



2ND KABUL PROCESS: TIME FOR TALIBAN TO GRASP THE MOMENT

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



It appears that the stalled peace process between Kabul and the Afghan Taliban may finally be on the verge of revival, and may even have been resurrected by the recent offer President Ashraf Ghani made to the Afghan Taliban during the second round of the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation in Kabul on February 28, 2018.

In an unprecedented move, and what is being termed as the best offer presented by any Afghan government, President Ghani offered recognition of the Taliban as a legitimate political group and to open an office for them in Kabul, proposed a ceasefire, release of Taliban prisoners, their removal from the international blacklists, security arrangements, as well as pledges to reintegrate and provide employment to those Taliban willing to join the process.¹ More importantly, President Ghani's offer to hold new elections involving the Taliban, as well as his offer for a constitutional review,² is significant considering the fact that a constitutional review or amendment has always been a major demand of the Taliban and unlike any offer made in the past.³

¹ Hamid Shalizi, James Mackenzie, "Afghanistan's Ghani offers talks with Taliban 'without preconditions,'" *Reuters*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban/afghanistans-ghani-offers-talks-with-taliban-without-preconditions-idUSKCN1GCOJ0>

² Hamid Shalizi, James Mackenzie, "Afghanistan's Ghani offers talks with Taliban 'without preconditions,'" *Reuters*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban/afghanistans-ghani-offers-talks-with-taliban-without-preconditions-idUSKCN1GCOJ0>

³ "Ghani Makes Taliban An Offer To Join Peace Process," *TOLOnews*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/ghani-makes-taliban-offer-join-peace-process>

In return, the Taliban are expected to recognise the Afghan government and respect the rule of law, including the rights of women.⁴ A document, titled *Offering Peace: Framing the Kabul Conference of February 28, 2018*, outlined Kabul's offer to the Taliban, in which it was stated that, "Kabul's offer was without preconditions in order to lead to a peace agreement in which:

1. Constitutional rights and obligations of all citizens (especially women) are ensured.
2. The constitution is accepted, or amendments proposed through the constitutional provision.
3. Defense and security forces and civil service function according to law.
4. No armed groups with ties to transnational terrorist networks and transnational criminal organizations, or with state/non-state actors seeking influence in Afghanistan, are allowed."⁵

President Ghani also used the opportunity to reach out to Pakistan, as he stated that, "Kabul is ready for talks with Pakistan, as [Kabul] wants to forget the past and start a new chapter." He further called on Pakistan to hold government-to-government talks, stressing that Kabul would be the best place to do so.⁶

Efforts dating back to over a decade have been made to establish dialogue with the Afghan Taliban. In 2001, Hamid Karzai as head of the interim government, declared a general amnesty for ordinary Taliban fighters,⁷ and in fact even offered positions in the government to those willing to put down their weapons.⁸ However, Karzai failed to win the trust of the Taliban who viewed him with immense suspicion, and criticized the Karzai government for "half-hearted attempts"⁹ at initiating peace, which they felt were "based on rhetoric and empty words."¹⁰

However, after the government of national unity took over in 2014, President Ghani reached out to the Taliban to enter into talks with the government.¹¹ Advocating for an inter-Afghan dialogue, President Ghani pursued efforts domestically (attempting to galvanize domestic support for the

⁴ Kathy Whitehead, "Government Discloses Details Of Ghani's Peace Offer," *TOLONews*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/government-discloses-details-ghani%E2%80%99s-peace-offer>
⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ghani Makes Taliban An Offer To Join Peace Process," *TOLONews*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/ghani-makes-taliban-offer-join-peace-process>

⁷ SayedSalahuddin, "Omar Vanishes as Victors Squabble Over Kandahar", *Reuters*, December 8, 2001, <http://www.afghanistannewscenter.com/news/2001/december/dec8b2001.html>

⁸ "Afghanistan's Karzai urges Taliban talks after scare", *Reuters*, September 9, 2007, www.reuters.com/article/featuredCrisis/idUSSP143493

⁹ "Taliban ridicules Karzai as puppet", *SBS News*, November 4, 2009, <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2009/11/04/taliban-ridicules-karzai-puppet>
¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "New Afghan President Ashraf Ghani calls for Taliban peace talks," *Dawn*, September 29, 2014, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1135067>

peace process), as well as sought assistance from the international community, particularly, Pakistan, China and the Arab world for establishing talks with the group. Hence, while offers of entering into peace talks have been made to the Afghan Taliban, such an unprecedented offer has certainly never been made and nor should it be missed by the Taliban.

