

Talking With The Taliban: Who Calls The Shots?

New Delhi, 26 March 2009: The Taliban, like the Al Qaeda, are not a monolithic, homogenous entity; a characteristic most commonly attributed to them in popular discourse. “At the very basic level, there are two different factions of the Taliban today – one group, which is the Afghan Taliban, comprising mainly of Afghan Pashtuns fighting the soldiers of Operation Enduring Freedom and NATO-ISAF... There is also the Pakistani Taliban, who are guided by leaders interested in retaining and extending their influence of power... and who are also more Islamist in agenda,” writes Mayank Bubna, a former intern of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), New Delhi in a recently published issue brief .

According to Bubna, the relationship between the two groups extends only as far as one needs the other. This makes any attempts at involving the Taliban in reconciliation talks difficult, with both factions having different agendas. However this is not where the buck stops. It is common knowledge now that the Afghanistan Taliban took refuge in the treacherous mountain terrain of Pakistan’s tribal areas after their ouster from Kabul. Today, however, Taliban leaders based in Pakistan are finding it increasingly difficult to control their rank and file in Afghanistan. “Some rogue elements have formed their own groupings, and take orders from local commanders. Moderate factions within the Taliban have been marginalized. Given such fissures within the Taliban organization, it is next to impossible to ascertain who to invite to reconciliation meetings, and who not to,” says Bubna. In such a scenario any success in coopting the Taliban in talks becomes highly localized.

Bubna also points to the fact that the Taliban have little motivation to be part of reconciliation talks given that they are currently the “winning” side and hold prime cards. Also, they have a readily available pool of young and able men, willing to join their ranks and so far have shown almost no interest in coming to the table to talk peace. “...while several advances have been made to try and integrate the Taliban into the peace process, no retaliatory statements for power sharing or peace making

have ever come across from the Taliban leadership,” he remarks. Talks, understandably, cannot take place till the Taliban realise that their options and cards have dwindled and the best way forward for them is to talk.

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Mayank Bubna’s complete report – **Afghanistan: Talking to Taliban** - is available on the IPCS website www.ipcs.org.

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