

The Taliban's Qatar office is a positive step, but not a prologue to peace

The Taliban's establishment of a negotiating team is welcome, but don't expect their 'talk and fight' strategy to end anytime soon



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- [guardian.co.uk](#), Wednesday 19 June 2013 12.28 BST
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The Afghan Taliban opened an office in Qatar on Tuesday to help restart talks on ending the 12-year-old war. Photograph: Mohammed Dabbous/Reuters

The [Taliban announcement that they are going ahead with opening their political office in Qatar](#), as a base from which they can dialogue with all and sundry, is an important development. It is also one which has been a long time in coming. No one should underestimate the amount of diplomatic effort which has gone into making this happen.

The Karzai-Obama declaration in January, the Cameron-Karzai-Zardari Chequers summit in February and the Kerry-Karzai-Kayani meeting in Brussels in April have all focused on getting the [Taliban](#) back to the negotiating table – from which they walked away in March last year. In the end, the formula was quite simple. The Taliban declared they they would not want anyone else to use the soil of [Afghanistan](#) to hurt another country. For the moment, the US team seems happy to read this as code for "we shall not let international terrorists back in."

It does not embarrass the Taliban, as they can tell their friends they were really referring to US [drones](#) launched against targets in Pakistan. The [Taliban also gave a bullet-pointed list of what they want to do with their office](#), which includes talking to other countries, Afghans, regional organisations, the United Nations and NGOs.

The important item in this list is the one where they say they will talk to "Afghans". Since January of this year, President Karzai has demanded that the Taliban office should only go ahead if the Taliban agree to move quickly to negotiating with his representatives. The Taliban have now provided themselves with a political cover to meet with the Kabul government team – under the anodyne heading of "Afghans". In principle, the Taliban can start by meeting a US delegation, agree some confidence building measures, firm up the commitment to cut ties with [al-Qaida](#), and then get round to talking with the Afghan government and address a political settlement and end hostilities.

Of course, no one should expect things to go so smoothly.

The Taliban have explicitly made their announcement in the name of the Islamic Emirate, which is how they referred to their pre-2001 government. To all Afghans, that sounds like a bid for restoration of Taliban rule.

It remains to be seen whether the Taliban just use their office to project the image of a government in waiting or whether in the dialogue they pursue a compromise with non-Taliban Afghans. Despite the widespread desire for peace, many residents of Kabul are for the moment highly sceptical of Taliban intentions.

But the Taliban will face dilemmas of their own. Hardliners in the movement still think that they should fight on and try to grab power once [Nato](#) leaves in 2014. Fighters, who have not been consulted at all in this process, wonder why they should make sacrifices while the leadership seems to be cutting a deal with the enemy.

Moreover, the Taliban's claims to be fighting to end foreign occupation become less credible (to Afghans) as Nato continues its handover of security and prepares to leave. For the moment, the Taliban leadership expects to be able to talk and fight. But they will find it increasingly difficult to justify and thus sustain the fighting part of that strategy.

There should be little surprise at the way in which [President Karzai promptly disassociated himself from the process](#), despite seeming to have endorsed the opening of the office. It is easy to see why he would object to the vagueness of the Taliban commitment to talk to the government, the inflammatory use of the Emirate label and the Taliban's insistence on fighting on while talking. He also does not trust a process outside his control.

For the present, the grim reality is that the killing continues. This was also [another day of deadly attacks](#) in Kabul, including an [assassination bid on a major opposition leader, Ustad Mohaqiq](#). The Taliban did not give a public commitment to end violence as part of the price for this office. But the Taliban will soon find that the dialogue goes nowhere unless they give a commitment to stop shedding Afghan blood.

- Editor's note: this article was updated at 9.45am on 19 June. The participants' names at the Chequers summit in February were also amended to Cameron-Karzai-Zardari