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BACKGROUNDER

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AFGHAN GOVERNMENT WILL NOT ACCEPT SECONDARY ROLE IN TALKS WITH TALIBAN

On January 3, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid announced his group planned to establish an office in Doha, Qatar to pursue negotiations with the United States and its allies. This potential step toward restarting the peace process in Afghanistan offers an opportunity for domestic and international players to identify existing grievances and debate possible political solutions until lead responsibility is handed over to the Afghans in 2014. However, previous failed attempts have left all parties skeptical of each other's intentions and desired end states. Afghan President Hamid Karzai is unlikely to agree to any deal struck between the U.S. and the Taliban if the Afghan government is relegated to a secondary role in the process.

Karzai initially rejected the idea of a Taliban office in Qatar but begrudgingly agreed after the decision had been announced in the Taliban statement.[1] Although both Washington and Kabul have said the Afghan government should lead negotiations, Karzai has protested past parallel secret discussions that reportedly occurred between the Taliban and the U.S without Afghan involvement. In late-2011, Karzai scuttled a similar U.S.-Taliban deal in its early stages that included a Taliban office in Qatar and a transfer of select detainees from Guantanamo Bay. He recalled his ambassador to Qatar and criticized the U.S. for leaving his government out of the process.[2]

In June 2010, the Afghan government established a High Peace Council to negotiate with the Taliban. Former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani, a respected and experienced figure, was appointed to lead it. Past peace talks were criticized for being highly secretive and opaque, and non-Pashtun minorities remained highly suspicious of deals that could be negotiated with Pashtun insurgents. As a result, the council was designed to be representative of different ethnic minority groups and offer a unified message from the government to the Taliban. However, efforts to negotiate with insurgents failed in large part because of the unwillingness and inability of the Taliban leadership to participate in good faith. In November 2010 an imposter posing as a Taliban representative absconded with hundreds of thousands of dollars, and in September 2011, an insurgent posing as a Taliban negotiator assassinated Rabbani and injured Presidential advisor Masoom Stanekzai, throwing the process into disarray.[3]

Although U.S. officials claim the Taliban's announcement is a step in the right direction, insurgent intent and capability remain unclear. While Quetta Shura Taliban leader Mullah Omar has stated that "every legitimate option can be considered" for the future, the Taliban has denounced negotiating and decried any prolonged Western presence as an attempt to occupy Afghanistan. The U.S. military's aggressive operations in southern and eastern Afghanistan have eliminated hundreds of insurgents and degraded the Taliban's command-and-control networks. Although the Taliban could be reeling from these raids, it remains possible that Taliban leaders are seeking to maximize their options prior to the drawdown of U.S. combat forces in 2014. They also may continue to conduct attacks while using peace talks to demand an expedited drawdown of U.S. forces from Afghanistan.[4]

Furthermore, the disparate nature of insurgent groups operating in Afghanistan is another challenge. The announcement of January 3, 2012 reflects a decision made by certain elements within the Quetta Shura Taliban, not other influential factions such as the Haqqani Network or Hezb-e-Islami. Even if negotiations with those elements are successful, other insurgent groups are likely to continue

armed struggle against the Afghan government and coalition forces, especially if they continue to receive support from the Pakistani military and intelligence services. The request to host meetings in Qatar may be a U.S. effort to reduce Pakistani pressure on the negotiations, as Islamabad is interested in cementing a favorable position in the region after the U.S. withdrawal.[5] Yet the rush of the United States to seek a negotiated settlement with the Taliban is likely to benefit the interests of Pakistani military and intelligence services, regardless of where these talks are actually held.

The Karzai administration has rightly demonstrated its interest in controlling the terms of Taliban reconciliation in ways that benefit the Afghan state. It has long argued that Afghans must have the lead for talks with the Taliban. While many Afghans believe a negotiated settlement is a likely step to ending the decades-long conflict, they fear a rush to reconcile will result in excessive concessions to the Taliban and empower them.[6]

Furthermore, Afghanistan's population and political elite lack a clear idea of what reconciliation would mean.[7] Asking the Taliban to break ties to al-Qaeda and accept the Afghan constitution is an ill-defined requirement with extremely vague consequences, and is hardly enough to compensate for the real and deserved hostility that most ethnic minorities and many Pashtuns have for the idea of reapportioning power to this violent, ideological movement. The international community should not rush to pressure Afghans to accept reconciliation on terms that favor only foreign powers. Rather, only a negotiated political settlement among Afghans, inclusive of the various ethnicities and groups, will likely succeed in accomplishing President Obama's stated objectives of achieving an enduring stability in Afghanistan that prevents the return of al-Qaeda and affiliated movements, there and in the region.

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NOTES

[1] "Taliban back Western proposal to open Qatar office," BBC News, January 3, 2011.

[2] DeYoung, Karen, "U.S. deal with Taliban breaks down," *The Washington Post*, December 22, 2011.

[3] Lister, Tim, Jennifer Rizzo, "Afghan assassination means Taliban 'want war, not peace,'" CNN, September 20, 2011.

[4] "No Space for Taliban in Bonn Conference: Crocker," Tolo News, August 4, 2011.

[5] Rosenberg, Matthew, Graham Bowley, "Karzai Gives a Lukewarm Welcome to Taliban Talks," The New York Times, January 4, 2011.

[6] Rodriguez, Alex, "Pakistani death squads go after informants to U.S. drone program," *The Los Angeles Times*, December 28, 2011.

King, Laura, "Afghans fearful of push to negotiate with Taliban," *The Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 2011.

[7] Gossman, Patricia, "Afghan High Peace Council Fails to Reflect Afghan Civil Society," U.S. Institute for Peace, January 10, 2011.