



## COMPARING SOVIET AND AMERICAN NATIONAL RECONCILIATION PROGRAMS

# Comparing Soviet and American National Reconciliation Programs



by Tribal Analysis Center Staff



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*A monopolistic and absolute interpretation of Islam, however, is not the sole problem with the Taliban. This radical group also believes in a sort of ethnic monopoly too, though they do not say it out loud. The Pashtun ethnic group has been staying power in Afghanistan for almost the past 300 years sitting on the top of the power pyramid.*

*Pir-Mohammad Mollazehi,  
Iranian Afghanistan Issues Specialist*

In a curious form of evidence verifying that large organizations tend to solve large problems in identical ways, both the Soviet Union and the United States encouraged and sponsored national reconciliation programs within Afghanistan as each prepared to depart the country. In the case of the Soviet Union once the decision to withdraw had been made Najibullah and the other senior leaders of the Afghan communist party were summoned to Moscow with and advised that they had two years in which to prepare to defend their government before Soviet troops were completely withdrawn from Afghanistan. Soon afterwards, Najibullah announced a policy of national reconsolidation with key aspects that included a cease-fire by the communist Armed Forces, power-sharing at the national levels of government with non-Communist political parties, amnesty for political prisoners, and official recognition of the local control that had been achieved by mujahedin commanders in rural areas.

Barnett Rubin, a negotiations adviser to State Department's Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, and his successor, Marc Grossman, explained in clear terms the distance that Najibullah was willing to go in order for his national reconciliation program to be acceptable to the mujahedin who were supported by Pakistan, the United States, and their Muslim allies:

“In a speech on January 3, 1987, to the founding session of the extraordinary supreme commission for national reconciliation in Afghanistan, Comrade Najib – as he then called himself – placated his listeners by asserting that the revolutionary process is irreversible. Over the next four years, however, President Sayyid Muhammad Najibullah – as he styled himself before group of ulama in July, 1990 – presided over the reversal of virtually every aspect of the revolutionary process.”<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the extraordinary efforts by Najibullah to accommodate his mujahedin opponents, the withdrawal of 100,000 Soviet troops on a specifically designated date left his enemies with the impression that they would achieve rapid victory once his Russian allies re-crossed the Amu Darya River separating Afghanistan from the Soviet Union over which they had invaded 10 years earlier. From the point of the mujahedin leadership, the departure of the Russians left them in a position from which any discussion of reconciliation was unnecessary.

Najibullah's Soviet military adviser who was an Uzbek Muslim, General Mahmut Gareev, arrived in Afghanistan on February 7, 1989, eight days prior to the last of the Soviet combat forces crossing “Friendship Bridge” into Termez, a border city now in southern Uzbekistan. He later wrote of the Najibullah's failed National Reconciliation Program:

“Soviet troops were withdrawn from Afghanistan at a time when the government of Najibullah had declared a policy of national reconciliation and was in persistent talks with the opposition to establish a coalition government. It is difficult to say to what extent he would have succeeded to

1 Rubin, Barnett R., *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, Yale University Press, 2002 (second edition), pg. 147.

implement this policy, in fact, if the new Russian Foreign Ministry [under Boris Yeltsin] did not turn away from the government of the Republic of Afghanistan. In any case, the blood would have been shed is less than it is now.”<sup>2</sup>

This aspect of Najibullah’s reconciliation program left the insurgents in a confident position:

“The cease-fire was longed [for under] Afghan President Najibullah. Moreover, Kabul unilaterally went on a cease-fire.”<sup>3</sup>

The Soviet officials and analysts Gareev met with during his pre-departure briefings were in a somber mood. He wrote:

“As a result of meetings and discussions with officials of the various departments involved in the affairs of Afghanistan, acquaintance with reports of Representatives Foreign Affairs, the KGB, the General Intelligence Agency, military advisers, and foreign press reports the situation is a rather depressing picture of the situation in Afghanistan. The main essence of all judgments, reports and messages came to the fact that the Mujahideen are elated to significantly enhance and prepare for the decisive battle for power, and government circles Republic of Afghanistan in connection with the withdrawal of Soviet forces are in a state of shock. *And there is no hope that the Najibullah regime can last at least several months.*” [emphasis added]<sup>4</sup>

The modern situation related to the withdrawal of U.S./NATO forces from Afghanistan is little different than what was described in 1989 by Najibullah’s newly arriving senior military adviser, Mahmud Gareev. There appear to be two differences in the current situation. Unlike the Soviets, there are no Geneva Accord agreements specifying an exact date on which all of their military forces had to depart from Afghanistan. Second, there are no current agreements requiring the United States and NATO to remove all of the forces and there are political statements being made to allow as many as 10,000 American soldiers to remain in Afghanistan in the post-2014 environment. But like in the situation experienced by the Soviet forces, the Taliban insurgents – much like the Soviet’s mujahedin opponents – can visualize a future in which the Afghan National Army and the other Afghan security forces will be left without skilled and experienced foreign combat soldiers supporting them. Basically, just like the mujahedin opposing the Soviets the Taliban insurgents have no incentive to enter into any form of reconsolidation program.

