

SUMMARY

Even as the U.S. ramps up its military campaign in Afghanistan, American and Afghan officials are pursuing political solutions to reconcile with the Taliban and end eight years of violence. Though Taliban leaders say they aren't open to negotiation, Afghan and U.N. officials have forged ahead with private talks.

Transcript

GWEN IFILL: Next tonight: the debate over talking to the Taliban.

The New York Times reports today that Pakistan is offering to broker talks among Taliban factions who operate from Pakistani soil. But will diplomacy work when nations are already at war? That is the topic of a debate now under way in Islamabad, Washington and Kabul.

Margaret Warner reports.

MARGARET WARNER: Even as the U.S. pours more troops into Afghanistan, triggering more fighting and casualties, U.S. and Afghan officials are trying to find a way to settle this eight-year-old war politically.

For years, Afghan President Hamid Karzai has talked about reconciling with elements of the Taliban to end the conflict, but with no result. He renewed the offer in November.

HAMID KARZAI, president, Afghanistan (through translator): I am calling on Taliban brothers to come back to their country. I want the international community to help and agree with me with this issue.

MARGARET WARNER: He made his pitch more concrete at an international conference on Afghanistan in London in late January. Karzai proposed pursuing this goal on two tracks. One track seeks to peel off and reintegrate Taliban fighters and their mid-level commanders into Afghan society. Karzai proposes to offer them jobs, security and amnesty, if Taliban soldiers agree to lay down their arms and abide by the Afghan constitution.

That proposal got an enthusiastic response from coalition members at the London conference. A second track seeks reconciliation with the senior Taliban leadership now believed to be holed up in Pakistan. Karzai would offer them amnesty, a safe return to Afghanistan and a role in Afghan politics and government.

They would have to give up armed conflict, cut all ties with al-Qaida, and agree to abide by the constitution, including its guarantee of women's rights. Publicly, top Taliban leaders insist they aren't open to a deal on any level unless and until foreign forces leave. A Taliban statement issued after a bloody multiple bombing in Kabul last month said that was their answer to Karzai's talk of a deal with Taliban fighters.

But Afghan and U.N. officials insist talks have been going on privately, including a meeting last month in a third country between U.N. Special Representative Kai Eide and several unspecified Taliban figures.

For its part, the U.S. supports the move to persuade low- and mid-level Taliban fighters to defect, as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said at the London conference.

HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON, U.S. Secretary of State: Among the decisions made today was to establish a peace and reintegration trust fund to support the government of Afghanistan's efforts to draw disaffected Taliban back into society, so long as they renounce violence, renounce al-Qaida, agree to abide by the laws and constitution of Afghanistan.

MARGARET WARNER: Clinton was noncommittal, however, on the issue of reconciling with the senior Taliban leadership.

For more on this new push to talk to the Taliban, we turn to two men with extensive experience in Afghanistan. Zalmay Khalilzad served as U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan during the George W. Bush administration. Afghan-born, he is a U.S. citizen. And Michael Semple was the European Union's deputy special representative for Afghanistan from 2004 to 2007. He and a U.N. official were expelled from the country by President Karzai for engaging with Taliban commanders.

And welcome to you both.

Ambassador Khalilzad, beginning with you, what prospects do you see for this renewed push to offer -- to neutralize the Taliban, essentially by offering deals at two levels?

ZALMAY KHALILZAD, former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan: Both the national reconciliation level and the reintegration level, prospects for success is very much condition-based.

And we face serious challenges with regard to both. At the reintegration level, in order to attract local commanders to join, it's very important, in my view, that we are able to control the territory in which they operate. That's the most important thing, because, unless we can offer security for those who turn in, work with us, they will be at risk, and their prospects to stay with us will not last.

In addition, of course, there are political and economic incentives that can be brought to bear. At the national level, at the reconciliation level, two things are important there. One is that the overall situation has to be one in which the government and coalition side has to be winning. At least, that's what the Taliban leadership has to believe.

MARGARET WARNER: Meaning winning militarily?

ZALMAY KHALILZAD: Meaning winning militarily, that time is not on their side. They have to come to that judgment.

