

## A Rolling Update of Peace Negotiations with Taliban

This Update: November 23, 2020

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This brief is based on a review of the available information on peace negotiations with the Taliban since 2010.

### Introduction

This document provides periodic updates on developments related to the peace negotiations with the Taliban, aimed at ending the armed conflict between the Taliban and the post-2001 government in Afghanistan supported militarily by international forces, particularly from the United States. The intention of compiling this document is two-fold.

First, this document provides a synthesis of all past events since 2010 regarding peace negotiations with the Taliban for those unfamiliar with the background and context of the peace negotiations.

Second, this document provides monthly updates to summarize the latest developments in peace negotiations.

The latest round of peace negotiations starting in late 2018 appears to have been envisaged as a two-stage process. The first stage is an agreement between the Taliban and the United States while the second stage is an agreement to be reached between the Taliban and all other Afghan stakeholders in "intra-Afghan" peace talks.

The first stage has been formally completed with the signing of a peace agreement by the Taliban and the United States. The second stage is expected to start in September 2020. All the information on this periodic update drawn from

on secondary sources including news reports and analyses and statements by various stakeholders.

## **Key Years**

### **2010**

Since 2010, the Government of Afghanistan has made several unsuccessful attempts to make peace with the Taliban to end the conflict. Until very recently, these initiatives were unheeded by the Taliban who have consistently refused talks with the Afghan government and have instead insisted on having direct peace talks with the United States as the occupying force in the country.

### **2014**

Attaining peace has been a priority of the National Unity Government (NUG) since its formation in 2014. President Ghani approached the regional countries, particularly Pakistan, to help Afghanistan in its efforts toward peace. He also made efforts to convince the international community that a peace process led and administered by Afghans could be successful.

The Kabul process aiming to build a regional and international consensus on an “Afghan led, Afghan owned” peace process was launched in June 2017. During the first Kabul Conference, President Ghani outlined his efforts to convince Pakistan to cooperate with his government in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table, and stated that Pakistan had rejected to cooperate and that it was unclear what Pakistan wanted from Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup>

### **2018**

The second round of the Kabul Peace Process was organized on February 28, 2018. In this round, President Ashraf Ghani offered the Taliban peace talks without preconditions. The proposal included amnesty for Taliban fighters, recognition of the Taliban as a political party, amendment of the Constitution, and lifting sanctions on Taliban leaders.<sup>2</sup> The Taliban, however, did not accept this offer, stating that they would start their spring offensive a month later in April.

In September 2018, US President, Donald Trump, appointed Zalmay Khalilzad as U.S. Special Envoy for Afghan Peace and Reconciliation. The appointment of Khalilzad, an Afghan-American who previously worked as US ambassador to Afghanistan, was a serious indication by Washington to reach a peace deal through negotiations.<sup>3</sup> To gather regional and international support, Khalilzad started his consultation meetings in Islamabad, Riyadh, and Doha. He also visited Russia and subsequently met with President Ashraf Ghani, Afghan political figures, and some civil society representatives to hear their opinions, priorities and concerns regarding a peace settlement.<sup>4</sup>

The first round of talks between US envoy and Taliban delegation took place on October 12, 2018 in Doha, Qatar.<sup>5</sup> According to Taliban spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, the group discussed ending Afghan conflict and agreed to continue similar meetings in the future.<sup>6</sup> The second round of talks between US envoy and high-ranking Taliban members, including Khairullah Khairkhwa and Taliban military chief, Mohammad Fazl, took place in November 2018 in Doha, Qatar. However, the US State Department refused to comment on the meeting.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, at the Geneva Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan in November 2018, President Ghani presented his roadmap for reaching peace with the Taliban. He introduced a 12-member negotiating team, consisting of men and women, led by Abdul Salam Rahimi, his Chief of Staff. The President added that his government had the potential and capacity to pursue peace negotiations and that Afghanistan had entered a new chapter in the peace process.

