

## Ahmed Rashid in Berlin: Transition before a political settlement 'is absurd'

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By Thomas Ruttig

Earlier today, Ahmed Rashid participated in a Chatham House-ruled podium in Berlin about 'Afghanistan on the Road to Bonn: Impacts of a Region in Change'. Of course, the event was overshadowed by the recent killing of OBL in Abbottabad, which has created some optimism for an opening political solution in Afghanistan amongst participants, and Ahmed tackled this issue, too. But, more importantly, he was very concise on issues like the need for an inclusive political settlement before transition and about the urgently needed involvement of Afghan civil society in the run-up to the Bonn-2(\*) conference in December. Therefore, AAN's Thomas Ruttig documents some of what Ahmed said, with his permission.

As could be expected, Ahmed started with the US operation that led to the killing of Osama Bin Laden, looked at its repercussions for al-Qaida and Pakistan as well as at al-Qaeda's relationship with the Afghan Taleban. After OBL's death, Ahmed stated, 'Pakistan is still in a state of denial. It is blaming the West, the Americans' and follows a 'very belligerent line', after initial softer statements by the civilian government.

"Al-Qaeda central" might shift to Yemen, Somalia or elsewhere in Africa now'. At the same time, groups like 'Central Asian groups, Lashkar-e Taiba and the Pakistani Taleban' remain active in Pakistan and are 'very close to al-Qaida. The largest number of terrorist groups that sympathise with al-Qaeda are in Pakistan.' He also said that he expects 'a lot of revenge attacks' after OBL's demise.

'It is a different point with the Afghan Taleban', Ahmed added. 'The Americans have always given a blanket definition of terrorism', putting al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taleban into the same category, 'while these are two distinct organisations'. The Afghan Taleban 'have not participated in or praised 9/11 or international jihad. Now, they have been hesitant with issuing a statement on Bin Laden's death. [See what finally came out - six days after the event - here] There has never been an organizational joint between al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taleban.' This means, he concluded, that the Afghan Taleban 'do not need to carry on the burden of al-Qaeda with them', in particular since Ahmed agrees that the relationship was very much a personal one, between OBL and Mulla Omar. But: 'This does not exist anymore now.'

On 'what the Americans call transition', Ahmed does not see the situation ripe for this 'on the ground', with the security situation actually worsening; he pointed to the recent two days of fighting in Kandahar city. [Well, yes, Kandahar is not part of transition phase 1 but sooner or later it will have to be transferred, too.] But, more importantly, 'the idea that you can transition to an Afghan government that is corrupt and inefficient [...], that you can do this in the midst of an insurgency is absurd. [...] Transition has to be part of a political solution - which means talking to the Taleban.' But: 'Just a deal between Karzai and the Taleban is not sufficient because it would not end the war'.

He added that 'international troops cannot move out without a political solution' reached prior to it 'that ends the civil war and the conflict'.

On the Afghanistan conference in December in 2011 in Bonn which will be hosted by Germany but chaired by the Afghan government, he urged the Western governments that there are still 'things to be done if it is to become meaningful' and not another conference where you have trouble to remember 'what had been discussed there at all': 'the Taleban have to be brought to the table [...] by the Americans (and with OBL's death, this has become easier); Bonn has to produce a regional coming-together, but probably an agreement not be expected yet - problematic countries like India and Pakistan, Iran, Russia and China need to come together on one platform -; and it has to produce a much better consensus inside Afghanistan about talks with the Taleban'.

The Taleban would have to make 'a statement before Bonn whether they want to come there or not'. This would need confidence building measures like a guarantee that the Americans would not target Taleban leaders while they, in turn, would agree to stop killing civilians and government officials. The main aim is 'trying to end the killing of civilians'. But even if the Taleban agreed, Ahmed believes that 'we will see talking and fighting at the same time for some time'.

'Civil society needs to be brought in' and 'Karzai to be convinced' that this is necessary, Ahmed continued. But he also said that he does not believe that this will happen. 'That's where the pressure of countries like Germany would be needed', he added. 'Civil society needs to play a strong role, but civil society also needs help [to be able to do so]. We need to start a dialogue with the new Afghan generations.'

On a question how to put pressure on President Karzai, Ahmed replied that 'if he is put in the centre of talks with the Taleban - as the international community currently does it - he might be more accommodating again. [...] But if you leave it to Karzai to organize it himself, there is the danger of a sell-out'.

Asked on the Afghan Taleban's political aims in a political settlement, Ahmed answered that they still want 'all foreign troops to withdraw' but had 'softened their position' so that they do not demand an 'immediate complete withdrawal before any talks' anymore. 'I don't think they would be in favour of long-term US bases' in Afghanistan however, he added. 'They would not sponsor al-Qaida and Pakistani terrorist groups' because they 'want good relations with all neighbouring countries'. (And that all neighbouring countries - 'except perhaps India - also do not want permanent US bases and the country turned into 'battleship Afghanistan'. 'Why don't the Americans just put an aircraft carrier into the Gulf, instead?' he asked.) Then, he poured some cold water on too much optimism when he said that 'we do not know whether they believe in power-sharing [...] and the [current] constitution'. And that it needed to be found out whether their position 'on social issues like education, women's rights etc. can be watered down'.