This was explained very clearly by a former mujahedin commander who was also an active Taliban supporter in Paktika province in a telephone interview conducted by RAND Corporation in November, 2012. The 57-year-old former mujahedin commander compared the Taliban insurgency with similar experiences during the American Revolution against the British, pointing out that regardless of the reverses experienced by the American forces they never considered reconciliation with the British, something they would have viewed as surrendering. He believed the Taliban movement is in a similar position. There is no reason to reconcile because they have not been defeated militarily. He also explained that the Taliban view of the current national reconciliation program is a belief that it is simply intended to split the Taliban and weaken it.<sup>5</sup>

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2 Gareev, Mahmud, *Afghan Suffering*; an analytic work by General Mahmud Gareev, a leading Soviet military analyst and author of more than 100 books and 300 publications on military analysis. In 1988-9, Gareev was Najibullah’s personal Soviet military adviser and he also served as the chief architect of the withdrawal of the Soviet forces. In his book, Gareev discusses in great detail decisions and actions during the withdrawal as well as his analytic conclusions of the aftermath of Soviet withdrawal. [http://read24.ru/fb2/mahmud-gareev--moya-poslednyaya-voyna-\(afganistan-bez-sovetskih-voysk\)/](http://read24.ru/fb2/mahmud-gareev--moya-poslednyaya-voyna-(afganistan-bez-sovetskih-voysk)/) Accessed January 4, 2013. The site is in Russian and was mechanically translated into English. Light editing was done to the translation for readability purposes.

3 Gareev, pg. 53.

4 Gareev, pg. 61.

5 The unclassified interview with the unnamed Taliban leader from Paktika province was conducted by telephone in November 2012.

Unfortunately, the best time to have attempted a serious national reconciliation program in Afghanistan would have been during the period when the Taliban were at their weakest. The time around the 2004 election would have been ideal and there was a serious attempt made by the Afghan government and its allies to develop such program. But again and equally unfortunate, little attention was made to historical animosities as the defunct Peace Through Strength Program was set up under the leadership of Sibghatullah Mojaddedi. His political history was quite significant, particularly to the Pashtun Taliban.

Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the new Afghan Interim Government composed of the seven parties supported by Pakistan appointed Mojededdi as the president of the country and when Najibullah departed in 1992, Mojededdi was responsible for establishing the post-Soviet Afghan government, but this process eventually resulted in Burhanuddin Rabbani, a Tajik, becoming president. As in the period following King Amanullah's abdication when Habibullah Kalakani, another Tajik, gained control of Kabul's government the Pashtuns revolted and fought until Kalakani was removed from power. When Mojededdi passed control of Kabul to Rabbani, a Tajik, the Pashtun mujahedin, particularly Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, reacted violently in a new phase of civil war. Because of Mojededdi's perceived involvement in placing the Afghan presidency into Tajik hands, few Taliban leaders would trust Mojededdi with reconciliation responsibilities.<sup>6</sup>

A second factor still involved both trust and confidence-building, especially with the Taliban. All of the Taliban leadership personalities at every level know of the case of their former foreign minister, Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil, who decided to reconcile with the "Americans" in early 2002 but instead of being received as a reconciling Taliban leader, possibly the first of many during this period of total defeat for their movement, Mutawakil was soon taken into U.S. military custody and confined for nearly two years at Bagram. This experience was not likely to inspire confidence in any additional Taliban leaders considering reconciliation.

Similar pressure was being applied to any significant leader in the Taliban from the Pakistani side of the Durand Line. One of the best known cases involved their senior military commander, Abdul Ghani Berader. Recently, the Afghan government acknowledged that Berader had been meeting with them:

"...[S]enior officials from both Afghanistan and Pakistan [revealed](#) that an Afghan delegation had met secretly with former deputy commander of the Taliban, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who has been in jail in Pakistan since he was captured in Karachi in 2010. The goal of the meeting, according to Rangin Dadfar Spanta, President Hamid Karzai's national security advisor, was to 'know his view on peace talks,' and move toward restarting the stalled reconciliation process... the Taliban also claimed responsibility for the killing of several senior political and military figures, including Ahmad Wali Karzai, the most powerful man in southern Afghanistan and the younger brother of President Karzai, Jan Mohammed Khan, a senior advisor and friend of President Karzai..."<sup>7</sup>

Tribal social networking reveals a great deal regarding the probable connections between these three individuals and the likely reasons for the killing of Ahmad Wali Karzai and Jan Mohammad Khan and the arrest of Berader, a man with a large number of followers and admirers within the Taliban who may have reacted negatively if he had been killed instead of being arrested by Pakistani officials. All three men are not only from the Popalzai Zirk Durrani tribe, but they share the same sub-tribe – a point where cohesion provides some degree of trust. With Berader

6 For an overview of this period of Afghanistan's history, see Tom Barfield's book, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. The account begins on page 259.

