

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind

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Peace Talks Enter New Episode

Peace talks with Taliban seem to have entered a new episode. After much hype and no tangible result in the earlier episodes, it has to be seen whether this episode would have something other than hype and empty promises.

To start the new episode, a delegation of Afghan representatives held face to face talks with Taliban in Murree, a resort close to Islamabad, on Monday and Tuesday. Though not formally disclosed, it is believed that Afghan delegation included Hikmat Khalil Karzai – the political deputy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) and Haji Din Mohammad – a powerful tribal leader and the former governor of Nangarhar province and members of High Peace Council (HPC). According to a statement of Junbish e Milli Party spokesman Bashir Ahmad Tayanj, Faizullah Zaki also attended the talks for the First Vice President after consultation with National Unity Government leaders.

On the other hand, the Taliban representatives included Maulvi Jalil, Mullah Abbas Stanikzai and Qari Din Mohammad. Moreover, members of Haqqani Network were believed to have met Afghan representatives, as well. Pakistan hosted the talks while Chinese and US representatives played the role of observers.

These talks were important in a sense that it was first official meeting between Afghan government and Taliban representatives. Moreover, both the sides agreed to continue talks after Holy month of Ramadan as well. However, there are concerns regarding the fact that the talks were kept secret. It is really important for Afghan government to have a clear stance regarding such talks so that it does not require to hold them secretly and let the people of Afghanistan know about their true nature and outcomes.

In recent months there has been a kind of indication on the part of Taliban for negotiations. Earlier Taliban delegation participated in a meeting that was organized in Pughwash, Qatar and, afterwards, had a meeting with High Peace Council (HPC) in China. They also had an important meeting with Afghan women delegation in Norway, which was vital in a sense that they, at least, agreed to talk to women delegation. Taliban during their reign did not allow women to participate in political affairs and did not appreciate law to safeguard their rights as per the international requirements. One of the most important discussions, if the peace process proceeds, would be the rights of women as there is a huge distinction between what the present Afghan constitutions states about their rights and what Taliban believe they should be. A Taliban delegation also met Afghan officials in Dubai few weeks earlier and then an Afghan delegation visited Oslo, Norway, where, it met Taliban peace envoys. The delegation was led by Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq, the Second Deputy of Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah and included Deputy Foreign Minister Hikmat Khalil Karzai, former speaker of parliament Mohammad Younas Qanooni, former minister of women's affairs Husn Bano Ghazanfar, former minister of commerce Anwarulhaq Ahadi and a member of the High Peace Council (HPC), Farhadullah Farhad. However, after the Oslo meeting Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq said that there were no changes in the stance of Taliban regarding peace talks with Afghan government.

Nevertheless, it is important to see what will be the outcome of the Murree meeting as Taliban have not openly accepted that they are willing to hold talks with Afghan government. Moreover, it is still ambiguous whether the Taliban delegations truly represent all Taliban who are fighting in Afghanistan. There are reports that no one from Taliban Doha office attended the meeting. Taliban do not seem to have a unity of command and control; there are different factions of them operating under different leaderships. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude whether the Taliban representatives meeting Afghan government delegations really represent Taliban and their words and promises truly represent the minds and the hearts of the ones who are in direct fight with Afghan forces.

Taliban have not shown any willingness to call off their fight and currently they have continued their Spring Offensive and are in violent clashes with Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in different parts of the country. They have intensified their attacks in the northern and western parts of the country and few districts have, in fact, come under their control. They also rejected the call of Afghan Religious Scholars' Council for a ceasefire during the holy month of Ramadan. Similarly, Afghan National Army (ANA) also terminated reinstatements on the use of artillery against insurgents. As Taliban are literally in a war with Afghan security forces with no evident willingness to end it, it is difficult to see the dreams of peace coming true; or as some of the analysts believe this intensification in war may be a tactic by Taliban to earn a good bargain in talks. However, no peace negotiation would ever be successful unless there is a willingness and practical measures for a ceasefire.

Another important factor that will play a key role in the peace negotiations is the intention. Negotiations can only be successful provided that the intentions of the involved parties are clear and true. If Afghan authorities, Taliban leadership and the regional countries, particularly the neighboring countries show honest commitments, there is every possibility that Afghanistan would see the sun of peace and tranquility brightening its every corner. On the other hand, if all the stakeholders have ill-intentions of gaining only strength and self-centered benefits, it is really difficult to restore peace in the country.

Peace, as a matter of fact, is in the advantage of all the stakeholders; the only requirement is to realize this undeniable fact.



