are the most important things. We need strong international support. The two groups of Taliban that are amenable to talks – we have to find out their problems and solve them.

Representative D: The Taliban are influenced by Pakistan and Iran. Pakistan does not want peace in Afghanistan. It is two-faced. The Taliban in our area need independence from outside actors and others; 90 per cent of the Taliban in Badghis is not happy with the control of the Kandahari Taliban over the whole movement. 10–15 commanders in our area were picked by the Quetta Shura but they have no social base. If this process is successful they could easily be removed or asked to surrender.

Ideal relationship with central government

Representative D: The relationship that is natural between a government and its nation or population is ideal. We are not a group that wants to create trouble for the government. We don't want to blow up roads or bridges (or only as a last resort). But the government should be able to listen to us and find out the problems in the area and come to us with an open mind.

“**When I was in Guantanamo an American showed me a picture of his family, and said – this is my daughter, my son – do you understand what family is? They had this idea of us as if we were not human.**”

For example, regarding the political rights of being represented. The current voting system is flawed – those who get the most votes win, whether the votes are genuine or not. In Ghazni for example, there could be several ways of conducting elections in insecure areas, where seats are saved and then voting can take place later. I believe that one way to cut the influence of Pakistan is to find the Taliban and speak with them, to influence them and bring them to our side. We should also have a plan to collect weapons without going through the local police, who just sell them back again. The Taliban in our area are held captive by the Kandaharis.

Group 3 – Quetta

Representative F is an influential figure within the Quetta Shura.

Origins of the Taliban

Representative F: The Taliban was created in 1994 and its purpose was to prevent the old *mujahidin* from taking advantage of the people. Mullah Omar and some friends sat together in Maiwand district and decided to start a movement against these people. At first, they sent some messages to commanders in Kandahar to ask them to join them. Some agreed, some didn't, and we defeated those who didn't in a short battle. There were two big commanders, Mullah Naqib (Jamiat) and Haji Qateb. Naqib joined but Haji Qateb didn't. We defeated him and took over all of Kandahar.

Then the movement split, one half going to Zabul and the other to Helmand. Mullah Omar was selected as leader and from this time on the Taliban officially became a movement. When the Taliban went to Zabul, most of the

commanders from the three surrounding provinces came to our side. In Helmand all except Mullah Rafa came to our side. We sent him messages three times but still he refused and then we defeated him. Eventually the whole province came to our side. Then Farah and Nimroz. The problem was that Ismail Khan was hard to defeat. We tried hard to convince him without conflict. When we were near to Kabul, [Jamiat commander Ahmed Shah] Massoud came to meet us and we agreed to defeat [Hezb-i Islami leader Gulbuddin] Hekmatyar together, but when we did this Massoud reneged on his promise of supporting us. Then we set up a government in Kabul with ministers and an administration, etc.

Taliban objectives today

Representative F: We are responding to cruelty. America brought down our government. Some organisations portray us as abnormal people who don't know about human rights, women's rights etc. There was a lot of pressure on us in 2001 from the US side and they removed our government. Just before this we had a meeting with US government representatives when we said we would give them Osama bin Laden and work on women's rights, etc, whatever they wanted, but they didn't listen to us. Now they are aware of us as humans.

When I was in Guantanamo an American showed me a picture of his family, and said – this is my daughter, my son – do you understand what family is? They had this idea of us as if we were not human. At that time, the media was a big problem for us, it was portraying us very badly. But we did understand human and civil rights then. It is our right to be in Afghanistan, this is our country.

The Taliban were very good people. When Mullah Omar gave the instruction to ban poppy, it was stopped. The crime rate was very low. I believe about 80 per cent of people were on our side. When we were in Kabul some politicians and ordinary people visited me in my office and I asked them about the Taliban. They said we had two faces, one was good, in stopping crime etc, and the other was bad, with the treatment of women and stopping music, etc. It wasn't the time then to focus on women's rights – it was a very difficult time in Afghanistan. If women dressed as you are dressed we didn't have any problem with that at all. We just told them to dress according to shari'a. If we had stayed in power we would have moved to an Iranian style of government with girls at school, at university, working. When the international community came to Afghanistan they put criminals in power and we must stand against them. If we compare [senior Taliban commander] Mullah Dadullah and Dostum, both killed lots of people but Dostum is now the Vice President and Mullah Dadullah is dead.