The President offered an unconditional peace negotiation, but he drew redlines for a peace settlement. Respecting the Afghan Constitution and women’s rights as well as preventing interference of foreign terrorist and criminal groups in internal affairs of the country were specified as the redlines for the Government of Afghanistan in the proposed negotiations.<sup>8</sup>

Also, in November 2018, Russia hosted the first round of peace talks between a Taliban delegation and the member of the High Peace Council, a non-government body responsible for overseeing peace efforts in Afghanistan. The Government of Afghanistan did not have an official delegation at this event but delegates of more than 10 countries including China, Pakistan, India, Iran, and Central Asian states were present.<sup>9</sup>

The Afghan delegation reiterated the offer of peace talks without pre-condition while the Taliban reaffirmed that they would only talk about peace with the United States. The Taliban also reiterated their position regarding the full withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan and the reform of the Afghan Constitution based on Islamic Sharia Law.<sup>10</sup>

On December 18, 2018, US and Taliban delegations held the third round of negotiations in the golf state of Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE), in the presence of the representatives of UAE, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, however, the Taliban refused to meet with the Afghan government delegation who were also in UAE.<sup>11</sup>

## 2019

The second round of talks in Moscow between Afghan political figures and the Taliban delegation took place in February 2019. The outcome of this two-day event was the agreement for a roadmap to end the conflict. The first step in this roadmap consists of a full withdrawal of foreign troops and the Taliban's commitment to respect the fundamental rights of Afghans. Both sides described the talks as "very satisfactory" and "very successful".<sup>12</sup>

Both parties agreed on a nine-point statement which emphasizes the need to reach a peace deal, continued for "intra-Afghan" dialogue – despite the fact that the Government of Afghanistan was not included in these talks, direct talks between the United States and the Taliban, systematic reform in national institutions, inclusion of regional countries in the process, complete withdrawal of foreign forces, assurance that

Afghanistan's territory will not be used against any other country, protection of women's rights as per Islamic provisions, protection of freedom of speech as per Islamic provision, attracting development aid for Afghanistan's reconstruction, removal of Taliban leaders from the United Nations' blacklist, and opening a Taliban office in Doha, Qatar.<sup>13</sup>

The third round of talks in Moscow between Afghan political figures and the Taliban took place in May 2019, where the parties discussed continuation of intra-Afghan talks, prisoner swap, ceasefire, foreign troops withdrawal, preserving Afghan sovereignty and women's rights, however, the parties did not reach an agreement.<sup>14</sup>

In July 2019, Afghan politicians, Journalists, civil society actors and youth met with Taliban delegation in Doha, Qatar, resulting in a joint-resolution.<sup>15</sup> Among others, supporting US-Taliban negotiations, unconditional release of elderly, disabled or ill inmates, stopping attacks on schools, religious establishments, hospitals, Bazaars and dams, as well as ensuring women's rights in any future political settlement were the provisions of this resolution.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, the talks between US special envoy and the Taliban delegation continued in 2019. The fourth round of talks between the United States and the Taliban began on January 21, 2019 in Doha, Qatar.<sup>17</sup> According to the framework that has emerged from the peace talks, in the event of a negotiated peace, the Taliban would ensure that Afghanistan would not be used as a safe haven for terrorists or become a base for terrorists to launch attacks against the U.S. or its allies. In return, the United States would fully withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan.

The framework is also said to have provisions for "enforcement mechanisms" though no details are available on how these mechanisms will work or who will enforce them.<sup>18</sup> According to Khalilzad, the Taliban will ultimately agree to a ceasefire and direct talks with the Afghan government, a claim that has been denied by the Taliban.<sup>19</sup>

The fifth round of talks between Zalmay Khalilzad and newly-released Mullah Baradar kicked off on February 25, 2019 in Doha, Qatar which lasted for 11 days. US envoy reported progress in the talks, however, no agreement was reached and the Taliban did not reverse their decision to meet with Afghan government delegation.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, the sixth round of talks were also held in Doha, Qatar which started on April 30, 2019.<sup>21</sup> The main agenda for this round was foreign troops withdrawal and counter-terrorism assurances. Taliban political spokesperson in Doha, Suhail Shaheen, said that the talks ended with “progress” and described the round as “positive and constructive”.<sup>22</sup>

