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**From:** H <hrod17@clintonemail.com>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, February 14, 2012 4:41 PM  
**To:** 'Russorv@state.gov'  
**Subject:** Fw: How Afghan Peace Talks Are Splintering the Taliban

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**From:** Sullivan, Jacob J [mailto:SullivanJJ@state.gov]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, February 14, 2012 12:23 PM  
**To:** H  
**Subject:** FW: How Afghan Peace Talks Are Splintering the Taliban

FYI

**From:** Grossman, Marc I  
**Sent:** Tuesday, February 14, 2012 8:56 AM  
**To:** Lute, Douglas E.; Sullivan, Jacob J  
**Subject:** FW: How Afghan Peace Talks Are Splintering the Taliban

**From:** Barnett R. Rubin   
**Sent:** Tuesday, February 14, 2012 8:23 AM  
**To:** Grossman, Marc I; SSRAP\_POL  
**Subject:** How Afghan Peace Talks Are Splintering the Taliban

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## How Afghan Peace Talks Are Splintering the Taliban

**Will the Taliban survive talking with the Americans? Many fighters say no.**

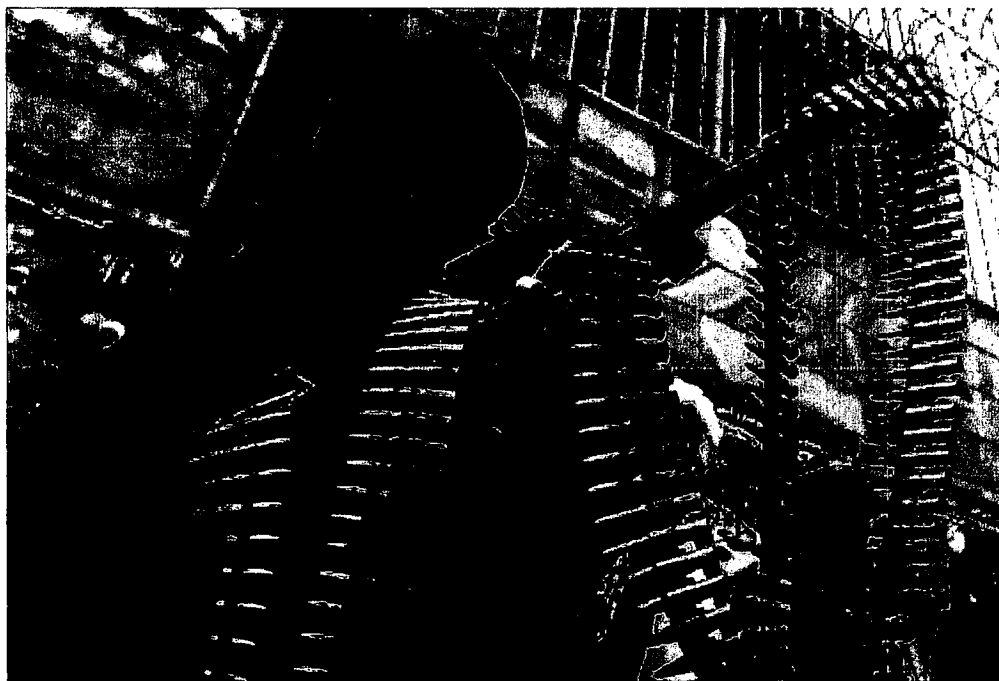
by [Sami Yousafzai](#), [Ron Moreau](#) | February 13, 2012 12:00 AM EST

Ever since he was 20, Ahmad Jamal has been a loyal follower of [Taliban](#) leader Mullah Mohammed Omar. He became a supporter back in 1996, the year Omar's mujahedin marched to power in Kabul, and until late last

year he was an active combatant in the war against U.S. and Afghan National Army forces. Even so, something changed when he heard about the secret peace talks between the Americans and the Taliban in the Gulf state of Qatar. Although at first he dismissed the tales as enemy propaganda, the more he heard, the more his worries grew. “Those rumors raised questions in my mind for days and nights,” Jamal says. And eventually he had to admit to himself that the news was true. “When I realized the Taliban was really talking face to face with the Americans—the worst enemies of Islam!—my dream of the holy jihad was washed away,” he says.

