

TALIBAN, AFGHAN NEGOTIATORS AGREE ON ROAD MAP FOR PEACE

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Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special envoy leading the talks with the Taliban.AP

The Taliban and Afghan representatives, including some government officials, agreed on Tuesday to a basic road map for negotiating the country's political future, a major step that could help propel peace efforts to end the long war, now in its 18th year.

In a joint declaration after two days of unprecedented and often emotional discussions in the Qatari capital, Doha, the two sides emphasised a need to work for reducing "civilian casualties to zero" and assuring women their fundamental rights in "political, social, economic, educational, cultural affairs".

The declaration is not binding, and at best is a starting point for when the two sides meet later for negotiations that could lead to fixed terms.

But even if the declaration might not immediately de-escalate the violence in Afghanistan, it does help push forward a peace process between U.S. diplomats and the Taliban that has been making strides in negotiations, but which has been struggling to overcome the Taliban's refusal to meet with Afghan government officials.

Timeline for pullout

The Taliban has said direct negotiations with the Afghans would start only after the U.S. announces a timeline for the withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan.

U.S. negotiators are in the middle of the seventh round of talks with the Taliban over the withdrawal of troops in return for a commitment from the insurgents that Afghan soil would not again be used to launch terrorist attacks against the U.S. and its allies. Those talks, also held in Doha, paused for the two days of the "intra-Afghan dialogue," and are expected to resume on Tuesday.

In a sign that U.S. officials saw progress on the Afghan-Taliban discussions as crucial to moving all the pieces of a comprehensive peace deal forward, Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special envoy leading the negotiations with the Taliban, was a regular presence on the margins of the intra-Afghan discussions. He attended both the opening and closing sessions and appeared to chat with participants during some of the breaks.NY Times

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