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Author(s): Nasria Pashtun

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Contextualizing Qatar's Role and Relevance in Afghanistan's Quest for Peace

NASRIA PASHTUN¹

In 1988, the Soviet Union was losing ground in Afghanistan due to heavy casualties, and the high costs of war forced it to withdraw its troops from the country. The Geneva Accords, which laid out the terms for the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, were signed between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with the Soviet Union and the U.S. serving as guarantors. The Geneva Accords included a timeline for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, resulting in an end to the nine-year long Soviet occupation of the country. However, the mujahideen who were not included in the negotiations and decision-making processes, did not accept the terms of the agreement,² and not long after the withdrawal, a civil war broke out, which ultimately culminated in the Taliban seizing control over Afghanistan.

Three decades on, Afghanistan finds itself in a similar situation. The U.S., after 17 years of counter-terrorism efforts, continues to struggle to counter and defeat the Taliban insurgency and other regional and international terrorist groups. According to the report of U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), at present, the Afghan government controls only 55.5% of the country's 387 districts.³ After several unsuccessful attempts to negotiate with the Taliban since 2007, in 2018, the U.S. appointed Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as its Special Representative for Afghanistan

1. Nasria Pashtun is the International and Diplomatic Coordinator at the Office of the Former President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai.

2. Soviets to Withdraw from Afghanistan." History.com, February 09, 2010. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/soviets-to-withdraw-from-afghanistan>

3. Fox, Kara. "Taliban Control of Afghanistan on the Rise, US Inspector Says." CNN, November 08, 2018. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/11/01/middleeast/afghanistan-report-taliban-gains-control-intl/index.html>

Reconciliation to facilitate dialogue and negotiation with the Taliban in Qatar, aimed at ending the conflict in Afghanistan. Soon after his appointment in September 2018, peace talks were expedited on various levels.

Given how the Taliban's political office is located in Doha, Qatar, it is necessary to understand Qatar's role in the peace talks with the Taliban. These talks are ultimately aimed at bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan, but would Qatar remain only a facilitator in these peace talks or could it also directly influence the process? This essay explores Qatar's role in the peace talks; its ties with Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia; what Qatar would gain or lose from peace in Afghanistan; and what Afghanistan can do to bring Qatar on board to ensure the success of peace talks. An additional question this essay explores pertains to other fora that can play an effective role in facilitating peace talks and an end to terrorism in Afghanistan.

Qatar enjoyed good relations with the neighboring states and regions until very recently. Over the past two years, Qatar's relations with Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain soured due to allegations leveled by Riyadh and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Some regional players, such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Iran, are significant and it is essential to explore their relationships with Qatar and the impact of those relations on Afghanistan and the country's peace related efforts.

Qatar–Afghanistan Relations and Prospects of Security Cooperation

Afghanistan and Qatar share very limited diplomatic ties. Though Afghanistan has an embassy in Doha, for reasons unclear yet, Qatar does not have one in Kabul. In 2015, Qatar announced that it would open an embassy in Kabul but whether and when the embassy will be opened remains unclear. However, the leaders of both countries do share cordial relations.⁴ Official delegations from Qatar are always well-received in Afghanistan, and Qatar reciprocates the same hospitality for Afghan diplomats and officials.

However, the Gulf country, plays an important role in Afghanistan's security and peace. It maintained "cordial relations" with the Taliban during the

4. "Qatar to Open Embassy in Kabul." Gulf News, October 29, 2018. <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/qatar/qatar-to-open-embassy-in-kabul-1.1578871>

latter's rule in Afghanistan, hosted Taliban leaders after their regime was toppled in 2001,⁵ and has hosted the Taliban's office since June 2013.⁶ Qatar has also provided financial support to Taliban.⁷ Therefore, this longstanding and strong relations between the Taliban as one of the parties to the conflict in Afghanistan, and Qatar, presents an effective leverage on the latter that can be harnessed to encourage the Taliban to join peace talks. This potential has been taken advantage of recently, as Qatar has facilitated multiple rounds of talks between the Taliban and the US.

