

# DEALING OR NOT WITH THE TALIBAN

## **Ali Aslan, International TV Presenter and journalist**

Right, and I will come to you, of course, in just a moment but, Renaud, let me get back to the initial point of the Taliban. Everybody is wondering what is on their mind. Some people have even talked about Taliban 2.0. This is a new Taliban. They have perhaps themselves learned some of the lessons throughout their first reign. They are trying to re-innovate themselves, reinvent themselves to the outside world – even using social media these days. What do you make of it? Do you think the Taliban 2.0 is a PR stunt? Do you think they have changed? What can we expect from them?

## **Renaud Girard, Senior reporter and war correspondent at *Le Figaro***

death of American conservatism – of all this theory prioritizing perceptions of democracy in relation to peace. Realists like Kissinger believe that peace is the most important thing. And neoconservatives think what counts most is perceptions of democracy or justice. My own opinion is that this neoconservative theory is dead.

Now, we have to look to the future. Personally, as a Frenchman, I am in favor of reopening our embassy in Kabul as it is important to recognize and maintain relations with States – and not with regimes – as part of international relations. I am completely opposed to the American doctrine. As soon as there is a regime that the Americans do not like, they cut all diplomatic ties. As in Iran, for example. It's highly abnormal that America has no direct relations with Iran. They have their disagreements. Fine.

I think we should reopen our embassy and try to work with the Taliban, who will be around for a long time – as is the case for the Communist Party in China. We do not agree with the Chinese regime, but we have to remain on speaking terms and maintain an embassy there. The Taliban are here for the long haul. The Americans handed the country back to them on a silver platter while they could very easily have retained a military presence in Bagram and forced them into a national unity government. They didn't do that. They made a choice – a major strategic mistake by Joe Biden that will go down in history as a shameful decision. But that is his problem.

Today, I think we have to speak with the Taliban. This is a policy that we did not employ in the time of Mullah Omar – and which we ought to have employed, because we could have worked with Mullah Omar. You will recall that the United Nations asked him to stamp out poppies – heroin – in Afghanistan. Mullah Omar did this, as observed by a UNODC mission in 2000. He got rid of 95% of Afghanistan's poppies. In exchange, he asked that the other UN agencies

helped the Afghan farmers – i.e. the FAO and the other organizations that deal with agriculture. But for bureaucratic reasons, the United Nations did not give him this.

I think that even the Americans made a mistake after 9/11. They outsourced negotiations with the Taliban to the Pakistani secret service. This was a serious mistake, because they had no idea what the Pakistanis were going to say to the Taliban. They should have shown some humility and gone to the Taliban themselves – because when you are very powerful, you have to be humble; and the Americans were very powerful in 2001 – and say: “Here is what happened in our city of New York. We have a problem. Tell us, Mr. Taliban, what would you do if the shoe was on the other foot?” Direct diplomacy was what the situation required.

Today, they are there. We have to talk to them. We cannot isolate this country. We have to keep providing humanitarian aid. What we must not do, in fact, is punish the Afghan people twice. The Americans punished them once by breaking their promise, as they had clearly promised the Afghans democracy, women’s liberation, etc. So they have already been betrayed. We must not punish them a second time by isolating this country, by stopping humanitarian aid, and by ceasing trade. We have to work with the Taliban as well as we can. It will not be easy. But it is not easy to work with the Chinese communists, either. We have to work with them and not punish the Afghan people a second time for ideological reasons.

In fact, the Americans’ huge mistake in this war was to have made ideology central to international relations. This was the death of international relations as Kissinger conceived them. And, unlike Cheney, Rumsfeld and Bush, it was Kissinger who had it right.

### **Ali Aslan**

Let me just follow up, because you made a very unambiguous, passionate plea for the West to recognize the realities on the ground and deal with the Taliban. You said France should reopen its embassy there. There are differences, of course, in opinion, as always within the European Union. All countries have their own motivation and some have their different approaches. Do you think we should have a common European approach as to how to deal with the Taliban moving forward? Because it is not going to do any good if 27 EU member states are having different sorts of relationships with Afghanistan and the Taliban. Are you pleading for a unified EU response and approach; and how realistic is that?

### **Renaud Girard**

It is always useful for the European Union to have a united response, as is the case for economic issues, standards and international aid. And the European Union has given a lot of aid to Afghanistan. But I think that a common foreign policy by the European Union is a pipedream. It is not so long ago that Europe’s nations were split on the neoconservative question of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the purpose of which, according to George Bush, was to build democracy throughout the Middle East. On one side, you have the French and the Germans...

### **Ali Aslan**

Let us focus on the European front.

