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Taliban talks: Another Karzai tiff with the US?

By Tom A. Peter

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Afghan President Hamid Karzai says he will personally attend a meeting with Taliban figures in Saudi Arabia, working around Western efforts to coordinate the peace process.

Kabul - The Afghan government has announced plans for President Hamid Karzai to meet with members of the Taliban in Saudi Arabia. Many are heralding the announcement as a potential breakthrough because the Taliban has thus far refused to recognize Mr. Karzai's government.

However, news of the meeting in Saudi Arabia comes weeks after the Taliban agreed to open an office in Qatar and has raised some concern that Karzai could create the appearance of a disjointed negotiation effort that could undermine peace efforts and threaten relations between the Afghans and the West.

“The Afghan side is worried about not having a complete role, and the Afghan government is suspicious of Qatar,” says Farouk Merani, an independent political analyst. “I think the Afghan government is trying to secure its own interests.”

There was already tension between Western and Afghan officials when news broke last month that NATO was negotiating with the Taliban to create a political office in Qatar and had not consulted Karzai's government. In response, Karzai pulled the Afghan ambassador from Doha in December.

US and NATO officials made efforts to address Afghan concerns about exclusion from the peace process and planning for the Qatar office continued. Still, such discord may confuse future talks with lingering questions of whether Afghan and Western officials are working together.

“Karzai is trying to give an impression that he is in contact with the Taliban, the Americans are trying to give the same impression, but the real Taliban who are fighting under Mullah Omar, they are very clever, they don’t trust the Pakistani establishment, they don’t trust Karzai, and they don’t trust the Americans,” says Hamid Mir, a Pakistani journalist and independent analyst. “Yes, they are ready to negotiate with the United States, but they want to negotiate directly, not through Pakistan and not through Karzai.”

Among the Taliban, the main focus of talks will likely be trying to broker a deal for the withdrawal of all foreign military bases from Afghanistan. Forging a coalition government with Karzai is less likely to be a draw for the Taliban, thus there is little need for the president at talks, adds Mr. Mir.

Among Afghans involved in the peace process, many say it is dangerous to read too deeply into Karzai’s forthcoming trip to Saudi Arabia to speak with the Taliban.

“These are the talks, and they are under one name. If they are in Qatar or Saudi Arabia they're still negotiations. I believe the people who might meet Karzai in Saudi Arabia are the same people who are sitting in Qatar. They are the political people who are responsible for talking to anyone,” says Haji Musa Hotec, a member of the Afghan High Peace Council who served as deputy minister of planning during the Taliban’s rule. “There were concerns when the talks were going on secretly between America and the Taliban. But after the Americans gave us our share and asked us to work with them, our concerns have gone.”

Adding yet another layer of complication, there are questions about whether the Taliban’s political representatives being sent to Qatar truly represent the interests of the group’s leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar. Specifically, there is some distance between the Taliban's leadership in Pakistan and the front-line commanders, especially after US forces decimated the ranks of mid-level commanders who moved between the two groups.