Qatar has also been an important ally of NATO and the U.S. in the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan. In January 2018, Qatar signed an agreement with NATO which allows NATO personnel to enter and transit Qatar and to use the Al-Udeid Air Base.⁸ Moreover, Qatar is a member of the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation in Afghanistan. The declaration of the second meeting of the Kabul Process held in February 2019,⁹ provides a useful platform and framework for security, peace and counter-terrorism cooperation.

Qatar-Pakistan Relations

Pakistan has close relations with the Arab world. Food items and minerals comprise a bulk of the goods they trade bilaterally. As of July 2017, Pakistan's exports to Qatar stood at USD 5.66 million, which increased to USD 8.74 million in January 2018. This increased marked the first time since May 2012 that bilateral trade between the two countries crossed the USD 8 million mark.¹⁰ In December 2015, Qatar agreed to supply Pakistan with

5. "How Qatar Came to Host the Taliban." BBC News. June 22, 2013. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-23007401>

6. Maclean, William. "Afghan Taliban Opens Qatar Office, Says Seeks Political Solution." Reuters, June 18, 2013. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban-opening/afghan-taliban-opens-qatar-office-says-seeks-political-solution-idUSBRE95H0NU20130618>

7. "In response to Pakistan request Saudi Qatar admit supporting Taliban." Afghanistan Times, December 23, 2018. <http://www.afghanistantimes.af/in-response-to-pakistan-request-saudi-qatar-admit-supporting-taliban/>

8. "Qatar's Strategic Role within NATO's Resolution Support Mission | Qatar-America Institute." Qatar-America Institute, November 07, 2018. <https://qataramerica.org/qatars-strategic-role-within-natos-resolution-support-mission/>

9. "The Kabul Process for Peace & Security Cooperation in Afghanistan Declaration." U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan, March 01, 2018. <https://af.usembassy.gov/kabul-process-peace-security-cooperation-afghanistan-declaration/>

10. "Pakistan: 64% Growth in Exports to Qatar." FreshPlaza.com, March 02, 2018. <https://www.freshplaza.com/article/2190381/pakistan-64-growth-in-exports-to-qatar/>

USD 16 billion worth Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG).¹¹ Moreover, thousands of Pakistani nationals are employed in Qatar and both countries are working to provide more job opportunities to Pakistani citizens in the Gulf country. Approximately 150,000 Pakistani workers are already employed in Qatar in all sectors, and in 2019, the government of Qatar announced that it would recruit an additional 100,000 Pakistani workers.¹²

For years, Pakistan has maintained strong ties with the GCC states. On matters such as regional and global affairs, Pakistan aligns its policies with those of the GCC states. The foundations of this relationship are based on common faith and culture. However, Pakistan chose to remain neutral when the relationship between Qatar and Saudi began to deteriorate. In 2017, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE cut ties with Qatar, claiming that Doha supported Islamist groups and that it had relations with Iran. Some argue that Pakistan's stance was based on the Qatar's contribution to the Pakistani economy, specifically its extensive engagements in Pakistan's energy sector. Another reason could be the Qatari royal family's relationship with former Pakistani Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif.¹³

Qatar-Iran Relations

Qatar-Iran relations have had their ups and downs. Both countries share diplomatic relations but after the attack on the Saudi diplomatic mission in Iran, bilateral ties soured. Qatar condemned that attack as well as ended diplomatic ties with Iran. However, when the diplomatic crisis between Saudi Arabia and other GCC states with Qatar began, Tehran provided economic and diplomatic support to Doha. Tehran opened its airspace to Qatar Airways when Riyadh and the others closed theirs, and Qatar restored full diplomatic relations with Iran.¹⁴

Moreover, Qatar and Iran share the gas field under the Persian Gulf waters

11. Haq, Riaz. "Assessing Qatar-Pakistan LNG Deal." South Asia Investor's review, February 22, 2016. <https://www.southasiainvestor.com/2016/02/assessing-qatar-pakistan-lng-deal.html>

12. Khan, Gohar Ali. "Qatar Plans to Recruit 100,000 Pakistanis, Says Consul General." dawn.com, January 31, 2019. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1460800>

13. Cafiero, Giorgio. "Where Does Pakistan Fit into the Qatar Crisis?" TRT World, December 20, 2017. <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/where-does-pakistan-fit-into-the-qatar-crisis--13473>