Kick-Starting Formal Peace Talks

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

In a major development for the peace efforts in Afghanistan, Afghan government delegation met Taliban representatives in Murree, a tourist resort near Islamabad. The talks are the first formal talks between the militant group and the Afghan government to end the long-lasting conflict in the country. According to Pakistani officials, participants of the talks agreed to continue negotiations with the aim to achieve peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. It is not yet fully clear if the ongoing talks are endorsed by the group's Qatar office; however, Pakistani officials have said the "participants of the talks had agreement of their leaders". Releasing a statement, Afghan ministry of foreign affairs has welcomed the talks, wishing the negotiations would begin a trend to prevent bloodshed in the country and pave the way for a peace settlement.

The talks are viewed as a milestone in the peace process, given the high-profile delegation comprised of Hikmat Khalil Karzai, Deputy Foreign Minister, and Haji Din Mohammad, a member of the High Peace Council. Since last year, Afghan politicians and HPC members had several informal peace discussions with members of the Taliban Qatar office in Norway, UAE and Qatar with no concrete progress for starting a formation peace talks. The peace talks in Pakistan are the first direct peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The formal peace talks is coming while Taliban spring offensive is at full swing and the militants waging a deadly offensive in many provinces across the country.

There have been much hopes pinned to the improvements of relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan for starting the long-awaited peace talks with the Taliban. However, despite a rapid improvement of Afghanistan-Pakistan ties and the hopes for a Pakistani role in peace negotiations, there has been no concrete progress in bringing the Taliban leaders on table of peace negotiations. The Taliban have been waging a deadly spring offensive in recent months. With the fresh momentum of the insurgency, all the efforts and preparations for a potential peace talks have been derailed with both the militant groups and the Afghan government trumpeting for war. In initial talks between Taliban envoys and Afghan delegates with different political backgrounds, both sides stressed the need for starting negotiations aimed at striking a peace deal that could end the conflict in the country. However, both sides failed to agree on potential compromises from the government and the militant groups to allow a fully-blown peace talks in Afghanistan.

In previous talks, the militants set a number of preconditions for starting peace negotiations with the Afghan government, notably stressing on immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops stationed in Afghanistan and amending the Afghan constitution. For the Afghan government these are the red lines which it is not prepared to cross at any cost. The new Afghan national unity government has made it clear that it is not going to compromise on the Afghan constitution and women's and human rights values. On the other hand, the government of Afghanistan has improved its security partnership with the West. Despite the preconditions set by the Taliban, there are hopes the

group would still come to peace negotiations given a number of variables such as pressures from Pakistan, new conditions on the ground, and the Taliban's internal shift towards entering peace talks with the United States. This suggests that any peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban would be unimaginably difficult given the thorniest issues related to the war and the Afghan constitution. The cautious hopes for the Taliban's coming to peace negotiations are also based on justified grounds. The group has shown much resilience towards some issues which were considered as the extremists' red lines when they governed Afghanistan over a half decade ago. The Taliban have suggested that they will be prepared to make compromises on women's rights and education for girls. The Taliban have come a long way in reaching this point. This is viewed as a remarkable shift of the militants' approach towards the women. Taliban delegates sat face to face with a number of Afghan women lawmakers and activists in Norway this year attempting to assure the women of the group's policies regarding women's rights. The Taliban have also made it clear that they would no longer be a threat to other countries notably the world powers that toppled the group from power in 2001. This is viewed as a pragmatic approach from the Taliban to the outside world involved in the Afghan conflict.

The fact is that there have been many factors forcing the Taliban to respond to the calls for peace talks. The group's weariness of war and continued robust security partnership between Afghanistan and NATO member states convince the Taliban that there would not chance of an outright military win for the group in post-NATO Afghanistan. Emergence of new militant players such as the Islamic State group and increasing decentralization of the Taliban has come as an alarm to the Taliban leadership for the future of the Taliban insurgency. Pakistan's shifting approach towards militancy, the Afghan Taliban and the government of Afghanistan is another factor that puts the Taliban in a difficult and even inevitable position for starting negotiations with the government of Afghanistan.

There are hopes as well as uncertainties regarding peace efforts in Afghanistan. Though providing an opportunity for forcing the Taliban into negotiations, emergence of new players such as the Islamic State militants Taliban members shifting allegiance further complicates prospects of the ongoing war and a peace deal with the Taliban. On the other hand, lack of a concrete action from Pakistan to bring the Taliban leaders to table of peace negotiations with the former Afghan government has tempered the initial hopes for a positive Pakistani role in the peace efforts.

The Two-day talks in Pakistan could be a genuine starting point in the road to a concrete peace deal with the Taliban. The opportunities currently available for starting peace talks may not permanently exist. The Afghan and Pakistani government need to work together to reach a common ground and a clear definition of a possible peace deal with the Taliban. Lack of actions from Kabul and Islamabad may mean forfeiting valuable opportunities that may not be existing at another time. Therefore, both the governments in Kabul and Islamabad needs to work hard to unite all major political forces in favor of resolving the long-lasting Afghan conflict and bringing peace and stability in both countries.

