



## **Consequences of Taliban Office in Qatar**

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Taliban ruled around 90 percent of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 and installed a radical Islamic regime. At that time, Taliban's defeat by the Afghan resistance groups seemed elusive but the incident of 9/11 and Taliban's loyalty to Al-Qaida led to the collapse of their regime by US Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001.<sup>1</sup> The Taliban, after that, turned from a regime into an insurgent group and began fighting the US and its NATO allies as well as the Afghan government. Since then, the Taliban's stated goals have been to drive foreign forces out of the country and establish an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan. After the death of Osama Bin Laden and other top official Al-Qaida members, in addition to the international troop surge in southern Afghanistan from 2010, the momentum of the Taliban in eastern and southern parts of Afghanistan has begun to break, provoking the insurgency to agree to hold secret talks with the US. In an interesting revelation, the Taliban signaled a willingness to only hold talks with the US and not with the Afghan government. The opening of a liaison office for the Taliban in Doha shows the Taliban's willingness to have a diplomatic voice but the question remains, whether the opening of the office in Qatar will give the Taliban an opportunity to join the political arena in Afghanistan.

### **Taliban Voice in Qatar:**

In December 2011, days after the Bonn II Conference, it was revealed that secret talks between Taliban and US, with Germany acting as the mediator, had taken place and that it was going to result in the opening of an office for the Taliban movement. The Afghan government reacted to

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<sup>1</sup> Council on Foreign Relations. "The Taliban in Afghanistan." 06 October, 2011.



this revelation by recalling its ambassador from Doha, claiming it was sidetracked from the developments.<sup>2</sup>

These secret talks with Taliban, which isolated the Afghan government, created an uncertainty among Afghan people as to the role of the Afghan government in this process. In recent years, the Afghan government has made several peace overtures towards the Taliban but the insurgency demonstrated no interest in the process. This is because the Taliban thought of the Afghan government as a 'puppet regime' of the US and its allies. This was exemplified in the insurgency's official statement, released 3 January 2012, in which they have acknowledged the opening of the office in Doha, negotiations with the US, ultimately as an effort to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan. They, however, have not written any willingness to discuss the peace efforts with the Afghan government.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, having the US carry negotiations with the Taliban, in what was supposed to be an 'Afghan-led' initiative has made the Afghan government's role in this process ambiguous. Meanwhile, the Afghan government's reaction to this went from clear objection to what seemed by many Afghans as a compromise with the US. However, the Afghan government continued to assert that reconciliation efforts should still be in consultation with the Afghan government and any agreement reached with the Taliban must have its seal of approval.<sup>4</sup>

The opening of the Doha office has been the single most important achievement of the peace and reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan. However, the establishment of the office is not void of conditions, specifically the release of Taliban prisoners from Guantanamo Bay as requested by Sayed Tayyab Agha, the main interlocutor leading the negotiations between the US and the Taliban leadership.<sup>5</sup> In response to this, the US administration, in order to build on the recent

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<sup>2</sup> RFERL. "Afghanistan Recalls Ambassador From Qatar." 14 December, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Taliban website. Shahamat. "Statement of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan regarding negotiations." 03 January, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> DW-World. "Kabul Specifies rules of the game for Taliban talks." 27 December, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Huffingtonpost. "Guantanamo Bay Taliban Detainees To Be Released: Report." 03 January, 2012.



achievements with the Taliban, have acknowledged the request to release prisoners and shows flexibility in addressing the issue.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, the release of high-ranking Taliban members by the US will have a significant impact on negotiations as it denotes an important step in trust-building. However, the opening of the Qatar office will not necessarily result in peace and stability in Afghanistan as this is the first step in a long process of dialogue. At this juncture, it seems that to the Taliban their demands for the release of prisoners are reciprocation for agreeing to participate in the opening of the Taliban office. Furthermore, releasing high ranking Taliban officials and relocating them in Qatar will also prove effective in mobilizing senior Taliban as a means to accelerate talks with the leadership in Quetta.<sup>7</sup>

### **Taliban and its potential future in Afghan politics**

There is a possibility that the Taliban may do away with their rigid ideologies and views on monopoly of force and join the political process and accept political plurality in Afghanistan. In a recent statement published on the Taliban website titled, "Fundamental facets of the Afghan puzzle," the insurgency explicitly states, "Contrary to the propaganda launched by the enemies, the policy of the Islamic Emirate is not aimed at monopolizing power. Since, Afghanistan is the joint homeland of all Afghans, so all Afghans have right to perform their responsibility in the field of protection and running of the country."<sup>8</sup> Such statements suggest a softening of the Taliban approach to the conflict and the means to bring an end to the war. In addition, Abdul Salaam Zaeef, former Ambassador to Pakistan during the Taliban regime illuminated in recent interview that he too was optimistic about the US and Taliban negotiations. He stressed that, "I think if the US is sincere, then Taliban will respond to its sincerity. And if there is any conspiracy, the result

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<sup>6</sup> Guardian. "US denies on freeing Taliban prisoners from Guantanamo." 04 January, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Taliban website. Shahamat-english.com. "Fundamental facets of the Afghan puzzle." 23 January 2012.



will be opposite."<sup>9</sup> Also, it seems that the leadership of the Taliban has become more moderate and flexible attempting to shift its image from a militant group to political party. "As a movement gets older, it becomes more mature, and makes positive changes," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid commented recently.<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, if the Taliban want to become part of a political process then this should be the will of Afghan people. This is controversial and also requires forgiveness of Taliban's brutality during 1996-2001 and also the subsequent massive suicide attacks and assassination campaign that Taliban conducted after 2001.<sup>11</sup> In support to the reconciliations controversial nature, according to the Asia Foundation Survey of the Afghan people on 2011, 64% of respondents do not have sympathy to the armed groups, including Taliban.<sup>12</sup>

One thing that the Afghan people are desperately looking for is security and the end of suicide and roadside bomb attacks in the country. Afghans have doubts whether the Taliban office in Qatar will have a significant impact on reducing or even stopping insurgency operations. On the other hand, Taliban's dynamics in monopolizing power will not encourage them to stop insurgency activities unless they have their own state power and autonomy which also might not be acceptable by the Afghan people. Therefore, Afghan people are scared that Taliban will emerge and enforce strict Islamic Sharia on the people and violate human rights, especially women rights in Afghanistan. However, in the interest of Afghan people, the Taliban must be disarmed, demobilized and reintegrated into society. Only then it will be allowed to become a political force and be given every chance to enter the political arena according to the script of the Afghan Constitution.

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<sup>9</sup> Pajhwok. "Taliban sincere about talks with US: Zaeef." 15 January 2012.

<sup>10</sup> The Wall Street Journal. "Emboldened Taliban Try to Sell Softer Image." 28 January 2012.

<sup>11</sup> The New York Times. "Rights Group Tells of Taliban Massacres." 19 February, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> The Asia Foundation. "A Survey of the Afghan People." 2011.