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A Deal With the Taliban Is Only the First Step Toward Peace

The Real Negotiations Are About to Begin

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After months of [closed-door negotiations](#) ^[1] in Doha, Qatar, the United States appears close to finalizing a deal with the Taliban that would end Washington's 18-year war in [Afghanistan](#) ^[2]. The agreement would reportedly set a conditional timetable for the United States to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan in exchange for Taliban commitments to suppress terrorist groups and open peace talks with their fellow Afghans.

The deal is controversial. Supporters (and I am one of them) view the agreement as far preferable to the status quo—a bloody battlefield stalemate—and a necessary first step toward any deal among Afghans to end the war. Critics worry that the deal sells out Washington's Afghan allies, places [naive trust in an extremist group](#) ^[3], and provides cover for a troop withdrawal that Trump wants regardless of whether it makes diplomatic or military sense.

Ultimately, though, no U.S.-Taliban agreement will [determine Afghanistan's future](#) ^[4]. Talks with the Taliban, the Afghan government, and other Afghan parties are far more important, and these are expected to start soon after the U.S.-Taliban deal is announced. Thus the most vital concession that the United States' lead negotiator, Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, has wrung from the Taliban is not the group's well-publicized promise not to support terrorism; rather, it is the group's agreement to at last negotiate with other Afghans, which for years it has refused to do until a timetable was in place for U.S. troops to withdraw. If, as reported, Khalilzad has negotiated a conditional timetable for withdrawal, the actual departure of U.S. troops would be contingent on the Taliban continuing these negotiations in good faith.

If the intra-Afghan talks that follow any U.S.-Afghan agreement succeed, stability is possible in Afghanistan and the U.S.-Taliban deal will have been a necessary precursor. If they fail, this initial deal's virtues may be for naught. The most important phase in this peace process is just beginning.

MAPPING THE TRANSITION

The primary mission of intra-Afghan talks will be to map out a transition period that ends the war and brings the Taliban into Afghanistan's political system. This will almost inevitably require the Afghan parties to address three issues from the beginning: Afghanistan's

forthcoming presidential election, the precise mechanism for incorporating the Taliban, and a ceasefire.

Afghanistan's presidential election is currently scheduled for September 28, but Afghans are split on whether it should take place. President Ashraf Ghani, the front-runner, wants to hold the election so that he can win a fresh mandate for negotiations. The Taliban argue for canceling the vote, which they consider an illegitimate product of the post-2001 "occupation" of Afghanistan. Many other Afghan leaders, notably former President Hamid Karzai ^[5], hope to cancel or delay the election because they consider peace a greater priority and fear—rightly—extensive electoral fraud and violence. The election may now be so near that a cancellation is unrealistic, but the parties are likely to debate the issue in the first days of intra-Afghan talks.

Whether or not the election proceeds, Afghans will need to negotiate a process for the Taliban to transition into mainstream politics. Ghani wants the current Afghan government to preside over any transition, while the Taliban and many of Ghani's other rivals want to create a new interim government. Either way, Afghan leaders will need to define what positions will be open to Taliban representatives. The negotiators must also agree on what the interim government's core tasks will be: for instance, reviewing the Afghan constitution, devising a program to reintegrate today's fighters into society, and reforming the security forces. Finally, the Afghan leaders will need to agree on how and when the transition will end and how any interim authority will be dissolved, whether through an election or a national conference to choose its successor.

The top objective for most non-Taliban Afghan leaders will be to negotiate an enduring cease-fire ^[6]. Like most insurgents at war with governments, the Taliban view violence as their primary source of leverage. They therefore have an incentive to postpone a permanent cease-fire until the political questions have been resolved. This means that although nearly all Afghans want an immediate end to the fighting—and Khalilzad has emphasized that a cease-fire must be a part of any final deal—an actual cease-fire may have to wait until the start of a transitional period.