We didn't have any connection with al-Qaeda. Osama was invited by the *mujahidin*, not by the Taliban. In the Taliban period, [Saudi Prince] Turki al-Faisal came to Afghanistan to ask for Osama and Mullah Omar said that he would give him to him if he came with a delegation of *ulema*, but not unless he did. Turki al-Faisal said he would go ahead and just take him anyway, and Mullah Omar told him to go away and never come back, because it was his responsibility as a Muslim not to undermine his hospitality to Osama as a guest of the country.

Vision for an ideal Afghanistan

Representative F: Afghan people must decide about their own future. The government must be moderate. People support the Taliban, we have captured 70 per cent of the land. People want us to capture their areas. The international community must help us to do something to make the situation become normal, because they were the ones who removed our government in the first place.

We will have a government – not by elections, because elections are not according to shari'a laws, but by selecting members from councils. Elections and shari'a are two different things. In Islamic law we can have one representative per province, for example, but not every individual voting. We know the people want elections but if I say that we are OK with elections then this could cause a problem. If the government has elections, it will probably be only in big cities because in 70 per cent of the provincial areas it is impossible to conduct them. Anyway, this [forthcoming] election will be corrupt. If the international community had sent clever people to us when we were in power to explain these things and to explain our situation to the world then we probably wouldn't be in this situation now.

It is very difficult to talk at this point about what the structure of the government might look like. There are lots of parties in Afghanistan. Many times it has been suggested that we are given a few ministries, but how would we work alongside these other criminals? We need a very strong president with no one else, not shared out by tribe, etc. I know that this is impossible now, but maybe it would happen if the Taliban took over again. The old *mujahidin* have sold our country. We need justice – why did these people kill so many people? Why are they so corrupt? We would like to be friends with the foreigners but it has to be according to some rules, respecting our national sovereignty, and recognising us as Muslims.

I have known [High Peace Council Chair] Ustad Khalili for a long time. Right now I can see that Khalili has very good ideas about peace with the Taliban. In all the speeches he has made, he has sent very good messages and he has helped to bring many Taliban to the side of peace (although

not to the government). In a short time he has had lots of achievements in peace. Lots of Taliban leaders would like to talk to him about peace.

Group 4 – South-east

Representative G is a senior member of an armed opposition group that has links to the Taliban in south-eastern Afghanistan.

Origins, objectives and operations

Representative G: Our district is bigger than other districts. At the moment it is one district but in Daud's [Khan] time it was three districts. Our leaders are active in these areas. We are [xx group] and our leader died in the *mujahidin* time. His sons are now in the group's leadership. The US says we are connected with al-Qaeda but this is not true. In the *mujahidin* times the *mujahidin* said we were connected to the US and Europe but this is also not true. Our activities are normal and we don't understand why we are labelled in this way.

We started to fight after the US invasion but this was just in defence – we were not attacking them. We tried very hard and met with [the organisers of this initiative] back in 2002 but we didn't find any good solution. We are not the followers of fighting. We want to continue towards peace – we are not against democracy, it is not against Islam. We have three clinics and we have female doctors too. No one can control local security as well as we can. There is a dam being built in one of our districts and we have 60 people providing security for that project. No engineer has died or been kidnapped. We are supporting them. Police are in their jobs, we are supporting them also.

In this area in the last 15 months there have only been nine attacks on the checkpoints and only four of them were caused by us – the others were Haqqanis and other foreign fighters. No one will find anything in our history that connects us to suicide bombers. In our mountain areas there are foreign fighters – Chechen, Punjabi, etc – and we try to stop them as far as possible but we cannot do this all the time. We do not allow them to come to the villages or the mosques. Foreign fighters have a lot of money and weapons but still we try to stop them. We have no funds from opium. The Peshawar Shura is supporting the Haqqanis but it is not supporting us. This is our story.

Relationship with Peshawar and Quetta Shuras

Representative G: Peshawar and Quetta Shuras do not support us because we don't want them in our area, we don't want the Pakistani influence. There is a road that goes through north and south Waziristan and the Taliban come through there. The Kandaharis do not want us in power.

But they are not all equal in the Peshawar Shura/Quetta Shura either, there are some problems. The Haqqanis, Mansour group, others – they are all separate. These groups have connections with foreign powers.