On the other hand, in a further unprecedented development, the Taliban too have expressed their willingness for peace talks. In a letter addressed to President Donald Trump and the American people, the group expressed that it is willing to enter into 'peaceful dialog' to end the 'futile and unwinnable' American war in Afghanistan.¹² At the same time, the group invited Senator Rand Paul (Kentucky Republican), a tough critic of the prolonged US-led war in Afghanistan, to visit what it said was a political office in the Qatari capital of Doha, "for mutual talks."¹³ The group further expressed that it was "sincerely committed" to meeting international concerns over Afghanistan being used as a base for terrorist attacks and had no wish for conflict with the United States or other powers.¹⁴

Although the Taliban are stronger than before and have taken more territory in 2016-17 than at any other time in their nearly 17 year war, the Taliban should not let this opportunity go to waste. After all, differences within the Taliban over leadership and peace talks have resulted in divisions within the group, with many joining the Daesh /IS. Despite limited presence and influence, the Daesh has been able to lure in many Taliban fighters and commanders. Although the Taliban initiated a recruitment commission¹⁵ to win back defected members, Taliban members continue to join the Daesh. Subsequently, major clashes have been taking place between the Daesh and Afghan Taliban, at times in Taliban dominated areas such as Nangahar.¹⁶ Hence, clashes continue to take place, including the recent violence in Lagman on February 14, 2018 in which both sides suffered casualties, but the Taliban had to retreat from 11 villages. This clearly shows that the Daesh poses a grave strategic threat to the very survival of the future of the Taliban in Afghanistan.¹⁷

¹² "Letter of the Islamic Emirate to the American people," *The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*, February 14, 2018, <https://alemarah-english.com/?p=25640>

¹³ Carlo Munoz, "Taliban invites Rand Paul to peace talks," *The Washington Times*, February 11, 2018, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/feb/11/rand-paul-invited-peace-talks-taliban/>

¹⁴ "Taliban pours cold water on Afghanistan President's peace talk invitation," ABCNews, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-01/taliban-pour-cold-water-on-invitation-to-afghan-peace-talks/9500610>

¹⁵ Abdul Basit, "Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban's IS predicament," *Express Tribune*, May 12, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/884582/al-qaeda-and-theafghan-talibans-is-predicament/>.

¹⁶ Casey Garret Johnson, "The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan," *USIP*, November 2016, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR395-The-Rise-and-Stall-of-the-Islamic-State-in-Afghanistan.pdf>

¹⁷ Hekmatullah Azamy, "Afghan Taliban Scrambling With The Rise of Islamic State," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, April 30, 2015, <http://gandhara.rferl.mobi/a/afghanistan-taliban-scrambling-with-the-islamicstate/26987259.html>

Despite putting up a largely united and strong front, the Taliban know that they cannot operate in isolation and in order to capture any means of political power and counter the threat posed by IS, they will have to reach a political compromise with the Ghani government. Subsequently, the Taliban will have to ensure a visible reduction in their attacks against the state. While the group continues to justify its on-going offensive, "to liberate Afghanistan from foreign control,"¹⁸ it is no longer advisable for them to do so as they are no longer fighting a foreign enemy, but rather fellow Afghans who make up the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

With changing regional dynamics and threat of the IS, neither the Afghan government nor the Taliban can afford to miss this opportunity of starting at least a dialogue process, as force is no more the solution. Recent moves by both Kabul and the Taliban clearly suggest willingness to enter into some form of engagement, but the Taliban's demand that they would like to initiate dialogue with the US first and later with Kabul is highly problematic since Kabul perceives this to be unacceptable. Moreover, the US has also clearly stated that it will not engage with the Afghan Taliban bilaterally.¹⁹

However, since the US is a party to the negotiations, the Taliban's demand should not be seen as a deal breaker, and in fact Kabul and the US should show flexibility since this is an important first step in a series of many more to come, that could lead to breakthroughs advantageous to all three parties. This would also ensure that the unprecedented magnanimity shown by President Ghani, and the subsequent overtures to the Taliban do not go to waste since they are coming after years of bloodshed.

Similarly, the Taliban too should not consider entering into talks as a 'surrender,' but rather see the offer as an opportunity to become a legitimate part of the future of Afghanistan and put an end to the long history of violence and bloodshed they have been a part of. In fact, by joining the process, their cause and mission will in no way be undermined, but will find a new and non-violent platform.

The real challenge for all parties is to find a solution that eliminates violence and promotes peace and reconciliation. Dialogue is the only way to end the turmoil in Afghanistan, and while the process is complex, long and frustrating, all principal actors involved will have to demonstrate flexibility and patience if they really want to put an end to the conflict. Afghanistan cannot afford the continuation of this conflict when such decisive steps have shown a sliver of hope towards a negotiated settlement - the future of the country depends on whether these opportunities are grasped.

¹⁸ "Good Islamic ethics, the sign of the sacred Azm (Determination) of Mujahideen," *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*, May 28, 2015, <http://shahamatenglish.com/good-islamic-ethics-the-sign-of-the-sacred-azm-determination-ofmujahideen/>

¹⁹ "Afghan Taliban call on US to hold direct talks for 'peaceful solution'," *Dawn*, February 27, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1392067>