Afghanistan

Between ‘civilian surge’ and negotiated peace

Oliver Jones and Kirsten Kaufman

With the 2nd Bonn Conference on Afghanistan due to start in December 2011, and with increasing acceptance by key political figures of the need for a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan, it is important to examine the prospects for such a settlement.

The current situation

At the NATO Lisbon Summit, attended among others by Hamid Karzai, the Afghan President, and Ban Ki-moon, the UN Secretary General, it was agreed on a “transition strategy” for Afghanistan, which is to phase in the handover of the country's provinces to Afghan security forces starting next year, and completing the shift within four years. With several security concerns in the international community over the reality of fewer boots on the ground, the international community is concerned of ensuring a stable security platform in 2014.

Current statistics demonstrate that force levels inside Afghanistan are at their highest level with more than 141,000 foreign troops deployed (of which roughly 130,500 are part of NATO’s ISAF). Afghan forces also number over 280,000, though current information suggests that only a single battalion sized unit of these is considered capable of unassisted operations. International and Afghan Government forces have apparently increased pressure upon the Taliban with special operations which have dramatically increased from the summer of 2010 when 2,974 Insurgents were killed or captured, of which 235 were considered ‘leaders,’ to early 2011 where around 12,500 Taliban had been killed or captured with roughly 1,500 of these considered ‘leadership.’

However, insurgent attacks remain at a high level. Despite evidence to suggest that the number of attacks had fallen year on year from 2010, more than 800 insurgent attacks were recorded in the first week of June 2011. Assassinations are also becoming a more popular tactic of the Insurgency, with the Kandahar area alone reporting between 5 and 10 assassinations per month in 2011, up from less than 5 per month in 2010 and less than 1 per month in 2009. Civilian deaths have been increasing as well, largely as a result of casualties caused by insurgent activity. In the first six months of 2011, according to the UN, 1,462 civilians were killed, up from 1,054 in the first six months of 2009 with at least eighty per cent of these inflicted by insurgents. As a consequence, Afghans are feeling less safe.

Ethnic and social divisions are also in evidence in the current Afghan conflict. In particular it is clear that in more socially conservative Southern Afghanistan, the strength of the Taliban is significantly higher than in Northern and Central Afghanistan. These areas tend to be Pashtun dominated, though the Taliban themselves are by no means an ethnically orientated organisation. Taliban strength in Southern Afghanistan is not only a reflection of numbers, but is also visible in the loyalty and quality of recruits. Further North, fighters utilised by the Taliban
tend to be of far lower commitment, sometimes operating as effective mercenaries, rather than ideological recruits.

Corruption is widespread and affecting all the levels of government and political authorities, thus affecting legitimacy, according to Pino Arlacchi, MP, Vice Chair of the European Parliament Delegation with Afghanistan.

The EU’s major effort in the country is carried on the basis of EU police training missions, specifically EUPOL Afghanistan. According to Allison Weston, Acting Head of Conduct of Operations Division, Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability, in charge of the EU police Training Mission, the training and building of a police infrastructure will be important as ISAF troops are being withdrawn. Expectations are modest, while more focus is being put on justice and the rule of law, and on developing a Ministry of the Interior and National Police Force.

**Current peace initiatives/negotiations**

Several initiatives have been started which aim to bring about a negotiated resolution to the conflict. First amongst these is the Afghan ‘High Peace Council’ which is tasked with orchestrating a peaceful Afghan settlement with the Taliban and associated groups. An initiative of Hamid Karzai, the Council was created as a result of the June 2010 Afghan ‘Peace Jirga,’ a conference designed to create consensus on how to approach peace negotiations with insurgent forces. However the 70-strong Council has been criticized, holding only 9 female members and including a significant number of warlords, former insurgent commanders and former members of the communist government. The Council has also proven controversial with political opposition groups in Afghanistan, some have accused Karzai of attempting to use the Council as a source of political legitimacy in the aftermath of his controversial election. The Jirga itself was condemned by the Taliban and other militant organizations such as Hezb-i-Islami, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Taliban forces even attempted disruptive attacks against the Jirga in June 2010. Hekmatyar’s group has presented a separate peace deal to the Afghan government, though this is outside the Peace Council/Peace Jirga activities. So far the Peace Council has achieved little visible success in negotiations with the majority of groups.