And, two, which is what President Karzai has been focused on in recent weeks, has been to convince Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, particularly Pakistan, which has -- which serves as a sanctuary for the Taliban leadership, to come to a view that reconciliation and a deal between Afghans and the Taliban, such a deal is in their interests, and they work hard for it.

All of this is very much in doubt at the present time.

MARGARET WARNER: And, Michael Semple, do you agree that the prospects are difficult, and do you share the ambassador's assessment about what it will really take?

MICHAEL SEMPLE, former European Union deputy special representative for Afghanistan: They're both difficult, but important.

The reintegration package that people are talking about is the idea of offering a deal to field commanders and their Taliban fighters that, if they get out of the resistance, that they will have some kind of guarantee of security, and, you know, guarantee of a job. It builds upon a very simple idea, which is that the majority of people in the ranks in the Taliban are not the sworn enemy of the government of Afghanistan or the United States and, offered the right incentive, and, as the ambassador rightly said, the right guarantee that they can stay alive, that their former comrades will not kill them, and that they may be prepared to cooperate with the government.

The trouble is that, you know, nobody really knows what percentage of the -- the Taliban can be attracted by any such scheme. A lot of the Taliban commanders that one talks to about this stress that, you know, OK, money's part of it, but it's really not the main reason why our people are fighting.

So, you know, however well the reintegration is run, there still is going to be a Taliban army in the field and the leadership driving it. The people inside the Taliban who have the capacity to, you know, deliver something a bit like peace, an end to the conflict, are really the leadership. These are the ones who we're looking at for reconciliation, not for reintegration.

A lot of things have got to come right for them to sign off on this. I absolutely agree that they have to decide that they really don't have a prospect of winning out, even in the -- the long term. They need to be nudged by Pakistan. Pakistan has got to come in playing a positive role on this. And, of course, they have to have confidence that they are being accepted as a legitimate part of Afghan society, and not being sort of, you know, simply labeled as terrorists.

MARGARET WARNER: Ambassador Khalilzad, what -- what sense do you get of the role the United States is going to play on either of these levels? In other words, reintegration of the fighters, that was very much a part of General McChrystal's overall new strategy for Afghanistan.

Is the U.S. military going to be running that, and running the money, the fund that the international community's put up for this? And -- and what about on the national reconciliation level with the top leadership? Again, is there a U.S. role?

ZALMAY KHALILZAD: Well, there is obviously a very important U.S. role, but for the U.S. role to be effectively played, I believe it is very important that there is coordination and agreement, to the maximum extent possible, between the U.S. and the Afghan government.

And, at the present time, there seems to be some difficulty in the focus between the two sides, where President Karzai is very much talking about the national level, reconciliation, as the primary focus, and we, the coalition, is talking more about reintegration.

But with regard to the specific U.S. role, with regard to the national level, the U.S. role to convince Pakistan that it ought to play an active, cooperative role in facilitating reconciliation is important.

MARGARET WARNER: Mr. Semple, with the -- with President Obama having set a July 2011 at least deadline to begin drawing down the surge of troops, do you think -- does it appear to you that the United States at least also has an interest in some kind of political settlement here?

MICHAEL SEMPLE: I think that, first of all, even if the United States goes ahead with this -- you know, starting to draw down its troops in 2011, there will be an enduring commitment to Afghanistan.

There will be a troops presence, perhaps reduced, for quite a while, but there will be other forms of assistance. You know, the U.S. is going to continue to be engaged in Afghanistan. Therefore, it clearly has an interest in getting some kind of political deal.

One of the reasons it has an interest is that everybody who has looked at the issue of reconciliation realizes that at the core of any political deal with the Taliban would be a clear break between the Taliban and al-Qaida, credible guarantees from the Taliban that, you know, they will, you know, help prevent the use of Afghanistan and even Pakistan for international terrorism.

The president has reiterated that this remains at the core of United States policy vis-a-vis the two countries. And so any deal which had the Taliban coming on board against al-Qaida, rather than with it, would be extremely attractive.

MARGARET WARNER: All right. Well, I think we have to leave it there.

Thank you both very much.

ZALMAY KHALILZAD: Thank you.

MARGARET WARNER: Obviously, a lot to be done.

ZALMAY KHALILZAD: Thank you.

