

ESSAY

Intra-Afghan Peace Talks: A Channel to Peace

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The Taliban is one of the Islamic fundamentalist movements formed in the early 1990s by an Afghan faction of Mujahedeen, the Islamist fighters who had fought against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan which took place in December 1979 and continued up to February 1989. The Taliban regime ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 and it collapsed as a result of the US attack on this country after the September 11 attacks. Since the establishment of the new Afghan government (2001), the Taliban has been involved in an armed conflict with it. The Taliban has also been labeled as an international terrorist group mostly functioning in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The gradual proliferation of the Islamic extremist groups and their expansion seem to be concerning for the international community. Thus, some countries such as the United States, Russia, China, and Qatar are currently engaged in an international partnership, trying to boost the ongoing Intra-Afghan Peace Talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government after eighteen years of war and bloodshed in Afghanistan. The Intra-Afghan Peace Talks are a series of international negotiations aiming for the consolidation of peace between the Taliban and the Afghan government. This research paper aims to explore and analyze the Intra-Afghan Peace Talks.

Keywords: Taliban; ISIS; Afghan Government; Intra-Afghan Peace Talks; Sustainable Peace; Sustainable Development

Introduction

As a result of its geographic position between the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia, Afghanistan has been acting as a central battlefield in history. Moreover, the divided nature of Afghan society, which consists of many different ethnic groups, has informed various domestic tensions in Afghanistan.¹ For example, the ethnic divisions have explained the tensions that fueled the conflicts and civil wars in this country.²

According to data from the US State Department, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan is the Pashtun, comprising 42% of Afghans. The Tajiks are the second largest ethnic group, making up 27% of the population, followed by the Hazaras (9%), Uzbeks (9%), Aimaq (4%), Turkmen (3%), Baluch (2%) and other groups that make up 4%.³

The Taliban is an extremist Islamic group formed in the early 1990s by an Afghan community of Mujahedeen who fought against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.⁴

The Taliban ruled in Afghanistan from 1996 until 2001. After the September 11 attacks in 2001, the United States attacked Afghanistan and ousted the Taliban as it had harbored Al-Qaeda, the organizer of the September 11 attacks.⁵ After the US invasion of Afghanistan, the United Nations sponsored an international conference in Bonn, Germany with Afghan anti-Taliban leaders

to form an interim government called the Afghan Interim Administration in 2001.⁶

As Craig Whitlock (2019) argues, US officials in fact tried to create a democratic government in Kabul modeled after their own in Washington. Since the creation of the interim government in Afghanistan and the ousting of the Taliban from power, the Taliban has been involved in an armed opposition against the Afghan government for the last eighteen years in a conflict that also involves Al-Qaeda and other forces present in Afghanistan.⁷

The Afghan tribal elders along with the UN officials who gathered in Bonn appointed Hamid Karzai as the country's interim leader. Karzai always believed that the Taliban can take a step forward to enter a peace negotiation. While the Americans defeated and removed the Taliban in 2001, Karzai wanted amnesty for them knowing that the Taliban was politically different from Al-Qaeda. Now after almost 18 years, the Americans agree with Karzai and his earlier calls to reach a peace deal with the Taliban and include them in the political process.⁸

Aside from the apparent reasons causing the USA to consent to enter a process of peace negotiations with the Taliban, there are secret documents obtained by *The Washington Post* revealing that the war had become unwinnable.⁹ This may be a reason that the USA acceded to peace negotiations with the Taliban.

A series of Afghan-led peace negotiations with the Taliban started in early 2018 in order to broker a peace settlement between this group and the Afghan government.

This research paper describes the Intra-Afghan Peace Talks and consists of two main sections: 1) The war between the Taliban and the Afghan government and 2) The Intra-Afghan Peace Talks.

The War Between the Taliban and the Afghan Government

After the Afghan Interim Administration was established in 2001, the Taliban started war against this government.¹⁰ The Taliban leaders and local rulers were occupying many districts that were far from the control of the Afghan central government. Scores of civilians have been killed during the conflict between the Taliban, Afghan army and coalition forces from the beginning of the conflict. Approximately 147,000 people have been killed in the Afghanistan war since 2001. More than 38,000 of those people are civilians.¹¹ The war has brought human trafficking,¹² violence against Afghan civilians, starvation of the people, and destruction of the cities and historical monuments.¹³

The Afghan government was weakened as a result of the conflict with the Taliban and this government tried several times to provide the ground for a comprehensive peace agreement. Despite its previous attempts to reach a reconciliation with the Afghan government, the Taliban in fact did not want to recognize this government and refused to negotiate until recently.¹⁴

As Kuehn (2018: 39) argues:

Around the time of the surge, President Karzai was calling for the Taliban to lay down their arms and join him. His government established the High Peace Council (HPC) in 2010, tasked with bringing about a reconciliation process, facilitating talks or in any other way supporting an end to the conflict. The Taliban saw the HPC as little more than another organ that worked under the command of the foreign forces. Mawlawi Kabir, a member of the Taliban's central council, explained a few months after the HPC was founded that "[the] peace council is a one-sided entity, having been established to protect their unilateral goals and interests. The council consists of people who practically support the Americans, though they claim being jihadi figures and leaders. But by siding with the American invaders, they had forfeited their credibility."