The ‘Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program’ which offers an effective amnesty to former fighters who renounce violence is also on-going. Progress so far however has been limited, with reports as of June 2011 listing 1,700 fighters as having subscribed to the program which has had over $140 million pledged to it. This scheme suffers from some significant flaws as a model for negotiated peace. Foremost amongst these is the fact that it does not represent a model for a political settlement. Because of this, it is only ever likely to attract those fighters who have very weak political commitments to the Taliban’s cause. This program, although helpful in demobilizing limited numbers of anti-government fighters, holds little prospect of expanding to become the basis of a lasting end to the armed struggle of the Afghan Taliban.

However, there has been more promising recent evidence of apparent negotiations between the U.S. government and representatives of the Quetta Shura Taliban held on at least three separate occasions in Qatar and Germany. More recently reports indicate that these
negotiations have broken down as a result of the government of Hamid Karzai deliberately leaking information on the talks. This is likely caused due to concerns within the Karzai government of being side lined by direct U.S.-Taliban negotiations. This fear was probably compounded by the centrality of Tayeb Agha to the negotiations, as he has previously promoted the idea that negotiations should take place between the U.S. and the Taliban, with the Karzai government in a secondary position. Tayeb Agha has held several positions within the Quetta Shura Taliban, including heading the Taliban’s political committee (tasked with developing the Taliban’s political objectives) and as Mullah Omar’s personal secretary.

According to Ambassador Simon Gass, NATO Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan, 5 key points are necessary for making the transition in 2014 a success and creating a stable security platform in Afghanistan. The first is to build strong civilian support, by development, good governance, and improvements in rule of law. Second is the need to establish a post 2014 framework in the international community by developing U.S.-Afghan security relations, Afghanistan relations with the EU, NATO, and other organizations as well as trade and investment. Grass’ third point is that of a civilian-diplomatic surge by encouraging civilian participation in the political process. Fourth, the international community needs to continue training of Afghan national security forces, including the military and police. Finally, it is necessary to keep military pressure on insurgency, even as troops levels are being reduced.

There also exists the possibility that the Taliban may well send representatives to the upcoming Bonn conference, as a part of the Afghan delegation. Such a move would be hugely significant and may well serve to increase the significance of the event, with the chance of a preliminary peace deal being revealed there that has had input from all sides. A recent letter apparently written by Mullah Omar however has dismissed the international conference in Bonn. Despite the dismissal, the letter does apparently soften Taliban positions on peace with the Kabul Government, and suggests the Taliban do not desire complete power over Afghanistan. This may indicate a desire to become part of a non-violent Afghan political process.

Thomas Ruttig, Co-Director of the Afghanistan Analysis Network, believes that it is necessary to invite and increase participation by civil society in the upcoming Bonn Conference. It is necessary to invest in empowering members of civil society in Afghanistan to participate in the political process, specifically voting. Ruttig suggests empowering members of civil society before the 2nd Bonn Conference by hosting a round table discussion between Afghan civil and political forces and encouraging more Afghan participation in the upcoming meeting. Civil society participation was marginalized and not taken seriously in previous conferences.

Obstacles to resolution

First amongst these are concerns over the links between Al Qaeda (AQ) and the Taliban(s). Governments from across the world share an interest in ensuring that Afghanistan cannot become a safe haven for global Salafi militancy. Some evidence does suggest however that AQ and the Taliban (at least the Quetta Shura) hold significant divisions, recognition of this, and desires to reach a peaceful accommodation. This may have a relation with the recent UNSC decision to formally divorce the two organizations, previously lumped together in UNSC
Resolutions. This UNSC move may also demonstrate the strength of the desire of the international community to reach a negotiated peace within Afghanistan.

Perhaps the most significant obstacle to negotiations lies in the preconditions set on both sides before official peace talks may take place. The Quetta Shura Taliban and other groups such as Hezb-i-Islami have both previously called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces as a precondition of negotiation. The U.S. government meanwhile has listed: disarmament, abandoning Al Qaeda and acceptance of the Afghan constitution as its conditions, though, it must be noted, in February 2011 Hillary Clinton has revised this position, citing this list as “necessary outcomes” of negotiations rather than preconditions (speech at the Asia Society, New York).

Divisions within the Insurgency also represent problems for peace talks. The ‘Taliban’ is not a monolithic organisation but a name often applied to several groups. The Quetta Shura; Haqqani Network; Mullah Dadullah Front; Hezb-i-Islami are several of the better known groups. The Quetta Shura controls what may most accurately be described as the Afghan Taliban. Its leadership, including Mullah Omar, has strong links to or were part of the Taliban government of Afghanistan prior to 2001. However, even successful negotiations with this group may not end the conflict. The structure of the organisation, based on personal loyalty and relationships, leaves it vulnerable to fragmentation. Other insurgent groups, who cooperate with, but are not part of the Quetta Shura Taliban may require a separate peace.

