

Massive blast hits Kabul as US envoy announces draft deal with Taliban

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A massive truck bomb exploded Monday night outside of Kabul's so-called Green Village, a fortified village housing foreign security contractors and NGOs. The suicide attack, which was claimed by the Taliban, came precisely as US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad was announcing a draft agreement with the Islamist movement in a broadcast on Afghan television.

The blast, which killed at least 16 people and wounded over 100, touched off an angry demonstration. Residents of nearby neighborhoods took to the streets demanding that the foreign contractors be moved out as their presence was leading to the deaths of Afghan civilians, who accounted for nearly all of the casualties, with the exception of three members of the country's security forces killed in the blast.

At one point, Afghan civilians scaled the walls of the compound, setting fire to armored SUVs parked inside. Others threw rocks and Molotov cocktails over the walls. Afghan riot police were brought in to suppress the "unauthorized demonstration," wounding at least five protesters with live ammunition.

In taking responsibility for the bombing, the Taliban said that the attack was in reaction to bombing of Afghan villages and homes by US occupation forces and the Afghan security forces.

The tentative deal announced by Khalilzad would ostensibly end US imperialism's 18-year-old intervention in Afghanistan, the longest war in US history. It was reached in nine rounds of negotiations between the US and the Taliban in Qatar's capital of Doha beginning last January.

According to Khalilzad, it would result in the withdrawal of some 5,400 US troops from Afghanistan beginning roughly five months after the agreement is signed. In return, the Taliban is supposed to guarantee that it will not allow territory under its control to be used by Al Qaeda, the Islamic State and its Afghan affiliate or any other armed group to prepare or launch attacks on the US or any other country.

"We have agreed that if the conditions proceed according to the agreement, we will leave within 135 days five bases in which we are present now," Khalilzad told Afghanistan's Tolo television news.

The withdrawal of the remaining 8,600 US troops is to be "conditions-based," tied to a subsequent round of negotiations between the Taliban and the US-backed regime in Kabul,

which was excluded from the Doha negotiations. The Taliban agreed only to negotiate with Washington, and not with the regime headed by President Ashraf Ghani, on the grounds that it is merely a puppet of the US-led occupation.

The US agreement to exclude Ghani's administration from the talks provided a concrete confirmation of the Taliban's assessment of the regime. Before appearing on Afghan television, the US envoy Khalilzad showed Ghani the draft agreement that had been hammered out without his participation.

A subsequent round of "Afghan-Afghan" negotiations is supposed to be directed at bringing about a permanent cease-fire in the country's protracted and bloody conflict, and creating the framework for an interim government that would include the Islamist movement that Washington intervened in October 2001 to topple.

The Taliban has insisted that the talks include the Afghan political opposition and other social groups, with representatives of the government representing only one faction.

For his part, Ghani is attempting to stage an election on September 28 in an attempt to secure some form of legitimacy before such talks. Both the Taliban and Khalilzad have opposed the move, with the latter referring to the US-backed government as "the biggest obstacle" to a peace accord. Ghani's opponents, including Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, his chief rival in the last election in 2014 with whom he supposedly shares power, have signaled that they are prepared to scrap the vote in the interest of "peace." No doubt, they are trying to keep their options open should the Taliban return to power.

In statements issued to their own followers, the Taliban leadership has portrayed the results of the negotiations with the US as the third historic triumph of the Afghan people against foreign occupation—following the driving out of the British in the 19th century and then the Soviets at the end of the 1980s. They have also suggested that the movement will be in a position to take Kabul.

According to a Reuters report citing a diplomat monitoring the Doha talks, the draft agreement would end US airstrikes on the Taliban, while the Islamist militia would halt all attacks on

US-led occupation forces, including “insider attacks” in which Taliban sympathizers in the Afghan security forces have turned their guns on US “advisers.”

Without US air support, the Afghan security forces would be far less able to resist an offensive by the Taliban, which has already seized more Afghan territory than at any time since it was ousted from power by the 2001 US invasion, controlling or contesting control over nearly half the country.

The draft deal between the US and the Taliban must be approved by US President Donald Trump, who has given contradictory signals about his attitude toward such an agreement, and the Taliban’s Leadership Council, or Quetta Shura, based in Pakistan.

Speaking to reporters last month, Trump cited the 18-year-long US occupation and said, “At a certain point, you have to say, that’s long enough.”

While Trump reportedly wants to secure an Afghanistan withdrawal before the 2020 election, he went on to indicate that the US would never completely pull out of Afghanistan. “It is a dangerous place and we have to keep an eye on it,” he said. “We’re going to keep a presence there. We’re reducing that presence very substantially and we’re going to always have a presence. We’re going to have high intelligence.”

Last Thursday, speaking on Fox Radio, the US president said that the US troop level would go down to 8,600 and “then we make a determination from there as to what happens.”

For the third time in barely one month, Trump repeated his assertion that “We could win that war so fast if I wanted to kill 10 million people.”

This implicit threat to wipe a country off the map with a nuclear weapon is not merely a twisted obsession of the current occupant of the White House. It is a telling expression of the criminality of the US ruling establishment and its military and intelligence apparatus as it employs violence, aggression and war across the globe in an attempt to offset the decline of US imperialism’s economic hegemony.

Gen. Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, also suggested that a complete US withdrawal—the principal demand of the Taliban—was far from assured. Last Wednesday, Dunford told the media, “I think it’s premature. I’m not using the ‘withdraw’ word right now. We’re going to make sure ... that Afghanistan’s not a sanctuary” for Al Qaeda-linked forces.

There is speculation that the deal between the US and the Taliban could include secret annexes that would allow Washington to maintain a “residual force,” including both CIA operatives and military contractors, some 2,500 of whom are already operating in Afghanistan. The CIA has over the past 18 years built up a network of armed militias, answerable only to the US intelligence agency. These armed groups, the best known of which is the Khost Protection Force, have been implicated in notorious abuses of the civilian population.

It is by no means excluded that Washington will attempt to

strike a bargain with a Taliban-led regime in Kabul to continue the pursuit of US imperialist interests that underlay the US 2001 intervention in the first place: securing US dominance over the energy-rich Caspian Basin and establishing a US military foothold in a strategic region bordering the former Soviet Union, China and South Asia.

The reactionary Islamist ideology of the Taliban is drawn in large measure from the Wahhabism exported by the Saudi monarchy, the principal US ally in the Arab world.

The US Afghanistan envoy Khalilzad got his start in the US government as an intelligence aide during the covert CIA-orchestrated war to topple the Soviet-backed Afghan government in the 1980s in which billions of dollars in arms and funding were funneled into a collection of Islamist militias that would give rise to both the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

Then in the 1990s, after the Taliban secured control over the country, Khalilzad was employed as an adviser to the oil giant Unocal, which was seeking a deal to run a natural gas pipeline across the country from the Caspian Basin to Pakistan, seeking to negotiate with the Islamist government and secure US recognition for it.

Whatever the fate of the US-Taliban agreement, the last 18 years of war and occupation have been catastrophic for the masses of the Afghan people. While the number of those killed directly in the conflict is conservatively placed at 175,000, when the number of indirect deaths is included, the figure is probably closer to 1 million. Millions more have been driven from their homes. On top of this slaughter of Afghans, the war has cost the lives of over 2,300 US military personnel and 1,100 other foreign troops.



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