

What Happened to the Afghan Peace Talks?

Written by Grant Farr

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GRANT FARR, FEB 24 2021

The peace talks between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban were set to resume in Doha, Qatar on January 6, 2021. Yet, to date, the talks have not restarted, except for minor meetings of staff over issues of protocol. The failure to restart the talks is in part because both sides are waiting to see what the Biden administration is going to do, especially whether or not the United States will abide by the agreement the Trump administration struck with the Taliban in February of 2020. This agreement called, among other things, for the withdrawal of all United States troops from Afghanistan by May 2021. In the meantime, the violence in Afghanistan continues unabated, with the killing of politicians, journalists, peace workers, and university students. The government of Ashraf Ghani seems unable, or unwilling, to stop this carnage as his government faces increasing pressure to form an interim government. All of this is taking place while the Covid-19 virus continues to ravage this poor country.

What will Biden do?

It had been expected that the Biden administration would be slow getting around to Afghanistan, given so many other pressing issues in the world. However, Biden's team has moved quickly. The first contact with the Afghan government came just two days after the presidential inauguration on January 22, 2021, when Biden's National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan called his Afghan counterpart, Afghan National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib. According to the readout of the call, Sullivan indicated to Mohib that the United States intends to review the February agreement with the intent to assess whether or not the Taliban was living up to its side of the deal to cut ties with terrorist groups, especially al Qaeda, reducing violence and making progress on peace talks with the Afghan government (Afzal, 2021; Bezhani, 2021).

President Biden also formed a working group of high-level American government officials and experts to advise him on this issue. This blue-ribbon study group, co-chaired by retired General Joseph Dunford, urged Biden to abandon the agreement that Trump had signed with the Taliban that would bring all of the remaining United States troops out of Afghanistan by May of this year. If the United States were to pull out all of its troops by May, the study group reported, the possibility for civil war in Afghanistan would be high and the Ghani government would certainly collapse (Ignatius, 2021).

President Biden has also decided to keep, for the time being, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad who served the Trump administration as the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation and who was the main negotiator of the talks with the Taliban and the major author of the February 2020 peace agreement. Khalilzad has an impressive resume. He was the United States Ambassador to Afghanistan from 2004 to 2005 and was the United States Ambassador to the United Nations from 2007 to 2009 under the Bush administration. Khalilzad has the advantage of being an Afghan-American and is able to talk with the Taliban in their own language. However, while he gets on well with the Taliban, he does not get along well with President Ghani who feels that Khalilzad has ignored him in the negotiations with the Taliban. In addition, Khalilzad is a Republican, a Trump appointee, and has served under the Bush administration. He may, therefore, be politically out of step with the new administration.

The Biden team's attempt to renegotiate the February 2020 agreement with the Taliban has several purposes. For one, the agreement was negotiated and signed by the Trump administration and therefore may not be considered valid by the Biden team. More importantly, if the negotiations are successful, it will give the Biden administration

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additional time to reconsider the troop withdrawal. It is also felt that the Taliban have not lived up to their part of the deal to cut ties with al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. However, walking away from the February agreement will mean abrogating the contract that the United States signed with the Taliban, and may well lead to increased attacks on United States forces. There have been no attacks on American forces since the agreement and, as a result, no casualties.

The Intra-Afghan Negotiations in Doha

The negotiations between the Afghan Government and the Taliban were to restart after a month-long break on January 6, 2021. However, to date, there has been no progress except for meetings of minor staff over issues of protocol. Most of the senior officials of the parties have returned home: to Kabul in the case of the government negotiators, and to Pakistan in the case of the Taliban side. Clearly, both sides are waiting to see what Biden's team will do, but the negotiations are also stalled because both sides have goals that are incompatible with the other side. The Taliban, which believes that it has essentially won the war, is willing to wait for the withdrawal of American troops as agreed upon with the United States in the February 2020 agreement. With the American troops gone, the Taliban believe that the Ghani government cannot survive and that they will be able to take over Afghanistan.

The Taliban's long-term goal in the negotiations, which is not clearly stated, is to create an Islamic Caliphate in Afghanistan. This can mean several things, but essentially is a form of government based on Islamic principles and overseen by a council of Islamic scholars who would approve or disapprove governmental actions. While this structure appears similar to that in Iran, the Taliban do not favor democratic elections like those that take place in Iran.

The Afghan government, on the other hand, comes to the negotiations trying to keep its rule intact. Ghani has stressed three issues that are important to his government going forward: the importance of democratic elections, the rule of democratic law based on the Afghan constitution, and the legitimacy of his rule as the elected president of Afghanistan until the end of his term in 2025 (Zucchini, 2021). The difficulty with the Afghan government's position in the negotiations is that it does not leave room for the Taliban to join the government. In addition, the Kabul government is pushing for a ceasefire. The level of violence is clearly too high and is eroding popular support for the government. In the February 2020 agreement, the Taliban agreed to cease hostile actions against United States forces, but it did not agree to cease hostile actions against Afghan forces. In fact, the Taliban has increased attacks on Afghan military posts and personnel and has gained control of large chunks of Afghanistan, including areas near and surrounding Kabul itself (Vendrell, 2021).

Violence in Kabul

The level of violence in Afghanistan has markedly increased in the last year, especially in Kabul, which until recently had been relatively free of it. In past years, the fighting usually slowed down in the winter as snow and cold weather made it difficult. Not this year. According to a survey by ToloNews, the violence in Afghanistan has surged by 50 percent over recent months, even as the peace talks have been underway (ToloNews, 2021).

