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Preface

The Taliban's political office in Qatar was officially inaugurated in 2013; but, due to the Taliban flag and their sign reading "The Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan", the Afghan government did not recognize it. But despite that, the Taliban, for peaceful settlement of the Afghan issue in previous years, have emphasized on the Qatar office as their sole address for talks and, through this office, they have announced their stance in various international conferences and meetings.

Three weeks ago, the Afghan government signed a peace deal with Hezb-e-Islami, as a result of direct talks between the two sides, and there are rumors that the Afghan government's representatives have met the Taliban representatives in Qatar and have discussed about the peace process. Although these talks are not officially confirmed; but if these talks have occurred; what are the consequences? Does it mean that the Afghan government's peace policy is changed? In the first part of the analysis you would read about it.

In the second part of the analysis you would read about the three day trip of the Afghan Chief Executive to Saudi Arabia. The Afghan Chief Executive has met many Saudi senior officials including the Saudi King Salman and came to agreements with them on some issues. What were the objectives and achievements of this trip? What is the background of Kabul-Riyadh relations? And how was the Afghan-Saudi relations in the past 15 years?

In this issue of the Weekly Analysis you would read analysis of the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS) about the above two subjects.

Did the Afghan government knock the main door of peace?



According to Guardian's 18th October story, Abdul Manan, the brother of Taliban's former leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, has talked with the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) chief Masoam Stanekzai in September and October of this year in Qatar¹.

The news about the held secret talks between Taliban and Afghan government has been vastly reflected in domestic and international media. The Afghan government hasn't yet officially accepted it but a source in the government has confirmed it. A senior official of the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) Ismael Qasemyar, although didn't said anything in details about these talks, but has only confirmed Stanekzai's recent visit to Qatar². The Taliban, on the other hand, has denied reports of holding secret talks with Afghan government³.

¹ Sami Yousafzai, Jon Boone, Sune Engel Rasmussen, Taliban and Afghanistan restart secret talks in Qatar, The Guardian, 18 Oct 2016, see it online:< <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/18/taliban-afghanistan-secret-talks-qatar>>

² Read more on this this page: <http://pa.azadiradio.com/a/28061114.html>

³ Read voa's report in this regard:

<http://www.pashtovoa.com/a/afghan-government-and-taliban-peace-talk-in-qatar/3555833.html>

If the report of secret talks in Qatar is officially confirmed then, after the death announcement of Mullah Omar, it will be the first face-to-face talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, with a bit difference that this time Pakistan is sidelined by US and Afghan government in these talks.

Whether the National Unity Government's peace policy is changed or not? What are the Taliban's concerns regarding the Afghan government and the U.S.'s peace policy? And if the secret talks in Qatar have occurred, what might be its outcomes? In this part of the analysis we have tried to answer these questions.

Elements of the NUG's peace policy

After the formation of the NUG, peace talks with the Taliban were hastened, compared to the last years of Karzai's second term in Afghanistan. The Afghan government's peace policy has three elements: seeking to use international influence over the Taliban, building regional consensus, and establishing contacts with the members of Quetta Shura of the Taliban.

Using international influence over Taliban; after becoming the president of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani started his first foreign visits from countries that were Pakistan's strategic allies and had influence over Pakistan (for instance Saudi Arabia and China). In the second step he improved relations with Pakistan, gave privileges to Islamabad and in exchange demanded Pakistan's assistance in peace talks with the Taliban.

Regional consensus: part of the Afghan government and particularly Ashraf Ghani's peace plan was to build regional consensus over "terrorism" and the Afghan peace process. Because, Ghani believes that, besides Afghans, fighters from Central Asia, Russia, China, Pakistan and Middle East are also fighting in Afghanistan and, thus, on the one hand, the current war in Afghanistan has regional dimensions and on the other hand, if insurgency is not suppressed it would have enormous impacts on the region. Therefore, compared to the last years of Karzai's second term, the NUG, after its formation in 2014, developed warm relations with Russia, China, Central Asia, India, Europe, America and Middle East.

