

## Afghanistan & Pakistan

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Was Taliban leader's capture really a good thing?

As coalition forces and insurgents battle each other in Marjah, some NATO and Afghan officials are talking about integration and reconciliation. CNN's Chief International Correspondent Christiane Amanpour spoke with Taliban expert and journalist Ahmed Rashid, who's written many books on the subject, including the best-selling "Taliban." They discuss how Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar's capture could be a Catch-22, the likelihood of Taliban reconciliation and if there have already been secret meetings between the Taliban and Afghan government to discuss this.

Are there any ongoing contacts with the Taliban? A: There are. All the major international humanitarian agencies had had indirect contacts with the Taliban, not on a political basis, but basically protect their humanitarian activities, for example, protecting the school and health programs that they are running. The U.N. has been in the same position. For example, the U.N. had a very good polio inoculation campaign across the country in Taliban areas, as well. Now, that couldn't have been carried out unless there had been some kind of contact with the Taliban to give access to the nurses and doctors who went into carry this out. So that's the first reason.

I think the second reason is that the U.N. has been very deeply worried by the attack on its offices and one of its guest houses in Kabul a few weeks ago.

Why did that happen? Because it's really one of the first times that's happened.

A: I think the assumption is that it was the main Taliban grouping based in Pakistan and was that some of the allies of Taliban who are more closely linked to al Qaeda, and was that done to, in fact, sabotage the relationship between the United Nations and any ongoing talks that might be held.

Q: First and foremost, it's all very nice that the U.N. talks on humanitarian issues and their polio vaccine, but that's not exactly what everybody's getting their hopes up, in terms of a political channel to bring the Taliban in. Is there any political channel of any credibility that's happening right now? [The U.N. special representative to Afghanistan] Kai Eide says no.

A: I think there is a channel that has been opened, and everybody acknowledges that that channel has to be carried out by President Karzai and the Afghan government. And all the others - you know, the Americans, U.N., everybody else should be - should help that channel, but they have to be for the time being bystanders.

So how far is it? How far is it along?

A: There have been talks - there were talks much earlier in the spring of last year in Saudi Arabia, but there have been talks this winter again in Saudi Arabia. And, in fact, several of the Taliban leaders have been in Saudi Arabia meeting with the Saudis and also meeting with representatives of the Afghan government.

But in terms of who do they represent, do they represent Mullah Omar? Are they real, credible Taliban who can actually deliver something?

A: The fact is that Mullah Baradar - this No. 2 who was arrested in Pakistan - was in Saudi Arabia for hajj just a few months ago. And all the reports are that he certainly did have talks, and there was a dialogue going on with the Saudis, with members of the Kabul government, and that is one of the main venues.

So why now then? Why his arrest right now, if he's one of the main interlocutors?

A: I think there are many levels of problems here. The first thing is that I think the Pakistanis obviously have been under huge pressure to arrest active members of the Afghan Taliban who've been living in Pakistan for years and years.

Now, the Pakistan's ISI, the Inter-Services Intelligence, could have arrested these people at any time. The question is, why did they choose to arrest them at this time? And I think one of the reasons is that the ISI wants to send a very firm message to the Taliban and to the Americans, also, that if there's going to be any talks or dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban, Pakistan will have to be the main broker or mediator.

So this is a shot across the bow then?

A: In a way, it's a shot across the bow, because you've arrested Taliban leaders, but certainly it's sending a very strong message by the ISI and the military in Pakistan to all of NATO and the Americans that, you know, don't go into talks without telling us because we are the key players here.

So Richard Holbrooke, the special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, has praised this. He's met with the Pakistani prime minister. He's called it a significant move. Is it a significant move in the right direction? Yes, they've got this top man off the battlefield, but does it hurt in the other direction, in terms of political reintegration?

A: I think, in the long term, it will hurt. Why? Because Mullah Baradar is a very serious No. 2 of the Taliban. He's very close to Mullah Omar. He would not have gone to Saudi Arabia and met these people, frankly, without permission of Mullah Omar. I think this is a Taliban joint effort. Mullah Baradar is not some rogue element who's talking on his own or he's not a moderate Taliban who's talking on his own.

So I think the Americans, of course, are faced with this dilemma that they want to encourage this amongst the Pakistanis, but the problem now is that, if Mullah Baradar was going to be the main negotiator, he is now tainted, he is now arrested. He will now be seen by many of the Taliban and even by members of the Afghan government as an envoy for Pakistan rather than an envoy from his own movement, because this is a man who's been arrested and been interrogated.

Even if the Pakistanis want to use him now as a mediator and they set him free, you've tainted him.

Given that you say he's so close to Mullah Omar, are there red lines? How does one deal with the Taliban, if you want to bring them in from the cold? How do they deal with the women's issue? How do they deal with the al Qaeda issue?

A: There has to be a political formal process of dialogue. And certainly, one of the main demands - the major demands of the Americans - is that they have to show signs that they've broken with al Qaeda. Now, the mainstream Taliban, which is represented by Mullah Omar, could possibly do this.

Now, how will they actually demonstrate this? That's the problem. How do you prove that you've broken with al Qaeda? It's not good enough for me to say, "I've broken with al Qaeda." I have to prove it on the ground. And one way I can prove it on the ground is actually by going after al Qaeda.

So would the Taliban be willing to actually go after al Qaeda? Because they know where al Qaeda is more than anyone. But don't forget that there are other elements here amongst the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani network, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who are very close to al Qaeda, who would do their utmost to sabotage any kind of dialogue like this.

Let's talk about U.S. strategy in Marjah right now. Give us an idea of where the concentrations of Taliban are.

A: The Taliban control most of the south and a lot of the east. They control some of the provinces. They have a very strong presence around Kabul, and I think that's where the next offensive, Western offensive will be. They are strong in the north. They have pockets in Kunduz in the north and in the west, in Herat, and other provinces in the west. So it's become now a countrywide movement.

Can [coalition forces] win the support? Are they bringing better governance? And are they telegraphing that message well enough?

A: Well, it's going to be piece by piece. This whole Marjah offensive is all about bringing governance - as General McChrystal has said, government in a box - to what is a critical area. It is, first of all, the poppy area. It is the concentration of the Taliban. And it was also the supply route for logistics going into Pakistan, where a lot of their recruits and logistics come. If you can settle that area, win the confidence of the people, certainly that would be a big blow, but you will have to repeat this many times in the next year or 18 months all over the country, particularly in the south, but in the east, you have to clear these provinces around Kabul, you have to push the Taliban back.

Will the U.S. and NATO forces win praise for what they did, which was so loudly telegraphed this, in order to get the civilians out of harm's way? Certainly some Afghan officials are already saying that the majority of people in that area are pleased at the fact that there was so much notice given.

A: This is a completely new and different strategy, and I think it's a very positive strategy, and I think it's been met with a lot of positive response by Karzai, by the government, and by the local people. There's enormous care being taken. The 12 civilians who were killed by this rocket attack - General McChrystal was quick to acknowledge that, to apologize for that, and then to take action against that. So I think this is a way to win hearts and minds.