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OMAR TO CONSIDER NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE NORTH. END SUMMARY.

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TALIBAN DEPUTY LEADER RABBANI (RE)EMERGES

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2. (C) IN THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS, TALIBAN DEPUTY LEADER MULLAH
MOHAMMAD RABBANI HAS RAISED HIS PUBLIC PROFILE AS THE TALIBAN'S
LEADING INTERLOCUTOR WITH THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY BY ENGAGING
IN DISCUSSIONS WITH PAKISTAN (THE TALIBAN'S CLOSEST ALLY), SAUDI

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ARABIA, AND THE UN. IN SOME WAYS THIS IS NOT SURPRISING: SINCE
THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE TALIBAN MOVEMENT IN LATE 1994, MULLAH
RABBANI HAS BEEN WIDELY ACKNOWLEDGED TO BE THE HIGHEST-RANKING
TALIBAN OFFICIAL AFTER MULLAH OMAR, THE TALIBAN LEADER. INDEED,
RABBANI'S OFFICIAL TITLES, "PRESIDENT OF THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF
AFGHANISTAN" AND HEAD OF THE TALIBAN'S "SUPREME RULING COUNCIL" (IN
KABUL), INDICATE HIS HIGH RANK. HIGH-LEVEL REPRESENTATIONAL ROLES
ARE ALSO NOT NEW FOR RABBANI, WHO REPRESENTED THE TALIBAN AT THE
OIC "SPECIAL SUMMIT" IN ISLAMABAD IN MARCH 1997, AN EVENT WHICH
EXPOSED HIM TO OVER 20 LEADERS OF ISLAMIC-MAJORITY COUNTRIES.
(NOTE: FOR ADDITIONAL BIO-DATA ON RABBANI AND OMAR, SEE REF B, AND
FOR A REVIEW OF THE TALIBAN DECISION-MAKING PROCESS AND LEADERSHIP
STRUCTURE, SEE REF A.)

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RUMORS OF FALLS FROM GRACE
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3. (C) NONETHELESS, THE EMERGENCE OF MULLAH RABBANI AS A KEY
FIGURE FOR THE TALIBAN ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE HAS BEEN AN EVENT
TO TAKE NOTE OF, ESPECIALLY SINCE THERE HAVE BEEN REPEATED RUMORS
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SINCE SEPTEMBER 1996, WHEN THE TALIBAN CAPTURED KABUL, THAT RABBANI
AND HIS NET OF SUPPORTERS HAVE BEEN "PURGED" FROM THE TALIBAN. FOR
EXAMPLE, MOST RECENTLY IN FEBRUARY, WERE TELLING U.S. DIPLOMATS THAT THEY
HAD HEARD THAT "RABBANI HAD BEEN FORCED INTO EXILE BY MULLAH OMAR." SIMILAR RUMORS WERE HEARD IN THE FALL AND SUMMER OF 1997, AND IN
OCTOBER 1996. TALIBAN OFFICIALS HAVE FREELY DISCUSSED THE RUMORS
OF A FALL FROM GRACE. FOR EXAMPLE, TALIBAN "DEPUTY FOREIGN
MINISTER" MULLAH JALIL, WHO IS CLOSE TO MULLAH OMAR, TOLD POLOFF IN
MAY 1997 THAT MULLAH RABBANI HAS "MENTAL PROBLEMS" AND "CANNOT TAKE
THE PRESSURE OF SENIOR POSITIONS SINCE HE CONSTANTLY NEEDS MEDICAL
ATTENTION IN SAUDI ARABIA." ASSERTIONS OF THIS TYPE BY JALIL AND
OTHER TALIBAN OFFICIALS WERE GIVEN SOME CREDENCE BY RABBANI'S
CONTINUED VISITS TO SAUDI ARABIA WHERE HE STAYED FOR LONG PERIODS
ON LARGE UNKNOWN BUSINESS IN LATE 1996, 1997, AND AGAIN THIS
YEAR.

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REPORTED FACE-OFF WITH MULLAH OMAR
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4. (C) WITH MULLAH RABBANI APPARENTLY IN THE ASCENT FOR NOW (HE WAS THE TALIBAN'S MAJOR INTERLOCUTOR WITH PAK PM NAWAZ SHARIF, UN SPECIAL ENVOY LAKHDAR BRAHIMI, AND UNICEF CHIEF CAROL BELLAMY IN
DEPT FOR SA/PAB, INR, AND EUR/CACEN; PARIS FOR POL/RAVELING; LONDON FOR POL/TUELLER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 4/7/08
TAGS: PGOV, KISR, PINR, AF
SUBJECT: AFGHANISTAN: THE TALIBAN’S MULLAH RABBANI: CONTENDER FOR TALIBAN LEADERSHIP?