Despite Taliban’s deadly attacks, the seventh round of talks between US envoy and the Taliban started on June 29, 2019 in Doha, Qatar.<sup>23</sup> This round of negotiation was focused on the timeline of foreign troops withdrawal and assurances that Afghan soil will not be used against US and its allies.<sup>24</sup> Further, the eighth round of talks kicked off on August 3, 2019 in Doha, Qatar which lasted for 9 days.<sup>25</sup> This round of negotiation was concluded with no agreement, with both sides stating that they will consult their leadership on next steps.<sup>26</sup>

The ninth round of talks between US envoy for Afghan reconciliation and the Taliban delegation began on August 22, 2019 in Doha, Qatar.<sup>27</sup> In this round, both parties reached an agreement “in principle”, conditional to president Trump’s approval. The agreement entailed withdrawing 5,400 troops from five bases in Afghanistan within 135 days, conditional to significant reduction in violence and counter-terrorism assurances.<sup>28</sup>

In September 2019, the Taliban delegation were scheduled to meet President Trump at Camp David where they would sign the peace agreement, however, after claiming the responsibility of a deadly attack in Kabul where 12 people including a US service member were killed, President Trump cancelled the meeting and called-off the peace talks.<sup>29</sup> While the Taliban

expressed they were “shocked” to hear the decision just before signing the agreement, they mentioned that their “doors are open” should the US decides to resume peace talks.<sup>30</sup>

In November 2019, President Trump made a visit to Bagram Airfield and announced that the talks will soon resume between US and the Taliban. The revival of peace talks came days after a prisoner swap between US and the Taliban in which two American University of Afghanistan professors were exchanged with Taliban commanders.<sup>31</sup> The talks between US envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban chief negotiator, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, resumed on December 7, 2019 in Doha, Qatar.<sup>32</sup> However, the negotiation was paused due to Taliban’s attack on Bagram Airfield on December 11, 2019.<sup>33</sup>

#### **2020 (To November 23)**

The eleventh round of talks between US and Taliban kicked off on January 17, 2020 in Doha, with ceasefire as the main agenda of the negotiation.<sup>34</sup> However, the resumed talks only led to a 7-day “reduction in violence” between US forces, Taliban militants and Afghan government which came into effect on February 22, 2020 and was a pre-condition for signing the US-Taliban peace deal.<sup>35</sup>

On February 29, 2020 US and the Taliban signed the historic peace deal in Doha Qatar. The deal entails a fully-fledged US and NATO troops withdrawal within 14 months, counter-terrorism assurances from Taliban, the start of Intra-Afghan dialogues and a complete ceasefire among all parties.<sup>36</sup> The Taliban declared the agreement as “termination of occupation of Afghanistan” and described it as a “great achievement”.<sup>37</sup>

The agreement also provisions prisoner swap to include the exchange of 5,000 Taliban militants and 1,000 Afghan security forces before the start of the intra-Afghan dialogues.<sup>38</sup> Despite initial resistance toward the prisoner swap, Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, signed a decree on March 11, 2020 laying down the manner and conditions for release of Taliban prisoners.<sup>39</sup>

The first batch of Taliban prisoners were released in April 2020.<sup>40</sup> So far, the government of Afghanistan has released a total of 4,400 Taliban fighters, however, the government has said it will not release the remaining 600 prisoners on the list as they are very dangerous and the “law does not allow” them to be released.<sup>41</sup> The government has asked Taliban to provide new names, whilst, the militant group has accused Afghan government of fabricating criminal cases against the prisoners.<sup>42</sup>

Since the US-Taliban peace agreement, the insurgency group has intensified their offensive on Afghan forces, while halting their attacks on foreign troops. Within 45 days of signing the US-Taliban agreement, Taliban have reportedly conducted 4,500 attacks in Afghanistan, marking a 70% increase from the same period last year. The data also indicate that Afghan National Security Forces’ (ANSF) casualty has sharply increased, while, Taliban casualty has dramatically declined compared to previous year.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, in June Afghanistan’s National Security Council said that ANSF witnessed their bloodiest week in the 19 years of Afghan war.<sup>44</sup> While Afghan government and its allies condemned the attacks and said it is in violation of the provisions of “reduction in violence” as stipulated in the agreement, Taliban dismissed the claims and stated that their attacks on Afghan government targets have substantially decreased.<sup>45</sup>