Contacting the members of the Taliban's Quetta Shura instead of the Taliban's political office in Qatar; although, according to various sources, Ashraf Ghani had met the representatives of Taliban's political office in Dubai during his election campaigns; but when he became the President he, to a great extent, neglected the Taliban's Qatar office and instead contacted some members of the Afghan Taliban's Quetta Shura. Pakistan also played a role in establishing these contacts, hence, the Afghan government met members of Quetta Shura first in Urumqi and then in Murree.

The Taliban's concerns over the U.S. and Afghan government's peace policy

The Afghan Taliban has some concerns about the U.S. and Afghan government's peace policy, the most important of which are as follows:

The United states' limited role in the peace process; the Afghan Taliban believe the United States to be the main party of the current war in Afghanistan and think that the current war would continue till withdrawal of the U.S troops from Afghanistan. After 2010, the United States backed an Afghan-led peace process. After the formation of the NUG, the United States tried to mediate between the Taliban and the Afghan government (as in Murree and Quadrilateral peace talks). But the Afghan Taliban does not want such role of the United States. It is said that the Taliban had set a condition to the United States that till the U.S's active role in the peace process; they would not conduct peace talks with the Afghan government⁴. Since the United States have recently started peace talks with the Taliban in Qatar; therefore, recent talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government might also be the result of these talks.

Peace through foreign policy; after the formation of the NUG, the Afghan foreign policy regarding peace was activated. The Afghan President's first unofficial trip was to the Saudi Arabia, his first official trip was to China and also the first President who traveled to Afghanistan was Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In the second

⁴ read more in voa's this report: <http://www.pashtovoa.com/a/afghan-government-taliban-talks-in-doha/3556231.html>

step, Ashraf Ghani visited Pakistan and subsequently many senior officials of both countries paid visits to each other's countries. But the Afghan Taliban, which believe themselves to be independent, on the contrary, in response to this policy of the Afghan government intensified their fight against the Afghan government.

The Taliban's emphasize on Qatar Office; ever since the beginning, the Taliban have emphasized over Qatar office as their address for peace talks. After Urumqi talks the Afghan Taliban denied these talks and announced that the Taliban's office in Qatar is the sole address for negotiations. In response to Murree talks, the Taliban released a statement and increased the powers of their office in Qatar. The statement read: "if anyone, without the permission of the Islamic Emirates' leadership or Qatar's office, attends meetings or conduct political talks; such act, either if it is done in the past or happen afterwards, is an individual effort and can never represent the Islamic Emirates"⁵.

Has the Afghan government's peace policy changed?

After the failure of the Quadrilateral talks, the Afghan government became suspicious of Pakistan's role. This suspicious is apparent in a piece published on the Afghan Presidential palace's official website, which reads: "after the creation of the NUG, Ashraf Ghani started talks with the Pakistani Army; meaning that the important party of the Afghan case is Pakistan and therefore, talks must be conducted with Islamabad's main authorities. But it did not have tangible achievement as yet. The Afghan government is skeptical to Pakistan's mediation and believes that the peace process is an intra-Afghan process and the Afghans themselves must set together and reach a conclusion"⁶. Hence, the Afghan government did not conduct peace talks with Hezb-e-Islami (Hekmatyar) through Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) meetings, and signed a peace deal with Hezb through an intra-Afghan peace process. Although foreigners supported

⁵ Read the full statement of the Taliban here:

<http://alemara1.org/?p=19802>

⁶ Read more on the website of the Presidential Palace:

<http://president.gov.af/ps/analysis/107585>

these talks but these talks, to a great extent, was the result of direct talks between the Afghan government and Hezb-e-Islami.

In the meanwhile, the Afghan Taliban has also become skeptical to Pakistan's role in the recent past. That is why; they conducted direct talks, without Pakistan's mediation, with Americans in Qatar. Although details about these talks remain unrevealed but in response to these talks Pakistan has arrested several Taliban leaders last week, the most prominent of whom was Mullah Nani⁷.

Besides that, after the failure of the quadrilateral talks insecurity increased and war intensified in the country. The countries' major cities are contested and war continues in Kunduz, Urozgan, Helmand, Farah and Nimroz. Due to insecurities, the Afghan government is also under pressure because on the one hand; war increases the mortalities of the Afghan security forces and on the other hand, it undermines the Afghan government's achievements.

If the news about the NDS chief's talks with the Taliban's political office in Qatar is accurate; it is an indication of the change in the Afghan government's peace policy and it means that the Afghan government has responded positively to the Taliban's concern on which they had emphasized for a long time.

