

# COMMENTARY

No. 128

Tuesday, 23 July 2013

## **The Doha Debacle**

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**T**welve years of blood, sweat, heartache, and grotesque amounts of money and resources have been expended in Afghanistan since 9/11, only now the parties are gesturing towards peace negotiations. That is not uncommon in conflicts and conflict resolution. However, this scenario especially stings for the countless innocents killed and maimed on all sides, and for Afghan women and citizens who fear a Taliban resurgence.

In anticipation of the 2014 troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan, it appears that the Barack Obama administration has been trying hard to bring to a closure the United States/International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) campaign – and some would say nightmare – in South Asia. The opening of a special office for the Afghan Taliban in Doha, Qatar was definitely not a step in the right direction.

First, the two parties in a conflict seeking negotiations can easily find a third neutral country to host talks, without having to open a special office for one of them. That has happened numerous times: Norway is where the Oslo Accords negotiations took place; Dayton is where the Bosnia and Herzegovina peace talks happened; it is all standard procedure in conflict resolution.

However, opening a special office for a non-state actor, the Taliban, known for its ruthless brutality and obstinacy, is in my view the height of folly. What kind of message does that send to some of the most extreme among global extremists? Here are the messages it conveys: 1) Taliban are legitimate (but not the sole) representatives of the Afghan people; 2) exclusive physical office space for Taliban delegates offers geographic and political recognition of the Afghan Taliban; and, most ominously, 3) it may render this interpretation acceptable to many: ISAF is pulling out soon, so the Taliban better get its political act together by negotiating with the foreign forces, while forging key regional alliances with Gulf Arab states, which just might help re-empower them. The latter point is not inconceivable since Saudi Arabia along with Pakistan helped create and sponsor the Taliban, providing ideological, financial, and other forms

of support. Plus, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates were the only three countries in the world to recognize the Taliban government in Kabul in 1996.

Second, the Doha Taliban office illustrates a blatant sideswipe of other more legitimate political entities and constituents in Afghanistan. Not to mention, this gesture completely excludes Afghan women. The Afghan government expressed its disapproval of the Doha office, which was reportedly opened to the Taliban with great fanfare. The Taliban hoisted their flag and erected plaques, apparently with Qatar's permission, as they claim. They were later removed after complaints from the Afghan government.

Third, the Doha office built for the Taliban is a transparent attempt by the Qatari government to assert itself in regional affairs. Since the outbreak of the "Arab Spring" uprisings and revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa, Qatar has been extremely active in political wheeling and dealings, clearly with its own agendas. That is expected, as states seek to maximize national interests. However, Qatar, much like its Arab compatriots in the Persian Gulf, is not exactly known to side with the ideologically moderate elements in the region. On the contrary, their support for extremist elements, along with well-known Saudi support for various Al Qaeda entities, is infamous. Qatar's overt attempts to ingratiate the Taliban are deeply troubling. If I were an Afghan, I would be exceedingly worried and anxious. I would also be wholly disappointed.

Finally, the Doha office has not deterred the Taliban from carrying out violent terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, some even targeting high-security diplomatic and ISAF areas in Kabul. Hence, opening the office for the Taliban in Doha sent the wrong message to the Afghan Taliban: no matter how many people they kill and maim, they have wealthy, powerful, ideologically like-minded friends who will support them while the US and ISAF prepare to pull out of Afghanistan.

I'm already hearing vocal comments from fellow Americans steeped in discontent expressing that 12 years of bloody war in Afghanistan has only led to this: talking peace with a newly empowered Taliban – was it all worth it?

The Taliban delegates are probably shining their plaques while wearing big grins, as we fumble to get them back to the negotiating table in their brand new shiny office.

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