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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Bill Van Auken
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Taliban claim breakthrough in Afghanistan talks, US commander says operations continue

The eighth round of negotiations between the Taliban and Washington ended in Doha, Qatar, on Monday without an agreement to end the nearly 18-year-old US war in Afghanistan.

Both sides, however, claimed progress had been made and that the talks had merely been paused so that negotiators could consult with their respective leaderships before moving ahead to resolve what were described as “technical” issues.

The Taliban’s spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, went so far as to declare “work on the agreement completed,” describing the negotiations as “tedious but effective.”



US troops in Spera, Afghanistan, on Nov. 16, 2009 [Credit: U.S. Air force]

Washington's chief negotiator, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, described the talks as "productive" and said he was on his way back to Washington to "consult on next steps."

Khalilzad has a long and bloody record in the protracted US imperialist intervention that has claimed the lives of millions in the impoverished south Asian country. He began as an intelligence aide during the covert CIA-orchestrated war to topple the Soviet-backed Afghan government in the 1980s in which billions of dollars in arms and funding were funneled into a collection of Islamist militias that would give rise to both the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

In the 1990s, after the Taliban secured control over the country, Khalilzad reemerged as a consultant for the energy conglomerate Unocal in negotiations aimed at establishing a trans-Afghanistan gas pipeline. He proposed that Washington recognize and support the Taliban regime in order to promote the interests of big oil.

Then in 2001, he was one of the architects of the October 7 US invasion to overthrow the Taliban, carried out in the name of avenging the September 11 attacks, but aimed at securing US military dominance over the strategic energy reserves of the Caspian Basin. After the overthrow of the Taliban, he became a US imperialist proconsul in Kabul, overseeing the creation of the puppet regime of Hamid Karzai.

A document that was described as a draft agreement between the US and the Taliban was leaked to the media in Kabul last week. Its terms included the withdrawal of US military forces, which now number roughly 14,000, along with some 6,000 other foreign troops, the release of some 13,000 Taliban prisoners, a guarantee from the Taliban that Afghanistan will not allow terrorists to launch attacks from its soil and the initiation of talks aimed at reaching a political settlement with the US-backed government of President Ashraf Ghani.

Thus far, the Taliban leadership has rejected negotiations with the US-backed regime, describing it as a puppet of the foreign occupation. This position has been substantiated by Washington's holding the talks with the Islamist movement behind the backs of the corrupt cabal in Kabul.

In a speech delivered on the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha on Sunday, Ghani insisted that the fate of Afghanistan could not be decided "outside" the country. He went on to claim that "respected figures" in Afghanistan had come forward to ask him to call off presidential elections set for next month and remain in power for "either five or ten years."

Without the support of the US military, it is questionable whether Ghani's corrupt regime would last for another five months.

The Taliban now controls or exercises the predominant influence over roughly half of Afghanistan's territory, more than at any time since the US invasion in 2001. It is able to attack Afghan army bases virtually at will and has inflicted unsustainable casualties on government troops.

Under conditions of declining morale and recruitment, the Afghan National Army (ANA) is compelled to replace more than a third of its forces every year. According to a report issued by the US inspector general for Afghanistan earlier this month, troop strength has dropped by 42,000 compared to last year, with the ANA fielding just 77 percent of its authorized forces. The decline has been attributed in large part to changes in the ANA's payroll system that eliminated so-called ghost soldiers, fictitious names placed on the books so that their pay could be pocketed by corrupt commanders.

US President Donald Trump has, according to the *Washington Post*, instructed his aides to secure the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan before the 2020 presidential election, clearly with an eye to garnering support from the wide majority of the population that favors an end to the longest war in US history. A Rasmussen poll released this week showed that only 31 percent of likely voters considered Afghanistan of vital national security interest to the United States. This is down from 45 percent two years ago.

Earlier this month Trump repeated his claim that the US could win the war in Afghanistan within days, but he was "not looking to kill 10 million people." He clarified that this holocaust could be unleashed without the use of nuclear weapons. "I'm talking conventional," he said.

The toll inflicted upon the Afghan people over the course of nearly two decades of US war is already massive. The number killed outright as a result of the conflict is estimated conservatively at 175,000, which, with the inclusion of indirect deaths, is probably closer to one million. Millions more have been turned into refugees and driven from their homes.

The war has also claimed the lives of over 4,000 US troops and civilian contractors. The cost of the war is estimated at nearly \$1 trillion, resources diverted from meeting the social needs of the US population. This does not include care for veterans, more than 20,000 of whom have been wounded in the war, while many more have been left with PTSD. According to research done by Brown University, the annual cost of the war is over \$50 billion.

Aside from Trump's crass political calculations, the drawing down of military resources from the Afghan war is in line with the strategic shift from the "war on terror" to the preparation for military confrontation with China and Russia. This was spelled out in the Trump administration's "National Security Strategy," which presented "great power competition" and confrontation with "revisionist states," i.e., Russia and China, as the new axis of a US global strategy that points toward nuclear war.

Nonetheless, there is substantial opposition within the US military and intelligence apparatus, as well as Trump's own party, to the signing of an agreement with the Taliban on the terms that have been made public.

South Carolina Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, a close Trump ally, went on Fox News Monday night to warn against a complete US military withdrawal and demand the leaving behind of a "residual force."

He stated: "If we leave Afghanistan without a counterterrorism force, without intelligence gathering capability, ISIS will reemerge, Al Qaeda will come back. They will occupy safe havens in Afghanistan, they will hit the homeland, they will come after us all over the world."

It seems unlikely that Washington will surrender its strategic foothold in Afghanistan. The Pentagon and the CIA will undoubtedly demand the "right" to continue military interventions in the country under the pretext of striking Al Qaeda and ISIS. Meanwhile, the CIA has trained various murderous militias that will still be in place after any US withdrawal.

How soon and how extensive the pullout will be is by no means clear. *Newsweek* magazine, citing unnamed Pentagon officials, reported this week that the US military was preparing to slash the number of US troops in the country by more than half to 6,000 and had ordered those remaining to de-escalate offensive operations against the Taliban and to halt assistance to the Afghan military.

The commander of NATO's Resolute Support Mission and United States Forces in Afghanistan, Gen. Scott Miller, however, issued a statement describing the article as "inaccurate and speculative."

"We have no such orders and have made no such changes," the US general said.

Indeed, the carnage inflicted by the US military and the Afghan puppet forces grinds on. The Pentagon has sharply escalated bombing operations as part of what is described as a

strategy to “set the conditions for a political settlement.” US airstrikes have increased by at least 15 percent this year, with 2,011 attacks being carried out between January and April alone. Air strikes have been the leading cause of civilian deaths for the first half of this year, according to a UN report that also revealed that forces supporting the Afghan government are responsible for more civilian deaths than the Taliban and other forces resisting the US-led occupation.

The UN mission in Afghanistan issued a statement on August 14 saying that it is “gravely concerned” about an incident three days earlier that claimed the lives of 11 civilians in the eastern province of Paktia. “Harm to civilians must stop,” the statement said.

Afghan security forces raided a student gathering in the Zurmat District on the night of August 11, according to a provincial council member, Allah Mir Khan Bahramzoi.

“Late in the evening, security forces surrounded the house, brought out the victims from the guesthouse, and shot them one by one,” Bahramzoi told the Reuters news agency.

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