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Turning the Taliban Against Al Qaeda

BYLINE: By SCOTT **ATRAN**.

Scott **Atran**, an anthropologist at France's National Center for Scientific Research, the University of Michigan and John Jay College, is the author of "Talking to the Enemy: Faith, Brotherhood and the (Un)making of Terrorists."

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FOR the last week there have been widespread news reports that NATO is facilitating talks between the Afghan government and Taliban leaders, even as it routs Taliban forces from their main stronghold in Kandahar. The United States plan seems clear: allow for "preliminary" talks to end the war through a broad-based "reconciliation" process, but don't get serious about a deal until beefed-up coalition forces have gained the initiative on the battlefield.

Yet, despite assertions by senior NATO officials that they can defeat the Taliban militarily if given enough money and men, and that military pressure will start the Taliban thinking about alternatives to fighting, the surge in southern Afghanistan appears only to have expanded the scope of the Taliban's activity and entrenched their resolve to fight on until America tires and leaves.

In truth, the real pressure to show that there is light at the end of the tunnel is not on the Taliban, but the United States, so it can start drawing down troops next year as President Obama has pledged. This is why NATO and Washington are only now openly discussing the talks, although they have been going on in fits and starts for years. True, some senior Taliban leaders are playing along -- but this is not so much because they fear defeat at the hands of the Americans, but because they worry that their new generation of midlevel commanders is getting out of control.

Washington's goals officially remain those stated by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton: to strengthen Afghan Army forces and to "reintegrate" the supposedly "moderate" Taliban, that is, fighters who will consent to lay down arms and respect the Afghan Constitution, including its Western-inspired provisions to respect human rights and equality of women in the public sphere. Yet in nine years of war, no significant group of Taliban has opted for reintegration (a few individuals have come in, only to return to the Taliban when it again was in their interest). Moreover, coalition military personnel know that there isn't a single Afghan Army brigade that can hold its own against Taliban troops.

Ten months into the new NATO push in Afghanistan, 2010 is the bloodiest year yet of the war. Insurgent attacks are up more than 60 percent compared with last year, according to the United Nations. The estimated number of Taliban has increased some tenfold since the aftermath of their defeat by coalition forces in 2001. Taliban troops now roam large areas in northern and eastern Afghanistan, far beyond the traditional Pashtun provinces of the south.

The United States claims to have killed thousands of Taliban in recent months, mostly foot soldiers and midlevel commanders. But those 25-year-old foot soldiers are being replaced by teenage fighters, and the 35-year-old midlevel

commanders by 20-something students straight out of the religious schools called madrasas, which are the only form of education available in many rural areas.

These younger commanders and their fiercely loyal fighters are increasingly removed from the dense networks of tribal kinship and patronage, or qawm, and especially of friendship born of common experiences, or andiwali, that bind together the top figures in the established insurgent groups like the Quetta Shura and the Haqqani network. Indeed, it is primarily through andiwali -- overlapping bonds of family, schooling, years together in camps, combat service, business partnership -- that talks between the adversaries, including representatives of Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan's president, and Mullah Omar, the Taliban's ultimate leader, have continued over the years.

These new Taliban warriors, however, are increasingly independent, ruthless and unwilling to compromise with foreign infidels and their associates. They yearn to fight, and describe battle as going on vacation from the long, boring interludes of training and waiting between engagements. They claim they will fight to the death as long as any foreign soldiers remain, even if only in military bases.

As with the older Taliban, their ideology -- a peculiar blend of pan-Islamic Shariah law and Pashtun customs -- is "not for sale," as one leader told a Times reporter. But the new cohort increasingly decides how these beliefs are imposed on the ground: recently the Quetta Shura sent a Muslim scholar to chastise a group of youthful commanders in Paktia Province who were not following Mullah Omar's directives; they promptly killed him.

Hardly anyone who calls himself "Taliban" (an umbrella term for fractious Pashtun tribesmen who collectively hate the foreign invaders enough to turn even traditional enemies into friends) considers the American conditions for reintegration as anything other than comical. To get the tribesmen to lay down arms that have sustained them for decades against a host of powerful invaders is about as likely as getting the National Rifle Association to support a repeal of the Second Amendment. The separation of men and women in the public sphere is at the foundation of Pashtun tribal life, along with the duty to protect guests.

So why hold talks at all? Because there is a good chance that the Taliban can be persuaded to cut ties with Al Qaeda and offer some sort of guarantee that President Karzai won't be left hanging from a lamppost when the Americans leave (as President Muhammad Najibullah, the puppet Afghan leader of the 1980s, was after the Soviets fled). The veteran correspondent Arnaud de Borchgrave recently told me that when he met with Mullah Omar shortly before 9/11, he was "stunned by the hostility" the mullah expressed for Osama bin Laden.

Indeed, there is strong evidence that in the late 1990s Mullah Omar tried to crack down on Mr. bin Laden's activities -- confiscating his cellphone, putting him under house arrest and forbidding him to talk to the press or issue fatwas. But then, as the Taliban were deliberating about how to "disinvite" their troublesome guest after 9/11, the United States invaded, bombing them into a closer alliance with Al Qaeda.

Likewise, it should be possible to drive a wedge between Al Qaeda and the Haqqanis. The group's leader, Jalaluddin Haqqani, was once called "goodness personified" by Representative Charlie Wilson, the great patron of the Afghan mujahedeen. During the Soviet occupation, he was a principal conduit of funds between Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence and the Islamic rebels, and remains a key link between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban.

Although some Haqqani leaders now profess loyalty to Mullah Omar and probably continue to harbor members of Al Qaeda, this is most likely a manifestation of the tradition of sanctuary and the Afghan tribal dictum that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." What's more, the Haqqanis have many long-standing andiwali ties with Mr. Karzai's tribe, the Popalzai, which could be exploited in negotiations. Indeed, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar -- a Taliban leader with close links to the Haqqanis who is in Pakistani custody, but is thought to be involved with the current talks -- is himself a member of the Popalzai and once saved Mr. Karzai's life.

With no real hopes for a breakthrough in negotiations, the Pentagon's current thinking seems to be to keep troop levels up for at least a few months after President Obama's declared June 2011 drawdown date, to show the Taliban that the

force and the will to beat them will remain if they don't come to the table. But this isn't likely to impress any Taliban, who can simply wait us out.

The smarter move would be to turn the current shadow-play about talks into serious negotiations right now. The older Taliban leaders might well drop their support for Osama bin Laden if Western troops were no longer there to unite them. The Haqqanis, too, are exclusively interested in their homeland, not global jihad, and will discard anyone who interferes in their lives. No Haqqanis joined Al Qaeda before 9/11, because they couldn't stand Arabs telling them how to pray and fight.

The problem now, for the Taliban leaders, the Afghan government, its Western backers and Pakistan, is that the main "success" of the recent surge -- killing thousands of Taliban foot soldiers and midlevel commanders -- may create a whirlwind that no one will be able to control.

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