

Iran Diplomacy

US, Iran Could Start Back Channel on Afghanistan

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By Sara Massoumi.

12 years have passed since al-Qaeda's attack on the World Trade Center in New York sparked a war which is still going on today. The US' presence in Afghanistan has turned into their longest military adventure ever. American soldiers will return home in 2014 after 12 years, but the story of militias in Afghanistan has still not ended. Osama bin Laden might be gone, but young al-Qaeda leaders are still counting down the days till the withdrawal of US forces.

And the Taliban, who had been marginalized for many years, has also returned to the political scene and the key to the establishment of peace and calm in Afghanistan after 2014 might only be in the hands of this group. Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist and best-selling foreign policy author of several books about Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia, spent ten years in the hills of Balochistan in western Pakistan attempting to organize an uprising against the Pakistani military dictatorships of Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan, but later turned his attentions to writing about his homeland. He writes for the Daily Telegraph, the Wall Street Journal, The Nation, Daily Times (Pakistan) and academic journals.

He is a well known and vocal critic of the Bush administration in relation to the Iraq war and its alleged neglect of the Taliban issue. Rashid's 2000 book, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, was a New York Times bestseller for five weeks, translated into 22 languages, and has sold 1.5 million copies since the September 11, 2001 attacks. In an exclusive interview, Iranian Diplomacy spoke to Mr. Rashid about the Taliban's status today, the West's accomplishments and failures in Afghanistan, the issue of peace talks with the Taliban in Doha, and the possibility of a link between Iran and the US in 2014 on the issue of Afghanistan.

In 2014, the West will withdraw from Afghanistan. Do you think that the US could claim victory after all these years?

No, I don't think the US can claim victory. The US has not been able to win a war of intervention since Vietnam. What we have seen in Afghanistan is that yes they certainly destroyed and routed al-Qaeda, but at the same time they spent many years not acknowledging the offensive by the Taliban which has continued despite the surge and I think the three or four areas which the US has particularly failed. The first has been the failure to do nation-building which President Bush had promised would happen. The second has been the failure to build an Afghan economy which is self-sustaining. The third is the lack of clarity regarding the political transition next year; if elections will be held on time, will they be free and fair, will all Afghans be allowed to take part, all these are still open questions. And lastly, the withdrawal and the military transition to the Afghan army are obviously going to lead to many problems because the Taliban are very much back, they are retaking a lot of areas in southern Afghanistan and they are still a force to be reckoned with.

What kind of a role do you suppose for the Taliban after the US withdraws in 2014? Do you think that the Taliban will join the political process?

Well, I think there is still hope that there will be some kind of dialogue between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Although we have seen the failure so far in the Doha process, we have seen very recently President Karzai's visit to Islamabad and his hope to try and revive the relationship with Pakistan, to persuade Pakistan to give access for some of the Taliban leaders to meet with Afghan authorities. So there's a lot going on behind the scenes, I think even Doha is not completely dead because the Americans are certainly considering a revival of Doha and a revival of certain peace offers to the Taliban, confidence-building measures. For example, one thing that they could reconsider is the first offer that they made in 2011 which was to free 5 Taliban leaders from Guantanamo, and that was then taken back because of the rejection by the US Congress and President Obama's failure to follow through. Now, if that happens and if that offer is revived, I think there's a very good chance that we might see Doha being revived also. So I think there's still a lot of mileage left in talks, and obviously, if talks take place, I think the first issue on the agenda has to be a

ceasefire between the Taliban and the foreign forces and the Afghan army, and then a political negotiation must start with all elements of Afghan society as to how the Taliban could be reconciled and reintegrated into Afghan society.

The Taliban has been a militia force for about ten years at least. Do you think the Taliban of today would no longer be the Taliban of yesterday, the Taliban of before 2001?

I think that's very true, I think the Taliban today are very different, in both positive and negative ways. I mean the Taliban today have publicly said that they want to break with al-Qaeda, they have publicly said that they will not allow foreign terrorist groups to use Afghan soil once the war is over. I remember this is exactly what they did do in the 90s when they allowed Kashmiri groups and al-Qaeda and central Asian groups to use Afghan territory. And they have different attitudes towards women's education, towards the media, towards all sorts of things. On the other hand, they are still also very rigid in their views on Deobandi Islam, they are also very fragmented, there are many hard-liners who have been influenced by al-Qaeda, some of whom have been prisoners in Guantanamo, who have been released and who have then gone back to the Taliban. And remember that a lot of the new leadership, especially the commanders in the field, are younger, more militant, more influenced with anti-Americanism, and more rigid about what they believe. So, yes, we do have a very different kind of Taliban from both a negative and positive aspect.