The situation in Afghanistan is like a triangle: there are foreign fighters, Afghan fighters, and then the Afghan government and people. We need to work with all three to achieve peace. We also would welcome talks on Islamic law. Tackling the foreign fights is difficult because these other countries don't want to stop them. The international community should find a way to stop them. It is not about shooting the leaders of the Taliban, but stopping the foreign fighters. Only [US President] Trump can do this. The other two sides of the triangle belong to Afghans to sort out.

Political system that can best support peace and inclusive representation

Representative G: This question belongs to the government. We have our own vision, we just want a long period of peace through Islam. We have human rights and women's rights. We are not like other extreme countries. We want a moderate way forward, with women's rights and respect for women. We want a government that respects these and respects all Afghans, not just one group.

The central government can't solve its own problems within itself so how can it solve those in our district? The government is corrupt. In this present government, the only good achievement has been education. If the government doesn't respect people's rights, then it will fail like in Syria, Libya or Iraq. If there was no Taliban then in this case the young boys would rise up against the government to make a new movement.

The international community doesn't want to change the present government. If there is a democracy then they should listen to the people. We are not against independent elections. The main problem is corruption. We are electing people who don't understand the law. No elections would be better than a corrupt election. Foreigners wanted this kind of election. 70 per cent of the country belongs to the Taliban and so we can only have elections in government areas anyway. Most of Afghanistan belongs to the Taliban. The international community didn't tell the truth to people. Not all the Taliban are good people – they have thieves and killers as well.

If the government does not apply the constitution themselves then how can they apply it to others? In Afghanistan there are three kinds of people – religious contractors, political contractors and nation contractors. They are all making money. It would be better to shoot

all of these people than keep losing 150 young men every day.

At the time of the Bonn Conference there was no corruption, no insecurity – the international community have made all these things. Ghani was in America at this time. Why didn't the international community think harder about these things at the time? The US has promised peace, security, construction – but where are they? Why did they say they were leaving in 2014? Pakistan cannot do anything without information from the US and UK. It can't keep fighting if it is not supported from outside.

Implications [of these initial talks] and a possible agreement with the government

Representative G: I do not think these talks will be successful, but [Chair of the High Peace Council] Ustad Khalili continues to say good things. We should keep the leaders where they are, government ones in government areas and Talib ones in Talib areas, but we should not label them like this. Only a ceasefire will help but even this will be very difficult to maintain, because they will keep bombing and they will say it is to target Daesh [Islamic State in Khorasan], but the Taliban will say they have broken the ceasefire. We would need a third party to protect the ceasefire, maybe ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross].

Group 5 – South

Representative H is a high-level member of the Peshawar Shura and was a former minister during the Taliban government in the 1990s. Representative I is a Taliban field commander in the south of Afghanistan.

Main objectives

Representative H: We want to stop the war, this is our main aim. Secondly, we want to have democratic rules but not forgetting Islam. Maybe you have heard that the Taliban is against women's rights but you should come to my home in [x province] and see my family. You should see how we are at home.

Democracy and Islam

Representative H: The US came to Afghanistan and have provided a bad explanation and demonstration of democracy. Some people think democracy is to own your own life, to have your own culture and your own religion. But Islam and democracy are two words with one meaning. We have rules for people that are Islamic and with these comes democracy. On Facebook, when the US does something bad, the Taliban write 'This is Democracy'. If we used Islamic rules instead of democracy this would be useful in Afghanistan. There is something wrong between the West and Islamic countries: their TV shows bad things about each other.

Relationship between leaders and people in the south, and nationally

Representative H: We don't have any democracy in [my province] because the relationship between officials and people is very bad. For example, people must wait months to see officials and when they finally get there they say, oh, no, he is too busy. The government is doing very bad things, for example going backwards in a one-way street just because they are a governor or something. When businessmen come across the border corrupt officials take customs money from them at checkpoints. In this regard there is a very big difference between government and Taliban areas. In government areas every car is stopped for money, but not in our areas.

The Taliban governor in [my province] works very hard, people can see him, anyone can see him after waiting only one hour. He makes decisions for the people very quickly. It is not the same in the government areas. In the 2014 elections the government said 'look, we had a free and fair election, and everyone voted' but ballots were stuffed and very few people went. No one gave people the right to vote. When [the former head of the Provincial Council] was alive, he made the decisions about who won the elections. Even the support of tribal leaders didn't help to change these decisions.

