

Report

Talks to Settle the Afghan Issue: Prospects and Obstacles

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After the bloodshed of the past 12 years, the parties in the Afghan conflict have concluded that a solution to the issue lies in dialogue and sitting at the negotiating table. These parties are now convinced that the use of force will not lead to a final solution to the issue. The developments within Afghanistan and the world in general as a result of the "war on terror" have confirmed this conviction. The parties began to issue successive statements emphasising the need for dialogue and understanding. In the belief that military action is not the answer, a number of practical steps toward dialogue and reconciliation have been mapped out.

The Importance of Finding a Solution

The conflict in Afghanistan has local dimensions that have harmed the people alongside global dimensions that are well known. History has shown that neglect of Afghanistan and its problems could eventually damage the entire region. The discontinuation of war there may lead to stability in the whole region, while the continuation of the war will be a scourge that affects many. Therefore, all parties are responsible for finding a solution to the problem and helping the people get out of the current crisis.

The Afghan government and its foreign allies began to consider dialogue with the opponents of the current regime early on and the National Committee for Reconciliation was formed in May 2005.⁽¹⁾ This committee was developed and named the "Commission for the Consolidation of Peace," headed by Sibghatullah Mojaddedi. According to the

Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP), the main goal of this programme, promised by the United Nations office in Afghanistan, was to determine a framework for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to help with security. The objective of APRP is dialogue with opponents of the Afghan government that were offered money to leave the opposition and join the government or just return to their daily lives.(2) However, the Taliban considered this another tactic to weaken their ranks rather than dialogue for the various parties to reach a settlement, and hence the conflict continued.

The Traditional National Council for Peace (a loya jirga) was held at the beginning of June 2010 in Kabul and was attended by about 1,600 people, including dignitaries and state officials. One of its decisions was to form the Afghan High Peace Council under the chairmanship of Burhanuddin Rabbani. This council was supposed to operate independently, but the government annexed it to the APRP,(3) which was and is still headed by Mohammed Masoom Stanekzai. Hence, the Afghan High Peace Council was doomed to fail from the beginning of its formation, because the Taliban, the largest faction in the armed opposition, saw it not as reconciliation but as 'war under the auspice of peace and an attempt to divide its ranks and deliver its members to the government.' The Taliban therefore sought to abort the council by any means possible. This led to acts of violence, including the bombing that killed Burhanuddin Rabbani, chairman of the Afghan High Peace Council, on 20 September 2011.

Dialogue in a Complex Situation

There is no doubt that the Afghan issue is a thorny and complicated one due to the opposing and contradictory positions of the internal parties involved. This includes the current government, peaceful opposition parties, the Taliban, the Hezb Islami led by Hekmatyar, and neighbouring countries like Iran and Pakistan who are also after their own interests. The two states have influence on Afghan authorities; each has its own mechanisms and ways to influence the course of reconciliation in Afghanistan. Their interests and different priorities further complicate the situation. Meanwhile, regional and global powers like Russia, China, India, America, European countries and Saudi Arabia have political, economic and security interests in the region that converge and oppose. In this complex atmosphere, it is difficult to hold a dialogue and achieve peace.

Alongside the complexities of the Afghan situation is the fact that dialogue and the end of conflict is not in the hands of only one or two parties. In fact, there are three main bodies concerned: the Taliban, the government, the opposition and the United States, which has control over the future of dialogue and reconciliation, especially after President Karzai's last trip to Doha.

The Position of the Taliban in the Talks

The Taliban believes it is capable of overcoming the influence of the United States and its allies through war and thus does not want to be the weakest partner in the next government. It wants to be an alternative to the current government, although it is not likely that it will be in the majority. The Taliban wants to engage in dialogue with the various parties to achieve the goals it thinks it is close to reaching through war. The movement has therefore laid down a number of conditions for dialogue and reconciliation.

The first aspect of the conflict is the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan. The movement believes in the need to settle accounts with foreign forces, especially the United States. This may take place through talks between the Taliban and the latter, where the focus would be on the withdrawal of troops and the mutual release of prisoners.

Second, the Taliban requires peace talks with the Afghan government and the settling of differences between the various Afghan parties, with a view to forming the next government.

Third, the movement requires that the talks be held through a formal office in which they have diplomatic representation. The Taliban rejects all of the talks between the government and its members to date, as it believes the purpose of these talks is to deliver its members to the government and rather than settle the Afghan issue.

Fourth, the Taliban believes that talks cannot be for the purpose of joining the current system of government but should be to form a new political system through the development of a new constitution for the country. It justifies its rejection of the current constitution in that it was written under American pressure.

Fifth, the Taliban rejects dialogue through the Afghan High Peace Council, which the government considers to be the sole authorised body to hold dialogue and peace talks. The Taliban stresses that reconciliation needs to be 'a sincere, neutral destination' and that 'those who seek peace commissioned by the United States...cannot restore peace to Afghanistan.'