This is while Taliban raided Afghan Directorate of Security in Aybak, Samangan where 11 people were killed and 63 others were injured, the insurgent group took responsibility for the attack and said that it is a message to those who “do not understand the language of diplomacy”.<sup>46</sup> The domestic and international calls on Taliban to stop attacks before the start of intra-Afghan negotiations is dismissed as “illogical” by the insurgent group.<sup>47</sup>

To bolster peace efforts, Afghan government dissolved the Secretariat of High Peace Council and handed over its authorities to the State Ministry for Peace.<sup>48</sup> The ministry will be

responsible for all peace-related issues and to build and strengthen national, regional and international consensus around peace.<sup>49</sup>

On May 17, President Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah signed a power-sharing agreement to end the political impasse that was created after the result of the 2019 election was announced, both frontrunners had claimed presidency and held parallel inauguration in March 2020.<sup>50</sup>

Among others, the agreement paved the way for Abdullah Abdullah to appoint half of the cabinet, including State Minister for Peace and become the Chairman of High Council for National Reconciliation.<sup>51</sup> However, Abdullah has been criticized by a number of politician and Kabul residents for his passive role and not doing anything related to peace since assuming the role. This is while Abdullah’s spokesperson says that Abdullah has been meeting with political figures, women and youth representative, and that peace agenda is their priority.<sup>52</sup>

In late July, Taliban announced that they are ready to start intra-Afghan talks after Eid al-Adha conditional to release of their 600 remaining prisoners.<sup>53</sup> The announcement was followed by the latest reshuffle of Taliban negotiating team in Doha, Qatar. The Taliban released a list of 20-member negotiating team to lead their peace negotiations with Afghan government, to include 13 members of Taliban leadership council.<sup>54</sup> While some high-ranking officials in Afghan government still maintain that the 600 Taliban prisoners based on a pre-list won’t be released; on July 25, fifty Taliban prisoners were freed, however, it is not clear if they are the ones on the Taliban issued list or the alternate list that Afghan government provided for Taliban in mid-July.<sup>55</sup>

In an unprecedented move, on July 28, Taliban announced three-day ceasefire during Eid al-Adha. Since June 2019, this is the third ceasefire among warring parties.<sup>56</sup> The ceasefire announcement is followed by the Taliban supreme leader’s, Hibatullah Akhundzada, Eid message in which he reaffirmed the groups’ intention of establishing an

“Islamic government”, and emphasized that the group is not looking for monopoly of power and that the sovereignty and strength of an “Islamic system” is in Afghans from all ethnic backgrounds united together.<sup>57</sup> The three-day ceasefire is welcomed by Afghan government and its international allies.<sup>58</sup>

To decide the fate of the remaining 400 Taliban prisoners, Afghan government called on a consultative loya jirga.<sup>59</sup> The 3-day jirga started on August 7 and concluded on August 9, resulting in a 25-article resolution, allowing the release of remaining Taliban prisoners, conditional to, among others, immediate start of intra-Afghan talks, a fully-fledged ceasefire and national and international guarantees that the released prisoners will not return to battleground.<sup>60</sup> However, the insurgent group questioned the legitimacy of the Jirga and stated that the gathering is not representative of all Afghans.<sup>61</sup>

On August 13, Afghan government released 80 Taliban prisoners from the final batch of 400.<sup>62</sup> However, the release of the remaining 320 prisoners was halted, in part, due to concerns raised by France and Australia as well as disagreement between Afghan government and Taliban over the release of 22 Afghan Special Forces.<sup>63</sup> This is while Taliban have intensified their offensive, particularly after the end of the Eid al-Adha ceasefire. In their recent large-scale attacks, Taliban targeted an Army base in eastern province of Ghazni, killed 14 security forces in Takhar and exploded a VBIED targeting an army commando unit in the northern province of Balkh.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, the convoy of Fauzi Koofi, a member of Afghan peace negotiating team, was attacked in Parwan - Kabul highway, however, the Taliban have denied responsibility for the attack.<sup>65</sup>

On August 29, a presidential decree was issued to name the members of the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR), mandated to oversee the 21-member Afghan government negotiating team for the intra-Afghan talks. The members included Jihadi leaders, politician, religious figures and civil society actors.<sup>66</sup>