7 Mafton, Khalid, "The folly of reconciliation in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, August 29, 2012. [http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/08/29/the\\_folly\\_of\\_reconciliation\\_in\\_afghanistan](http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/08/29/the_folly_of_reconciliation_in_afghanistan) Accessed January 2, 2012.

making unofficial contacts regarding possible reconciliation with the Karzai family, it was probably obvious to Pakistani supporters of the Taliban Movement that this particular reconciliation could have a devastating impact and not only was Berader's arrest ordered, the line of probable negotiators was removed – permanently.

### **Conclusion**

Given the incompetence of the Afghan government in connecting the original reconciliation program, Peace Through Strength, to a man the Taliban could not trust, Mojededdi, and later placed Burhanuddin Rabbani in charge of the National Reconciliation Program, a match that had provoked rebellious Pashtuns into the post-Najibullah civil war, there should be no surprise that the program is not successful. The inability to conduct reconciliation activities is compounded by American errors, especially with the arrest of the former Taliban foreign minister, Mutawakil. Few other Taliban leaders would consider reconciliation and risk similar treatment.

On the other end of the reconciliation continuum are the Taliban, al-Qa'ida, and some of the Pakistani intelligence and military officials – if not all of them. Those Taliban leaders suspected of developing informal contacts with the Afghan government have been arrested. This number includes some of the most powerful individuals within the Taliban senior leadership, such as Berader, Obaidullah, Turabi, and Mullah Ismail. Ismail, an Andar Pashtun, was arrested by the Taliban, themselves, and this act may have been a catalyst that resulted in the recent revolt against the Taliban among Ghazni province's Andar tribesmen.<sup>8</sup>

But reconciliation is a high risk activity for the Taliban and if they are successful, they must worry about Afghan government incompetence and corruption that keeps promised temporary stipends from arriving for those individuals from the lower ranks of the Taliban. For example, a senior district official from Paktika province explained in a telephone interview conducted by RAND Corporation in November 2012 that one local Taliban commander had given up was waiting for promised temporary funding and had relocated to Kabul where he was now making a living selling produce from a pushcart. Similarly, an additional nine Taliban fighters who had reconciled entered the local Afghan Local Police element in order to earn a living. Unfortunately, five of these individuals were captured by the Taliban at a remote outpost and were subsequently beheaded. Mullah Kaksar, the Deputy Minister of Interior and the first of the Taliban leadership to defect and attended a press conference in which he denounced the Taliban, was later murdered in Kandahar, probably as a warning to others considering similar actions.<sup>9</sup> Needless to say, reconciliation is a high risk activity for the Taliban membership.

### **Recommendations**

Caution is needed when planning attacks during the withdrawal phase since this can have a negative impact on future reconciliation negotiations. The Taliban movement is far from being monolithic and weakening one group can strengthen another. Mahmed Gareev described this process: “When deciding on the bombing on the territory controlled by Ahmad Shah, the Afghan and Soviet leadership did not considered one more important fact. With the weakening of the forces of Ahmed Shah, which under certain conditions could still somehow agree [with

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<sup>8</sup> See “The Worm Turns, Villagers Take the Counterinsurgency Into Their Own Hands”, *The Economist*, August 18, 2012 for an account of the Andar tribesmen to reports of Ismail's arrest in an internal Taliban purge.

<sup>9</sup> Witte, Griff, “Taliban Defector Is Assassinated”, *Washington Post*, January 15, 2006. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/14/AR2006011400983.html> accessed January 5, 2013.

reconciliation], strengthens the position of the more dangerous and implacable opposition of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in the first place.<sup>10</sup>

Confidence-building may be possible through mediators trusted to be neutral by the Taliban. Pir Gailani would have been ideal, but he has already been associated with the government and is tainted from the Taliban perspective. Someone similar may be trusted.

The U.S./NATO “talks” have centered on a settlement at the highest political levels of the Taliban and have made no progress. Following some of what Najibullah attempted would probably be more successful and negotiating at a more local level may show more success. This may be even more feasible to consider once the U.S./NATO forces have begun to draw down significantly as a sign of good faith associated with President Obama’s desire to withdraw. A very significant number of Taliban leaders and fighters will view the foreigner’s departure as an indication that their need to participate in jihad is over and that the remaining foreigners are Pakistani Pashtuns and Arabs.

Reconciliation talks with senior Taliban leaders located inside Pakistan is likely to result in their arrest by Pakistani authorities or murder by the less pragmatic Taliban. This is another reason to focus reconciliation on indigenous Taliban who are beyond the reach of Pakistan’s military and intelligence officials.