DEFINING THE FUTURE

Beyond these immediate issues, intra-Afghan discussions will need to broach the larger questions at the heart of the war—those concerning Afghanistan's longer-term political future and how the country can begin to rebuild after nearly four decades of civil war. These questions may take years to fully resolve but finding some early convergence will be critical for a successful peace process.

Perhaps the most basic question concerns Afghanistan's form of government. Nearly all non-Taliban Afghans embrace the post-2001 democratic system, whatever its flaws. Although Taliban leaders rarely demand the literal return of their draconian 1996–2001 emirate, in which the group banned elections and imposed a strict form of sharia law, they reject the legitimacy of the post-2001 system and insist on replacing it with something more "Islamic." If the Taliban decide that a compromise is possible on this point, they may propose some new balance of secular and religious institutions akin to the Iranian system, in which unelected clerics exercise a check on elected officials. If so, the most important debate in the entire negotiation might be over the respective authorities of elected and religious leaders.

Particularly in light of this fundamental divergence over the role and interpretation of religion, the negotiators will undoubtedly need to address the fundamental rights of Afghan citizens [7], especially women, who were prevented from working or attending school the last time the Taliban held power. Afghan women's groups are adamant that the country must not revive the abuses of the Taliban regime, and most Afghan leaders at least claim they will prioritize women's rights in any negotiation. The Taliban are quick to assert that they, too, will protect women's rights—albeit “in accordance with Islam.” Basic rights for women are now guaranteed by the 2004 Constitution of Afghanistan. Yet they will inevitably come up for discussion, and the parties might well empower a commission to amend or redraft the document. The international community has long prioritized the treatment of women as a vital litmus test of its willingness to continue to bankroll Afghanistan, something that even the Taliban quietly recognize; this might prove important leverage for donors to prevent any deal from trading these rights away.

Finally, no agreement will be stable unless it meaningfully provides for the enormous population of fighters and prisoners that the war has created. The Afghan government currently holds tens of thousands of battlefield prisoners, most of them Taliban fighters, and the Taliban can reportedly mobilize up to 60,000 men. Most Afghan leaders appear inclined to release the majority of these prisoners, forgive most crimes, and help fighters find gainful employment as the price of peace. Even a magnanimous approach, however, comes with serious challenges. Disillusioned fighters could drift toward groups such as the Islamic State (or ISIS). The Taliban may resist demobilizing even under a peace agreement. Victims may bitterly oppose impunity for murderers. And whatever happens in the negotiations, Afghanistan's poor economy will struggle to absorb tens of thousands of young men. Reintegrating these fighters into society will take years of arduous work, even if the parties agree on principles at the outset.

AIM HIGH

The Afghan negotiators could begin to address some of the country's most fundamental issues in their first round of talks. Alternatively, they could aim for something simpler and more immediately achievable, such as a suite of confidence-building measures or a schedule of milestones that puts off resolving core disputes.

The parties should be wary, however, of setting their sights too low. Addressing the major questions concerning Afghanistan's future will only get harder over time. The world's attention may move on, Afghan and international parties may become less committed to peace, and outside events may roil the country's domestic politics. Nobody expects an immediate grand bargain, but the negotiators may be able to find a sweet spot—for instance, an agreement on the mechanics of the transition process and on a set of principles to guide future negotiations on the longer-term substantive issues. Early talks may not settle on new constitutional language, for example, but they might empower a commission to do so and give it guidance on what can or cannot be changed. Each guideline will chip away at the conflict's central disputes at a moment—possibly fleeting—when both the government and the Taliban are willing to talk.

Ending Afghanistan's war will require all parties to make difficult compromises. An intra-Afghan settlement is the only plausible way to achieve stability, however; neither a hasty U.S. withdrawal nor an inertial U.S. presence can bring it about. Washington must do whatever it can to help intra-Afghan negotiations succeed—most importantly by reinforcing that the

departure of U.S. troops depends on the talks' progress. This offer of a conditional U.S. withdrawal was necessary to create the current moment of opportunity, but ultimately, peace in Afghanistan depends on Afghans themselves.

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