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Talking with the Taliban

by defence correspondent Hans de Vreij

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The international media have discovered a new hype concerning Afghanistan. It's called 'Talking with the Taliban' and numerous reports claim the United States and others are now in favour of talking with the fundamentalist movement as an alternative to defeating them on the battle field.

The hype is now a week old, and began with a British general hinting at possible talks with the Taliban. Then, reports emerged that last month, Saudi Arabia hosted talks between Taliban representatives and envoys of the Afghan government.

What appears to have happened is that the Saudi court, in line with Ramadan traditions, did indeed invite some Afghans for a festive dinner. The guests included former Taliban officials, and lower-ranking government officials from Kabul.

However, the Taliban movement quickly denied that there had been any negotiations, adding that an absolute precondition for peace talks would be for all foreign troops to leave Afghanistan.



US General David Petraeus Photo: ANP

First Gates, then Petraeus

Then, US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates told journalists that part of the solution in Afghanistan would be negotiating with members of the Taliban willing to work with the government in Kabul.

This was followed by a speech by US General David Petraeus on Wednesday. Petraeus was the commander of the multinational forces in Iraq and will soon take over Central Command or CENTCOM, the US command that covers large parts of the Middle East and South-West Asia, including Afghanistan.

The lecture was on his experiences in Iraq, where efforts to isolate radical groups from the mainstream Sunni population have by and large been successful. In question time, the general was asked whether that strategy could work in Afghanistan as well. His answer:

"Some of the concepts used in Iraq are transplantable, others perhaps are not. And what you have to do in every case, the biggest lesson in counter-insurgency is that every situation is unique, you have to be very careful to have that nuanced understanding of the unique aspects of the circumstances on the ground and then produce that comprehensive approach and achieve unity of effort and so forth".

'Willing to reconcile'

The general added that talks would only be possible with those insurgents that were willing to reconcile with the Karzai government, not with the Taliban movement as a whole. To the extent that it exists, as the Taliban encompasses a number of fractions, warlords and the Haqqani movement:

"The key there is making sure that all of that is done in complete coordination, with complete support of the Afghan government and with president Karzai. If that is done, if there are people that are willing to reconcile, then I think certainly that would be a positive step in some of these areas that have actually been spiraling downwards throughout the course of this year".

NATO ministers of defence, meeting in Budapest, will no doubt elaborate on this issue.

But so far, the track record for negotiated settlements in Afghanistan has not been good. The most notorious example has been the town of Musa Qalah in Helmand province. In 2007, British and Taliban forces agreed to leave the area and hand the authority back to the local tribal leaders. It didn't take long for the Taliban to return in full strength.

Weblinks

[Video: General David Petraeus speech at the Heritage Foundation](#)
[Taliban demand withdrawal of foreign troops](#)
[Taliban reaction to report of talks in Saudi-Arabia](#)

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