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Istanbul and Bonn Conferences: Building Blocks of the Afghan Transition Process

Summary

- The Istanbul Conference slated for November 2, 2011 aims to bring to the discussion table issues relating to the transition in Afghanistan, including Afghan security, recruitment, training and equipment of Afghan security forces, as well as the reconciliation process. The conference will also focus on regional economic cooperation.
- The December “Bonn+10” Conference will convene more than 1,000 delegates from 90 nations, international organizations and the United Nations to discuss the transfer of responsibility for security to the Afghan government by 2014, international commitment to Afghanistan following this handover, and the political process vis-à-vis national reconciliation and the integration of former Taliban fighters.
- Many Afghans and members of the international community wonder if the Istanbul and Bonn conferences will be another step in speeding up the withdrawal and “Inteqal” (the Dari and Pashtu word for transition) process, or if it will be a step toward creating meaningful stability in Afghanistan.
- A successful peace process in Afghanistan hinges not only on successful talks with the Taliban but also on successful security and economic transition, and relatively effective and sustainable governance and rule of law.

“The Istanbul and Bonn conferences can be used as a mechanism to bring together members of the international community, the Afghan government and Afghan civil society in order to formulate a practical roadmap leading to 2014.”

Introduction

This fall, Afghanistan stands at a critical crossroad when the handover to full Afghan security control will start and Afghanistan begins to transition toward a self-sufficient nation and sustainable peace. President Barack Obama announced on June 22 he would bring 10,000 American troops home by December and the remaining 23,000 “surge” troops by the end of September 2012. This would fulfill his promise at West Point in 2009 in which he indicated that the troop surge would last in Afghanistan for 18 months. President Hamid Karzai has set the end of 2014 as the target date for Afghan police and soldiers to take the lead in protecting and defending the country, allowing most international combat forces to go home but likely with some remaining in country to provide training and support to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

In anticipation of this transition, two major conferences stand to play a critical role in facilitating a durable peace settlement in Afghanistan: a summit of regional leaders hosted by Turkey in

Istanbul in early November, and the “Bonn+10” Conference chaired by the Afghan government and hosted by Germany in December which aims to build further regional and international support for Afghanistan. Both conferences could serve as critical building blocks for the unfolding Afghan peace process. While the Istanbul and Bonn conferences serve different purposes, together they lay the groundwork for positive relations among the regional players and interlocutors and pave the way for what is aimed to be a successful and sustainable transfer of responsibility of security to the Afghan government by 2014.

The first component of a successful transition in Afghanistan is the security handover, which will require building up the capacity of the ANSF—including the Afghan National Army, the Afghan National Police and other elements of the Afghan security forces. The focus of the U.S. has been on building the size and capacity of ANSF, weakening the insurgency through military strikes, and maintaining security gains.

The second component is a political settlement. Most Afghans and members of the international community recognize that a political settlement is considered critical to bringing about genuine peace to Afghanistan. The initial preconditions of the Afghan government and its international allies for negotiating with the Taliban to the desired end states of a negotiating process, are that the Taliban break ties with al-Qaida, pledge and abide by the Afghan Constitution, and cease violence. The vital ingredient to a successful political transition is to make the reconciliation process both transparent and inclusive.

The third component of the transition process is the economic component. Weaning the Afghan economy off foreign aid and military spending is critical to a successful economic transition. For a sustainable Afghan economy, initiatives must be taken that focus on economic growth vis-à-vis public/private partnerships as well as support on regional integration, the latter of which will be an important focus at the upcoming November Istanbul conference. Sustainable economic progress with an eye towards strengthened trade, commerce and investment opportunities is critical for the economic well-being of Afghanistan.

Istanbul Conference

The goal of the Istanbul Conference slated for November 2, 2011 is for Afghanistan’s regional players to commit to a stable and independent Afghanistan and to discuss regional economic cooperation. The Istanbul Conference aims to bring to the discussion table issues relating to the security transition in Afghanistan, including Afghan security, recruitment, training and equipment of Afghan security forces, as well as the reconciliation process.

The Afghan government sees the Istanbul Conference as an opportunity to gain affirmation from regional players that they will support stabilization efforts in Afghanistan. For a secure, stable and prosperous Afghanistan and region there needs to be a push for sustainable economic growth through transport, transit infrastructure, and new trade agreements. There are hopes that a “New Silk Road” concept of an integrated trade and transportation network through Afghanistan can bring the regional players and interlocutors together and attract new sources of investment and consumers for its goods. Afghanistan and Pakistan have already started this process by recently signing a transit trade agreement which can serve as a good example of regional cooperation to others in the region.

