

Report

The outcomes of the 'Taliban/Paris Meeting on Afghanistan'



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As the United States prepares to withdraw combat troops from Afghanistan in 2014, the region is abuzz with developments over the country's future, particularly in the context of the Taliban's role. The latest headline from this swiftly-paced drama was a meeting from December 20-21, 2012 in Paris with representatives of the Afghan Taliban, Afghanistan's High Peace Council, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami, members of Afghanistan's parliament, civil society, political groups that were earlier part of the Northern Alliance and figures who have been associated with the government.ⁱ The meeting was organized by the Foundation for Strategic Research, a French think tank.ⁱⁱ

The meeting in France followed several similar encounters that were designed to attempt to pave the way to full-fledged negotiations in 2013. A 'Peace Process Roadmap to 2015', developed by the High Peace Council, provides a detailed plan for these talks and envisages a role for Pakistan, Afghanistan's neighbour with which it has had a long contentious relationship, in facilitating these, as well as the support of the United States and Saudi Arabia.ⁱⁱⁱ

Competing Frameworks

Talks with the Afghan Taliban took on a formal nature in January 2012, after the group established a diplomatic office in Qatar with the support of the United States. The Afghan government was initially unreceptive to the move -- even going so far as to withdraw their ambassador from the Gulf Peninsula for some time -- but they are beginning to warm to the official Taliban presence, albeit with preconditions.^{iv}

There are currently two kinds of 'talks' that have been made public: negotiations between the Taliban and US officials on a variety of issues, including the release of prisoners from Guantanamo and a US soldier in Taliban captivity; and talks between representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban.

It is what can be considered a third kind of meeting -- that between Afghan political figures not necessarily part of the government and Taliban representatives -- that has gained more momentum as of late. Prior to the Paris meeting in December, a member of the Taliban's political commission, Qari Din Mohammad, participated in an academic conference in Kyoto, Japan, and a subsequent meeting took place in Paris (although not attended by an official Taliban delegation) the same month.^v Given the format of these meetings, the Taliban representatives have not just presented their prepared statements, but have had to defend their policies and vision(s) for Afghanistan's future. Similarly, the participation of former education minister Qari Din Mohammad at the Kyoto conference in June was "to explain the policies of the Islamic Emirate," according to a spokesperson for the Afghan Taliban.^{vi} The Kyoto meeting was also attended by Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai, a senior member of the High Peace Council. Another meeting

is being brokered by the United Nations Mission in Afghanistan and is scheduled for early 2013 in Turkmenistan.vii

Paris Dialogue

At the Paris conference in December, the Taliban's representatives Mawlawi Shahabuddin Dilawar and Dr Muhammad Naeem reportedly highlighted their rejection of Afghanistan's current constitution and the 2014 elections because these were being implemented while Afghanistan was still 'under invasion'.viii The Taliban's opposition is not just limited to Afghan President Hamid Karzai but also to his government because of its support from the US. However, the Taliban have positions that they issue to the public at large as well as those that they save for more private meetings. In private, some Taliban senior members are even willing to concede an enduring international military presence inside the country.ix

As far as the peace process is concerned, the representatives also highlighted the roadblocks. In the speech delivered (later published on the group's website), the representatives said, "Even now, they state one thing and do another. On the one hand they say that peace must be achieved and on the other, they add new people to the black list; they say that they will leave Afghanistan but sign strategic pacts in false hopes of prolonging their occupation. They are doing this despite being well informed that the Kabul administration can never represent the Afghan people but still bargain with them on the future of the Afghan nation."x This highlights some structural issues with the conditions necessary for peace negotiations to go ahead. The representatives also reiterated Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar's commitment to an 'all inclusive Afghan government'.xi Given that representatives of political parties and factions were at the Paris meeting, these statements may hold stronger significance.

Outlook for 2014 and Beyond

Discussions such as those in Paris – though few and far in between with no concrete outcomes – appear to be laying the groundwork for direct negotiations and reintroducing the Taliban's political messages and agenda to the world.

In November 2012, the Afghanistan's High Peace Council roadmap for the peace process was leaked to the media. It includes "confidence building measures" to be taken in the first half of 2013 such as Pakistan facilitating direct contacts between the Taliban and the Afghan government, exploring and agreeing on terms for peace talks and "the US, UN and other international partners to support the delisting of identified Taliban and other armed opposition leaders from the UN 1998 Sanctions List."xii In the latter half of the year, the roadmap outlines a ceasefire. It also looks forward to understandings between the negotiating parties on the inclusion of Taliban and other armed opposition leaders in the power structure in Afghanistan, the elections in 2014, the release of Taliban prisoners (conditional on their agreement to

renounce violence) and on the transformation of militant groups to political movements.^{xiii} The High Peace Council's Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai has said that the "peace process should not just be a deal between a few people or between the government and the Taliban, but everybody should benefit from the peace process, and everybody should see a peaceful prospect for themselves for the future."^{xiv}

Several of the steps listed in the roadmap were conditions for the talks between the Taliban and the United States, which were officially suspended in March 2012. The US had asked for Afghan government officials to be part of the negotiations, as well as for the Taliban to accept the country's constitution, which it rejects, and breaking off all ties with Al Qaeda.^{xv} However, veteran Pakistani journalist Rahimullah Yusufzai, who has extensive contacts within the Taliban, noted that the US changed these from being conditions to objectives that they wanted to achieve through negotiations.^{xvi}

These – or any negotiations – are also contingent on support for them from the international community, which is a part of the roadmap. As the US and other countries with forces in Afghanistan prepare to pull out troops, there have been stronger efforts from countries to take negotiations forward. Germany, for example, not only worked to bring US and Taliban officials to initiate talks – which were ultimately suspended – but in July 2012, Afghan President Hamid Karzai asked the German government to mediate with the Taliban.^{xvii} French officials were present at the Paris meeting in December. The other country involved in the talks is Pakistan, which has begun to release high profile Taliban detainees on the request of the High Peace Council^{xviii}.