**Renaud Girard**

There you are. It is a very long-term, eschatological wish: joint European foreign policy and joint European security and defense policy. I think we have to make ad hoc alliances with the countries that have both the means and the desire to do something in Afghanistan, as not all European countries have the resources to sustain a presence in Afghanistan. We, the French, have a high school in Kabul where the former King Mohammed Zahir Shah and Commander Massoud both studied. I think we should reopen this high school. We have a major archaeological delegation in the country. We should reopen it and continue our archaeological work.

You have highlighted the fact that the Taliban have several dispositions. There is a tough streak, and another that is more open. But if we want to empower the more moderate factions, we will not do this by isolating them or refusing to reopen our embassy. We need to have relations with the countries. And the fact of having diplomatic relations with a country in no way signifies approval of its political regime.

**Ali Aslan**

Marc, I will give an opportunity to respond right away and then I have a question for you. Go ahead.

**Marc Hecker, Director of research and communications at Ifri, Editor-in-Chief of *Politique étrangère***

I just want to follow up on that. I agree that we should talk to the Taliban, but there is a difference between talking and an official recognition. That is the first point.

The second point is that the Taliban have to walk the talk. They have now to demonstrate that what they say is effective. So, let us follow up on your example, the reopening of the French high school. Let us say we do that. Then we have to stand firm with our principles: "Okay, we will do it but we want girls to attend this high school". Then what happens if the Taliban forbid it? We will probably shut down the school again and be back to square one.

So, it is not an easy task. Once you decide to withdraw your troops, you lack leverage, you lack tools to put pressure on the actors in the country. I think that the leverage we now have on the Taliban is quite limited. It would be very cynical to say, "Okay, our tool to put pressure on you is the financial aid that we provide and if you do not abide by our rules, then we will cut the financial aid". That would be detrimental above all to the Afghan population and we already know that we are on the verge of a humanitarian crisis.

**Ali Aslan**

Jim, I know you want to jump in, but let me bring in Tatiana. I am going to come to you in just a second. The question is still how to deal with the Taliban moving forward, Tatiana. What is the view from Moscow? What are the approaches, the tactics?

**Tatiana Kastouéva-Jean, Head of Russia-NIS Center of Ifri**

On the question of international recognition for the Taliban, Sergei Lavrov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, has stated until now that, “This is not on the agenda”. This somewhat unique play will be toughly negotiated by the Russians, in particular to obtain an inclusive government in Afghanistan or, in Sergei Lavrov’s words, to make them act “in a more civilized fashion”. It is a play that we can only make once, and it is extremely important. Other means of negotiating with the Taliban could involve Russian lobbying for the lifting or weakening of sanctions, as Russia believes sanctions can contribute to the radicalization of a regime that would be in financial and economic disarray.

In fact, this recognition, if it ever happened, is extremely important for Russian policy, as until now it has always been said that Russians prefer secular, even authoritarian, even highly authoritarian regimes to moderate Islamic religious regimes. So this will be a change, a significant rupture, that could give Russia a little more room for maneuver in the Islamic world.

Russia does lots of things in different areas. On one hand, it shares intelligence with the countries of Central Asia, in particular on Afghanistan’s different ethnic groups and the various terrorist movements. It also shares intelligence with the Taliban – Russia officially recognized it in 2017 – in particular on the ISIS-K groups, the Islamic State in Khorasan and the groups operating in Afghanistan, as both sides believe this is a main threat for Russia and the Central Asian countries, some of which are linked to Russia via the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). So this is a kind of “lesser” NATO. And while not quite being Article 5 of the North Atlantic treaty, Russia could theoretically find itself drawn into the conflict. It is an extremely significant point.

Russia also undertakes extensive diplomatic measures. I mentioned recognition and a possible lifting or weakening of sanctions. There is also a military focus. Russia has two military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It contributes to strengthening border controls. Russia is extremely afraid of the migrants and refugees that can flock to these countries. It conducts bilateral military exercises under the umbrella of the CSTO in August and September to strengthen its Central Asian allies’ defensive capacities.

**Ali Aslan**

Thank you so much. Thank you for pointing it out because we have been talking about France, NATO, America, and of course India, but Central Asia is very much involved there as well. M. K. Narayanan, the question that we are posing to this panel – and to you in particular – is how is the international community to deal with the Taliban moving forward, recognizing the realities on the ground, as Renaud was pleading? What is your take?

**Mayankote Kelath Narayanan, Executive Chairman of CyQureX Systems Pvt. Ltd., former Senior Advisor and National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister of India**

Who knows the reality on the ground? I think that it is the first question that we need to address. You have the Taliban and, as somebody said, they are the Taliban 2.0. How can you talk about Taliban 2.0 when the interim government has a whole lot of internationally identified terrorists in their ranks? As it was said a few minutes ago, they have shown no indication that

they have shifted outcome. The government is interim, so we do not quite know who is in power.