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Peace Talks Kicked-Off in Islamabad

By Asmatyari

The talks between Taliban and Afghan government kicked-off earlier in the capital city Islamabad of Pakistan. The representative from both the conflicting groups have agreed to continue talks to achieving peace and reconciliation process with follow up round to begin after the holy month of Ramadan. The Afghan delegation was led by Deputy Afghan Foreign Minister on Political Affairs Hekmat Khalil Karzai. Taliban's former Deputy Foreign Minister Mullah Jalil and senior leader Qari Din Muhammad represented the Taliban group. Earlier a two-day meeting between the Afghan officials and Taliban representatives was held in the month of May this year in Urumqi, China. This meeting was a follow-up of the recently of the same talks.

Formerly, President Ghani had demanded Pakistan to exercise its effort by bringing Taliban on the table of negotiation. It is said this series of talks are arranged by Pakistan to gesture goodwill aimed at a negotiated solution to the insurgency. Afghan government has been seeking a mediator that could facilitate the peace talks –depended on Pakistan and US for its formal instigation and finalization. Previously another round of conference was staged by the Oslo Forum was co-hosted by the Norwegian Foreign Ministry and the Geneva-based Center for Humanitarian Dialogue between conflicting factions. This setting was nothing more than a confidence building measure that might draw the conflicting factions comes close together.

Taliban and Afghan government has been in state of war for over decade that have earned devastating casualties and irreparable harms to war torn country – the central upshot. In order to draw in the stalled peace process, a practical, agreeable and feasible approach is required – a kick-starter. It is contemplated to work out a peaceful solution to ongoing conflict to put an end to ongoing bloodshed, provided a credible mediator exercise unconditional mediation. Moreover, a great degree of leniency is observed on government's part for getting the Taliban convinced for peace talks. Afghan authorities have repeatedly tried to jumpstart talks with the Taliban in the hope of ending a 13-year conflict, but the militants have set tough conditions, including the withdrawal of all foreign troops in Afghanistan, affirms the aforementioned reservations. Seeking quicker drawdown of international forces has never been a priority of Kabul's central government; instead it hastened to accredit the status of Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) that ascertains the residual force stay for another decade to carry out the assist, advice and train mission of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). How would the incumbent government persuade Taliban given in to its term –is an unarguable posture. In the former talks between Taliban representatives and members of Afghan civil society, had taken place in Norwegian capital, Oslo. Report-

edly, Taliban has demonstrated willingness to let women partake in socio-political endeavors and chase their academic goals unhampered. Most of the people fears, Taliban gave in, with regard to display a human friendly outlook –this very reservation do not coincide with the on ground truth. Taliban has made compromises, making then convenient fit in the new setup of democracy. There are some hard born reservations Taliban still assert to be primarily considered on peace talks agenda; they eye constitution to be Islamized, Taliban be given greater share in the new setup. Earning concession in women's right can not be deemed as if they would go rational on every account. The constitution certainly will be bombarded with Islamic clause –making the rule of business difficult for ordinary masses and religious minorities. This is the richest price the country will have to pay in the long run.

Nevertheless, just as it appears the peace process may finally be picking up steam, the Taliban recently rejected a call from the Afghan Religious Scholars' Council to put in place a ceasefire during the holy month of Ramadan. In response to the militant group's continued enmity and desire to continue fighting through the holy month, the Afghan National Army (ANA) has reportedly ended restorations on the use of artillery against insurgents. Taliban, the claimant of champion of Islamic instruction turned harsh –even vowed not to spare the people in the holy month.

Earlier, vehemently the government expected truce but Taliban turned it down by launching successive brutal attacks. It is evident Taliban wants to talks in the position of strength –nonetheless not the government. This bewildered stance may complicate governments' position. Though the president asserted the talk with Taliban would continue in the government's term, is contradicted with Taliban's present gallant gesture. This deliberately seems a political statement.

More or less, the peaceful resolution is the sole solution dace long conflict. It should be learnt that peace is not the absence of conflict, but the way conflict is lead to an conciliating ending. The years long war earned us not only life losses but also infrastructure losses. The harms inflicted to poverty stricken Afghanistan can not be reciprocated with endless butchery of the misled and betrayed militants and terrorists. Certainly, the segregation of militants into terrorist and insurgents might yield congenial solution –the terrorists are serving vested interest whilst insurgents for political say; the former should be dealt with iron fist while later through dialogue.

The dual approach; negotiation and operation exercised by incumbent government to seek an end to decade long bloody conflict, is justifiably agreeable. The government proposing peace talks to the conciliating splinter group amidst executing military operation in the bid to crush those challenging the writ of government, tends tolerable.

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