

## Ahmed Rashid: The Truth Behind America's Taliban Talks

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### The truth behind America's Taliban talks.

The daring night-time raid on one of Kabul's best-known hotels by Afghan militants on Tuesday, underlines once again how much depends on the secret talks with the Taliban. Following President Barack Obama's plan for a limited withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, hopes of a peace settlement that would allow a full and safe western troop withdrawal by 2014 depend on these negotiations.

However the recent leaks by government officials in Washington, Kabul and London, are extremely dangerous and could scuttle the talks just as they enter a critical phase. Even more dangerous has been the speculative naming by journalists of American, German and Taliban participants. Exposing names endangers these officials' lives at the hands of groups such as al-Qaeda and others, who are vehemently against the talks and want to sabotage them at the outset.

I have followed in close detail the many attempts at dialogue in Afghanistan since 2005, in the hope that they could bring eventual peace to a country that has known nothing but war since 1978. These talks have largely been between Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai and the Taliban and only recently included the Americans.

At stake is not just peace for Afghanistan, but the entire region including a deeply precarious Pakistan. The talks are premised on the essential realisation that neither a successful western withdrawal from Afghanistan nor a transition to Afghan forces can take place, without an end to the civil war and a political settlement that involves the Afghan government and the Taliban, but also Pakistan, the US and the region.

In an attempt to avoid further speculation, I am laying out the bare facts of the talks as western officials have described them to me. The first face-to-face meeting between Taliban leaders and US officials took place in a village outside Munich in Germany on November 28 2010.

The meeting was chaired by a German diplomat and also there were Qatari officials whom the Taliban had asked to be present and involved. The talks continued for 11 hours.

The second round took place in Doha, the capital of Qatar on February 15. Three days after the Doha meeting, US secretary of state Hillary Clinton made the most far reaching US public statement to date, telling Americans, "we are launching a diplomatic surge to move this conflict toward a political outcome that shatters the alliance between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, ends the insurgency, and helps to produce not only a more stable Afghanistan but a more stable region".

The third meeting took place again in Munich on May 7 and 8. All the same participants have taken part in the three rounds which have largely involved trying to develop confidence-building measures between the Taliban and the Americans, such as lifting sanctions from the Taliban, the freeing of Taliban prisoners, the opening of a Taliban representative office and other steps.

On June 17 in a major step forward, the UN Security Council accepted a US request to treat al-Qaeda and the Taliban separately in relation to a list of global terrorists the UN has maintained since 1998. There will now be two separate lists and UN sanctions on al-Qaeda members will not necessarily apply to the Taliban making it easier to take the Taliban off the list - a major boost to the dialogue process.

Mr Karzai has been fully briefed after each round and has unstintingly supported the Taliban's desire to hold separate talks with the Americans, even as his government continues their talks with the Taliban at several levels. Pakistani leaders have also been recently briefed about the talks, although they have expressed some reservations about them.

One US-German target is to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the 2001 Bonn meeting that set up the Afghan interim government, with another international meeting in Bonn in December 2011 in which the Taliban will hopefully participate.

This would formalise the talks process, but there is still a long way to go before the Taliban agree to such a demand - all the more reason that the identity of interlocutors are well protected by governments and the media. Even then some believe that the Americans are going about the talks too slowly.

The process began when German officials at the request of the Taliban, held their first meeting in September 2009 in Dubai. Germany has always been admired by the Afghans because it has stayed neutral - never taking sides in Afghan conflicts and even tried to diplomatically mediate to end the 1990s civil war between the Taliban and their opponents.

The Germans made sure that the interlocutors fully represented the Taliban Shura or its governing council which is headed by Mullah Mohammed Omar. (The Americans have also taken their time to verify the authenticity of the Taliban.) The Germans held eight further meeting with the Taliban to build trust and confidence, before bringing in the Americans. The Germans have never doubted that their role is as facilitators - while the actual negotiations must take place between the US and the Taliban.

Qatar has played a role because the Taliban wanted a Muslim country at the table and considered Qatar neutral. Qatar has not interfered in Afghanistan, nor has it ever backed any of the regional countries who have taken sides in Afghanistan's conflicts in the past such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, India, Turkey or Iran.

A former Taliban leader told me recently that "the fundamental problem is between the US and the Taliban and we consider the Afghan government as the secondary problem". He added "the talks we (Taliban) want must involve the international community and end with international guarantees".

If that is the case and the Taliban would like to see an orderly western exit from Afghanistan, the media and governments must allow these talks to succeed. The only way to do that is to respect the participants need for secrecy. These many Afghan efforts have always been undermined by rival governments in the region or extremists. The recent talks are clearly no longer secret but who participates, what is discussed and what progress made, must remain private if the talks are to have any chance of success.

The writer is author of 'Descent into Chaos and The Taliban'.

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## **Response by Hilary Synnott**

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### **Ticking political clock means time is short for talks**

Ahmed Rashid's piece is the most authoritative account of the process of talks with the Taliban that I have seen so far. At one level, his account is encouraging: talks are proceeding, despite previous seemingly impossible Taliban preconditions, and with a sense of urgency. Indeed, this chimes with an experience I had earlier this year, when I met a senior Taliban official whom I had come to know in Islamabad in 2001. I was struck upon meeting him again by his new flexibility and moderation, and took this as a broader sign that progress may be possible.

It is interesting to note also that Pakistan, although being kept briefed on events, is not a direct party to the talks. Direct involvement has always been Pakistan's aim, and with out there could yet be trouble in store. Even without this complication, Rashid is surely right about the delicacy of the talks process. In such cases, nothing is agreed until everything is agreed: the package, if one emerges, must be seen as a whole. By revealing only a partial picture, leaks can generate opposition and jeopardise the whole process.

Whether Rashid's fellow journalists heed his plea for discretion is of course another matter. But the overall challenge remains that a successful western withdrawal from Afghanistan cannot take place without an end to the civil war, and a political settlement that involves the Afghan government and the Taliban, but also Pakistan, the US and the region. This points to a long term process, rather than any quick fix. The critical question, therefore is whether western political imperatives will allow this. Here, more depressingly, there remains considerable room for doubt.

The writer is the author of 'Transforming Pakistan: Ways out of Instability' and a former UK high commissioner to Pakistan.

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