Efforts must be made to reduce the Afghan bureaucracy involved in the reconciliation process. For those Taliban risking their lives through reconciliation, the fact that promises made are not kept can destroy the confidence-building that would result in additional reconciliations.

Like Najibullah, Karzai had little to offer other than regional autonomy and ministerial positions as enticements for some of the Taliban nationalist commanders, such as Berader if he is ever released from prison, to split the post-jihad commanders from the opportunists in the insurgency who are prone to work for both Pakistan and al-Qa’ida.

Avoid Hekmatyar at all costs. He is not trustworthy and can be relied upon for one thing: betrayal.

The Iranians are probably correct in their assessment of the Taliban approach to reconciliation:

“Under present circumstances, the Taliban considers itself as representative of the Pashtun people’s ethnic demands. Therefore, Taliban is in no position, either ideologically, or ethnically to accept reconciliation. However, they cannot totally ignore the existing hard realities as well. The Taliban has gradually come to grips with two important external realities:

1. Military victory in Afghan war is by no means conceivable for them; and
2. Ethnic groups other than Pashtuns will never give in to ethnic monopoly on power again.

The reality that in the current war in Afghanistan neither the Taliban are able to defeat the government and foreign forces, nor government forces and their foreign backers are able to totally eliminate the Taliban from the country’s power equations is not disputable. Therefore, when a military solution to the problem is out of the question, a political option will be naturally more attractive. This is where the difficulty exists and is exactly where the Taliban is faced with its more formidable challenge; a problem which has both ideological and ethnic dimensions. From an ideological viewpoint, the Taliban considers [the] negotiation table as the “portal to apostasy.” From an ethnic standpoint, however, when engaged in any form of negotiation for national reconciliation, they would have to forget about their ethnic roots as well as their historical backdrop. At any rate, the Taliban is gradually finding the capacity and the finesse to overcome these problems. The recalcitrant realities of Afghanistan will ultimately get the Taliban to the point that the group would have to give up its claim to monopoly on power. However, this would not mean that

10 Gareev, pg. 51.

the group would also relinquish its ideological and ethnic monopolies as well. This will be only a temporary tactic for them to weather the current difficult conditions and to finish the bumpy road which lies ahead of them. From this viewpoint, the Taliban can accept reconciliation as a first step and then make proper plans for the next stages of gaining more power.”<sup>11</sup>

The U.S./NATO troop withdrawal has made the “temporary tactic” for the Taliban far less temporary.

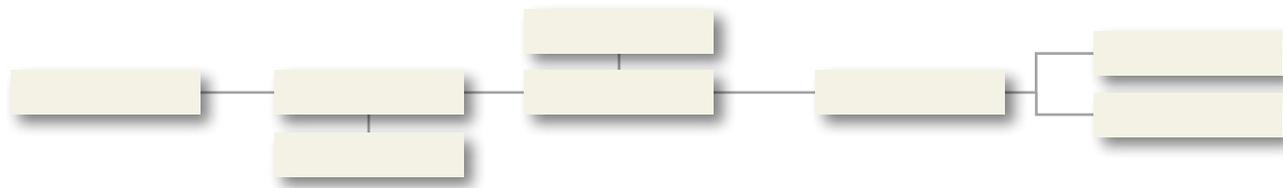
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11 See Afghanistan and the Difficulty of Achieving National Reconciliation, Saturday, December 22, 2012, *Pir-Mohammad Mollazehi, Expert on Pakistan and Afghanistan Issues*; <http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/Afghanistan-and-the-Difficulty-of-Achieving-National-Reconciliation.htm>, Access January 3, 2013.

# TRIBAL ANALYSIS CENTER

Traditional anthropological research conducted among tribes inhabiting remote areas where insurgents and criminals operate has become increasingly difficult to implement. Studies carried out among people living in small-scale societies now are nearly impossible due to the physical dangers associated with the civil and religious unrest found in those areas. Swat, for example, has become so dangerous that Frederick Barth's studies only could be repeated at the risk of the investigator's life. Similar research is not feasible among Burma's Rohingya tribes located on both sides of the border with Bangladesh, as well as with the Pashtuns in Afghanistan's interior and within Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, where even Pakistan's army enters with reluctance.

Given the difficulties of conducting direct fieldwork in conflictive areas, the Tribal Analysis Center utilizes an indirect approach. Using multidisciplinary research, we seek to collect and analyze data obtained from a wide variety of sources, both current and historical. In the absence of new ethnographic fieldwork to update our base of knowledge, the Tribal Analysis Center compiles and summarizes existing research and documents on tribal societies, combining this material with contemporary press reports and articles. We assume that much can be gleaned from well-informed observers who are not anthropologists, ranging from journalists and travelers to government officials.



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