14. "How Qatar Came to Host the Taliban." BBC News, June 22, 2013. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-23007401>

(referred to as North Field by Doha and as South Pars by Tehran), the world's largest natural gas field, and this factor has a great influence on their relationship. In late 2013, Qatar offered to help Iran develop its side of South Pars, a development which has also been interpreted as being driven more out of a fear that sloppy work by Iranian firms might damage the gas field and hurt Qatari revenues and not altruism, as well as being possibly driven by a desire in Doha to keep tabs on Iranian activity in the field.¹⁵ A large chunk of Qatar's revenue is based on petroleum and natural gas exports. Therefore, it is important for Qatar to maintain good ties with Iran for cooperation in the field of gas extraction. This is especially so because the natural gas reserves are unevenly distributed, and Qatar extracts three times the amount of natural gas from the field compared to Iran.

Qatar-Saudi Arabia Relations

Saudi Arabia and Qatar shared warm and friendly relations until it soured two years ago. Previously, both countries had synchronicities in their foreign policies, especially with regard to Iran. However, bilateral relations began deteriorating when the Qatari state-owned television network, Al Jazeera, began criticizing the Saudi Royal family. Qatar was also accused by Saudi Arabia of serving as an ally to the Ansar Allah (an Islamic religious political armed movement, also called the Houthi movement), a group Saudi Arabia's monarchy views as a major threat.¹⁶ This, in addition to other previous disagreements such as on Qatar establishing ties with Iran and Israel, and Doha's backing of Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, enraged Riyadh, which, along with other GCC states, cut diplomatic ties with Doha.¹⁷ All these developments took place even as the Taliban maintained a political office in Doha, which too was questioned in media and by the GCC states given how Taliban leaders were residing in Doha, living a lavish life financed by the Qatari royal family. However, while Saudi Arabia and some other GCC states imposed a blockade on Qatar, the latter's security was ultimately guaranteed due to the fact that Qatar hosts the biggest U.S. air base abroad,

15. "Qatar offers to help Iran get out its gas." *Iran Times*, January 03, 2014. <http://iran-times.com/qatar-offers-to-help-iran-get-out-its-gas/>

16. Harb, Malak. "Al-Jazeera a Target in Gulf Confrontation with Qatar." *AP News*, June 09, 2017. <https://apnews.com/854b5ce82eb9467db8298d37e110d44d>

17. "Qatar Row: Saudi and Egypt among Countries to Cut Doha Links", *BBC News*, June 05, 2017. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-40155829>

a factor which prevented any possible military interventions by Saudi Arabia and its allies.¹⁸

Peace Talks with the Taliban

If Qatar's foreign policy is closely studied, what emerges is that Doha's strategy focuses on either maintaining cordial relations with everyone or choosing to stay neutral in case of a conflict. Qatar is also known for balancing its relationship with countries that are rivals. For example, Qatari lobbyists are reaching out to individuals close to U.S. President Donald Trump and lobbying on Capitol Hill while simultaneously improving its diplomatic ties with Iran. Moreover, being a GCC state, Qatar faces many restrictions to maintaining a healthy relationship with Iran, but Doha managed to avoid the tension with regard to Iran. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are essentially displeased about the small but rich Gulf nation's outsized role in regional affairs, sponsoring factions in revolts and civil wars and brokering peace deals across the Middle East.¹⁹

When Doha was criticized for supporting Islamist groups or for opening an office for Taliban, the Qatari Foreign Minister's Special Envoy on Counterterrorism, Mutlaq Al Qahtani, clearly stated that it did so "by request of the US government" and as part of Qatar's "open-door policy, to facilitate talks, to mediate and to bring peace."²⁰

At present, though the ongoing U.S.-Taliban peace negotiation has witnessed forward movement, the Taliban have been largely unwilling to negotiate with Afghan government officials/representatives. This aspect is the biggest drawback of this phase of talks. Not involving the Afghan government has created obstacles for the success of the peace talks. This is further compounded by developments that suggest that the U.S.-Afghanistan relationship is also souring.²¹

