

198

JUNE
2013

THE END GAME IS ON IN AFGHANISTAN

Gabriel Reyes & Emma Hooper, Associated Fellows, CIDOB

The opening of the Taliban office in Qatar was hailed by many optimistic observers – including a number of American officials - as a turning point in the process of finding a negotiated solution to the conflict in Afghanistan.

As much as it deserves credit as yet another attempt to kick start once again a long-needed dialogue, like many other past developments in Afghanistan which have appeared optimistic but which then were short-lived, the event should be taken with a great deal of caution. None the less, one should not lose faith in the possibility of a negotiated end to the conflict, for the moment at least.

For many, especially the international community, the week of 17 June 2013 was meant to represent the beginning of the long awaited squaring of the circle of a successful transition to a new Afghanistan in the right track towards stability ahead of 2014. With the official transfer of all security responsibilities to the Afghan National Security Forces across the country officially announced on 18 June 2013 and the planned signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement between the US and the Afghan Government later in the week, by mid week, things were looking good. But, hours later, what could have been the unexpected (for some) icing on the cake of a momentous week – the opening of a Taliban office in Doha as a privileged hub for talks - plunged Afghanistan once again into another political crisis. Angered by a move over which he had no control, a frustrated President Karzai reacted to the news by announcing the delay in signing the bilateral security agreement (thus punishing the US for supporting the initiative in Qatar) and by decrying the Taleban move as not being “Afghan-led” - (to be read as “not Government-sanctioned and illegitimate”).

In fact, the Afghan President’s reaction should not come as a surprise, nor should the outcome of this week’s setback. After all, both the negotiations and the presence of foreign troops on Afghan soil are critical, and intertwined for the future of the country: they are in consequence inherently vulnerable to the ever-changing winds of local and regional power politics and calculations.

For very long - too long, some might say - the “Afghan-led” reconciliation process (however that is interpreted by the different parties, including especially for average Afghans themselves), has been a victim of the fight for influence and control over the future of Afghanistan. Efforts aimed at building an inclu-

sive, constructive, sustainable reconciliation process have been systematically undermined by the attempts of both external and internal players to strengthen their respective positions and interests, with seemingly little thought for reactions by other key stakeholders. This trend has been exacerbated since the announcement of the withdrawal of international troops in 2014. All key players, including western powers, remain motivated by the belief that, whoever controls the process and the parties around the negotiating table, controls the outcomes. They have so far acted in consequence, sadly to the detriment of any meaningful progress in talks.

The opening of the Taliban office in Qatar, a “propaganda coup” orchestrated by the latter (as rightly qualified by Afghan Analysts Network researcher Kate Clark), is no exception in this battle for influence.

It in fact epitomises the complex, multi layered, multi track, overcrowded and cacophonous mediation game at play in Afghanistan and the region. The Afghan government has repeatedly stated that negotiations should be Afghan-led and has done everything within its power to try to remain the sole owner and the main driver of the process. This also applies to the specific case of the Qatar-supported Taliban office in Doha (labelled by the latter and by the US as an “Afghan-led” initiative). President Karzai has tried repeatedly, and unsuccessfully, to limit its influence and bring under both the presidential wing and that of the High Peace Council (as exemplified by Karzai’s early April trip to Qatar to that end). The end result has been the protracted stalemate of all talks.

In the light of the current struggle by the different parties to impose a specific track as the main forum to discuss any future political settlement, it is difficult to see how a dialogue process with some genuine possibilities of success can be taken forward. The US and Qatar have bet on the Doha track; Karzai supports the “Kabul track” with probable support from Saudi Arabia and Turkey; whilst Pakistan attempts to monopolise talks through its control of the high-ranking Taliban present on its soil: all this within a context of uncertainty in the light of the withdrawal of international troops, and, given the forthcoming presidential elections of April 2014, the Taliban’s position of strength on the ground juxtaposed with the fragmentation of interests and interlocutors within both the Taliban and Afghan political forces, with limited overall representation.

None the less, it is clear by now that a settlement of the Afghan conflict will only be achieved in a sustainable way through a negotiated process. Indeed, some might add a process that includes the Taliban in a future government in Kabul, provided the red lines of peaceful coexistence, acceptance of the Constitution and the respect of human rights are not waived or abrogated. A neutral third party is likely to be required to ensure that all interest groups and their concerns – including those of the citizens of Afghanistan themselves, who are generally left out of the equation - are taken into consideration and placed firmly on the table. As Roger Cohen rightly reminds in his January 2013 article for the New York Times “*Diplomacy is Dead*”, in order to achieve advances in international relations and to address terrorism, communication has to be kept open, even when one profoundly dislikes what one’s interlocutors may be saying.

Dialogue is the present and future key to a peaceful, stable Afghanistan, whether it is held in Qatar, Bonn or Kabul. The Taliban not only raised the white flag of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in Doha this week, they also planted it on top of the hill winning the upper ground of the bitter struggle over negotiations - as of today, at least. It is now time to put in place the means to ensure that the flag of true dialogue and reconciliation is the one that prevails in the near future.