

# Talking to the Taliban

## Topics for peace

The focus of this session will be on talks with the Taliban and other insurgent groups. While previously some stakeholders were reluctant to engage with them, lately there has been a significant change of policy. This is particularly the case in the United States which has joined those, such as the Afghan Government, who assert that talks and agreements with the Taliban are central to achieving a sustainable peace. Publicly, the Taliban have stated that they will not engage in peace talks until foreign forces have left the country, while at the same time it is known that there have been some discreet talks. It is hoped that talks could potentially prevent Afghanistan from falling further into conflict and could facilitate the transition of security responsibility to the Afghan authorities. Despite the recent surge in US troops, increasing numbers of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troop contributors have announced the withdrawal of their battle troops from Afghanistan due to domestic pressure. At the Lisbon Summit in November 2010, 'transition' was the key idea discussed by NATO as well as the handover to the Afghan security forces and an overall withdrawal of ISAF troops by 2014. The governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as other regional stakeholders, are concerned with the role of the US in the region beyond 2014, and ambiguity about their long term presence is adding to their concerns. Others fear Afghanistan will fall back into war once the international forces withdraw.

While an increase in operations by international forces have lead to less attacks in some areas of Afghanistan, in other regions armed confrontations have been rising. 2010 saw the highest number of civilian casualties since the beginning of the international operation in 2002 and an increase in the number of attacks on international aid personnel. As a result of this, humanitarian access has continuously declined. Security is one of the most pressing issues and talks with the Taliban could include ceasefire agreements or other security arrangements. Different agreements for different regions might be required as diverse stakeholders are involved in each region. The issue of targeted killings also remains controversial in domestic Afghan and Pakistani politics. In talks with the Taliban, this divisive but important issue needs to be addressed. Over recent years, this has been a crucial issue influencing how the parties are perceived in public, in Afghanistan and abroad, as well as affecting support for any potential agreements.

Addressing these contextual issues through talks is central to establishing the confidence of international stakeholders. At present there is very little trust between the stakeholders in Afghanistan, making talks difficult. Nonetheless, several back channel negotiations have been initiated and while some have failed, others are ongoing. If successful, they could be an important element of a larger peace process that includes transition, reconciliation and regional diplomacy.

Once confidence is established and the contextual issues have been discussed, more substantial matters could be addressed in a larger political process. The role of Sharia law, as well as the issues of education and human rights, would have to be tackled. In addition, the presence of US forces in the region beyond 2014 would have to be discussed. Governance issues, including constitutional reform, could also be debated at an early stage in order to generate a framework for detailed negotiations.

To achieve lasting peace, negotiations with the Taliban are a vital part of the preparations for a comprehensive reconciliation process. Afghanistan's National Consultative Peace Jirga, which was launched in 2009 and led by President Karzai, has so far been slow and achieved limited results. The Taliban are not part of the Council and attacked its opening ceremony. In order to achieve true reconciliation, a more inclusive process is required which is supported by all the stakeholders.

## Questions for discussion

**What are some of the realistic, short-term goals of talks with the Taliban and other insurgents? What should be the sequence of efforts to establish dialogue? Should a local reconciliation process precede regional diplomacy efforts or vice versa?**

**What should a reconciliation process look like? What should be the role of the Afghan High Peace Council?**

**Is it possible to offer military concessions and compromises to encourage talks? How could ceasefire agreement(s) and security guarantees be presented? What is the impact of the withdrawal of NATO troops in 2014?**

**Who should be involved in, and leading, the talks on the Taliban side? Who could be leading the talks on the other side? What role should the Afghan Government have in the talks? What should the roles of the US and the Pakistani Governments be in the talks?**

**What are the implications of a political agreement with the Taliban for the Afghan population in terms of education and human rights? How can the question of Sharia law be addressed?**

**What is the impact of the death of Osama bin Laden on peace and potential talks with the Taliban? What is the effect of the “Arab Spring” on Afghanistan? Is there a new opportunity for peace?**