


THE ISTANBUL TALKS AND PROSPECTS FOR PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

Huthaifah Busuulwa



iNSAMER
İHH İNSANİ VE SOSYAL ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
IHH HUMANITARIAN AND SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTER
مركز البحوث الإنسانية و الاجتماعية

To cite this article: Busuulwa, Huthaifah. "The Istanbul Talks and Prospects for Peace in Afghanistan",  Analysis
iNSAMER, 20.04.2021.

On 12 March 2021 Turkey announced that it would host high-level talks in April for Afghanistan peace process. The announcement was a confirmation of earlier reports about U.S secretary of state Anthony Blinken's call for the Taliban and the Afghani government to meet with Turkey as a mediator. This comes at a time when the U.S and NATO partners are racing against time for a final decision regarding troop withdrawal from Afghanistan - slated for May - in line with a deal brokered by the Trump administration with the Taliban in 2020 which committed the withdrawal of foreign forces from the country by May 2021.

It looks like the next outcome will depend on the success of the talks in Istanbul. President Joe Biden has already indicated that the withdrawal decision is still a tough one to make but the Taliban insist there would be consequences if the withdrawal is not put in effect.

Turkey in this case is perhaps the country best suited to mediate because of its relationship that encompasses almost all sections of the Afghan society. The Taliban and the Northern Alliance do trust Turkey, as stated by Kaswar Klasra:

"Turkey is a powerful player in the region. It is perhaps the only country in the world that can ensure peace and stability in Afghanistan. It has a cordial relationship with two major local stakeholders in Afghanistan, including the Northern Alliance and the Taliban. Both of them have shown trust in Ankara in the past as well. It can single-handedly achieve desired peace in war-torn Afghanistan".¹

Turkey already has close ties with key actors such as Rashid Dostum and the Uzbek community in Afghanistan because of their Turkic ethnic links and shared culture. It also has close ties with Abdullah Abdullah, President Ashraf Ghani,



iNSAMER
İHH İNSANİ VE SOSYAL ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
IHH HUMANITARIAN AND SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTER
مركز البحوث الإنسانية و الاجتماعية

and other officials. Moreover, it also has close ties with key stakeholders such as Pakistan, Russia, the U.S, NATO, Iran, and the Central Asian states.

Turkey has a positive image among the Afghan public because of the long-running ties between the two countries. It has contributed enormously to international efforts to rebuild the war-torn country. Turkey has a non-combatant force under NATO which has provided training to the Afghan National Army and police force² and has been involved in the peace process from the beginning through setting direct and indirect communication channels.

However, it is important to note that negotiators will face a difficult job ahead in trying to forge a lasting peace. The Afghan government is willing to participate, with the representation by President Ashraf Ghani, on condition that the Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhunzada or the son of the late Taliban founder Mullah Yaqub also participate.³

Already reports indicate that President Ghani rejected the American proposal for an interim government to accommodate the two warring parties. In its stead, President Ghani will present a proposal for presidential elections within six months.⁴ U.S special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad's proposal is to replace the government in Kabul with an interim one. But government officials in Kabul told Reuters that "The president would never agree to step aside and any future government should be formed through the democratic process, not a political deal."⁵

The major contestation is the disagreement in the interests and values of the two major actors in Afghanistan. Kabul for instance insists that Afghanistan should remain a republic with the president and parliament elected. On the other hand, the Taliban are still holding onto their desire for re-establishing a theocratic system with an un-elected leader like it was before they were overthrown in 2001. The Taliban insists the U.S forces to withdraw from the country before they establish an emirate.

It will be vital to try to resolve those differences of opinion. Covertly the actors are worried about their positions and interests and before these are rectified there may not be a lasting solution. The Taliban still enjoys some support from sections of Afghan people especially the Pashtuns who are wary about the Kabul government. The multi-ethnic country will require considerable management of interests, for instance by espousing symbolic and real representation and prioritizing core values shared by the different facts.

As the Istanbul meeting nears, international actors also seem determined to facilitate a peace deal and curb violence in the war-torn country. Following a meeting in Moscow, Russia, the U.S, China, and Pakistan released a joint statement urging parties in the Afghan war to reach a peace deal. Although it will still be a daunting task, it is hoped the Istanbul meeting in April may provide the much-needed foundation for peace in Afghanistan and much-needed relief for the people who have been affected by decades of war and turmoil.

Endnotes

¹ Eralp Yazar, Daily Sabah, 'Turkey's ties with actors in Afghanistan point to mediator role', published March 21, 2021.

² Menekse Tokyay, Arab News, 'Turkey to host Afghanistan peace meeting' published 12 March 2021

³ Hamid Shalizi Reuters 'Exclusive: Afghan president rejecting U.S peace plan, to offer election in six months, officials say' published March 23, 2021.

⁴ ibid

⁵ ibid