Therefore, the Taliban continued to reject the calls for peace.

When the Taliban got involved in armed conflict with Afghan government and the foreign troops which were military present in Afghanistan since 2001, the consequences of the continuing war in this country which were reflected by the media, gradually raised concerns in Afghanistan and beyond. Considering this fact, some countries and international organizations tried to help Afghanistan to arrange a set of effective peace negotiations with the Taliban and end the Afghan war. The Afghan government and its supporters¹⁵ tried to defeat the Taliban. The United Kingdom also supported the

USA to fight against the Taliban.¹⁶ Canada recognized the Taliban as a terrorist group.¹⁷ In 2013, with the approval of the USA and the Afghan government, Qatar permitted the Taliban to hold a diplomatic office inside the country, to facilitate peace negotiations with the support of other countries.¹⁸ This provided a fertile ground for Intra-Afghan Peace Talks (the peace talks between the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government), and these talks officially started in 2018.¹⁹

The Intra-Afghan Peace Talks

In Afghanistan, the peace talks with the Taliban were about to take place in 2001, as a result of the US war in Afghanistan and the fall of Kandahar. But this peace plan did not actually succeed as the Taliban leadership slunk across the border into Pakistan to plan their resurgence.²⁰

After the evacuation from Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul and Herat by the Taliban as a result of the US attack on Afghanistan, Kandahar was the last major city under Taliban control.

On 19 October 2001, the US Special Forces moved towards Kandahar. Hamid Karzai, an anti-Taliban commander was given a mission to fight in Kandahar and oust the Taliban from this city. Taliban leaders feared Karzai's potential to crush them as they were aware of their weakness when compared to the US forces. After recording advances in the villages of Kandahar, Karzai's men maintained their positions and began negotiations with the Taliban for the surrender of the whole city.²¹ Karzai told the Taliban officials that he wanted an unconditional surrender. The Taliban, having no alternative, apparently accepted Karzai's term. But then during the negotiations on 5 and 6 December 2001, the negotiators of the Taliban escaped.

In one of his interviews, US Special Forces Battalion Commander David Fox said he was sure that key Taliban leaders escaped during negotiations for the surrender in the south. He said he believed that the Taliban thought if they kept Karzai at bay with these negotiations and a set date to surrender, this gave them the time to get in their vehicles and drive off.²²

But the exact circumstances of the negotiations and the reasons that the Taliban did not prefer to accept the peace agreement are still unknown and debated among historians.²³

Three institutions were created for facilitating reconciliation and peace negotiations with the Taliban after these initial attempts: A) High Peace Council in 2010,²⁴ B) Presidential Committee for Peace in 2018,²⁵ and C) State Ministry for Reconciliation Affairs in 2019.²⁶ In spite of the creation of different organizations for promoting peace accords, the Taliban has ignored the Afghan government until recently, describing it a puppet of the USA. Therefore, the Taliban is not ready to negotiate with the Afghan government at all, and it has only met with some Afghan nongovernment delegates, and politicians such as Abdul Latif Pedram, Ismail Khan, Atta Mohammad Noor, Fawzia Koofi and others only in a non-official manner.

Moreover, negotiation with the Taliban is an international peace program which requires "global partnership" to result successfully.

However, the Taliban has demanded the withdrawal of occupation forces as a prerequisite for peace negotiations. As Shereena Qazi (2019) argues, the most important demand from the Taliban was “a complete withdrawal of foreign troops in order to end the occupation in Afghanistan.”

The peace process began in early 2018 in Kabul (capital of Afghanistan) with a peace proposal designed by the US and Afghan government and offered to the Taliban. Kai Eide (2018) describes the Kabul peace process as following:

At the Kabul Process II conference on 28 February, President Ashraf Ghani proposed to launch peace talks with the Taliban without preconditions, offering to recognize the Taliban as a legitimate political group, and presenting several significant proposals to be included in a peace process. The new peace plan was more comprehensive than anything previously presented and did not contain any of the aggressive language so often heard in the past. It did not offend the Taliban by calling on Pakistan to “deliver” the enemy to the negotiating table but appealed to the Taliban directly. Furthermore, the peace plan was not presented as an ultimatum. On the contrary, the document states that “the Taliban are expected to give input to the peace-making process, the goal of which is to draw the Taliban, as an organization, to peace talks.”

