

# MODERATE FACTION OF AFGHAN TALIBAN GAINS VISIBILITY

As the New York Times notes, the Taliban took steps over the weekend to remove some of the more provocative aspects of its office in Qatar from which representatives may enter into negotiations on the end of the war in Afghanistan. Specifically, they took down both the version of the Afghan flag which they used while they ruled the country and they removed the sign that could have been interpreted as a claim that they were still the legitimate government of the country:

In a possible easing of tensions that have held up an opening for peace talks by American, Afghan and Taliban officials in Qatar, the Afghan government confirmed the complete removal of an objectionable sign, flag and flagpole that had led the Afghan delegation to boycott negotiations.

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“According to the timely and appropriate and precise position of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the Taliban flag has been brought down from the office, the Islamic Emirate sign has been removed and the Qatari police removed the flagpole from the Taliban office,” said a statement released Sunday by the presidential palace, quoting Masoom Stanekzai, a senior member of the Afghan High Peace Council.

The statement referred to the signs and flag unveiled when the Taliban open their Doha office last week – their first public re-entry on to the international stage in almost 13 years. At the official opening of the office the Taliban had put up signs saying

“Political Office of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan,” which is the name they used for their government when they ran Afghanistan, and they raised their white flag with black writing.

Both gestures, along with their description of the office’s mandate of speaking to foreign governments, suggested that the Taliban were trying to present themselves as an alternative to the Afghan government.

It is possible that these symbolic moves came about through an ascendance of a more moderate wing within the Afghan Taliban. Significant support for such a view comes from a remarkable interview TOLONews correspondent Mujahid Kakar conducted with Mutasim Agha Jan, who was Finance Minister of Afghanistan when the Taliban ruled. The interview can be seen in the two-hour-plus video embedded below (with English subtitles) or the English translation can be read as a 31 page pdf file here.

There are a couple of caveats that should be kept in mind when reviewing Jan’s statements. First, the interview took place in Turkey, where Jan has resided since about 2011, when he was injured in an attack in Karachi after falling out with Taliban leaders in 2010, so the fact that he is not in either Qatar or Afghanistan suggests that he and the moderate faction for which he appears to speak still don’t feel safe in either of those locations. Second, I of course have no idea whether the translations in the video or transcript are accurate.

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youtube='http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snZrqk9S  
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With those caveats in mind, however, Jan makes a number of striking statements. Early in the interview, we get a description of the moderate and extremist groups within the Afghan Taliban:

Kakar:

Sometimes the media claims that there are both extremist and moderate groups amongst the Taliban, if this is true, then who are the leaders of these groups?

Mutasem Agha:

I shall say that for all Taliban there is a specific leader, and that is Mullah Mohammad Omar Mujahid. As you said, the Taliban can be divided into two different groups or ideas. One group, according to us, can be called moderate. They are the Taliban who, beside military efforts, believe in peaceful aspects as well. They believe that war has been imposed on us; we are fighting to defend ourselves. The second group is the Taliban who we call extremists. This group wants the war to continue in Afghanistan and their views don't match with those of the current government so they want to continue the war until they it is defeated. I can also define these groups in a simple way, which is that the moderate Taliban are the ones who act according to what the people want. First, they emerged by doing what the nation wanted in that the nation told them "we are fed up of the situation, life is horrible, and we can't pursue our lifestyle in a proper manner." So there were problems, and that is why they started their movement according to what people wanted. With the support of people they quickly became successful to a certain extent. The second group, which is extremists, wants to implement Islamic law in Afghanistan and they won't stop until they have fulfilled that quest. The moderate Taliban just wants the people to decide. This Taliban can be understood in this way.

Jan identifies himself as being a part of the moderate faction. After a brief venture into suggesting that perhaps the Mossad was behind 9/11, Jan makes a remarkable admission about the failure of the Taliban to hand bin Laden over to the US:

Kakar:

Okay. In your opinion, when America asked the Taliban to surrender Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban refused, was this the right decision?

Mutasem Agha:

Afghans, on the basis of their culture and tradition, have made many decisions throughout history and some of them have backfired and some have been beneficial. This was one of those decisions that backfired.

To me, the most encouraging part of Jan's statements addresses whom a new government in Afghanistan should represent:

Kakar:

During the Taliban's era there were some sides that you were fighting against. Those groups are currently more in control of Afghanistan, they have participated in the elections and they have put their arms down—what do you think about relations with them?

Mutasem Agha:

In Afghanistan, not only the Taliban is a hostile side. In Afghanistan, 35 years war has created many hostile sides and groups. It has created lots of hatred and conflicts, but we can see that most hostile sides have now joined together. They are sitting in one parliament, with one platform, on one dining table, and discuss one issue because the time requires this. Similarly, the Taliban

feels it is important for past hatred, conflict, enmities and discriminations to be forgotten for benefit of the people.

Kakar:

It is said that most Taliban are Pashtuns and it is said that they want a government where always Pashtuns have control. How much of this is true according to you?

Mutasem Agha:

This is not true because in the government of the Taliban there were representatives of every ethnicity. There were representatives of Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazara and Turkmen. You know that the Taliban's emergence started from the Pashtun areas and it started from the Kandahar province. So at first the members of the Taliban's council or important figures of the Taliban were Pashtuns. When the Taliban reached the central government of Kabul there was instability, war and unrest. The Taliban couldn't create a national government. The Taliban doesn't have a tribal, regional or ethnical ideology – the Taliban has an Islamic ideology. In an Islamic ideology we can include all the ethnicities and tribes and classes of Afghanistan.

It is my hope that this interview appearing concurrently with the removal of the provocative sign and flag from the Doha office represent the moderate faction within the Taliban gaining a stronger foothold. The views Jan presented in the interview could go a long way toward achieving a much more peaceful and stable country after the end of NATO actions and with a newly elected government in place.