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A \$1bn sweetener for the Taliban

By Abubakar Siddique
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Senior Afghan officials have unveiled a plan to reconcile with up to 35,000 Taliban insurgents by offering jobs and vocational training, in the hope that the scheme will gain traction in the lead-up to a major international conference on Afghanistan in London later this month.

Elements of the plan, which could cost more than US\$1 billion to see through, were discussed during a one-day summit in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates on January 12.

Richard Holbrooke, the United States' special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, attended the event along with those two states' foreign ministers. But perhaps most welcome was the presence of foreign ministers from Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and the participation of high-level representatives of several major Arab nations.

These states are considered by many observers to have the best chance of exerting influence over key Taliban leaders and networks due to religious affiliations. And experts suggest that, like al-Qaeda, the Taliban raises considerable funds through private donors from Arab states.

Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai, a key adviser to Afghan President Hamid Karzai and the architect of the Taliban reconciliation plan, tells RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan that the Abu Dhabi conference discussed "ways to include insurgents into a peace process, and to reintegrate them into society".

Based on what he saw and heard in Abu Dhabi, Stanekzai appears optimistic that Afghanistan

can gain international backing for the plan. But he also notes that certain circumstances have to be addressed for such a plan to deliver.

"War is not a solution. The solution for Afghans would be to mutually agree to live peacefully with each other," he says. "We also have to remove circumstances that result in Afghans fighting Afghans - sometimes from outside the country. This requires a broad range of measures and cannot be achieved by creating employment for some [insurgents] alone."

Caretaker Afghan Foreign Minister Rangin Dadfar Spanta tells RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan that reconciling with Taliban members who denounce violence and are willing to abide by the Afghan Constitution tops Karzai's political agenda for the remainder of his five-year term.

"The international community wanted to understand Afghanistan's perspective" regarding the reconciliation process, Spanta says of the session in Abu Dhabi where he pitched the plan to the international community. "I explained to them our perspective and our current plans regarding this process. And I requested the support of the international community in implementing this strategy under Afghan leadership and supervision."

Strong incentives?

The Afghan government's past attempts to negotiate with the Taliban, in an effort to lure more moderate elements to drop their guns, ran into difficulties because they offered little protection or financial incentives.

Critics of the current plan, too, question whether Taliban fighters will want to switch sides when they believe they are on the cusp of victory. But proponents believe the jobs, vocational training, and other incentives that would be offered will make the latest plan more enticing.

The West, while wary of dealing with hardline Taliban allied to al-Qaeda, is keen on replicating the success found in buying off Sunni insurgents in Iraq.

The Karzai administration, meanwhile, is aware that previous plans failed to achieve broad backing from within the various factions that dominate large swathes of the political spectrum.

Previous attempts by Kabul failed to convince major Taliban field commanders to defect. And its past attempts to negotiate with the reclusive Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar eventually broke down after much hype.

Spanta says that Kabul has won the crucial support of the Pakistani civilian government for its plan, but needs the support of the country's powerful military. Over the past eight years, Afghan and Western leaders have repeatedly pointed to Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan as a source of insurgency in Afghanistan.

Spanta sees a silver lining in the Arab participation in the Abu Dhabi summit and hopes it contributes to concrete international backing for Taliban reconciliation efforts.

But Abdul Hakim Mujahid, who formerly served as a Taliban representative to the United Nations, says robust diplomatic efforts still are needed for such a plan to succeed.

In an interview with RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan, he praises Kabul's recent efforts to remove some moderate Taliban leaders from the UN sanctions list, but called for a "transparent" policy for dealing with the group.

"The Afghan government first needs to take into confidence foreign forces as they brace for negotiations with the Taliban or other opponents," he says. "The Afghan government, the foreigners, the US government in particular, should work on a transparent policy that has clear goals and strategy. I believe that if the Afghan government and its foreign backers can coordinate on this, we will see progress."

Mujahid, who claims to be no longer associated with the Taliban, argues that the Afghan government needs to first formally recognize the Taliban movement and allow it to operate peacefully within the political arena.

He called on the Afghan government to free Taliban prisoners from Bagram prison and those detained at the United States' facility at Guantanamo, and to remove their names from UN sanctions lists. "This will create an atmosphere of trust," he said.