THE PAST TWO WEEKS), OBSERVERS ARE SPECULATING ON RUMORS OF A WORSENING SPLIT IN THE TALIBAN RANKS BETWEEN RABBANI AND MULLAH OMAR. ACCORDING TO

WHO FREQUENTLY MEETS WITH THE TALIBAN, RABBANI HAS A "CLIQUE" OF TALIBAN OFFICIALS WHO STRONGLY SUPPORT HIM AGAINST OMAR. THESE OFFICIALS INCLUDE:

-- MULLAH HASSAN AKHUND, THE "ACTING FOREIGN MINISTER."
-- MULLAH GAUS, MEMBER OF THE "INNER SHURA" AND FORMER "ACTING FOREIGN MINISTER."
-- MULLAH YAR MOHAMMAD, THE TALIBAN "GOVERNOR" OF GHAZNI PROVINCE.
-- MAULAWI JALALUDDIN HAQQANI, A MAJOR TALIBAN COMMANDER NORTH OF KABUL.
-- MAULAWI NURUDDIN TURABI, THE "ACTING MINISTER OF JUSTICE."

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5. (C) WENT ON TO ASSERT THAT RABBANI'S GROUP IS CONFIDENTIAL

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INVOLVED IN A FACE-OFF WITH THOSE OFFICIALS WHO ARE KNOWN TO BE CLOSE TO MULLAH OMAR, WHO, HE SAID, INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

-- MAULAWI WAKIL AHMED, THE TALIBAN MOVEMENT SPOKESMAN.
-- MULLAH HASSAN RAHMANI, THE TALIBAN "GOVERNOR" OF KANDAHAR.
-- MULLAH JALIL, TALIBAN "DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER."
-- MULLAH KHAIROULLAH KHAIRKHWAH, THE "ACTING MINISTER OF INTERIOR."
-- MULLAH ALLAHADAD, AN IMPORTANT TALIBAN MILITARY COMMANDER BASED IN KANDAHAR.

ACCORDING TO JOSTLING BETWEEN THESE CLIQUES HAS IN THE PAST HALF-YEAR LED TO THE "PURGES" BY MULLAH OMAR OF MULLAH GAUSAU AND MULLAH HASSAN FOR THEIR ASSOCIATION WITH RABBANI. (NOTE: IT IS TRUE THAT GAUSAU AND HASSAN APPEAR TO BE LESS POWERFUL THAN BEFORE. HOWEVER, SOME OBSERVERS SPECULATE THAT GAUSAU IS ON THE OUTS WITH MULLAH OMAR NOT BECAUSE OF HIS ASSOCIATION WITH RABBANI, BUT BECAUSE HE FAILED TO SUBDUE, THROUGH FORCE OR BY NEGOTIATION, TALIBAN OPPOSITIONS IN MAZAR-I-SHARIF IN MAY 1997.)

ISSUES THAT MAY DIVIDE NOT CLEAR

6. (C) WHEN POLOFF HAS PRESSED AND OTHER OBSERVERS WHO AGREE WITH HIS THESIS OF RABBANI/OMAR TENSIONS -- ABOUT THE ISSUES THAT MAY DIVIDE THE TWO TALIBAN LEADERS, THE ANSWERS ARE USUALLY LESS THAN CLEAR. TOLD POLOFF THAT HE THOUGHT THAT RABBANI WAS MORE WILLING TO CONSIDER PEACE TALKS WITH THE NORTHERN ANTI-TALIBAN FACTIONS. AS PROOF OF THIS, IN AN APRIL 7 CONVERSATION, POINTED TO THE MORE CONCILIATORY APPROACH RABBANI TOOK IN HIS RECENT MEETING WITH BRAHIMI, COMPARED TO THE

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MORE HARD-LINE APPROACH BRAHIMI EXPERIENCED IN AN EARLIER MEETING WITH WAKIL AHMED, MULLAH OMAR'S KEY ASSISTANT. ALONG THESE LINES, TOLD POLOFF THAT RABBANI SUPPORTS OMAR'S GOAL OF AN "ISLAMIC AFGHANISTAN" RULING ACCORDING TO THE TALIBAN PRECEPTS, BUT RABBANI IS WILLING TO USE NEGOTIATION TO ATTAIN THAT GOAL, AS OPPOSED TO OMAR'S "FIXATION ON A MILITARY SOLUTION."

