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Taliban talks in Doha drag on endlessly

Taliban representatives have been in Qatari capital for almost a year, but negotiations seem to be going nowhere.

Ali M Latifi

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Doha, Qatar - Far from the glistening glass and burgeoning metal structures that dot the Doha skyline, the Afghan Taliban try to discreetly blend in far less pristine areas around the Qatari capital.

The Taliban came to Doha nearly a year ago to establish an office from which they could engage in negotiations with representatives of Washington, in the hope of eventually achieving direct Afghan-to-Afghan talks with the government of President Hamid Karzai.

However, with a coalition of more than 40 nations currently involved militarily in Afghanistan, "everyone is trying to woo them", a person close to the Doha-based Taliban representatives told Al Jazeera on condition of anonymity, saying he did not want to jeopardise any potential for progress towards peace.

Despite nearly a year since their arrival in Qatar, a formal office has yet to be established, and progress towards peace seems a long way off. In fact, all the attention from various representatives from around the world has proven too much for the Taliban here, the source said.

"They want to be left alone for a while," he said.

In recent weeks, representatives from Britain and Germany have been particularly voracious in their pursuit of the men, who are said to be speaking on behalf of **Mullah Mohammed Omar** and the Quetta Shura - the top leadership of the Afghan Taliban believed to be based in northwestern Pakistan.

Germany has played an active role in getting the Taliban to the negotiating table since 2010. But one representative for Berlin has proved particularly irksome to the Taliban in Doha, who approached a diplomat from another country to tell him to kindly back off, the source said.

"They needed someone to tell the Germans to leave them alone. As pious men, they couldn't do it themselves, so they asked for help," said the source. "Everyone wants some kind of credit" in case negotiations are able to broker peace in the war-torn Central Asian nation.

For the small Gulf state of Qatar, helping establish peace after more than 30 years of conflict in Afghanistan would be an important diplomatic coup.

"Qatar wants to be known as being a big player," said the source, who has visited Doha several times over the last few months.

"More importantly, though, Doha hopes that with Afghanistan out of the way, they can turn the world's attention to Iran," a historic enemy of the Arab sheikhdoms in the Persian Gulf, the source said.

But in interviews with Al Jazeera, Afghan officials, sources close to the negotiations, analysts and activists indicated that the Taliban is far from ready to forge peace by laying down their arms.

Seeing snow in Norway

The diplomatic attention proved too much for the dozen or so Doha-based Taliban. To escape the persistent diplomatic overtures, they left Qatar for Norway "to see the snow", said the source.

But not even the snow-capped lands of Scandinavia could provide a respite from the peace process. Soon after the Taliban arrival in Norway, officials in Oslo received a dispatch from Kabul.

"Karzai sent a message to the Norwegians offering the Taliban the Ministry of Justice and the position of Chief Justice," the source told Al Jazeera. A second source also close to the Afghan Taliban in Doha confirmed the offer.

Calls and e-mails to the Afghan government for comment on the alleged overture were not answered by publication time.

Several observers have suggested the Taliban are simply trying to buy time until presidential and legislative elections in the spring of 2014 to see who the next Afghan leaders will be.

A source who took part in both formal and informal talks with the head Taliban negotiator, Maulvi Shahabuddin Dilawar, at a December meeting in France, said there were few signs that the group is ready to lay down their arms.

"They were clearly reading from a paper. What they did say centred around war and the battlefield," said the source, who also asked for anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to the media.

"You could tell Dilawar was surprised that everyone else was talking about coalitions and elections," he said. "They still think they can win on the battlefield."

Events on the ground in Afghanistan also indicate peaceful reconciliation is not at the forefront of Taliban strategy.

A United Nations **report** recently highlighted a 700 percent increase in targeted attacks against Afghan government officials.

"They are directly involved in the protraction of our country's invasion and legally we do not find any difficulty in their elimination, rather we consider it our obligation," **said** Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid in a statement which claimed the UN report "does not bear impartiality".

Despite the continuing Taliban violence, Aimal Faizi, a spokesman for Karzai, sees a Taliban office in Doha as an important first step in Afghanistan's peaceful future.

Faizi said a Doha representative office "can only help the peace process move forward", and he urged the Taliban to take advantage of it. "They must engage and take an active interest in the peace process," Faizi told Al Jazeera.

But there is serious disconnect between an office for negotiations in Qatar, and violent attacks in Afghanistan.

Faizi said the representatives at the Paris meeting were asked point blank, "how do you come as a messenger of peace talks then send suicide bombers to [**attempt to**] assassinate Asadullah Khalid", head of the Afghan intelligence agency.

Their response was, "you shouldn't believe everyone who claims to be a Talib", said Faizi.

Taliban cohesion?

Ahmad Majidiyar - senior research associate at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative Washington, DC-based think-tank - said the group's violent tendencies on one hand and moves toward peace on the other show that the Taliban "is not as cohesive movement as it was in the late 1990s".

The Kabul government has even asked the Doha-based Taliban for documentation proving "they

have the backing of these leaders to act as true representatives of Mullah Omar and the Quetta Shura", Faizi said.

With the group as divided as it is, even that may not be assurance enough, Majidyar cautioned.

"The Haqqani Network, for example, publicly supports the Mullah Omar-led leadership council, but is completely independent in its decision-making and operations," Majidyar told Al Jazeera.

Also complicating peace negotiations is the number of players with their own interests. "This is not an isolated process," Faizi said.

Colin Cookman, a security policy analyst with the Center for American Progress, another Washington DC-based think-tank, also highlighted the obstacles with so many parties involved.

"Almost every actor in the Afghan conflict has the potential to disrupt a political settlement," Cookman told Al Jazeera.

The source who was at the Paris talks attended by the Taliban representatives, said the group believes there will be a "snowball" effect after the December 2014 international troop withdrawal, which will lead to a strong leadership position like they enjoyed in the late 1990s.

He said the Taliban stated anything short of total victory remains unacceptable. "We're fighting for a cause," he quoted them as saying.

The so-called "Doha Process", which so many had hoped would spearhead meaningful peace talks, is now largely seen as dysfunctional among most observers.

Wazhma Frogh, executive director of the Research Institute for Women, Peace and Security, said Doha negotiations have failed so far partly because civil society organisations have not been included, and the discussions don't extend back to Afghanistan itself.

"What is the guarantee that hundreds of young Afghans who are armed and fighting will stop that just when someone sitting in Doha makes a political deal? This conflict is much bigger than political talks," she said.

A central question of the Afghan conflict must also be addressed, Frogh told Al Jazeera. "What is the reason that thousands of our young sons and brothers have taken up guns and continue killing their own people?" That's something she said is difficult to answer from thousands of kilometres away.

Women and other groups marginalised during the rule of the Taliban must be included in any plans for the country's future, Frogh said.

"If women leaders and women activists as independent voices are not part of the political processes in Afghanistan and in Qatar, their rights enshrined in the Afghan constitution will be compromised," she said.

