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U.S. Pullout a Condition in Afghan Peace Talks



David Guttenfelder/Associated Press

United States Army soldiers firing mortar shells last week at Taliban positions from a base in Afghanistan's Kunar Province.

By DEXTER FILKINS
Published: May 20, 2009

KABUL, Afghanistan — Leaders of the **Taliban** and other armed groups battling the Afghan government are talking to intermediaries about a potential peace agreement, with initial demands focused on a timetable for a withdrawal of American troops, according to Afghan leaders here and in Pakistan.



Reuters TV

Talks have been held with representatives of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a warlord.

The talks, if not the withdrawal proposals, are being supported by the Afghan government. The Obama administration, which has publicly declared its desire to coax "moderate" Taliban fighters away from armed struggle, says it is not involved in the discussions and will not be until the Taliban agree to lay down their arms. But nor is it trying to stop the talks, and Afghan officials believe they have tacit support from the Americans.

The discussions have so far produced no agreements, since the insurgents appear to be insisting that any deal include an American promise to pull out — at the very time that

the Obama administration is sending more combat troops to help reverse the deteriorating situation on the battlefield. Indeed, with 20,000 additional troops on the way, American commanders seem determined to inflict greater pain on the Taliban first, to push them

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into negotiations and extract better terms. And most of the initial demands are nonstarters for the Americans in any case.

Even so, the talks are significant because they suggest how a political settlement may be able to end the eight-year-old war, and how such negotiations may proceed. They also raise the prospect of potentially difficult decisions by President [Hamid Karzai](#) and [President Obama](#), who may have to consider making deals with groups like the Taliban that are anathema to many Americans, and other leaders with brutal and bloody pasts. Some of the leaders in the current talks have been involved with [Al Qaeda](#).

While the talks have been under way for months, they have accelerated since Mr. Obama took office and have produced more specific demands, the Afghan intermediaries said.

The Taliban leaders, through their spokesman, and those of other armed groups publicly deny that they are involved in any negotiations. But several Afghans here and in Pakistan say they have been talking directly to the Taliban leadership group headed by Mullah [Muhammad Omar](#), the movement's secretive founder. The council is based in the Pakistani city of Quetta.

Discussions have also been held with representatives of [Gulbuddin Hekmatyar](#), a longtime warlord with a record of extreme brutality, and with [Sirajuddin Haqqani](#), whose guerrilla army is based in the tribal areas of Pakistan. Mr. Haqqani's group is also known for its ruthlessness and for sending suicide bombers into Afghanistan.

"America cannot win this war, and the Taliban cannot win this war," Mullah Abdul Salaam Zaeef, a former Taliban ambassador and one of the intermediaries, said in an interview. "I have delivered this message to the Taliban."

The talks under way now appear to be directed not at individual bands of antigovernment insurgents — the strategy suggested by President Obama — but at the leaders of the large movements.

American officials insist they are not participating in any talks. "The U.S. would support such efforts only if Taliban are willing to abandon violence and lay down their arms, and accept Afghanistan's democratically elected government," said Ian Kelly, a State Department spokesman. Still, two of the principal intermediaries, Mr. Zaeef and Daoud Abedi, said they had held extensive discussions with American officials.

A State Department memo described a single meeting with Mr. Abedi, but said it ended abruptly because American officials were not permitted to meet with representatives of Mr. Hekmatyar. There is no independent confirmation of Mr. Zaeef's claim to have met with Americans.

Afghan officials said they welcomed the talks. "The government has kept all channels of communication open," said Homayun Hamidzada, a spokesman for Mr. Karzai. "This includes the Taliban and Hekmatyar."

Mr. Abedi, an Afghan-American businessman from California and a member of Mr. Hekmatyar's political party, the Islamic Party, said he conducted negotiations in March. Guerrillas loyal to Mr. Hekmatyar are battling the Americans in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan. His political party still has a wide following in the country.

In an interview, Mr. Abedi said he undertook the negotiations — with Mr. Hekmatyar and with the Taliban leaders — at the behest of the State Department, a claim that American officials deny. Mr. Abedi said he met several times with American officials in Washington before and after his trip to Pakistan and Afghanistan. He declined to say which American diplomats he met, saying, "I am a Pashtun, and I swore on my honor that I would not reveal the names of the people I met with, so I cannot."

Mr. Abedi said he hammered out a common set of demands between the Taliban and Mr. Hekmatyar's group. The groups agreed to stop fighting if these conditions were met. Mr.

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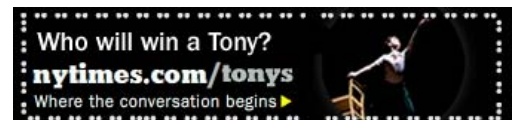
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Hekmatyar's group. The groups agreed to stop fighting if those conditions were met, Mr. Abedi said. The Taliban's demands seem incompatible with much of Mr. Obama's strategy, which is to substantially weaken the Taliban through a combination of military force and economic development.

Nor did the deal Mr. Abedi described mention either [Osama bin Laden](#) or [Ayman al-Zawahri](#), the two senior Qaeda leaders believed to be hiding in Pakistan under the protection of the Taliban or some other armed group.

The first demand was an immediate pullback of American and other foreign forces to their bases, followed by a cease-fire and a total withdrawal from the country over the next 18 months. Then the current government would be replaced by a transitional government made up of a range of Afghan leaders, including those of the Taliban and other insurgents. Americans and other foreign soldiers would be replaced with a [peacekeeping](#) force drawn from predominantly Muslim nations, with a guarantee from the insurgent groups that they would not attack such a force. Nationwide elections would follow after the Western forces left.

As for Mr. Hekmatyar, Mr. Abedi said that he maintained a "direct link" with him, and that he was authorized to negotiate on his behalf. He did not meet with Afghan government officials.

After the agreement between the Taliban and the Islamic Party was reached, Mr. Abedi said, the Taliban leaders added more conditions: an end to the [drone attacks](#) in Pakistan's tribal areas, and the release of some Taliban prisoners.

Mr. Abedi said that when he returned to the United States with his proposal, he was greeted with enthusiasm by officials at the State Department. But he said they never called him back.

Mr. Hekmatyar earned a reputation as an especially brutal commander in the civil war that engulfed the country in the 1990s, in particular for the relentless bombardment of Kabul between 1994 and 1996 that killed an estimated 40,000 civilians during an attempt to capture the capital.

In 2002, after Mr. Hekmatyar resisted the American invasion, the Americans tried to kill him with a missile fired from a remotely piloted airplane. They missed.

The other main negotiation is led by Mr. Zaeef and Arsallah Rahmani, a former Taliban minister and now a member of the Afghan Parliament.

"We are not talking to low-ranking people — we are talking to the leaders," Mr. Rahmani said in an interview. Mr. Zaeef was the Taliban's ambassador to Pakistan; he served nearly four years in American military prisons, including the one at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

Their plan would be for the guerrillas and the government to reconcile slowly, starting with the least contentious issues. One of the main low-level demands of the opposition leaders is that their names be removed from a so-called blacklist, contained in a resolution passed by the [United Nations Security Council](#), which obliges governments to detain them. More difficult issues would follow.

"Blood begets blood, but talking begets peace," Mr. Rahmani said.

Mr. Zaeef said the public declarations of Mullah Omar, who usually vows to fight on, are not necessarily to be taken seriously.

"A policy can have many faces," he said.

Taimoor Shah contributed reporting.

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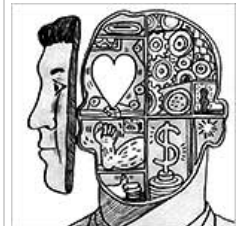
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