Conclusion

Generally, direct talks between the parties of the issue are promising and the more direct talks are conducted between them the more will they get close to the resolution of the issue. There, if vis-à-vis talks between the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government have occurred; it must be vastly welcomed.

The need for a mediator group is necessary, irrespective of secret talks in Qatar. The mediator group will be helpful in decreasing trust deficit between Afghan government and Taliban, pave the way for direct talks, remove some hindrances and will play a guarantor role, to some extent. In this regards, some strives have

⁷ For more details visit: <http://pa.azadiradio.com/a/28048234.html>

been made by few sides.⁸ But, they are not yet officially recognized by Afghan government and Taliban.

A mediator group can be helpful, because, as it would be completely informed about the on-going peace process, it can bring the peace process back on track through public pressure if the peace process becomes stall or a side refused to deliver its promises. For instance, whenever peace talks between Afghan government and Hezb-e-Isami (Hekmatary) were faced with hurdles, public opinion and public pressure pushed peace talks to continue, because, almost all the civil societies and public were aware of such talks.

⁸ Center for Strategic & Regional Studies, Dr. Amin: we presented the scheme of intra-Afghan reconciliation to the Taliban/interview, August 8, 2016:

<http://csrskabul.com/en/blog/dr-amin-we-propose-a-scheme-for-the-intra-afghan-reconciliation-to-the-taliban-interview/>

The NUG and Kabul-Riyadh ties



The Afghan Chief Executive Dr. Abdullah Abdullah along with a delegation of senior officials traveled to Saudi Arabia. In this three day trip Abdullah was accompanied by Minister of Hajj and Religious Affairs, Minister of Commerce and Industries, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, the caretaker governor of Balkh and the chief executive of Jamiat-e-Islami Atta Mohammad Noor and some other senior government officials.

Dr. Abdullah and his companions, in this trip, met the Saudi King Salman Abdul Aziz, the Crown Prince and Minister of Interior Mohammad bin Nayef, the Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of Defense Mohammad bin Salman and Ministers of Islamic Affairs Calls and Guidance, Education, Commerce and investment, Finance, Justice and some other senior Saudi officials and they also came to agreement on various issues.

Here you would read about the purposes and achievements of this trip, the background of relations between the Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia and the NUG-Saudi ties.

The background of the bilateral relations

Afghanistan has long and historical relation with Saudi Arabia. The friendship agreement between the two countries was signed in 1932 and King of Saudi Arabia at the time Malik Faisal visited Afghanistan in 1349. The Afghan-Saudi ties were friendly during Dauod Khan's rule in Afghanistan but in the aftermath of 1357 coup d'état relations between the two countries were deteriorated.

During the Afghan Jihad against the Soviet Union, Saudi Arabia financially and diplomatically supported Afghan mujahedeen.. After the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia was one of the three countries that recognized the Taliban regime but after the 9/11 incident, Saudi Arabia along with United Arab Emirates, which had formerly recognized the Taliban regime, cut ties with the Taliban regime.

After the creation of an interim government, under Hamid Karzai, in Afghanistan in 2001, once again, relations between the two countries was established and, in Tokyo Conference, Saudi Arabia pledged \$220m in aid to Afghanistan. Thus Saudi Arabia pursued a new policy towards Afghanistan. In the meanwhile the Afghan senior officials also paid visits to Riyadh. Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai visited Saudi Arabia twice in 2005 and once in 2010 and, generally, the two countries enjoyed good relations in the two terms of Karzai's rule in Afghanistan and the two countries signed agreements of cooperation in various areas.

NUG's relations with Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia holds an important place in the NUG's foreign policy. Right after swearing in, Ghani announced his foreign policy doctrine where Saudi Arabia came in the second circle of his foreign policy (Islamic countries).

The Afghan President went on first unofficial foreign trip to Saudi Arabia and in the past two years he has visited thrice to the kingdom.

On the other hand, Afghanistan was among the countries that announced their support from Saudi Arabia's stance in Yemen and later Afghanistan also entered in Saudi-led anti-terrorism coalition.