Sixth, the Taliban requires that the peace talks are preceded an initiative from the United States and the Afghan government to prove their good intentions, such as the release of detainees, the discontinuation of executions, and other measures. (4)

The Position of the Afghan Government

The Afghan government is in a dilemma because the Taliban refuses to engage in any dialogue with it until foreign troops withdraw from the country. The government has also been excluded from the occasional secret talks between the United States and the Taliban in a number of European and Arab countries. The president, therefore, fears the marginalisation of the government's role in resolving the issue. As a result, he intensifies his tone on occasion against events that the United States does not oppose, such as the establishment of the Taliban's political office in Doha, but later backs down after voicing his views. The government has set a number of conditions for dialogue with the Taliban: First is the Taliban's approval of the current Afghan constitution, including approval of the basic freedoms guaranteed by law. Second is cutting ties with Al-Qaeda and all other terrorist entities. Third is the cessation of terrorist acts and violence against the defenceless Afghan people. Fourth is the recognition of the basic rights of all Afghans, including women.(5)

Analyses indicates that the government aims to develop these conditions for dialogue to push armed opposition parties into the political process and have them shift from armed action to political action and participate in the political processes and elections so as to 'preserve the gains of the past period,' as stated by the authorities. Although it seems that the conditions set by the government are merely symbolic to keep it from looking weak, it is ready for dialogue if the Taliban is willing and therefore in a position to complete the path of reconciliation. The most important features of the route of reconciliation are:

The first phase, which lasted until March 2012; this stage required Pakistan and other countries in the region to support the peace process in Afghanistan, release Taliban prisoners in Pakistan and transfer them to Afghanistan or a third country, encourage the Taliban to take advantage of the impact it would have if it cut ties with Al-Qaeda and provide a safe path for Taliban members to join the process of national reconciliation.

The second phase in the first half of 2013; the steps in this stage are to remove the names of Taliban leaders from blacklists, provide a safe path and respond to all requests of the Taliban leaders who seek to participate in the peace negotiations, for Pakistan to prepare favourable conditions for cooperation between known Taliban leaders, other armed groups, the High Council for Peace and the government; for both Afghanistan and Pakistan to create conditions for cooperation between the 'ulama of the two countries and prevent illegal fatwas, and for Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and the United States to create the conditions for direct talks between the Afghan government and armed opposition in Saudi Arabia.

The third phase will take place in the second half of 2013. The basic steps of this stage will be to create conditions for formal and direct talks between the Afghan government and Taliban representatives through channels organised for the purpose of reaching consensus on security, taking into consideration priorities such as the elimination of violence and the provision of social services, education, humanitarian assistance and security for the electoral process.

The fourth phase will take place in the first half of 2014. The basic steps in this stage are to get public support for the gains of the reconciliation process and the government, and for the Taliban and other armed groups to support these gains. The government will be responsible for providing security for Taliban leaders; the Pakistani and Afghan governments will not engage in any kind of intervention that could lead to instability in Afghanistan; the international community and especially the United States will support these steps.

In the fifth phase, states in the region and beyond will continue to cooperate to stabilise security in Afghanistan and the region as a whole. The success of this course requires Pakistan to play a key role in the reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban, although the government of Pakistan denies that it has this much influence.

The US Position on Dialogue with the Taliban

The United States has vital interests in Afghanistan. Washington has announced that it wants to withdraw some of its troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014 but reports indicate that it will retain a number of troops in permanent bases set up in the various regions of Afghanistan. It is in the United States' interest to keep some troops in Afghanistan, in order to maintain national security. It was for this reason that it sent troops to Afghanistan in 2001. The United States believes that Afghan forces will not be able to confront the armed opposition should their forces completely withdraw from Afghanistan. This would restore the conditions that existed before 2001 and constitute a direct threat to the United States' national security as well as its economic, military, security and strategic interests. Analysts agree the United States does not want to completely withdraw from Afghanistan, and this has been repeated by American politicians who have stated that they will not leave Afghanistan to become a "den of terrorism" as it was in the 1980s. But above all, the United States wants to engage in dialogue with Taliban representatives for two reasons:

1. To try and split the ranks of the Taliban. The United States believes that dialogue with the Taliban will lead to a difference of viewpoints between its various leaders and other militant groups, thus weakening the Taliban and causing some of them to join the government. There are indications that Mullah Mutassim Agha Jan, the former chairman of the Taliban political committee, has split from the organisation and is attempting to establish a political process to participate in the electoral process. Mullah Taib Agha was subsequently fired from his position in the political committee.
2. To exhaust the Taliban. The United States may want to engage in talks to weaken the movement and convince them to join the current government. Simultaneously, it seeks a security agreement with Karzai's government that would give it the opportunity to keep its troops in Afghanistan.

In brief, the United States will seek dialogue with the Taliban, but will not agree, for the abovementioned reasons, to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan completely. It is therefore apparent that a gap exists between the United States' objectives and what the Taliban seeks in the talks.