That’s when he decided to do something he had never dreamed of: abandon the fight. You don’t tell the Taliban you’re quitting—not if you want to keep living. Still, he had to say goodbye to his 25-year-old kid brother, Ahmad Bilal; the two had been fighting side by side for four years. “I’m not going to risk making my four children orphans and my wife a widow so some Taliban leaders can share power with the American puppet [President Hamid] Karzai in the Presidential Palace,” Jamal says he told Bilal late one night. Then he got rid of his weapon and headed off to rejoin his family in Pakistan, their home since the days of the Soviet occupation. On the way, he passed through Kabul, where he spoke with a Newsweek reporter. “I fought to kick out the infidels from my country and to restore our Islamic regime, not to give up our ideals,” Jamal said as they sat together at a kebab shop. “I cannot trust my leaders anymore.”

Disclosure of the leadership’s secret talks in Qatar—confirmed and driven home by the group’s opening of a liaison office in the emirate’s capital, Doha—has devastated the insurgency’s ranks. The previously unified movement is splitting, if not shattering, as doubts grow among its members about the logic of their once-unshakable commitment to jihad. Many formerly loyal fighters like Jamal have become confused and demoralized. Although there have been no reports so far of any large-scale desertions, some ranking Taliban admit they’re worried about the possibility. “I fear there is a serious risk of defections,” says a Taliban logistics officer. Intentionally or not, Washington’s decision to put out serious peace feelers to the group has sowed dissension among the insurgents, even before the talks have made any real progress.



The number of men leaving the insurgency has grown from a trickle in years past to a real worry for their leaders., Melad / Xinhua Press-Corbis

Veteran commanders are at a loss to explain to their troops exactly what’s happening in Qatar, let alone what the senior leadership is thinking. According to Taliban sources, at least one senior member of the group’s main military council could only throw up his hands in response to his subordinates’ questions, saying, “I don’t know

more than I've heard on the radio." That kind of talk is anything but reassuring to the group's fighters and subcommanders. In the past two years the Taliban's former strongholds have been hit hard by the Americans' troop surge and by the Special Operations Forces' night raids. Now many Taliban worry that after so much hardship and sacrifice, their leaders may be in the process of selling them out. "Mullah Omar has always said fight, fight, fight until the Americans withdraw their troops," says Rahmatullah, a former insurgent (like many other Afghans he uses a single name). "Suddenly he's talking to the Americans. How can Mullah Omar cross out 18 years of resistance? It's impossible for Taliban to understand."

In the frozen mountains of Maidan-Wardak province, just west of Kabul, Jamal's younger brother is fighting on—and yet he too harbors doubts about the insurgency's future. "We were shocked and stunned by the news," says Bilal, referring to the secret discussions. "I'm afraid these peace talks are a conspiracy to destroy the Taliban, to silence the barrels of our guns," he says. "Our guns are our beauty and strength," he continues. "Without them we would be lost forever." He believes there's no choice but to keep fighting. "We have to restore our Islamic regime with our weapons, not talk about peace with the infidels," he says. He keeps telling himself that Omar will never compromise the movement. "I can't believe that Mullah Omar would sell the blood of our martyrs," he says. "The Taliban will not stop the jihad until we get a clear message from him."

Commanders and fighters alike are waiting for some word—any word—from Omar. The reclusive leader hasn't issued a single verifiable audio or video statement since he was driven from power in late 2001. But considering the disarray in his ranks, he needs to. "Everyone is waiting for a statement from Mullah Omar," says a Taliban intelligence officer. "They have to hear something from him. And soon." In fact, there are unconfirmable reports that he did send word orally to several senior commanders via the grapevine late last month. "I will not betray you and compromise the sacrifice of your blood," the somewhat ambiguous message said, according to one senior Taliban commander who requests anonymity. "My target is to achieve the goal of every Taliban, as we have fought so hard and suffered so much."

Around the same time, the ruling Quetta Shura's leadership council sent out a written dispatch—apparently an effort to calm the insurgents' nerves. A subcommander in Laghman province tells of having attended a meeting where a letter from the council was read aloud. It acknowledged that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (as the Taliban call their defunct national government) was in the process of opening an office in Qatar. "Apart from continuing the jihad, we want to have a process of negotiations to win the release of prisoners," the letter said. "We assure you we will not compromise our jihad's main goal of forcing the U.S. to leave Afghanistan."

