[**Ironies of the Afghan war**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1472565/ironies-of-the-afghan-war)

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**HE was captured on Feb 8, 2010, in a joint CIA-ISI raid outside Karachi. The Obama administration described the arrest of the Afghan Taliban’s second-in-command as a “turning point” in its war in Afghanistan. He remained in confinement as the Taliban insurgency swept across the country.**

In what could be termed as an irony of history, nine years later, Mullah Baradar [sat across the negotiation table](https://www.dawn.com/news/1459623) with American officials to discuss the timeline for the withdrawal of the occupation forces from his homeland. He had been [released](https://www.dawn.com/news/1441400) by Pakistani security agencies last year on America’s request.

A co-founder of the Afghan Taliban movement, his role is seen as critical to the effort to end the 18-year war. The long confinement seems to have increased Baradar’s respect among the Taliban commanders. After the death of Mullah Omar, he is the de facto leader of the movement. His presence in the negotiations has given greater authority to the Taliban delegation. Though it is not going to be easy, progress in talks had raised hopes of the two sides reaching some kind of an agreement on ending the war.

Among others, there are [five former inmates](https://www.dawn.com/news/1442491) of Guantanamo who are also part of the Taliban delegation now engaged in peace talks in Doha with those who were their tormentors. They were released in 2014 in exchange for an American soldier held by the Taliban. Since then, they have been living in Doha. All of them had been close to Mullah Omar. They came out of the shadows to join the negotiating team when the Trump administration decided to directly talk to the Taliban.

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*Mullah Baradar has been credited for rebuilding the Afghan Taliban into an effective fighting force.*

Their inclusion in the team was also meant to send a message to Washington. Zalmay Khalilzad, the chief American negotiator, has described their presence in the talks as “more authoritative”, and tweeted that this could be “a significant moment” in the talks.

Thirteen years of imprisonment and torture do not seem to have diminished their resolve. And, there is no sign of bitterness about what they had gone through. “It’s been a long war, with lots of casualties and destruction and loss. What gives me hope is that both teams are taking the issue seriously,” Mullah Khairkhwa, one of the Guantanamo returnees, told the *New York Times*. “The two sides shared a common interest, at least, in ending the war.”

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The very fact that the Americans are now negotiating their withdrawal plan with the group their forces had ousted from power almost 18 years ago tells the story of a war gone wrong. Even if the world’s greatest military power believes that it has not lost the war, it has not won it either. The Americans are now sitting across the table with the same men who they incarcerated and declared terrorists.

Surely, each one of those representing the Taliban in the negotiations has a story of struggle, of being in power and a life in detention. But Baradar has played a much greater role in building the insurgency, notwithstanding his long period in detention. His elevation to the top rung of the Taliban leadership indicates the influence he wields, particularly among the fighters.

Known as a brilliant and charismatic military commander, Baradar has been credited for rebuilding the Taliban into an effective fighting force and running the group’s day-to-day affairs after the fall of the so-called Islamic emirate. Besides heading the Taliban’s military operations, he ran the group’s leadership council, also known as the Quetta Shura.

As a young man, he participated in the Afghan ‘jihad’ against the Soviet forces. It was during the war that he came to know of Mullah Omar. They fought side by side against the communist forces. After the withdrawal of the Soviet forces and the collapse of the communist regime in Kabul in 1992, Baradar settled down in the southern district of Maiwand where he and Mullah Omar ran their own madressah.

When Mullah Omar started a campaign in 1994 against local warlords with a force of some 30 men, Baradar was among the first recruits. That was also the beginning of the Taliban movement which in 1996 swept Kabul and established the Islamic emirate. He first served as the Taliban’s corps commander for western Afghanistan and later as the garrison commander of Kabul where he directed the fight against the rival Mujahideen commanders in the north.

Described as the most skilled military leader who spearheaded the fighting in southern Afghanistan, he also conducted the Taliban’s financial operations, allocated Taliban funds, appointed military commanders, and designed military tactics.

His arrest had dealt a serious blow to the Taliban insurgency. American officials were quick to declare a “significant win”. But his detention did not change the course of war. By the time he was released, the Taliban had expanded their influence to more than 50 per cent of Afghanistan. Following his release, Baradar had circulated an audiotape promising Taliban fighters he would have a greater presence within the movement.

Baradar’s release shows the Trump administration’s desperation to find a political solution to the Afghan crisis. Although he seldom participates in the larger meetings between the two sides, his presence there helps to clear a roadblock. Whenever there was an indication of talks breaking down, Khalilzad would call on him and the problem would be mostly sorted out. But his health seems to have been sapped by nearly a decade of detention.

The US-Taliban talks have made significant progress. But there is still a long way to go before peace can return to the war-torn country. Decades of conflict that have exacted a severe toll on the lives of millions of Afghans and wrought destruction cannot be ended easily even if the two sides reach an agreement.

Certainly, the war has intensified while they have been engaged in serious negotiations. It is going to be a classic war-war, talk-talk situation. There are still sticking points that could cause the negotiations to go on for much longer. The differences over the definition of ‘terrorism’ and the time frame of the withdrawal of the American forces have remained unresolved. Then there is also the issue of the intra-Afghan dialogue. All those needed to be resolved before one can hope for peace to return to Afghanistan.

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