About ten days ago, a spokesman for the Afghan Foreign Ministry said that they are thinking about the resumption of peace talks in Turkey or Saudi Arabia. Do you think this is possible? Why Turkey and Saudi Arabia?

Well, the Saudis have played a role for a very long time, going back to 2007, 2008, when the first contacts were made between the Taliban and the Karzai government, in fact they were held over the Hajj at that time with both sides doing Umrah. Now, I don't believe frankly that the Saudis are interested in playing a role. I think they are very nervous about getting involved because they know the Doha experiences in front of them. Even though Karzai may want the Saudis to get involved, I really don't believe that the Saudis themselves want to get involved. Remember, negotiation and reconciliation is a two-way street, both sides have to be prepared to get involved and do it. And so the whole issue now is really persuading the Taliban to come back to the negotiating table and I still think Doha is a viable negotiating table, and secondly, persuading Karzai to accept what is on the table, because the last initiative was really delayed by him, he can't have everything his way as he would want it to be. He has to also compromise.

What about Turkey? Do you consider any role for Turkey?

Well Turkey has played a very important regional role, bringing the regional countries together in what is being called the Istanbul process. That includes countries like India and Iran which are also part of this process. And I think Turkey, given its involvement now in Syria, in Egypt, given its own political crisis inside Turkey, I don't think Turkey would like to take on more responsibility for Afghanistan. I think Turkey is doing what it can to try and bring about a settlement amongst all the regional countries so that they can agree not to interfere in Afghanistan in the future. I don't think Turkey wants to get involved in the reconciliation process.

Iran is a neighbor of Afghanistan, but in these ten years, no one has talked about Iran as a mediator between the Karzai government and the Taliban or even as the host of negotiations. Why?

I think the problem is that the Americans would not accept that and the fact is that Afghanistan remains a country that is under occupation by the Americans. They call the shots as far as any kind of military action is concerned or regarding American troops. Especially if they remain in Afghanistan and if some bases are still there after 2014, they are not going to allow negotiations to take place through Iran. The Americans are really very nervous about the good relationship that Karzai has with Iran and how he has been able to balance Pakistan and Iran and the Americans for all these years. I think the Americans would prefer that Karzai take a tougher line towards Iran. So I don't see Iran playing a role in the reconciliation process, but I think Iran can play a very important role in the regional process. Iran's support is needed obviously. All the neighboring countries of Afghanistan, of which Iran is the most important, need to come together and work together, even though there may be American objections or any other objections. So I think Iran has a major role to play in the regional situation. But you know the last government in Iran was not in favor of really any kind of negotiations with anyone. I hope this new government in Iran will be much more in favor of talking to the neighboring countries, talking to the Gulf States, talking to Turkey, and furthering Iran's role and influence in

seeking a settlement.

Do you think that the US would make a secret channel with Iran on Afghanistan before leaving this country in 2014?

I think that's quite possible and I think there may already be a channel. We know that Switzerland has played such a role; we know that Oman has played such a role, and we've just had the visit of Sultan Qaboos, the ruler of Oman, to Tehran. It's quite possible that the Americans and the Iranians, perhaps with the help of some other powers, could start a back channel to discuss Afghanistan. I hope they do because I think it's very important that it happens.

What is your prediction regarding the Afghan election in 2014? Who will President Karzai's successor be?

I think it is very difficult to say at the moment. We don't know exactly who the candidates are or who President Karzai is going to back. I think we'll have to wait for that.

And about the new government in Islamabad, do you think anything has changed under Nawaz Sharif, especially about relations with the Taliban?

Sharif has talked very positively about Afghanistan and of course he has just now welcomed President Karzai which is the first visit that Karzai has made in the last eighteen months to Pakistan. There have been very bad tensions with Pakistan in these last eighteen months. We haven't seen Nawaz Sharif offer anything specific to Karzai. There was the hope that maybe he would offer to free some of these Taliban leaders that Pakistan is holding to encourage some kind of negotiation between Karzai and the Taliban. So far nothing has happened, but I think Sharif is very keen to improve the relationship.

What about Sharif's plan to limit the power of the ISI and the military in Pakistan? Do you agree with this?

Sharif has not expressed any plan to do anything like that. I think what Sharif is trying to do is to work with the military and the ISI and influence thinking towards the peace process. I don't think Sharif is going to try and take on the military right now. He wants to have the military as a partner rather than as an antagonist.