The Doha Office and the Future of Peace Talks

The Taliban opened a political office in Doha, Qatar and established diplomatic representation for it so that the movement can come out of its political seclusion. The Taliban wants to be a body that speaks in its own name in order to prevent the Afghan government or the United States from contacting or influencing its members. The Taliban received the green light to open its office in Doha in 2011 after secret talks that took place between the chairman of the Taliban's political committee, Mullah Taib Agha, and the Americans in Germany and a number of Arab countries. Several Taliban leaders moved to Doha with their families in December 2011, which Karzai saw as a complete rejection of his government. He summoned the Afghan ambassador from Doha and objected severely to the opening of the office. In reality, he was objecting to the insulting way that the United States had treated his government. Karzai subsequently retreated and announced in December 2012 that he agreed to the establishment of Taliban's office in Doha, but the Americans then retreated from their promises to the Taliban. The office has not yet opened officially, and Taliban leaders have not been released from Guantanamo Bay.

At the end of March 2013, Karzai travelled to Doha at the official invitation of the Emir of Qatar to discuss the opening of the Taliban's political office. Although Karzai expressed

his approval, the question that arises is the impact this office will have on talks between the Taliban, the Americans and the government in Kabul.

The establishment of the Taliban's political office is arguably necessary at this stage because the crisis Afghanistan faces requires dialogue. War can never be a solution and the Afghan issue is not excluded from this rule. If the Afghan people and the international community want to resolve the issue of Afghanistan, there must be dialogue between the different parties in the conflict. The Taliban is a force that must be allowed to participate in the talks but this cannot occur unless it has a political office and diplomatic representation. The different Afghan parties must also formally exchange views to restore confidence. This can only happen through the office, which will help them modify their ideas and promote moderation. This is the secret danger the Taliban anticipates in establishing its office.

The Future Results of the Dialogue

In light of the foregoing analysis of the positions of the influential parties in the Afghan issue, it can be argued that talks between the United States and the Taliban in their current format will not yield tangible results because of the stark contrast between their interests and the two parties' opposing purposes in the peace talks. One of the parties will have to compromise some of its basic principles, which is unlikely in the current circumstances. The United States does not seem inclined to compromise its objectives and is not ready to withdraw all of its troops because its leaders believe that this would subject it to a security threat. If that happens, the last twelve years will have been in vain. In addition, the new generation of the Taliban do not want to approve of the existence of US bases in Afghanistan because that would forfeit their *raison d'être* and everything they have fought for.

The positions of the different Afghan parties are not as contradictory and distant; they can overcome their problems and bring their views closer together through serious talks if they sincerely intend on doing so. Here we are not referring to the Afghan government and the Taliban but rather the various Afghan parties including those that are part of the government, the armed opposition and the political opposition. If compatibility were achieved between all Afghan parties to determine the features of the next system of government, it would be easier to expel foreign troops. Hence, it is recommended that simultaneous dialogue is initiated between the different Afghan parties and between the Taliban and the United States.

For the talks to succeed in resolving the Afghan issue, they must take into account the following matters:

- Neutral Afghan parties must mediate between the various Afghan parties; they must have the confidence of all the parties involved. The High Peace Council did not succeed because the Taliban considers it an government body and hence unable to maintain neutrality in talks.
- Within the framework of the Council of Islamic Cooperation, an axis of strong Islamic countries must embrace and support the peace talks in Afghanistan. This will enable decisions to be implemented and persuade western countries, especially the United States, to accept the outcomes of the talks and assist in building state institutions after stabilisation. The countries that make up the axis cannot have ambitions in Afghanistan or influence their neighbours, especially Pakistan. These countries include Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Malaysia and Qatar.
- An office with Afghan experts and academic specialists should be established in Kabul with the assistance of experts from outside Afghanistan to advise entities that seek reconciliation.
- The initial focus must be on restoring mutual confidence between the warring Afghan parties, first, through multiple meetings and, second, through concrete steps that indicate that the parties are serious about the reconciliation process and that it is not just a façade.
- Various Afghan parties should be brought to the dialogue table to agree on a plan for reaching stability in Afghanistan.
- The Afghan people should be encouraged to support those seeking reconciliation between the various parties.

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- (1) <http://www.pts.af/index.php?page=en_Background>.
 - (2) See the details of these programme brochures with the title 'A Guide to the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP)' p. 11 at the following address: <https://ronna-afghan.harmonieweb.org/FRIC/APRP%20Policy%20Documents%20Structures%20and%20SOPs/Reintegration_Hand_Book.pdf>.
 - (3) Find the posted details of the APRP at the site of the Supreme Council for National Afghan Reconciliation at the following link: <<http://www.hpc.org.af/english/>>.
 - (4) Review the statement read by Taliban representatives at the French conference: <<http://www.nunn.asia/index.php/afghanistan/articles/5789>>.
 - (5) The Roadmap for Reconciliation is at the following address: <http://bostnews.com/details_dr.php?id=13409&cid=56>.