Bonn Conference

Special Representative of the federal government of Germany for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Ambassador Michael Steiner, announced on March 10, 2011 that an international conference

on Afghanistan will take place in December 2011. The conference was initiated at the request of President Karzai who asked German Chancellor Angela Merkel to host a follow-up conference 10 years after the 2001 Bonn Conference. The conference will be Afghan-led with more than 1,000 delegates from 90 nations, international organizations, and the United Nations expected to attend.

The conference will focus on three important themes that play a role in the unfolding Afghan peace process: transferring responsibility for security to the Afghan government by 2014, international commitment to Afghanistan following this handover, and the political process vis-à-vis national reconciliation and the reintegration of former Taliban fighters¹.

Many argue that the 2001 Bonn Conference and subsequent agreement were not inclusive and representative of broad segments of Afghan society because Taliban and the Pashtun tribes associated with the Taliban did not attend. With the 2011 Bonn Conference, a single Afghan delegation will be present. However, the make-up of the delegation remains flexible therefore making it possible to include a diverse range of Afghan participants. Many analysts looking back at the 2001 Bonn Conference say it was a mistake that the international community and Afghans did not bring Taliban to the discussion table, and view the 2011 Bonn Conference as an opportunity to rectify this mistake. Nevertheless, the Taliban will not be represented at the upcoming Bonn Conference. Taliban Leader Mullah Mohammad Omar said in an Eid message that the upcoming December conference is symbolic and the Taliban will not participate in it. Whatever the composition of the delegation, it is important that it not just be a group of hand-picked Afghans decided by the Afghan government but rather should also be representative of the broader civil society including women and youth.

For many Afghans, 2014 looms with questions such as what will happen when the International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) mission comes to an end and security is handed over to the ANSF. Will negotiations with the Taliban lead to the marginalization of democratic forces in their country? These and other related concerns are further escalated as civil society feels marginalized and excluded from the peace process and the upcoming Bonn Conference. Three major priorities of Afghan civil society are transparency in negotiations with the Taliban, increased access to the national decision-making process in Afghanistan, and long-term international support for democratization and reconstruction.

European officials are pushing back against framing the December conference as "Bonn 2.0," arguing it would only result in inflated expectations. There are increasing demands that the December Bonn Conference provide tangible and implementable results.

The Istanbul and Bonn conferences can be used as a mechanism to bring together members of the international community, the Afghan government, and Afghan civil society in order to formulate a practical roadmap leading to 2014. To ensure mutual understanding among the various stakeholders in the Afghan peace process, it is important that the delegation present at the upcoming Bonn Conference is representative of all factions of Afghanistan not just government. Furthermore, the agenda of the conference should have space for Afghans to openly discuss key concerns surrounding the transition and the strengths and weakness of the current system.

Conclusion

The December Bonn Conference will be a great opportunity for key stakeholders to establish a roadmap leading to 2014 and to define a vision for Afghanistan beyond 2014 in terms of successful security, political, economic transition, and relatively effective and sustainable governance and rule of law.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief highlights two upcoming major conferences that will play a critical role in the future of Afghanistan. Hodei Sultan, the author, is a program specialist for Afghanistan and Pakistan programs with USIP's Center for Conflict Management.

While an effective transition from international forces to Afghan National Security Forces is critical, transition in Afghanistan should not only be seen as a security transition but should also include political and economic transition.

The transition process as part of the broader peace process must be inclusive of all segments of society. Civil society can serve as the voice and bridge between local communities and the Afghan government during the transition period. Civil society leaders can liaise with key decision makers to ensure that concerns of communities are brought to the table. Women's security and safeguarding women's rights should be a top priority during the transition process and for the long-term. In this regard, bringing key women leaders to take part in the transition process that can effectively represent and vocalize the concerns of everyday Afghan women is key to ensuring a gender sensitive transition. Finally, a successful transition and durable peace in Afghanistan is not possible without the Afghan government's ability to provide good governance, political reform and effective rule of law.

Endnotes

1. German Embassy in the United States. "Bonn to Host Conference on Afghanistan in Early December." March 10, 2011. Retrieved August 31, 2011 from http://www.germany.info/Vertretung/usa/en_pr/P_Wash/2011/03/10_AFG_Bonn_PR.html



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