The idea of giving the peace talks a chance may not have much support in the field, but it has traction among rear-echelon Taliban officials and former fighters who continue to believe in the cause. Negotiating with the enemy is not contrary to Islamic teachings, they say. "The Prophet Muhammad talked with and traded with his enemies," says Rahmatullah, who was arrested in a 2007 night raid and spent two years in U.S. and Afghan detention facilities. "We must talk and reason together."

Many of these pragmatists want to regain power, but don't believe it can be done by force of arms. "The talks can help us get politically what we have been trying to win militarily," says a former senior Taliban minister. They welcome what they see as the American recognition of the insurgency as a viable political force. "It's good that the U.S. seems ready to end this war and to give the Taliban a role in the future Afghan political system," says Qazi Habibullah Fauzi, who was the regime's chargé d'affaires in Saudi Arabia when the Taliban held power. "The question is, after 10 years of fighting has the Taliban gained a political vision that will allow it to take advantage of this opportunity?" says a former senior Taliban diplomat who declined to be quoted by name. "As a former Taliban, my answer is, regrettably, no."

Everyone, whether for or against negotiations, insists that the insurgents haven't been brought to the peace table by force. "I'm leaving the jihad not because the Taliban are weak, but because they are dishonoring our ideology," Jamal says. Rahmatullah agrees. "The Taliban are not weak," he says. "They can create security problems anywhere, any time. They will slowly come back." NATO analysts evidently share that view.

“Though the Taliban suffered severely in 2011, its strength, motivation, funding, and tactical proficiency remains intact,” says a classified report issued early this year, based on the interrogations of 4,000 Taliban and al Qaeda prisoners. “Many Afghans are already bracing themselves for an eventual return of the Taliban.”

All the same, the insurgency has clearly lost the momentum it had two years ago, before the American surge. Battlefield setbacks in the south, east, and north are believed to be largely responsible for the Taliban’s agreeing to talk. “In the key provinces of Helmand and Kunduz, the Taliban doesn’t exercise one meter of control,” says the Taliban logistics officer, who supports the talks. “We can’t hold ground, and we can’t stop construction and progress, even with IEDs and suicide bombings. It’s time for someone to persuade Mullah Omar to show some flexibility, before we lose everything.”

Nevertheless, there’s no guarantee that even a direct order from Omar himself could get his commanders and fighters to honor a ceasefire. Never mind whether they would go along with the confidence-building measures that are believed to be under discussion. Some Taliban voice doubts that anyone can stop the fighting. “Mullah Omar may not be able to answer his fighters’ questions,” says the Taliban intelligence officer. “Many are addicted to the ideology and the war. It will be difficult, if not impossible, for them to change.”

On the other hand, some former Taliban think the men on the ground could be persuaded to hold their fire—for a while, anyway. When dealing with recalcitrant commanders and fighters, the group’s political operatives are taking the line that the Taliban’s popularity with Afghan villagers would actually be strengthened if the shooting stops and peace comes. “Let’s have and observe a ceasefire and see what happens,” says one Taliban liaison officer. “In the end the Afghan people will support us.” Fauzi agrees. “If the Taliban can show discipline and political maturity during a ceasefire, there’s a strong chance they would gain lots of support in the countryside,” he says.

To do that, the insurgents would have to accept that Afghanistan is not the same as it was 10 years ago. “The Taliban should change and compromise,” says Rahmatullah. “Because the people have changed. Afghans have seen development, technology, and the benefit of knowledge over these past 10 years.” He believes that most Afghans—in the villages, at least—are still undecided about which side to back, and that a cessation of hostilities would favor the insurgents. “The majority of people are not talking but are watching and waiting.”

Breakthroughs at the talks seem vanishingly unlikely in the near term. Any talk of prisoner releases and ceasefires is premature at best; even Taliban who support the negotiations understand that much. “It has taken us months to decide to open an office in Qatar,” says the former Taliban cabinet minister, who is still close to the insurgency. “It’s just the beginning, and we have a very long and difficult way ahead.” The important thing is that some Taliban are finally setting out on that journey.

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