7. (C) HOWEVER, OTHER OBSERVERS DO NOT SEE MUCH DIFFERENCE BETWEEN RABBANI AND OMAR ON POLICY. AND LONGTIME EMBASSY CONTACT, TOLD POLOFF APRIL 7 THAT HE BELIEVES THAT RABBANI WHOLEHEARTEDLY SUPPORTS OMAR'S POLICIES ON GENDER ISSUES AND ON PROVIDING "SAFE-HAVEN" TO SAUDI TERRORIST FINANCIER USAMA BIN LADIN. ON NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE NORTH, SAID RABBANI MAY BE MARGINALLY MORE WILLING TO WORK WITH THE UN AND NEGOTIATE WITH THE NORTHERN COALITION, BUT THE DIFFERENCE IS MORE OF STYLE THAN REAL SUBSTANCE -- "LIKE MANY AFGHANS, RABBANI TRIES TO BE POLITE TO PEOPLE HE IS MEETING WITH. MULLAH OMAR AND WAKIL AHMED ARE WILLING TO BE MORE GRUFF AND TO-THE-POINT. HOWEVER, THE MESSAGE ALL THREE GIVE IS BASICALLY THE SAME." ADDED THAT HE AGREES THAT OMAR AND RABBANI ARE INVOLVED IN A POWER-STRUGGLE, BUT HE UNDERLINED THAT THE "ISSUE IS POWER, NOT IDEAS."

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AMCONSUL KARACHI
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
USCINCENT MACDILL AFB FL/CCJ2/CCJ3/CCJ5/POLAD/
AMEMBASSY DHAKA

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DEPT FOR SA/PAB, INR, AND EUR/CACEN; PARIS FOR POL/RAVELING; LONDON FOR POL/TUELLER

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8. (C) ALL OF THE OBSERVERS THAT POLOFF HAS SPOKEN TO ON THIS SUBJECT HAVE EXPRESSED DOUBTS THAT THE PERCEIVED TENSIONS BETWEEN RABBANI AND OMAR WILL LEAD TO AN OPEN SPLIT, AT LEAST IN THE NEAR-TERM. FOR EXAMPLE, IN AN APRIL 4 CONVERSATION WITH POLOFF, [_____] COMMENTED THAT THE TALIBAN ARE "LIKE BOLSHEVIKS, WHO ARE FOCUSED ON PARTY UNITY." EXPANDING ON THIS POINT, [_____] SAID HE STRONGLY DOUBTED THAT MEMBERS OF THE TALIBAN LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE WOULD TURN ON EACH OTHER -- "ALL OF THE TALIBAN, INCLUDING RABBANI AND OMAR, HAVE KNOWN ONE ANOTHER FOR YEARS. THEY HAVE Fought TOGETHER AND PRAYED TOGETHER. OVERALL, THE THINGS THAT UNITE THEM ARE MUCH STRONGER THAN THE THINGS THAT DIVIDE THEM AND THEY KNOW THAT FACTIONALIZATION COULD END THE MOVEMENT."

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9. (C) IN THE LONGER TERM, THERE IS A FEELING THAT EVENTS PERHAPS COULD LEAD TO AN OPEN OMAR/RABBANI SPLIT. UNDER THIS SCENARIO, A SERIES OF TALIBAN DEFEATS ON THE BATTLEFIELD COULD FORCE RABBANI'S HAND, AND GIVE HIM THE MORAL LICENSE WITHIN THE MOVEMENT TO REPLACE OMAR. RABBANI COULD BE ASSISTED IN HIS COUP ATTEMPT BY [_____] WHICH, AFRAID FOR ITS INVESTMENT IN THE TALIBAN, MIGHT DECIDE TO TURN TO RABBANI TO SORT THINGS OUT. [_____] TOLD POLOFF IN JANUARY THAT HE THOUGHT RABBANI COULD UNDER THESE CIRCUMSTANCES BENEFIT FROM THE SUPPORT OF THE PASHTUN TRIBAL LEADERSHIP "SINCE RABBANI IS KNOWN TO BE A MORE TRIBAL MAN THAN OMAR."

COMMENT

10. (C) IN PREVIOUS MESSAGES, EMBASSY HAS NOTED THAT ANALYZING
RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE TALIBAN MOVEMENT -- WHICH IS COMPOSED PRIMARILY OF ISLAMIC CLERICS -- IS DIFFICULT: THE MOVEMENT IS OPAQUE AND IT IS NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE FOR A NON-TALIBAN TO FULLY COMPREHEND HOW THE TALIBAN RELATE TO ONE ANOTHER. ONE THING THAT CAN BE SAID AT THIS TIME IS THAT MULLAH RABBANI APPEARS TO HAVE REEMERGED TO A POSITION OF ENHANCED INFLUENCE IN THE MOVEMENT FOR THE TIME BEING. THIS COULD BE GOOD NEWS, IF -- AS SOME SPECULATE -- MULLAH RABBANI IS REALLY MORE WILLING TO CONTEMPLATE NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE NORTH. SIMULTANEOUSLY, AS HAS APPARENTLY HAPPENED IN THE PAST, IT IS A REAL POSSIBILITY THAT RABBANI WILL HAVE HIS WINGS CLIPPED BY MULLAH OMAR, WHO MAY RESENT RABBANI'S HIGHER PUBLIC PROFILE, PERHAPS SEEING THE CONTRAST TO HIS OWN (DECIDEDLY LOW-PROFILE) LEADERSHIP STYLE AS A CHALLENGE.

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