

Professor Anatol Lieven has addressed a briefing dinner of the U K Defence Forum on his talks about talks with the Taliban. Although this was under the Chatham House Rule, he and colleagues have gone "on the record" as described below by RUSI.

The Taliban led by Mullah Mohammad Omar are open to a general ceasefire and/or political agreement which could lead to a US military presence in Afghanistan after 2014, but will not negotiate with President Karzai or his administration, which is seen as corrupt and weak, according to a new Briefing Paper published by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI).

Taliban Perspectives on Reconciliation presents interviews with four senior Taliban interlocutors about their approach to reconciliation and reveals the so-called Quetta Shura Taliban (QST), led by Mullah Mohammed Omar, will not accept the interpretation of the Afghan constitution in its current form widely seen as informing the political authority of the Karzai regime since it would be akin to surrender.

Taliban representatives however, did welcome the prospect of a US military stabilisation force operating in Afghanistan up to 2024 out of the five primary military bases Kandahar, Herat, Jalalabad, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Kabul as long as US presence contributed to Afghan security and did not constrain Afghan independence and Islamic jurisprudence. The paper also warned any American attacks against neighbours such as Iran and Pakistan launched from Afghan bases would not be tolerated since it would impact on national security and invite 'trouble'.

The authors of the report Professor Anatol Lieven, Professor Theo Farrell and Dr Rudra Chaudhuri, from the Department of War Studies at King's College London, together with Professor Michael Semple from Harvard University's Carr Center on Human Rights met with one former Taliban Minister, one former Taliban Deputy Minister and founding member of the Taliban, one senior former Mujahidin Commander and lead negotiator for the Taliban and one Afghan mediator with extensive experience of negotiating with the Taliban.

The discussions revealed for the first time the emerging consensus of the Taliban leadership, a far more pragmatic picture of the Taliban than has previously been made public, with the Taliban willing to take part in peace negotiations in exchange for political leverage after 2014. The briefing paper highlights that the primary view of all four representatives was that if any agreement with the Taliban were to be successful it would require endorsement from Mullah Omar, who is open to negotiating a ceasefire as part of a general settlement.

So far no Taliban leader has publicly endorsed the idea of a ceasefire. Another of the main findings to emerge is that the Taliban leadership and 'base' deeply regret their past association with Al-Qa'ida; so much that once a general ceasefire and/or political agreement are decided they would obey a command to completely renounce Al-Qa'ida, if this call came from Mullah Omar. These views have been made apparent before, but until now there had been little clarity over how this might happen.

According to the paper, renunciation of Al-Qa'ida, seen as a process rather than an end in itself, would need to be built into a larger comprehensive peace settlement agreement in exchange for some form of political recognition. The Taliban propose they would then act, with ISAF and Afghan Government representatives on a Joint Monitoring Commission to ensure that Al-Qa'ida is no longer able to operate on Afghan soil. One interviewee noted that any renunciation process would be used 'as a lever to negotiate something substantial'.

To read the briefing paper in full, please visit www.rusi.org/talibanbriefing2012