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Michael Semple on Peace Talks With the Taliban

June 25, 2013
By Jenny Li Fowler, HKS Communications

U.S officials are trying to get peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government back on track after disputes over the opening of a Taliban office in Qatar last week.

If the talks resume it would mark progress from an impasse that began 18 months ago when the Taliban walked out from negotiations, accusing the U.S. of dealing in bad faith.

We asked [Michael Semple](#), Carr Center for Human Rights Policy fellow, for his perspective on the Taliban as a political organization and where peace talks in Afghanistan might lead.

Q: What is the intent behind the Taliban opening an office in Qatar? Is it seeking to position itself as a legitimate political organization? How will it do so?

Semple: Opening a representative office in Qatar is the biggest step the movement has taken off the battlefield in over a decade of insurgency. Those in the Taliban leadership who have planned this move conceive of it as a way to translate some of the gains they have made on the battlefield into political clout. However, there are differing views within the leadership about how to exploit the opportunity. Some think they

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Michael Semple, Carr Center for Human Rights Policy fellow

"There will be ongoing peace efforts to try to avert a new civil war. If those efforts do make some headway maybe the worst case scenario can be avoided," said Semple.

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should keep on fighting and use the office as platform from which they can muster international support for their bid to grab power in Afghanistan after the NATO withdrawal. Other Taliban are doubtful of the prospects of a military outcome and are happy to use the office as a venue in which they can pursue a political settlement.

Q: In what ways is U.S. government supporting the Taliban's efforts to realign itself as a political organization?

Sample: U.S. support for the opening of the Taliban office in Qatar was vital. The U.S. has invested sustained diplomatic effort into persuading the Qatari, Afghan and Pakistani government to cooperate with the endeavour. Beyond that, for two and a half years the U.S. administration has encouraged the Taliban to move beyond violence by communicating to them and anyone else willing to listen, that the Taliban can have a future if they are prepared to break with Al Qaeda.

Q: The Afghan government is now pushing back against the U.S. as the clock ticks on the U.S. military pull-out from Afghanistan. What are the elements at play here?

Sample: One of the principles under-pinning the U.S. approach to Afghan peace-making is that it will not do anything which undermines the Kabul government. The U.S. itself has a very short list of items to discuss with the Taliban, mainly concerning links with Al Qaeda and the few Afghan detainees which the U.S. still holds. It expects the main political issues to be discussed in an intra-Afghan dialogue. However the U.S. administration's dealings with the Afghan government have been as difficult as its dealings with the Taliban. Most analysts believe that even after the U.S. withdrawal, the Afghan government will require about \$5 billion annual funding for its security forces and a small international military force. However the Afghan president seems to be suspicious of U.S. intentions in general and of the Qatar initiative in particular. The Afghan presidential elections scheduled for April 2014 add a further complicating factor as President Karzai manoeuvres to see if he should risk defying the U.S. further, by trying to stay in power.

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Q: What do you predict will happen over the next year in Afghanistan -- as the U.S. pulls out and the Afghan government and military assume greater control over the country.

Sample: On balance it is most likely that Afghans will experience a further deterioration in the military and political situation over the next year. The elections, even if they are not postponed, are likely to be messy. The hard-line faction in the Taliban will try to keep up military pressure and the Afghan security forces may lose some ground in the south of the country. Many in the U.S. will question whether this is the kind of place they want to make a long term commitment. However there will be ongoing peace efforts to try to avert a new civil war. If those efforts do make some headway maybe the worst case scenario can be avoided.

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