

Washington seeks Taliban deal as Afghanistan casualties mount

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US negotiators are expected to meet in the Qatari capital of Doha this week with representatives of the Taliban, the Islamist movement that the US toppled from power nearly a dozen years ago, only to fight a war with it and other Afghans opposed to foreign occupation ever since.

The talks triggered a political crisis before they even began, with US-backed Afghan president Hamid Karzai issuing a public protest that he had been lied to about US intentions in meeting with the Taliban. In retaliation, he formally broke off talks with Washington on a Bilateral Security Agreement that would provide for US troops remaining in the country after the December 2014 deadline that Washington and NATO have set for withdrawing all their forces.

Just hours before the Obama White House announced the planned talks with the Taliban, four US soldiers were killed in a mortar attack on the heavily fortified Bagram Airfield, north of Kabul. The Taliban claimed credit for the attack and reported that it had wounded six other troops.

Twenty-three US troops have been killed so far this month, bringing the total number to have lost their lives since the launching of Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001 to 2,243. Another 444 British troops as well as 653 from other NATO and US-aligned countries have also died.

Afghan casualties undoubtedly number in the hundreds of thousands. According to the United Nations, the number of civilians killed or wounded from the beginning of this year until June 6 reached 3,092, a 24 percent increase over the same period last year. And the Afghan NGO Security Office reported that there were 47 percent more attacks launched by the Taliban and other groups opposed to the government and the foreign troops that support it in the first quarter

of this year than in the same period in the first quarter of 2011.

The announcement of the US-Taliban talks came on the same day that the US-NATO command formally turned over security for the entire country to Afghan security forces. What this will mean in practice remains to be seen. Some 66,000 US troops and more than 30,000 from NATO and other US allies continue to occupy the country, and Pentagon commanders are reportedly pressing for them to remain in large numbers through next year's spring-to-autumn "fighting season."

As for the Afghan forces, while the army has 350,000 troops on the books, they are poorly trained and armed and are suffering heavy casualties as well as morale problems that lead to a loss of about a third of their ranks each year through desertions and failure to re-enlist. According to a Pentagon report issued last December, only 1 out of 23 Afghanistan National Army brigades is capable of operating on its own without US-NATO support.

Given the state of the Afghan military and the pledge to withdraw the bulk of the US-NATO troops by the end of next year, the Taliban appears to be going into the talks with the US and its puppet regime with a fair amount of confidence and is showing no inclination to put down its arms any time soon.

Speaking after the close of the G8 meeting in Northern Ireland, US president Barack Obama welcomed the Taliban's formal opening of its office in Doha and the initiation of talks, declaring, "This is an important first step towards reconciliation; although it's a very early step. We anticipate there will be a lot of bumps in the road."

The first major "bump" was provided by Karzai, who essentially charged that the Obama administration had

lied to him about the nature of the US-Taliban talks. A statement from his office announced the suspension of the talks on a post-2014 security agreement due to “the contradiction between the acts and the statements made by the United States of America in regard to the peace process.”

According to Afghan officials, the Karzai regime was angered by the Taliban’s presentation of its office in Doha not merely as an outpost for peace talks, but rather a virtual embassy for a rival government. One official who spoke to the Reuters news agency cited in particular the hoisting over the office of a Taliban flag and a banner of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, as the Taliban regime was known before it was overthrown by the US in 2001.

Karzai issued a statement vowing that his negotiators in the High Peace Council, which he set up in 2010 to pursue a negotiated settlement with the Taliban, would not go to Doha “as long as the peace process is not Afghan-led.”

Until now, the Taliban had refused to negotiate with representatives of the Karzai government, which it has branded a puppet brought to power by the US-NATO occupation and therefore illegitimate. A spokesman for the group said that there would be talks with fellow Afghans “in due time.”

Karzai apparently fears that the US could reach a deal with the Taliban at his expense. Given Washington’s increasing reliance on Islamist forces in Egypt and Turkey and in the wars it has instigated in Libya and Syria, such a concern is understandable.

US officials have publicly stated that they are seeking three commitments by the Taliban as the sole basis for a settlement: a formal break of all ties with Al Qaeda, an end to armed actions and acceptance of the Afghan constitution, an undemocratic document rammed through an unrepresentative loya jirga (tribal council) dominated by Karzai’s hand-picked delegates and Afghan warlords in 2004.

Al Qaeda today does not represent any significant force in Afghanistan, and its invocation by Washington is aimed more at maintaining the pretext that the war there is part of a “war on terror.” The reality is that the Bush administration could have negotiated such a break when the Taliban was in power, but instead chose to invade Afghanistan, initiating the 12-year war. Even before the September 2001 attacks, the Taliban

leadership had attempted to broker an agreement with Washington to remove Osama bin Laden and bring him to trial, but US officials showed no interest.

The unstated commitment that the US is most interested in securing from the Taliban is the acceptance of a continued US military presence in the country and US imperialism’s use of the Afghanistan as a forward base in projecting its power into Central and South Asia as well as against China.



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