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Chatting with the Taliban

By PETER WORTHINGTON, TORONTO SUN

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What is a "moderate" Taliban leader?

Is there even such a thing?

The NDP's Jack Layton has long believed in Taliban moderation and has urged negotiations to end our military involvement in Afghanistan. "Taliban Jack," indeed.

Now the PM, Stephen Harper, no longer thinks it "despicable" to negotiate with Taliban terrorists, and we should consider holding talks with "moderate elements of the Taliban."

President Barack Obama also favours dealing with "moderate Taliban leaders," while dispatching 17,000 troops to join the 55,000 already there, as well as 30,000 allied soldiers, including 2,500 Canadians.

So who, and where, are these "moderate" Taliban leaders? A case can be made that there is no "moderation" in the present Taliban leadership that revolves around Mullah Omar, whose regime the Americans and Northern Alliance deposed.

There may be Taliban "moderates" among the rank and file, but unlikely among the leaders. Taliban leaders may negotiate -- but only to get what the Taliban want, not what we want, or the Afghan people need.

Consider: "Taliban" translates as "students," and was created by Omar to combat corruption and the tyranny of warlords endless fighting. Fighters (mostly Pashtun) came from Islamic religious schools, and were initially popular. From 1996 to 2001, the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, but only three states accorded diplomatic recognition: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Mullah Omar is basically an ignorant man who imposed an extreme interpretation of Sharia law on Afghanistan -- which he seeks to impose again.

Here is what "moderate" Taliban leaders advocate: No political parties, no salaries to officials or soldiers, just food, clothing, shoes and weapons. The goal is to recreate life as the Prophet lived it 1,400 years ago.

Women are denied education, jobs, sports participation, nail polish, taxis, access to doctors, beaten if not in a burka, stoned to death if convicted of adultery.

CHAOTIC GOVERNMENT

Taliban society is a male society with no education in science, history or mathematics and no skills in farming or handicrafts. TV, movies, music, dancing, pictures in homes are banned, as is clapping during sporting events, kite flying, photography, statues, and keeping of pigeons. Men must wear untrimmed beards.

Beatings and executions occurred on Fridays at Kabul's football stadium. The Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Suppression of Vice uses religious police to investigate and punish.

Sledge hammers were used to destroy museum artifacts, and despite Saudi Arabia's protest, the 53-metre Buddha statues at Bamyan (554 A.D.) were destroyed.

When in power the Taliban government was chaotic -- no press releases, no press conferences, no budget, just military or religious leaders in charge with no elections. This, then, is the legacy of Taliban "moderation."

Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a Somali woman who fled to Holland to escape an arranged marriage, and was later elected to the Dutch Parliament. She faced death threats for participating in a documentary about Islamic repression of women. Filmmaker Theo van Gogh was assassinated.

In her best-selling memoir, *Infidel*, she documents her disillusion with Islam. She chuckles at the idea of a "moderate" Taliban leader.

"They might pretend to be moderate, but only to deceive their enemies," she says. "They know us better than we know them, and they know we believe what we want to believe, and indulge in wishful thinking."

The likes of Harper and Obama so want the Afghan mission to end that they and our allies persuade themselves that "moderation" is a Taliban trait. It is a mistake of grievous consequences.

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