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Talking to the Taliban

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In the battle for hearts and minds, the Taliban are compromising core principles

Landov



THE mood in Kabul has been a gloomy one of late, with little sign that NATO forces are any closer to winning the war against the Taliban. On the front-line in Helmand there is equally little sign that the Taliban are winning the fight either. Instead there are signs that the organisation is adapting to broaden its popular appeal.

The British army, leading the NATO effort in Helmand, has lost 115 soldiers there since 2006, compared with perhaps 5,000 dead Taliban. Yet Qari Yusuf Ahmadi, a senior Taliban spokesman, is relentlessly upbeat: "We struggle for almighty Allah and we are sure we are winning." The outgoing British commander, Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith, credits the Taliban with being "still tactically quite resilient and certainly quite dangerous". But he says the British are "minimising the objective damage" they are able to inflict.

Given the military stalemate, the British strategy now focuses on developing Afghan forces and government structures with a view to an eventual political solution. Brigadier Carleton-Smith estimates Britain can start withdrawing troops in three to five years. But Afghan political maturity could take "decades or generations".

In the past year the Taliban have lost territory, notably the towns of Garmser and Musa Qala, the only two places in Afghanistan where they defended fixed positions. Now their strategy appears to rely less on controlling territory than on expanding influence. So, to court greater support from the warily ambivalent Helmand population, they have eased some of their resented social edicts. Bans on music, television, kite-flying, dog-fighting and even the shaving of beards have all been lifted.

There are also persistent reports of the Taliban offering amnesties to government officials and police who defect, even when they are captured in combat. Immediate execution used to be the norm. Some locals seem won over by the new approach. Others think it merely a tactic. Haji Salim Khan, a tribal elder from Musa Qala, sniffs that the Taliban are being “so nice” only to find out who their friends are, “then they impose their law.” Another compromise has been the Taliban’s accommodation with drug-farmers and -smugglers. This autumn Taliban commanders have promised to defend the poppy fields in the previously pro-government districts of Nad Ali and Marja—a delicate matter, given the Koran’s prohibition of drug use.



“It is lies that drug money comes to us,” insists “Mullah Mujahed”, a 23-year-old Taliban commander. But he does acknowledge that the Taliban accepts *zakat*, alms, from the local poppy-farmers. This buys arms and ammunition, usually from corrupt Afghan police and soldiers, and mitigates the Taliban’s long supply lines.

Resilient though the Taliban are proving, their internal dynamics seem to be changing. “Mullah Ahmed”, a distinctly weary older Taliban commander, says that half the Taliban are “respectable” God-fearing people. But the other half are robbers or people who bring “personal enmities” into the Taliban.

Since 2001 NATO has managed to kill many trusted members of the old Taliban leadership. The replacements are less well-known quantities. Mullah Mujahed may just have been promoted to command his own “*mahaz*”, or front-line, a rank roughly equivalent to a Western major. He says the average age for such a promotion is now just 25. Where they can, the Taliban replace dead leaders with their nearest relative. This helps maintain loyalty in a group obsessed about “spies”. But it reinforces tribalism. Indeed, some analysts now see the Taliban in Helmand as to some extent a tribal force, representing particular groups excluded from power since 2001.

Historically, the Taliban’s strengths were their Islamic credentials, their reputation for imposing law and order and their opposition to tribal factionalism. If those three weaken, it is harder to distinguish them from the myriad other tribal militias that have long plagued Afghanistan.