18. Fisher, Max. "How the Saudi-Qatar Rivalry, Now Combusting, Reshaped the Middle East." *The New York Times*, June 13, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/world/middleeast/how-the-saudi-qatar-rivalry-now-combusting-reshaped-the-middle-east.html>

19. "Qatar Hosted Taliban at Request of US Government." *Al Jazeera News*, June 11, 2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/qatar-hosted-taliban-request-government-170611114833584.html>

20. Qatar Hosted Taliban "at Request of US Government." *Al Jazeera News*, June 11, 2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/qatar-hosted-taliban-request-government-170611114833584.html>

21. Landler, Mark. "U.S. Diplomat Is focus of Afghan leaders' anger over peace talks with Taliban." *The New York Times*, March 15, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/us/politics/zalmay-khalilzad-afghanistan-taliban-talks.html>

Conclusion

Qatar does not have a direct role in the peace talks, and neither has it signed any security cooperation agreement with Afghanistan. However, Qatar came into the limelight in matters related to Afghanistan when the Taliban established their political office in Doha and continued as Qatar facilitated the talks between the U.S. and Taliban in its territory.

In addition to peace talks in Doha, other fora too can be harnessed to ensure that the Taliban (and other terrorist groups) genuinely seek peace and prove their willingness to join the Afghan government in the peace process. It is important to note that peace is possible only if Afghans are united and if the peace process is Afghan-led and Afghan-owned. The recently launched ‘intra-Afghan dialogue’ process in Moscow is a good example because it was an occasion in which Afghan and Taliban leaders exchanged views and arrived at a consensus that peace is the need of every Afghan, and drafted a Joint Resolution, where some ground rules were articulated, emphasizing national unity, withdrawal of troops, and women’s rights.

However, while insofar Qatar’s role in the Afghan peace process has been only to facilitate the process, recent events (such as pertaining to the preparation of the preliminary list of participants for the Doha talks) shows that at times, Qatar seems to play a relatively bolder role as well. The Taliban chose to have the group’s office in the Qatar, and the country agreed to host the group’s office on the U.S.’s request as well as to maintain its image as a state that promotes peace. Qatar did not have anything to lose by hosting the office, but by being actively involved in the peace talks, it can earn a higher status and join big powers in the world in their efforts in the war against terrorism.

Policy Recommendations

- In order to further enhance its their bilateral relationship, Qatar and Afghanistan should work on developing deeper diplomatic ties. For instance, there should be a Qatari embassy in Kabul, and exchange programs and trainings for the young diplomats should be promoted. If necessary, the Afghan ministry of aviation should consider allowing Qatar Airways to fly in and out of Kabul.

- Qatar and Afghanistan have not signed a security cooperation agreement, but the former has signed a security agreement with NATO.²² Upon an invitation from NATO in July 2018, it also joined the NATO-led Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan, under the aegis of which Doha will deploy ground forces in Afghanistan and assist in training and advisory missions.²³ By focusing on training and advising Afghan forces as part of its engagement under the aegis of its security cooperation arrangement with NATO, Qatar can contribute to the efforts aimed at eradicating terrorism and ending the longest war in U.S. history.
- Qatar should concentrate on the ongoing peace talks between U.S. and Taliban. If these peace talks end on a positive note and the Taliban agreed to negotiate with the current Afghan government, agree to a ceasefire and end their malicious activities in Afghanistan, that will be a great achievement for Qatar. Doha should also ensure that it does not undermine and/or embitter its own relationship with the Afghan government and should ensure that the Afghan government is included in the negotiations. Doha's efforts to bring the Taliban and the Afghan government to the negotiation table failed terribly because the Taliban had issues with the list of participants that the Afghan government proposed. Qatar should work as a mediator and resolve this issue. Doing so will improve its relationship with Afghanistan and the intra-Afghan dialogue too will gain momentum.

22. Stocker, Joanne. "Qatar Signs Security Agreement with NATO." *The Defense Post*. January 18, 2018. <https://thedefensepost.com/2018/01/17/qatar-nato-security-agreement/>

23. Munoz, Carlo. "Regional Rivals Qatar, UAE to Officially Join U.S.-led Coalition in Afghanistan." *The Washington Times*. July 06, 2018. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/jul/6/regional-rivals-qatar-uae-officially-join-us-led-c/>