

AFGHANISTAN: WHAT KIND OF PEACE?

The U.S. is trying to negotiate a peace deal with the Taliban to end two decades of war in Afghanistan. But many are worried about what might happen next. BY PATRICIA SMITH



After nearly two decades of war in Afghanistan, the United States and the Taliban are close to securing a peace deal. When Rahima Jami heard that, she thought about her feet.

Jami, now a lawmaker in the Afghan Parliament, was a school principal back in 1996. That year, a radical Islamist group called the Taliban seized power in the country. The Taliban forced her out

of her job. They also told her that women had to wear a head-to-toe cloak called a *burqa* when leaving their homes. One hot day at the market, her feet were showing from underneath her burqa. In response, the religious police beat her feet with a horse whip until she could barely stand.

Even all these years later, when Jami thinks of that time she was beaten, she says, "I remember it, and I actually feel faint."

Many Afghan women have similar horror stories of how they were treated when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, from 1996 to 2001. Now Afghan women have something new to fear. Anxiety has grown over the possibility that American troops will leave Afghanistan as part of a peace agreement.

In January, a U.S. official announced that American and Taliban negotiators had agreed to the outlines of a deal. The agreement could end American military involvement in Afghanistan. It's the most concrete step toward ending a war that has killed 2,284 Americans and tens of thousands of Afghans. The conflict has dragged on for more than 17 years. That makes it America's longest military entanglement ever.

U.S. troops invaded Afghanistan in 2001, in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. Nearly 3,000 people were killed in those attacks. They were planned in Afghanistan by Al Qaeda, a terrorist group that the Taliban had given safe haven.

The U.S. and its allies quickly kicked



Afghanistan BY THE NUMBERS

Population
34.9 Million

**Percentage of
Population Under 25**
63%

Literacy Rates
Male: 52%
Female: 24%
(U.S.: 99%)

Per Capita GDP
\$2,000
(U.S.: \$59,800)

SOURCE: WORLD FACTBOOK (C.I.A.)



American soldiers in Hazarbutz, Afghanistan, in 2006; 13 years later, the U.S. is still fighting.

not be able to hold off Taliban fighters. These fighters are still engaged in a relentlessly bloody revolt. And Afghan women, who suffered so harshly under the Taliban regime, are also concerned. They're terrified that they'll lose their rights and all the slow progress made under American protection.

No School, No Jobs

Afghanistan has essentially been at war for 40 years. The fighting and instability began with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 (see *timeline, p. 8*). The Taliban is an extremist group with a very rigid interpretation of how Islam should be practiced. The group took control of the country in 1996.

Life under the Taliban was hard. They persecuted the country's few religious minorities. They banned music and TV. They forbade men from wearing neckties and required them to grow beards. But it was women who fared the worst. The Taliban banned girls older than 8 from going to school. Women were barred from most jobs and told they must wear a burqa when they left their houses.

Although swiftly driven from power by U.S.-led forces, the Taliban have waged a skilled guerrilla rebellion. They've withstood all attempts to remove them from Afghanistan. The Trump administration now seems to be looking for an exit strategy that involves negotiating a deal with them. Some analysts have drawn an analogy to the Vietnam War (1965-75) (see "*The New Vietnam?*" p. 8). In that conflict, the U.S. supported South Vietnam in its fight

against Communist North Vietnam. In 1973, the three countries signed a peace deal that enabled the U.S. to bring its troops home.

President Trump had declared his intention to withdraw half of the 14,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan. And he did so even before the announcement of a preliminary framework for a peace agreement with the Taliban. Trump's declaration surprised his own military



Taliban fighters in western Afghanistan

out the Taliban and helped set up a new Afghan government. But many of the Taliban escaped into the Afghan countryside. They regrouped there as insurgent fighters, carrying out deadly terrorist attacks. The U.S.-backed Afghan government and American forces have been battling them ever since.

Now the U.S. is trying a different tactic: negotiation.

"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," said Zalmay Khalilzad, the chief American negotiator, after the preliminary agreement was announced.

Both Americans and Afghans are eager to end the fighting. But there are deep concerns about the long-term price of a peace deal with the Taliban. U.S. officials are mainly worried about Afghanistan once again becoming a refuge for terrorist groups. The Afghan government fears that without U.S. military support, it will

There are deep concerns about the price of a peace deal.

Timeline AFGHANISTAN & THE U.S.



Islamic fighters known as *mujahideen* battle the Soviets.

Terrorists fly planes into the World Trade Center in New York.

1979

Soviet Invasion

When Islamic guerrillas threaten to topple the Communist-leaning government in Kabul, the Soviet Union invades Afghanistan.

1984

Cold War Battle

The U.S. begins arming the *mujahideen*, Islamic guerrillas fighting the Soviets. In 1989, after nearly 10 years of war, the Soviets give up and head home.

1996

The Taliban

The Taliban, a radical Islamist group, seize power in Afghanistan, imposing a harsh interpretation of Islamic law.

2001

9/11 Attacks

The 9/11 attacks on the U.S. are planned by Osama bin Laden and other Al Qaeda leaders given refuge in Afghanistan by the Taliban.