Roadblocks Ahead

One of the key questions that have emerged following the Paris meeting and those preceding it is whether a peace process is indeed viable under the current Karzai government. After years of decrying the Karzai government as "puppets" of the US, the Taliban would not be able to renege on this and enter into public negotiations with them. "The Taliban has been fighting against them for eight to ten years," Yusufzai said. "It can't really change policy on this." There is, however, a chance that there may be movement on this after the 2014 presidential elections.

The mantle then falls on the High Peace Council and governments of the region – mainly meaning Pakistan and Saudi Arabia but also Qatar – to serve as a negotiating front for the Afghan government. Given the controversial role of Pakistan in Afghanistan's affairs and its harbouring of the insurgency over the past two decades, this has not been met well within Afghanistan.^{xix} Yusufzai said that the High Peace Council had no concrete achievement to its name in the past two years, save for securing the release of Afghan Taliban officials from Pakistan, and that it was considered as a "joke" within Afghanistan. The roadmap, he said, was "ambitious" but did not appear achievable.

A second question is whether the Afghan Taliban is completely on board with the idea of peace negotiations? As far as negotiations with the US are concerned, Yusufzai said that the Taliban's support for these had more credence, because "Mullah Omar was personally involved in dictating these, and sent Tayyab Agha – who he is very close to – to Qatar to lead the delegation. So there is an understanding among Mullah Omar and the Taliban's shura on this."

Researchers who have closely covered the developments in Afghanistan point to differences of opinion within the Taliban, the changes within the movement over the years and influences from other countries where the Taliban's leadership has been based.

As researchers Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn note, "While there might be incentives to find a political solution, there are also factions within both the insurgency and the Afghan government that are opposed to a settlement, or a substantial inclusion of the insurgency into the current political paradigm." They also point to a bigger challenge – the capture-or-kill campaign in Afghanistan that is "removing credible negotiation partners among the Taliban."^{xx}

Anand Gopal, a fellow at the New America Foundation think tank, highlighted the divisions in the Taliban. "There are differences of opinion within the Taliban, which run the gamut from those who recognise a military victory is impossible and therefore see the urgent need to negotiate, to those who believe they can wait out the Americans and then perhaps reconstitute some version of the '90s Taliban rule. Down to the rank and file, my sense is that most are less open to the idea of negotiations, if only because who wants to be the last person to die for a negotiated settlement?"^{xxi}

The lack of a coherent strategy is more evident in the Afghan government's public stance. Its stance on the Paris meeting and the next event scheduled in Turkmenistan appears to be clouded by double-speak.^{xxii} Officials have repeatedly denied each others' statements on these talks and the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs has stated that "direct official negotiations between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban may take place outside the country through official processes, including the establishing of the Office of a Taliban Movement Office in Qatar."^{xxiii} For any meaningful peace process to go ahead, it needs a coherent policy from the Afghan government on what it will, and will not, support. The inconsistency in the statements from government officials send confusing signals to not just the people of Afghanistan, but to the Taliban – who may well exploit these – and international partners involved in the country and the peace process. Of course, political hedging has always been a tactic associated with President Hamid Karzai and it seems unlikely that it will completely cease.

There is, on the other hand, a push from the US to go ahead. After a meeting on January 11 between US President Barack Obama and Afghan President Hamid Karzai, President Obama said that the US backed the opening of a Taliban office to facilitate talks but that any reconciliation process must be Afghan-led.

President Obama said that, "It is not possible to reconcile without the Taliban renouncing terrorism, without them recognizing the Afghan constitution and recognizing that if there are changes that they want to make to how the Afghan government operates, then there is an orderly constitutional process to do that and that you can't resort to violence."xxiv

However, there are several challenges associated with the stalled US-Taliban talks, and an early resolution of these is essential. One of the most contentious preconditions – the exchange of prisoners by both sides – appears unlikely in the immediate future and may be even more complicated after the approval of the National Defence Authorization Act 2013, which enforces limits on prisoners who can be transferred out of Guantanamo. However, Yusufzai said that a step in this regard will be taken as a "confidence building measure" and will have an effect eventually in spurring negotiations with the Afghan government.

Some have proposed that a more intensive discussion process needs to take place among Afghans, even outside the track-two discussions that have now started to happen. This can be envisioned in different ways, possibly including a multi-location set of meetings in all provinces. The proposed agenda for these meetings: a full re-evaluation of the role of government at a provincial and national level, including suggestions for a discussion of the relevant terms of the constitution and a possible devolution of power to the provinces. Another component, which the High Peace Council has proposed, is for clerics from Afghanistan and Pakistan to meet and play a role in pushing the peace process forward. While this has met with resistance from the Taliban for now, initiatives like these could work during the course of the peace negotiations.xxv

Conclusion

While meetings such as that in Paris may be considered a positive step in bringing representatives of Afghanistan's political structure together, there is a long way to go for a substantial peace process to start. Broader structural issues are currently making it difficult for either the Taliban or the United States to move forward with serious confidence-building measures such as a ceasefire or with a prisoner exchange, yet it is only a move of significance like this that has the power to unlock the future political process. Many things can and will happen between now and January 1, 2015, when Afghanistan's post-transition future is scheduled to begin. The likelihood of a peace deal before that date between all parties seems slim to none, but without some sort of agreement the future looks bleak for Afghans not involved in the political process, caught as they are between forces over which they have no control.

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