

Statement of Amrullah Saleh

Greetings from Afghanistan.

I want to extend my sincere thanks and gratitude to Ambassador Hussain Haqqani for inviting me to speak at Hudson institute. I wish I could make it and utilized this chance to have more interactive session with you all.

Today the burning issue in Afghanistan is the endurance and survival of pluralistic system, democracy and governance sans shadow of terrorism and violence. A bloody violence waged and unleashed by Taliban with backing of Pakistan army, terror outfits from the region, drug smugglers & transnational criminals.

Can the issue be resolved through talks & in what format and mechanism?

President Ashraf Ghani has offered unconditional talks with the Taliban which they have rejected to this date partly because they find their status elevated and emboldened by direct talks with foreign allies of Afghanistan. The offer of talks to the Taliban was made on behalf of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, an entity built by massive Afghan and foreign sacrifices, blood & treasure, in the last 18 years. The Republic is not a title but an icon embodying the wishes and aspirations of the Afghan people and it has come into existence through exercise of democracy. It is an inclusive system as every other form of governance failed to unify the nation and be accommodative enough.

I served as minister of interior of Afghanistan until January and during my short tenure there I found out that today's Taliban are no less dangerous in ideology and conduct than those who co-sponsored 9/11 terror attacks. It will be naïve of us collectively to say Al Qaeda was the sophisticated guest of a naïve Afghan host and thus the Taliban were not responsible for actions of terror groups they harbored then and are harboring now. Today the Taliban multi layered & sophisticated with dozens of foreign terrorist groups & global violent jihadists.

We understand that the United States has initiated direct talks with the Taliban and Ambassador Khalilzad tweeted after sixteen days of secret talks in Doha that he has reached an agreement with the Taliban on a draft agreement. Did the Taliban also represent global terrorism in the talks? We don't know.

In our view there is no substitute and alternative to the direct talks between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban. Every other format for talks may lead to misconceptions, misperceptions and un-necessary elevation of the Taliban while they are reluctant to show any concession and flexibility on fundamental matters such as human rights, verifiable de-linking process with drug networks, denunciation of terrorism & terrorists not only those who target western countries but regional states too and acknowledging the pluralistic fabric of the Afghan society.

We understand and appreciate the rhetoric behind direct US Taliban talks but such efforts without direct participation of the Afghan state will not only be counterproductive but also in violation of all UNSC resolutions. It is also a violation of the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) and Bilateral Security Agreement that the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has signed with the United States of America. I am sure the US delegation will connect with Arg (Afghan presidential palace) to provide the necessary briefing and clarifications. We look forward to end of ambiguity and confusion.

The people of Afghanistan have paid and continue to pay a high human and material price in fight against terrorism. We acknowledge and honor the sacrifices of our allies both in blood and treasure but the biggest victim of terrorism and the largest troops contributor to this effort has been Afghanistan. A nation that is ready to give such massive sacrifice for its dignity and integrity is also capable of representing itself.

We hear there is an Afghan war fatigue in most donor capitals and that Doha talks is thus portrayed as a mechanism to mitigate this fatigue, create a breakthrough and invest in peace. We appreciate it. Unfortunately, the matter very important and dear to the Afghan people hasn't been part of the agenda. There is a pan Afghan demand that the issue of the sanctuaries in Pakistan and the support by Pakistan army for the Taliban and other terrorist groups who fight alongside the Taliban be included in the agenda. The Taliban and Pakistan government must come clean on the scope and scale of their destructive relationship. All dark layers of this bloody conflict which has left deep scars in the body and the psyche of our nation has to be addressed and our allies must stand on our side in honor of our continued sacrifices so we discuss these matters ourselves.

We believe only clarity and negotiating from a position of principles and values will lead to understanding and lasting peace. Afghanistan and its hard earned achievements and progress must not become a victim of a rush processes. A lull in the violence possibly achieved as a result of such talks must not be interpreted as sustainable and lasting peace. The Taliban violence is not a local insurgency stemming from genuine grievances. It has never been. The brave Afghan national security and defense forces are in front line against terrorism continue to defend the values of the Republic. The resilience of terrorist stems from the unhindered backing they get from Pakistan, an issue we insist must be included in the talks between US and the Taliban.

Afghanistan is a changed country and has built functioning institutions far more mature than what we had in the dark decade of 90s. These institutions will play a significant and central role in the enforcement of any possible deal or ceasefire or otherwise deterring terrorist from gaining vital territory or space in the country. The consensus within the strategist community in and out is that a governed Afghanistan with functioning institutions is far less costly to assist than to contain an ungoverned dark Afghanistan. The era of Taliban regime was an era of ungoverned Afghanistan dark and inaccessible. The territory they control today is nothing different from the 90s and the harsh rules they enforce has not changed. We therefore appeal to the world community not to undermine our collective achievements and thus not give un-needed and unnecessary elevation to a terrorist group which has done nothing to prove itself otherwise.