

Peace in Afghanistan?

Written by Grant Farr

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GRANT FARR, APR 20 2019

Even as the fighting of the spring offensive intensifies, it now looks as if there finally may be an agreement in Afghanistan that will bring American forces home. The United States delegation, led by Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad, appears to be working out a deal that could end the conflict and bring home 14,000 American troops (and remaining European forces) stationed in Afghanistan. To date this war has lasted over 17 years, taken 2,372 lives of American soldiers, over 20,000 American soldiers wounded (Defenselink, 2019), and cost over 100,000 Afghan lives, many of them civilians (UNAMA, 2018). The war in Afghanistan has now cost American tax payers over 45 billion dollars each year (Pennington, 2018). However, an agreement may finally be reached, there are a number of difficult and complex issues that remain to be resolved, problems that could plunge Afghanistan into turmoil for years to come.

The Peace Talks

After declaring for years that the United States would not talk directly to the Taliban without the participation of the Afghan government, on Friday October 12, 2018 American representatives did just that, meeting with representatives of the Taliban in Doha, Qatar. The leader of the American delegation, Zalmay Khalilzad, had been appointed United States Special Adviser on Afghanistan in the State Department. This was not the first time the U.S. had talked directly with the Taliban, but this time the talks seemed to be on firmer ground.

Khalilzad is an interesting choice for this task. Born and raised in Afghanistan, he received his master's degree at the American University of Beirut and his Ph. D. at the University of Chicago. He rose quickly in the ranks of the American Foreign Services as a follower of Zbigniew Brzezinski in the Carter administration, despite being a Republican. Khalilzad served as the American Ambassador to Afghanistan from 2003 to 2005 and played a key role in the writing of the Afghan constitution. He later became Ambassador to Iraq under George Bush and then the United States Ambassador to the UN.

The basic issues being negotiated have not changed. From the beginning the Taliban have made several demands, primarily the withdrawal of all American forces from Afghanistan. Other demand include recognizing the Taliban as a legitimate political party in Afghanistan, releasing Talibani prisoners (including those in Guantanamo), delisting of the Taliban as a terrorist organization, and changing the Afghan constitution to create a more Islamic-based government.

By early February 2019 it appeared that an outline of a partial agreement had been reached. This agreement states that the Taliban would guarantee that Afghanistan would not house or otherwise support international terrorist groups, especially Al Qaeda, in return for the United States withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan. Afghanistan's housing of Al Qaeda at the time of the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 was the major reason for the United States becoming involved in Afghanistan in the first place. This agreement, although an important breakthrough in negotiating the end the war, leaves additional issues unresolved.

The premises of the agreement will not be easy to implement. To begin with, the Taliban's agreement to not allow terrorists to operate in Afghanistan depends in part on the interpretation of what exactly a terrorist is. The Taliban itself has been classified by the United States and other Western countries as a terrorist organization (Mashal, 2019). Both the United States and the Taliban agree that the Islamic State is a terrorist organization, but there are many

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other groups that the United States would define as terrorist that the Taliban would not. These include the Jalaluddin Haqqani Network, Tehreek-e Nafaz- Shariat-e Mohammadani, the Caucasus Emirate, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan which has been active in northern Afghanistan (Counter Extremism Project, 2019). Even if the United States and the Taliban come to a peace agreement, they will have to deal with these other groups.

In addition, the agreement to withdraw American forces from Afghanistan is also up for interpretation. The United States has in mind keeping some military forces in Afghanistan, perhaps a couple thousand, for up to five years and possibly longer after the withdrawal of the majority of the forces. The purpose of these remaining military personnel would be to protect the United States diplomatic mission in Kabul and to ensure that the Taliban complied with its agreement not to allow terrorist groups to operate in Afghanistan. There is also disagreement regarding the phasing of the United States military pullout, with the United States considering a gradual pullout over the span of several years, while the Taliban insisting on an immediate and complete withdrawal (Gibbons-Neff, Barnes, 2019).

The Role of the Afghan Government

The Taliban has insisted that the present Afghan government not participate in the peace negotiations, arguing that the Afghan government is a puppet of the United States. The United States has, at least for now, acquiesced to this demand and has begun negotiations without the Afghan government present at the talks. This has, of course, infuriated the Kabul leadership who argue, so far without results, that there can be no peace in Afghanistan without the elected government of President Ashraf Ghani being a part of the negotiations. (Mashal and Abed, 2019)

The Taliban has seemingly won on this issue and the Afghan government has not been invited to the talks. Many expect that a negotiated settlement with the Taliban will mean the end of the present Afghan government. (Mehrddad, 2019) To try to increase their legitimacy, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani is attempting to organize a *Loya Jirga*, a national tribal council, of over 2000 Afghan politician, tribal and religious leaders from around the country. Known as a "consultative" Loya Jirga, the purpose is to try to create a national consensus about how to negotiate with the Taliban and to give the Ghani government some legitimacy. The Ghani government hopes that members of the Taliban itself may attend. (Mashal and Abed, 2019) The Loya Jirga was originally planned for March 2019, but this date has passed with no meeting. A new date in late April has been set, but it is likely that that date will also slip.