However, several appointees, including ex-president Hamid Karzai, jihadi leader Gulbudin Hekmatyar and ex-foreign minister Salahuddin Rabbani have decline their membership in the High Council.<sup>67</sup>

After nearly two decades of war, the intra-Afghan dialogue started on September 12 in Doha, Qatar. This marks a historic moment as it is the first time the warring parties have officially come to negotiation table.<sup>68</sup> On September 15, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution, welcoming direct talks between Afghan government and the Taliban.<sup>69</sup>

Since mid-September, the parties have been discussing the rules and regulation for the talks. Of the 20 disputed points, only two have remained unresolved.<sup>70</sup>

In the meantime, the Taliban have intensified their attacks and while repeatedly refusing calls for a nation-wide ceasefire.<sup>71</sup> According to a confidential report released by Foreign Policy, the majority of Taliban fighters released as part of the US-Taliban deal have returned to battleground or assumed their previously held positions within the group, despite their pledge not to resume fighting. The report also casts doubt on the Taliban’s commitment to reduce violence, and their promise to cut ties with al Qaeda.<sup>72</sup>

On September 20, the Taliban delegation proposed the establishment of an “elite religious council” to select the head of state, defying the democratic means for this purpose in the future “Islamic system”. The Taliban spokesperson also stated that women will have limited participation in health, education and judicial sectors in the future government.<sup>73</sup>

On September 23, in a pre-recorded speech to the UN General Assembly, President Ghani emphasized that peace is Afghanistan’s “most urgent and important priority” and called on international and regional actors to address terrorism as a “global phenomenon and threat” as

well as to help Afghanistan become a “sovereign, united and democratic” country.<sup>74</sup>

On October 5, President Ghani visited Doha, Qatar, where he met with Qatar Emir and Prime Minister to foster bilateral relations between the two countries.<sup>75</sup> President Ghani’s trip, however, coincides with a deadlock in the negotiations in Qatar while various mediators try to end the stalemate.<sup>76</sup>

In late September - early October, Abdullah Abdullah, chairman of the HCNR visited Qatar, Pakistan, India and Iran with the aim of strengthening regional consensus around Afghan peace and improving bilateral ties.<sup>77</sup>

On November 19, Pakistan’s Prime Minister, Imran Khan visited Afghanistan. In his first visit to Kabul, he stated that Pakistan will do everything in its power to reduce violence in Afghanistan.<sup>78</sup> The outcome of this visit was an agreement on “Shared Vision to Support Peace and Stability” in both countries. The agreement includes cooperation in areas of peace, security and economic development.<sup>79</sup>

Despite multiple warning that a drawdown in the number of US troops in Afghanistan will change the balance of power in favor of the Taliban, US Department of Defense announced a cutback of approximately 2,000 troops in Afghanistan by mid January 2021.<sup>80</sup> This will leave around 2,500 US troops in the country post January 2021.<sup>81</sup> The

move is being criticized by many, including those in US congress and members of the incoming Biden administration. The US-Taliban deal calls for the departure of all US service troops from Afghanistan by May 2021.<sup>82</sup>

NATO’s General Secretary stated in a tweet that NATO would continue to “train, advise and assist” Afghan forces, regardless of the plans for US troops withdrawal. Similarly, the German Foreign Minister stated that a premature drawdown in the number of troops from Afghanistan would complicate the peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, jeopardizing the achievements reached so far.<sup>83</sup>

After months of discussion over the rules and regulations for the intra-Afghan talks, on October 22 sources in Doha stated that the deadlock over the contested issues had been resolved and that a breakthrough had been achieved. However, this has not been officially confirmed. Reportedly, the parties have agreed to the US-Taliban deal, UN endorsement of the Afghan peace process, and commitment by both negotiation teams to act according to the will of the Afghan people as the basis for the negotiations.<sup>84</sup> The breakthrough comes a day after US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo’s visit to Doha and his meeting with both Afghan government and Taliban negotiation teams.<sup>85</sup> The next step in the current negotiation will be agreement by both sides to an agenda for the peace talks.<sup>86</sup>

## Endnotes

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