After the Kabul peace process, some other countries such as Russia, China and Qatar²⁷ also intervened to contribute to this process and hosted Intra-Afghan Peace Talks. This proves the role of international key powers in the Intra-Afghan Peace Talks. According to Missy Ryan and Amie Ferris-Rotman (2018), “Russia has been cultivating ties with the Taliban to increase its influence in Afghanistan three decades after Moscow’s humiliating defeat there helped hasten the Soviet Union’s collapse”. Also one of China’s reasons for being involved in the Afghan peace process is the fact that it fears that the political instability of Afghanistan caused by the Taliban war could strengthen the political forces of East Turkestan in its Xinjiang province.²⁸ Qatar is the seat of the Taliban’s political and diplomatic office.²⁹

The prospects of peace are not only important for China, Russia, and Qatar but also for the USA. The USA has become mired in nearly two decades of warfare in Afghanistan. Beside the deaths and injuries of the Taliban, Afghan army and civilians, more than 775,000 US troops have deployed to Afghanistan. Of those, 2,300 died there and 20,589 were wounded in action, according to US Defense Department figures. Moreover, the USA has spent between \$934 billion and \$978 billion on the war in Afghanistan.³⁰ The USA could not defeat the Taliban and convince them to stop the armed opposition against the Afghan government. It has been proved that the Afghan war cannot be won by relying on violence. Instead, diplomacy and reconciliation can be better options to end this war.

Conclusion

Afghanistan is struggling with the tensions between its central government and the Taliban since 2001. The Taliban has been fighting and opposing the Afghan government for eighteen years. This group is not going to be disarmed with military might.

Hopefully, a compromise that is brokered by the international community and is acceptable for the warring sides can be a suitable solution to prevent the possibilities of war continuing. The Intra-Afghan Peace Talks bring such an opportunity.

After the meetings for peace between the Taliban officials and the Afghan diplomats in Qatar and Russia, President Trump said that he had planned previously unknown talks with the two sides in Camp David, the presidential retreat in Maryland.³¹ After an attack in Kabul on September 7, 2019 which killed a US soldier and 11 other people, Trump cancelled the meeting in Camp David and called off the peace negotiations. Because of this cancellation and recent developments such as the assassination of Soleimani in Iraq, reaching an intra-Afghan peace agreement is now in question.³² However, any restart of the process will foster a hope to end the war in Afghanistan.

Notes

- ¹ To learn more about Afghanistan’s ethnic problems, see Peace Insight (2015, February).
- ² For more information about the ethnic tensions in Afghanistan, see Afghanistan: Ethnic Diversity and Dissidence. (1979), a research paper of the National Foreign Assessment Center. See also Ahmed (2017).
- ³ For more accurate information, see the original report at NATO Civil-Military Fusion Center (2011, August 14).
- ⁴ For more information about the Afghan-Soviet war, see *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan* (1980) by the Director of Central Intelligence. For further information about the emergence of the Taliban, see Brahimi (2010). See also Afsar et al. (2008).
- ⁵ For more details refer to Dupont (2014, November 25). See also Keneally (2019).
- ⁶ For more details refer to Khalilzad (1991). See also Oliver (2001, December 5).
- ⁷ For further information see Reuters (2019).
- ⁸ More details are available at Alam (2019, April 19).
- ⁹ To obtain more information please refer to the original report written by Whitlock (2019, December 9).
- ¹⁰ For more details see Gall (2004, November 13).
- ¹¹ To access more accurate data please refer to the original report written by Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs (2018, November). For more accurate information see the original report provided by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (2019).
- ¹² For further details refer to McGirk and Plain (2002, February 10).
- ¹³ For more information about destruction of the Buddhas see Centlivres (2012, April 18). See also Francioni and Lenzerini (2003).
- ¹⁴ For more details see Saifullah (2018, June 16).
- ¹⁵ For more details see Council on Foreign Relations (2019).
- ¹⁶ For more information see Peacock (2001, October 2).

- ¹⁷ For more information, you can access the original website “Currently listed entities”.
- ¹⁸ To find more details see Rashid (2017, October 4).
- ¹⁹ More details are provided by the original source Hussainkhail (2018, September 22).
- ²⁰ See Ariana News (2019). More information can be found at Bohlen (2001, December 7).
- ²¹ To access more information about the fall of Kandahar see Fox. (n.d.). See also Gopal (2010, November 10). See also Stewart (2003).
- ²² See Supra note 21.
- ²³ For detailed information about the fall of Kandahar, please see Supra note 21.
- ²⁴ To learn more about the High Peace Council, see Afghan Biographies (2010).
- ²⁵ See the original website Daftar-e Riyasat Jomhoori Islami Afghanistan (2017).
- ²⁶ For more information about the State Ministry for Reconciliation, see Ariana News (2019).
- ²⁷ To access detailed information about the role of mentioned countries in the Afghan peace process, see Ferris-Rotman (2019, May 28). See also FP Editors (2019, July 10).
- ²⁸ To learn more about China’s role in the Afghan peace process See Sirat. (n.d.).
- ²⁹ For more details about the peace negotiations in Doha, see Ruttig (2019).
- ³⁰ See Supra note 9.
- ³¹ For more details about the planned negotiations in Camp David, see Agence France-Presse (2019).
- ³² To learn more about the insights on the future of the Afghan peace process, see Aljazeera (2019, September 19). See also Mohammadi (2020, January 14). See also Mohammad and Hussein (2020, January 7).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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