I am not a Mufti [an expert on Islamic law] but in my experience there are two ways that electing leaders can work. When a country is peaceful, and people believe in the leadership, then it is possible for them to help choose. But when the country is experiencing difficult times and conflict then it is better for a small group to choose the leadership.

In [former president] Najib's time I wasn't in [my province]. In the Taliban time my province and Kabul were very close because Kandahar was the centre of the country. In Karzai's time there were close relations with Kabul. Right now there are bad relations between my province and Kabul because the government does not get on with the chief of police.

It is better if the central government divide resources between the provinces, according to their size, and make decisions about how that money is spent. Then every Afghan has the same rights. During the *mujahidin* time commanders just collected money and spent it on themselves.

Decision-making within the Taliban movement

Representative H: There are two types of decisions. Some are taken in the Quetta Shura and are passed down to commanders. Others are made inside Afghanistan, eg about attacks and money. 70 per cent of Taliban

commanders are living in Afghanistan now. Most of the Taliban would like to be far away from Pakistani decisions, but they have their own problems, they can't come to Afghanistan. If the international community helps to pressurise Pakistan then they can solve all their problems with the Afghan Taliban. It was the Pakistanis who killed [former Taliban leader] Mansour. They gave the information on where he was to the Americans.

Afghanistan's relationship with its neighbours

Representative H: If in the future the Afghan people want good relations with their neighbours then we must first remove the foreign troops, and then Afghanistan can sort out these relationships on its own, with an independent government. At the moment we [the Taliban] must take help from both sides (Pakistan and Iran) and this is the main source of the problem. Afghans in their nature do not like foreigners to intervene, and not just the West – they don't like neighbours or Islamic countries intervening either.

Political arrangements that might help prevent fighting between different groups within Afghanistan

Representative H: If the foreigners withdraw their forces, this would help towards preventing war. If the Taliban were completely in power then there is no way that a civil war would happen. For a long time we have all followed the orders of the leadership. All the Taliban think that they would keep Afghanistan's strong army and police, unlike the *mujahidin* who took the tanks and weapons for themselves individually. At the beginning it was very bad because the internationals made friends with the wrong Afghans.

The Taliban is ready to accept changes, although on women's rights they need to be within Islamic rules. We are not against women's education, we want this and we want to allow them to do other things also. When we were in power we ran two courses for women, one was in nursing. I have travelled to a lot of other countries. When I was a minister I visited many countries and told them that we want to be friends with them, but they did not accept this.

Representative I: Sometimes we attack checkpoints and the government forces are just selling weapons there. The government chief of district for our area never comes to the district, he just sits in [the provincial centre] and gets a government salary. Government forces have no morals. A few weeks ago we attacked a government

checkpoint – there were eight people there. We finished the attack in 10 minutes, but just down the road there were loads of government forces who didn't come to help them. They have no morals. Recently on the battlefield a Talib soldier died and his friends came and took his body away and gave him a proper burial. A government soldier also died and his colleagues came, one took his gun, the other took his mobile phone, and they just left his body there.

The following statements summarise common positions that were held by all groups

1. Above all, it is critical to end the needless killing of Afghans. We want to work towards the establishment of peace in our country.
2. We want to see Afghan sovereignty restored, and the political and military interference of foreign powers removed or significantly reduced. Nevertheless we welcome interactions with foreign countries that are conducted between equal sovereign nations. Within this, foreign aid and reconstruction is also welcomed, provided that it conforms to Afghan priorities and needs.
3. We envision a moderate Islamic government for Afghanistan, and one in which corruption and the abuse of power at all levels are eliminated.
4. We want to see justice applied to all people, no matter their rank, and no matter their background.
5. We want to see a government that is representative of all Afghans and we are interested to explore different ideas about how this representation might be achieved.
6. We agree that all citizens, men and women, deserve the opportunity to access services and education.
7. We place paramount importance on the relationships between local communities and their leaders, and wish to see this relationship strengthened, while also recognising the importance of connections between these leaders and central government. We believe that local leaders should be enabled to provide assistance, protection, services and time to their communities.