In addition President Ghani has formed a consultative council composed of current and former senior government officials, leaders of political parties and opposition groups. President Ghani will lead this council himself. The purpose of this council will be to create a national front to negotiate with the Taliban. This council will also appoint a subgroup who will be charged with negotiating directly with the Taliban and will send this subgroup to Doha for the next meeting between the United States and the Taliban. (Mashal and Abed, 2019) The problem with this plan, however, is that the Taliban remains adamant that they will not negotiate with any party from the present government. (Mehrddad, 2019)

The Ghani government has reason to fear negotiation with the Taliban. For one, Ashraf Ghani himself is not expected to survive in a new governmental structure that would include the participation of the Taliban. (Mehrddad, 2019) No doubt Ashraf Ghani is mindful of the fate of the past president of Afghanistan the last time the Taliban took over Kabul in 1996. After a failed attempt to flee India, Mohammed Najibullah, who had been president of Afghanistan from 1986 to 1992, remained in Kabul seeking refuge in the United Nations headquarters until 1996, when the Taliban took Kabul. The Taliban abducted Najibullah and his brother from UN custody in the early morning of September 27, 1996, tortured both of them and hanged their bodies from a traffic post the next day. (White, 2010) While Presidents Najibullah and Ghani are quite different people and the present is a different time. Both are, or were, unpopular and both are from the same Pashtun tribe. (Mehrddad, 2019)

Women's Rights

Another group that has much to fear from the future participation of the Taliban in the Afghan government are women. When the Taliban ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 women were not allowed to work or go to school and were forced to wear the all-enveloping burqa when they journeyed outside the home. Women were regularly beaten

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for showing too much ankle and many women were killed who were thought to be adulterous. (Graham-Harrison, 2019)

However, while on one hand Afghan women fear the return of the Taliban, they also desire peace. For many Afghan women, who have lost brothers, sons, or fathers in the fighting during the last 17 years, peace could not arrive fast enough. "I think trying to reach a peace deal with the Taliban is a good move...The concern is that the Afghan people are not a part of the government. Women don't know what will happen to their lives in the future, and to the freedoms they won after the Taliban." (Graham-Harrison, 2019)

However, the Taliban insist that they are not the old Taliban with regards to women's rights and that they have a new attitude towards the role of women in Afghan society. In December 2018 Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said "If peace comes and the Taliban returns, then our return will not be in the same harsh way as it was in 1996." He went on to say that the Taliban is not against women's education or employment but want to maintain cultural and religious codes consistent with the tenets of Islam. (Bezhan, 2019) While the women in Afghanistan are hopeful for peace, they have reason to fear the return of the Taliban.

Tribal and Ethnic Groups

In addition to women, many ethnic and religious minorities have much to fear from the return of the Taliban. Afghanistan is composed of a number of ethnic and tribal groups. Since the Taliban is, in part, a tribal uprising by Pashtun from southern Afghanistan, other ethnic groups fear the participation of the Taliban in national politics. While no national census has been conducted, it is estimated that about 40 percent of Afghans are Pashtun, 27 percent Tajiks, 10 percent Hazara and 10 percent Uzbeks. (World Atlas, 2019) All of the non-Pashtun groups have much to fear from the Taliban, but especially the Hazara who are not only a distinct ethnic group, but are also Shia Muslims, while the Taliban, and most of the rest of Afghanistan, are Sunni Muslims. To Sunni Muslims, particularly the Taliban, the Shia are seen as heretics and have been systematically persecuted over the last two decades by the Taliban.

When the Taliban ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 there were mass killings of Hazara in Mazar-e Sharif, in 1998 and in central Bamian, the center of the Hazara people. (Zucchini and Faizi, 2019) More recently, hundreds of Hazara families were driven out of their homeland during a Taliban offensive in Uruzgan and Ghazni Provinces, which are part of the Hazara homeland known as the Hazarajat. The killing of Hazara has also taken place in Kabul where many Hazara families have sought refuge. On March 2018 a suicide bomber killed 33 people in a Hazara area of Kabul during a New Year celebration. (Zucchini and Faizi, 2019). As a result the Hazara political parties are now preparing for a Taliban return by stockpiling arms and preparing for an ethnic civil war.

In addition, to the Hazara who live in the mountains of central Afghanistan, the Turkic ethnic groups in Northern Afghanistan, especially the Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Turkmen, fear the return of the Taliban. With the weak government in Kabul, these groups, especially those around the city of Mazar-e Sharif, have over the last decade formed their own ruling structure and have been operating outside the domain of the Kabul government. They will certainly object to the return of Taliban in the Kabul government, which they properly interpret as the return of the rule of the Southern Pashtun.

Conclusion

It now appears relatively certain that some kind of agreement will be reached, and American forces will begin to withdraw from Afghanistan, in large part because of the Trump Administration's desire to end the war. However, we should not fool ourselves. Notwithstanding how well intentioned American withdrawal will result in a series of disastrous events. The present government of Ashraf Ghani will almost certainly collapse, the Afghan constitution will be modified to restrict women's rights, and civil war between the Taliban and non-Pashtun ethnic groups—particularly the Hazara—will ensue.

America's involvement in Afghanistan has to end. The cost has been too great in resources and lives. Yet, as the lesson of the United States' withdrawal from Vietnam tells us, chaos and internal armed conflict will follow. It won't be

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pretty, but it is time.

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