2001

U.S. Invasion

The U.S. invades Afghanistan in October. The Taliban fall quickly, but Osama bin Laden escapes into the mountains on Pakistan's border.

chiefs, who had advised against it.

“Great nations do not fight endless wars,” Trump said in the State of the Union address in February.

Some U.S. analysts are concerned that withdrawing U.S. troops as part of a peace deal will allow terrorist groups to once again grow in Afghanistan.

Last year, Jim Mattis, who was then secretary of defense, pointed to the estimate that some 20 terrorist groups

would quickly use the freedom created by an American troop pullout to try to launch operations against Western targets. Many of these groups are offshoots of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS).

Some Defense Department officials are now arguing that if all U.S. troops are withdrawn from Afghanistan, an attack on the U.S. could occur within two years.

James Dobbins, a former top Obama

administration official for Afghanistan, says it's critical that the U.S. remain in Afghanistan while the Taliban and Afghan government negotiate directly and work out an agreement. He says the U.S. should leave only after a deal is implemented.

“If we pull out too soon, it means the country descends into civil war and extremist groups like Al Qaeda and the Islamic State gain new scope for far-

THE NEW VIETNAM?

Some see echoes of Vietnam in the Afghanistan war

The war in Afghanistan

is the longest in American history—but that dubious honor used to belong to the Vietnam War (1965-75).

That's not where the comparisons between the two conflicts end. In both cases, it became increasingly clear to many experts that they were militarily unwinnable.

Now, with the Trump administration's moves to negotiate a peace deal with the Taliban, some see

shades of the U.S. decision to end the Vietnam War without a victory in sight.

“I think the comparison is very legitimate,” says Andrew Bacevich, a professor of international relations at Boston University. “In this case, President Trump has recognized that the Afghanistan war is unwinnable and has set out to end it.”

In 1973, the U.S., South Vietnam, and Communist North Vietnam signed the Paris Peace Accords. That



Fall of Saigon: In 1975, an American helicopter evacuates people from the roof of the U.S. embassy.

treaty allowed U.S. troops to leave, but it didn't end the fighting between North and South Vietnam. Two years later, the North Vietnamese overran South Vietnam and unified the nation under a Communist regime.

The Afghanistan war has now lasted 17 years and three presidential administrations. It might make sense for the U.S. to leave now, says Bacevich, but there will be a price, “and that will be paid by the Afghan people.”

CHRISTOPHER GUNNESS/AP IMAGES (MUJAHIDEEN); CHAO SOI CHEONG/AP IMAGES (9/11); BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES (VIETNAM)



President Obama and senior officials watch the raid on Osama bin Laden's Pakistan compound from the White House situation room.



U.S. officials discuss the peace talks with Afghan leaders in Kabul.

2004

Afghan Government

The democratic election of Hamid Karzai as president signals a new Afghan government. But it proves to be dependent on U.S. support for its survival.

2010

More Troops

President Obama increases the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, bringing the total to around 100,000.

2011

Bin Laden's Death

U.S. troops kill Osama bin Laden (right) in Pakistan. A few months later, the U.S. begins reducing troop levels in Afghanistan. At the end of 2018, about 14,000 troops remain.



2019

A Peace Deal?

U.S. negotiators announce the outlines of a peace deal with the Taliban. President Trump orders the withdrawal of 7,000 troops.



Afghan women (waiting to vote in 2018 in Herat) are worried about U.S. troops leaving.

flung attacks," Dobbins says.

Those worries resonate with Afghan government officials. They fear that the Taliban would simply overthrow the existing Afghan government once U.S. troops are no longer there to stop them.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has complained that the current negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban have essentially sidelined the Afghan government. Any peace deal must be worked out among Afghans, he says.

"The victims of the war are Afghans," Ghani says. "So the initiative of peace should be in the hands of Afghans."

A New War on Women?

All Afghans will have to live by any deal made with the Taliban. But no group

has more to potentially lose than Afghan women. After the Taliban's removal, Afghanistan adopted a new constitution that guarantees women's rights. There's also been considerable progress for women in recent years. Since the lifting of the Taliban's ban on education for girls, hundreds of girls schools have been opened. Many women, especially in large cities, have jobs. And women make up more than a quarter of the members of the country's parliament.

No one needs to sell Afghan women on the need to end the bloodshed. They have buried many husbands and sons and brothers. But they fear that a peace that empowers the Taliban may

mean a new war on women.

"We don't want a peace that will make the situation worse for women's rights compared to now," says Robina Hamdard of the Afghan Women's Network.

Everyone involved in peace negotiations agrees that the war can end only with a power-sharing deal. That might mean sharing government ministries or territory around the country, or some combination of the two. It might even mean Taliban officials running for national office and possibly winning.

And that's worrisome to Shukria Paykan, another female member of Afghanistan's parliament.

"We want the Taliban to accept women's rights and publish a statement where they guarantee women's rights," Paykan says.

Jami, the lawmaker whose feet were beaten by the Taliban, expresses a sentiment that might be echoed by many Afghans and by wary American analysts.

"Afghan women want peace too," she says. "But not at any cost." •

Would a peace deal allow terrorist groups to flourish?

With reporting by *The New York Times*.