On February 11, 2021, attackers killed five Afghan policemen escorting a United Nations convoy on the main highway leading into Kabul. Also, on February 11, 2021, a chain of bomb explosions targeted the Kabul police, killing a district police chief and his bodyguard and wounding five people (Akhgar, 2021). These killings have included not only military personnel, but also journalists, government officials, aid workers, and university students. In the past, killings were accomplished by shootings and suicide bombers, but more recently by explosives attached to the bottoms of cars. Called, "sticky" bombs, these explosives are then detonated remotely or set off by a timer.

The terrorists have especially gone after journalists. In the last six months, over 50 journalists and reporters have been killed. Saba Sahar, one of Afghanistan's first women film directors and her driver were shot, although she survived (Hassan, 2020). This increased level of violence has several effects. Killing reporters and journalists makes reporting on terrorists' activities more dangerous and thus reduces coverage. The increase in killings also weakens the support for the Ghani government which seems unable, or unwilling, to stop the carnage.

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The Taliban have denied having anything to do with the increased violence. While the Taliban no doubt bare some responsibility for the killings, it may be that other terrorist groups are involved. Specifically, the Islamic State insurgents are active in parts of Afghanistan and have been known to attack religious groups that do not adhere to their strict Islamic beliefs. This includes members of the Sikh and Hindu communities and, more importantly, Shia Afghans who have been the targets of recent attacks. The killings may also be the work of rogue Taliban units, such as the Hakkani network that is operating out of Pakistan and supported by Pakistan's military.

Interim Government

As the negotiations in Doha between the Afghan government and the Taliban languish and the Ghani government in Kabul struggles with violence and corruption, the momentum for forming an interim, or transitional, government continues to grow. The impetus for an interim government comes from several directions.

For one, when there is a peace deal with the Taliban, Taliban leaders and Taliban ideas of Islamic governance will have to be incorporated into the Afghan governmental structure. This will be almost impossible with the present government, but more likely if there is an interim government in power that would be open to the incorporation of Taliban ideas. In addition, there is growing feeling that one of the major obstacles to peace is President Ghani himself who seems unwilling to compromise in dealing with the Taliban. Therefore, it would make sense, some Afghan politicians have suggested, to form an interim government, led by Afghan leaders who are more neutral, or at least open, to incorporating the Taliban into the governmental structure (Gul, 2020).

President Ghani continues to argue that he was elected president of Afghanistan in the 2019 presidential elections and that he rules according to a constitution that was approved by the Afghan people through a *loya Jirga*. He maintains that he will serve out his five-year term ending in 2025. To change this, he argues, would violate the will of the Afghan people and bring chaos to Afghanistan. He has surrounded himself with Afghan leaders who are strongly anti-Taliban, including First Vice President Sarwar Danish, the former intelligence chief and a staunch anti-Taliban figure. In addition, Ghani has reappointed as a senior advisor Mohammed Mohaqiq, a former anti-Taliban commander and a leader of the Shia Hazara community which fears the return of the Taliban.

However, outside of Ghani's tight circle of supporters, the call for an interim or transitional government grows. In an online discussion arranged with the U.S. Institute of Peace, Abdullah Abdullah, the head of the Afghan High Council for National Reconciliation and the leader of the Afghan delegation at the Doha peace talks, when asked about the Taliban's proposal for an interim government, said: "We have to be flexible in our thoughts. Nothing should derail us from getting to a long durable, lasting and acceptable peace" (Gul, 2020). These remarks were interpreted to mean that he would consider an interim government. Several other Afghan leaders are leaning towards supporting an interim government. Atta Mohammed Noor, a powerful regional leader, has supported the idea, as has Amin Ahmadi, a member of the Afghan government's negotiating team.

Ross Wilson, the senior United States diplomat in Kabul, has denied that Washington is advocating for an interim government, reporting that "the outcomes of Afghanistan Peace Negotiations are up to the Afghans and we believe those outcomes should reflect the wishes and aspirations of the Afghan people" (Bezhan, 2021). However, behind the scenes, Khalilzad visited Kabul in early January of this year to sound out the possibility of an interim government with Afghan leaders. He did not meet with Ghani (Bezhan, 2021).

While an interim government may move the stalled negotiations forward, it may also create chaos and destabilize an already fragile country. President Ghani may not be well-liked and presents a major obstacle to the negotiations with the Taliban, but the country sits on the precipice of civil war. The anarchy and chaos that followed the resignation of President Mohammed Najibullah in 1992 after the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan remains on Afghans' minds. Najibullah announced his intention to form an interim government that would include the Mujahedin. Instead, state institutions broke down and a devastating civil war followed that ultimately brought in the Taliban in 1996. Najibullah was brutally tortured and executed in 1996. This history is not lost on President Ghani, who said at an event in Washington last year: "Dr. Najibullah made the mistake of his life by announcing he was going to resign... Please don't ask us to replay a film that we know well" (Bezhan, 2021). President Ghani and ex-president Najibullah are

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from the same tribe.

Summary

Afghanistan appears stuck. The negotiations with the Taliban are on hold, the level of violence is high, a new administration in Washington is reexamining its commitment to Kabul, and the call for an interim government is growing. Kabul now waits to see what the new Biden team will do. If the Biden team moves to renegotiate the agreement with the Taliban and keep American troops in Afghanistan beyond this May, then Kabul and President Ghani can relax, although not for long. However, if the Biden team decides to honor the February 2020 agreement and remove American troops from Afghanistan by May of 2021, then the Taliban will have won and the Ghani government in Kabul will be in a very difficult position. Afghanistan has been at war for over 40 years, with 20 of those years involving the United States. While the end of Afghanistan's troubles is in sight, the final ending still remains distant.

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