I think the European Union will look into this problem or somebody else will look into the problem, which to me is very premature. We need to be clear on what is going to happen before we take the next step, otherwise we will do exactly like what happened with the Bonn Accord and other issues way back at the beginning of 2000.

The first and foremost idea is to get a clearer picture and I do not think there is any clear picture. The Taliban itself is not united and you have Pakistan, which is the creator of the Taliban. The ISI created the Taliban. It is common knowledge, it is not a great intelligence coup to talk about it. Today, there is the Taliban that is divided between the Quetta Shura and the Miran Shah Shura.

In Afghanistan, you have the Taliban who use guns and weaponry to get rid of the US or the NATO and US troops and they have taken control. We do not know what is to be done. I think it is premature for us to talk in terms of whether the Russians or the Europeans or the so-and-so will play a role. I think you need a far better understanding of what we need to do, and I do not think we need to rush into the situation as if it is a problem that is going to be sorted out within the next 48 hours or the next four weeks, etc. We need a much clearer understanding of it, and I do not think anyone now is willing to isolate Pakistan from the situation. I do not think it is possible to do that just now because, as long as Pakistan exists, the ISI will play a role in dealing with the Taliban.

Therefore, at the moment, the United States has said that they will not deal with Pakistan for various reasons of the past and present. I do not know how they will deal with the Taliban if they keep Pakistan out of the reckoning. I would love it to happen, but I do not know how practical it can be. You need to stand between a theoretical approach or a theoretical construction of what we should do and what we need to do on the ground.

I do not think that tomorrow morning, we are going to open schools or open Embassies and children are going to schools and colleges, etc. There is no way, it is not on the horizon, it is nowhere on the scene. I would say that there is certainly a major role for South Asia and West Asia to play this time.

The United Arab Emirates took a step forward by giving Ashraf Ghani a home to stay in, because had he been there, he would already be history. I think there is an understanding. It is a remarkable step that did not require great intelligence analysis, which is the prerogative of many other countries. They made a decision on it. We need to have people who understand the situation and I think that South Asia and West Asia will have a major role to play in any construction this time. I hear about the European Union and others but I do not think they have a role to play.

However, I think there is a more important point to make. I think this is an opportunity for a global consultation. I remember we had a consultation of Europe many years ago. So, when the initial steps are taken by West and South Asia, then we can move towards a global consultation. Let us see what they can do and not rush into anything because this problem is going to remain.

If Afghanistan implodes even more than it does today, then that is a tragedy for all of us in South Asia. It is easy for the rest of the world to look at it, but this is something that we live. We do not want – one and two are over, now we do not want a three to take place. That is the point that I wish to emphasize.

### **Ali Aslan**

Thank you so much. It's an important point. Mr. Al Zaabi, I know you wanted to jump in here because M. K. Narayanan says who knows what the reality on the ground is? Let us let the dust settle first before we make a decision; and, if a decision is made, this certainly can no longer be as it was in the past, the decision-making process that took place in the West. It has to be a much more comprehensive approach.

### **Salem Mohammed Al Zaabi, Director of the Department of International Security Cooperation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, United Arab Emirates**

I think all that has been said is right. Someone mentioned sanctions; we have tried sanctions. We have tried to cut diplomatic ties, we have tried military operations and, unfortunately, none of these really had some type of success.

We have also tried to engage with the government for the last two decades. Not the government of Afghanistan, I cannot really consider it as such, it was the government of Kabul, the government of the capital of Afghanistan. They do not have that authority, really, to extend it to all of Afghanistan.

I think we now have to find a way and it is what we call engagement, but it has to be a comprehensive engagement with parallel approaches, political and financial, as well as preventive measures. I will just give you an example. We are talking about terrorism and extremism and now we really have a lot of fears and concerns that Afghanistan is becoming a safe haven for terrorists from different areas.

However, do we have a preventive policy? We use a preventive strategy in Afghanistan. The United Arab Emirates really educates nearly 2,000 religious clerks on moderate Islam. That program was extended for nearly 10 years, with the support of the Kabul government at that time. We realized that it has a lot of benefits for the new generations. We are talking about the new generation so we are looking ahead. Yes, as I mentioned before, Afghanistan has not been excellent history in the last three decades, but it is our responsibility – and also the Taliban's and the Afghans' – to rebuild it.

### **Ali Aslan**

Let me jump in. Renaud Girard, for instance, makes a very clear point that we, the West, the world should establish diplomatic relationships with the Taliban. Marc Hecker says, 'Not so fast, let us see the realities on the ground, if they are walking the talk, if rights are being protected, if the progress that has been made over the past two decades is not being destroyed within a few weeks'. What is your take?



**Salem Mohammed Al Zaabi**

I think we should engage with the Taliban, or the government, and also with the people. So, it is not a matter of limiting our engagement to the government. Afghanistan has had enough, so we need to support the Afghan people.