

U.S. and Taliban Agree in Principle to Peace Framework, Envoy Says

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Afghan Army troops, left, and American soldiers attacking a Taliban firing position in 2013. Bryan Denton for The New York Times



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KABUL, Afghanistan — American and Taliban officials have agreed in principle to the framework of a deal in which the insurgents would guarantee Afghan territory is never used by terrorists, which could lead to a full pullout of American troops in return for larger concessions from the Taliban, the chief United States negotiator said on Monday.

The negotiator, Zalmay Khalilzad, said those concessions must include the

Taliban's agreement to a cease-fire and to talk directly with the Afghan government, which the insurgents have persistently opposed in the past.

“We have a draft of the framework that has to be fleshed out before it becomes an agreement,” Mr. Khalilzad said in an interview with The New York Times in Kabul. “The Taliban have committed, to our satisfaction, to do what is necessary that would prevent Afghanistan from ever becoming a platform for international terrorist groups or individuals.”

Mr. Khalilzad added: “We felt enough confidence that we said we need to get this fleshed out, and details need to be worked out.”

Keeping Afghanistan from reverting to the terrorist haven used by Al Qaeda to plot the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States — the catalyst for the nearly two-decade-old war — has long been a primary demand by American officials.

After nine years of halting efforts to reach a peace deal with the Taliban, the draft framework, though preliminary, is the biggest tangible step toward ending a war that has cost tens of thousands of lives and profoundly changed American foreign policy.

A senior American official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss continuing negotiations, said the Taliban delegation had asked for time to confer with their leadership about the American requirements for the insurgents' agreement to hold direct talks with the Afghan government and to a cease-fire.

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Afghanistan is America's longest war — 17 years. That's longer than World War I, World War II and the Korean War combined.

The official described all those issues as “interconnected” as part of a “package deal” that was likened to a Russian nesting doll. The official’s account was supported by details that have been leaked by some Taliban and Western officials in recent days.

A senior Taliban official with direct knowledge of the talks on Monday confirmed the draft agreement on the issue of foreign troop withdrawal and the Taliban pledge that Afghan soil would not be used against others. He said “working groups” would iron out details on a timeline of a withdrawal.

But in a sign that the conditions the Americans have demanded may be difficult to reach, the Taliban official said he did not see the agreement as being dependent on a cease-fire or direct talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. The official declined to specify the Taliban’s position on these issues.

The details of enforcing the Taliban’s pledge to prevent international terrorists such as Al Qaeda from using Afghan soil as a launching pad for attacks again also remained unclear.

American officials said Taliban representatives had told them the Taliban would “provide guarantees” that would satisfy the American demands, but they would not share details of an enforcement mechanism.

Although the Taliban have been distancing themselves from Al Qaeda, they have never denounced the group. Taliban fighters still intermingle with international militants in parts of Afghanistan and maintain relationships of coexistence with some of them.

To many analysts of the Afghanistan conflict, the details that have emerged so far in Mr. Khalilzad’s discussions with the Taliban suggested an American [desperation for a withdrawal](#) from a war regarded as unwinnable, rather than patience for a comprehensive peace deal that could ensure some of [the most basic values](#) the Americans have emphasized in their 18-year presence in the country.

Diplomats in Kabul, aware of the way Mr. Khalilzad has characterized the progress in talks, also said the American envoy was candid in his caution that the conditions the United States had presented to the Taliban before a deal could be finalized might prove difficult to reach. Mr. Khalilzad had expressed that he was still seeking ways, including assistance from regional countries, to convince the Taliban to meet the Afghan side and agree to a cease-fire.

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One diplomat said Mr. Khalilzad had suggested the idea of “freezing” the agreement on the two central issues and waiting for Taliban to deliver on the conditions laid out for finalizing it. But he also suggested that might test President Trump’s already waning patience.

Mr. Khalilzad returned to Afghanistan on Sunday to brief the government

in Kabul after conducting six days of talks with the Taliban delegation in Doha, Qatar.

In an address to the nation on Monday after Mr. Khalilzad had briefed him, President Ashraf Ghani expressed concern that a peace deal would be rushed. He highlighted previous settlements that ended in bloodshed, including when the Soviet Union withdrew from the country in the late 1980s.

Despite a promise of a peace deal at the time, Afghanistan broke into anarchy, and years later the Afghan president who had been in charge during that transition, Najibullah, [was hanged from a pole at a traffic roundabout](#).

“We want peace quickly, we want it soon, but we want it with prudence,” Mr. Ghani said. “Prudence is important so we do not repeat past mistakes.”

There is concern among senior Afghan officials that the Afghan government has still been sidelined from the talks. Officials close to Mr. Ghani say he is particularly concerned that the Americans might negotiate important agreements that Afghan officials are not party to, potentially including the shape of an interim government outside of elections. Mr. Ghani has repeatedly insisted that such details be taken up only in direct talks between the government and the Taliban.

Fueling Mr. Ghani’s suspicion is the circulation of a potential draft agreement written by a former American diplomat who had held several meetings with the Taliban before Mr. Khalilzad was appointed to the role.

A leaked draft of the document written by the former diplomat, Laurel Miller, for the RAND Corporation, has been circulating in Kabul. The draft tries to envision “as realistically as possible” what a final peace agreement could look like, and one element is the formation of a transitional government on interim basis that could include the Taliban. That transition authority would then pave the way for changing the Constitution and holding elections that would include the Taliban in some agreed-upon

way.

Taliban fighters during a cease-fire in Nangarhar Province in June.Parwiz Parwiz/Reuters

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Mr. Ghani, who is running for a second five-year term in elections now scheduled for July, has repeatedly rejected that idea.

“Afghans do not accept an interim government — not today, not tomorrow, not in a hundred years,” Mr. Ghani, a former academic, said last week. “Whoever comes up with such stupid ideas — a few former officials that I wouldn’t even accept as my students — should think again.”

On Monday, Mr. Khalilzad insisted that he was trying to push the Taliban to negotiate those points directly with the Afghan side.

“There are a lot of reports that we have discussed an interim government: No, I have not gotten into any of that discussion,” Mr. Khalilzad said. “I have not entered into what that could look like with the Taliban — they would like to talk to me about it, but I have not.”

Mr. Ghani’s position may have been weakened in his struggle to unite a fractured Afghanistan in the face of the Taliban. At a time when he has needed consensus, he has repeatedly picked fights with the political elite in what he says is an effort to end the patronage embedded in governance. Diplomats have commended such a goal but some say it should not be the priority at the moment.

During the talks last week, the Taliban signaled seriousness by appointing one of their most powerful officials from the original movement, [Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar](#), as their chief peace negotiator.

Though American and Afghan officials said that Mr. Baradar was not directly involved in the Qatar meetings last week, with some sessions lasting as long as eight hours, he was expected to take the lead in the talks

to come. Senior American officials said new high-level talks would start in late February, but suggested that teams from both sides could start on technical details before then.

The interview with Mr. Khalilzad on Monday was the first time that the American government had directly confirmed some details of the agreement taking shape.

Fahim Abed contributed reporting.

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