As important regional powers with particular interest in Afghanistan, both Iran and Pakistan could also present potential problems to any peace process. Pakistan holds some influence over two of the three major insurgent groups in Afghanistan. Both the Haqqani Network and Hezb-i-Islami have reportedly been linked to Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence. Pakistan has implied an ability to force the Haqqani network to the table, but this is not guaranteed, especially if Pakistan feels threatened by Afghan-Indian relations. Conversely Indian suspicion of any settlement with Islamist groups in Afghanistan might serve to encourage Pakistani cooperation. Iran also has some influence on the situation though its interests are more complex. Iran has a strong interest in seeing the establishment of a stable Afghan neighbour, with a government able to challenge the narcotics trade and to curtail the activities of Salafi inspired groups. Iran is opposed to any U.S. military basing rights in a stable Afghanistan; as such Iran’s position on peace negotiations will depend on the specifics of the deals offered by each side.

Finally, negotiations may require a shift in current U.S. tactics in Afghanistan. The significantly increased use of drone strikes and ‘kill or capture’ raids is liable to be detrimental to any peace process. Not only do such attacks undermine trust and harden attitudes, but in the longer term these attacks also degrade the ability of the Taliban leadership to control their organisation: Taliban command and control structures are very much based on personal relationships, which these raids can sever. Leadership in hiding becomes much harder to contact for all sides in the conflict. The Afghan government, alongside NATO and the U.S. may well find themselves negotiating to figures that have become irrelevant to the leadership of the Taliban, as Lawrence Korb (Center for American Progress) affirmed.
Concluding thoughts

In conclusion there are several key points which require highlighting with regards to the current situation in Afghanistan and the future of any resolution to the conflict.

Firstly, it is important to note that the idea of talks is taken seriously by the Taliban. Despite a continuing high level of violence including several recent high profile attacks against the foreign presence in Afghanistan, such as the assault on the British Council and the devastating truck bomb targeted against American military personnel, the Taliban appear to considering the possibilities for a negotiated settlement. Indeed the occurrence of such significant attacks in recent weeks may well be indicative of a desire for an enhanced negotiating position from the Quetta Shura leadership. The presence of individuals such as Tayeb Agha suggest at the very least that high level leadership is aware of peace talks, if not tacitly supporting them. Recent dismissals of peace talks, although worrying, do not necessarily indicate a lack of will on behalf of the leadership. This may have resulted from a desire to re-assure its domestic audience, and lower echelons of its commitment to their struggle and as a further mechanism to gain concessions.

It is also key to note that the process of negotiated settlement will likely be a lengthy process. Although the potential for Taliban representation at Bonn does exist, it would be a mistake to assume that the Bonn Conference will bring about a peaceful resolution or that the conference will result in significant progress towards a deal. As an example, the British Government was involved in negotiations with dissident Irish republican groups from at least the 1970’s before a lasting peace settlement was reached in the late 1990’s. It must also be said that even if/when negotiations do finally resolve the conflict with the Taliban, this will not mean peace and stability for Afghanistan. Splinter groups, separate organizations such as Hezb-i-Islami and the Haqqani Network and those involved in the production and trafficking of narcotics will all remain involved in sub-state violence. These groups may require their own distinct solutions to conflict, or may remain unable to resolve their differences with the Afghan political system. To use Northern Ireland as an example again: to this day small groups continue to perpetrate a low level of violence in pursuit of political goals.

Finally it is important to stress that any deal will likely result in a weakening of the Afghan State. Some analysts have suggested that the Taliban might push for some form of autonomy over the Afghan South, an area where they retain a significant level of support. Any ceding of power to Taliban authorities may encourage similar demands from other political and ethnic movements; in particular many within the ‘Afghan National Front’ political alliance would like to see a decentralization of power from the Karzai executive. This reality may underline key divisions of interests between foreign stakeholders in the Afghan conflict and the current Afghan administration. Even within the international community, the creation of a Taliban autonomous region may prove a hard sell to India, Russia, Iran and some domestic publics in the West. The draining of power away from the Afghan centre may raise concerns over the return of international terrorist groups, but it should be noted that the chances of Afghan wide Taliban
government are low whatever the outcome of negotiations, and this fragile balance of power will reduce the likelihood of a return of Al-Qaeda related groups.

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1. This article is based on a Note produced for the Atlantic Treaty Association, September 2, 2011. This Note is the result of a report from an Evening Debate organized by the Security and Defense Agenda and further research by the ATA Secretariat.


3. Figures for April 2011, figures obtained from: Livingston; O’Hanlon ‘Afghanistan Index’ (September 2, 2011).