Afghanistan between Iran and Saudi Arabia

The Saudi Arabia's role, as the center of Islamic world, cannot be ignored neither in politics nor among the public in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Iran, with 950 km common border, has religious, cultural and language commonalities with Afghanistan and has had long historical and relatively good relations with Kabul.

The cold war between these two rival countries has started ever since the Islamic revolution in Iran. Afghanistan and particularly Jihadi groups, during the Afghan Jihad against the Soviet Union, had strong relations with the two rival countries which has influenced the Afghan foreign policy during Civil War, the Taliban regime and even in the past one and half decade.

In the past 15 years, compared to Kabul-Riyadh relations, the Kabul-Tehran relations were closer. But after the formation of the NUG, the Kabul-Riyadh ties improved. When President Ghani announced his support from Saudi Arabia in Yemen case, he was pressurized by some political circles and stakeholders of the government and, after that time, the NUG has tried to remain impartial between Riyadh and Tehran⁹.

Currently the two countries (Iran and Saudi) are engaged in proxy war, in cultural and religious fields, in Afghanistan; for instance, we witnessed some propaganda, by some circles, against the construction of an Islamic center and university in Kabul and Jalalabad by Saudi Arabia.

Generally, the NUG has succeeded to maintain necessary balance, based on common intercourse and cooperation, in its relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia.

⁹ Read CSRS' analysis in this regard:

<http://csrskabul.com/en/blog/the-saudi-iran-tussle-and-its-impacts-on-afghanistan-and-the-region/>

Recent visit of the Afghan Chief Executive to Saudi Arabia

The Afghan Chief Executive along with a delegation of government officials visited Riyadh on Monday 17 October 2016. Besides the senior government officials, some Afghan traders and the deputy High Peace Council of Afghanistan was also among the Afghan delegation. This trip had economic and trade purposes and besides that the problems of Afghan workers in Saudi and peace talks with the Taliban was also the objectives of the trip. In this trip the main issues of focus was as follows:

Peace: although, in the past one and half decade, Saudi has not played a significant role in improving the Kabul-Islamabad relations nor has it done anything for peace talks with the Taliban. But yet it is believed that Saudi Arabia can play a significant role, if it is willing to, in the Afghan peace process. Therefore, in his meeting with the Saudi King Salman Abdul Aziz, the Afghan Chief Executive demanded Saudi's assistance in the peace process. The King of Saudi Arabia, in response, said that his country wants improved Kabul-Islamabad relations and would help to maintain peace and stability in Afghanistan as much as he can.

Politics: in his meeting with, the King of Saudi Arabia, the Afghan Chief Executive said that Afghanistan has now become a member of Saudi-led anti-terrorism coalition and supports the Saudi Arabia in Yemen issue. In addition he emphasized that, now is the time when Saudi Arabia must provide help to fight against terrorism so that some countries in the region stop supporting terrorism¹⁰.

Economics: expansion of trade between the two countries and Riyadh's investment in energy sector in Afghanistan were also of the main issues discussed between the Afghan Chief Executive and Saudi officials. Dr. Abdullah invited Arab investors to invest in Afghanistan and the Saudi Minister of Commerce and Investments, in a meeting with Abdullah, pledged to send a technical team to inspect investment environment in Afghanistan.

¹⁰ Read more here: <http://ceo.gov.af/fa/news/159577>

On the other hand, the Afghan workers issue in Saudi Arabia, which despite vast relations between the two countries has not been resolved in the past 15 years, was also raised by the Afghan Chief Executive. In a meeting between Saudi Arabia's Minister of Interior and the Afghan Chief Executive, the two sides discussed and came to agreements regarding changing the Pakistani passports of Afghan workers, distribution of Afghan passports to them and granting work licenses to the Afghan workers in Saudi Arabia.

Education and Culture: in this trip, the Afghan Chief Executive, demanded from Saudi senior officials that, besides construction of a major Islamic Center in Kabul and an Islamic University in Jalalabad, this country must focus in other areas as well.

The Saudi Minister of Education Dr. Ahmad Issa, in his meeting with Dr. Abdullah, pledged an annual 400 scholarships to Afghan students and said that, in order to properly coordinate and facilitate these scholarships, he will appoint an educational attaché in Saudi Embassy in Kabul¹¹.

The end

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¹¹ Read more here: <http://ceo.gov.af/fa/news/159574>