



# Intra-Afghan Talks Commence in Doha, Qatar

September 16, 2020

On September 12, 2020, Afghan government and Taliban representatives officially met to begin inaugural direct peace negotiations in Doha, Qatar, a significant moment with potentially dramatic implications for the course of the Afghan conflict. The United States, whose military involvement in Afghanistan is approaching its twentieth year, helped facilitate the talks while withdrawing U.S. military forces from the country. As negotiators begin their work, U.S. officials, including Members of Congress, are expected to closely follow the negotiations, given the impact that a settlement could have on U.S. interests such as human rights and counterterrorism.

## Background

After eighteen months of negotiations, the United States and the Taliban [signed an agreement on February 29, 2020](#), laying out a timeline for the withdrawal of U.S. and international troops in return for counterterrorism assurances by the Taliban. The pact also outlined plans for talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government (which was not a party to the agreement) by March 2020. Intra-Afghan talks remained unscheduled for months amid complications that included gridlock in Kabul due to the disputed September 2019 presidential election, delays to a prisoner exchange between Taliban and the Afghan government, and ongoing violence. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, Ghani's electoral opponent and former partner in a unity government, [agreed in May 2020](#) to end the impasse and appoint Abdullah as chairman of the newly created High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR) to oversee talks with the Taliban. The prisoner exchange was [completed](#) in early September 2020.

## Participants

The Afghan government's [21-member negotiating team](#), led by former Afghan intelligence agency head and [Ghani ally](#) Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai, includes four women and represents Afghanistan's major ethnic groups. The Abdullah-chaired HCNR is to oversee the team's work, though the full membership of that body is unclear in light of Abdullah's [rejection](#) of Ghani's August 2020 appointment of HCNR members.

The Taliban negotiating team also comprises 21 members (all men), though the Taliban have not made the list public. On September 5, the Taliban [announced](#) as lead negotiator Mawlawi Abdul Hakim Haqqani, a senior [hard-line](#) cleric who is head of the Taliban's judiciary body and reportedly close to Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada. Some analysts have speculated that the move represents an attempt by Taliban

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senior leadership (likely based in Pakistan) to exert more control over negotiations, which are ostensibly overseen by Doha-based Taliban deputy political head Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar (who met with Secretary of State Michael Pompeo in Doha, **Figure 1**), whom [analysts view as](#) more moderate.

U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad negotiated the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement and [said on September 11](#) that the United States will “be engaging each side,” but that it would not be a direct participant in talks, with its role limited to aiding the negotiations if asked.

**Figure 1. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and Taliban Deputy Political Leader Mullah Baradar in Doha, Qatar, September 12, 2020**



**Source:** Secretary of State Pompeo (@SecPompeo), Twitter, September 12, 2020. Available at <https://twitter.com/SecPompeo/status/1304766751251595264>.

## Major Negotiating Issues

Experts and officials expect the talks to last months and that at least two key substantive issues will be dominant—reducing violence and future governance.

### Reducing Violence

The U.S.-Taliban agreement commits the Taliban to refrain from attacking U.S. and international forces—a commitment the Taliban has reportedly observed. It does not, however, address Taliban operations against Afghan government forces, which have continued and even [increased](#) in some areas in 2020, with hundreds killed on both sides. The Afghan Ministry of Defense [reported](#) Taliban attacks in 18 of the country’s 34 provinces on September 12 as talks began in Doha.

Violence has directly affected those involved in talks: female negotiator [Fawzia Koofi](#) and Vice President and HCNR member [Amrullah Saleh](#) were injured in separate assassination attempts in August and

September 2020, respectively. The Taliban **denied responsibility** for both attacks, which Khalilzad blamed on “spoilers” seeking to undermine talks.

The Afghan government has **prioritized** a permanent ceasefire, which the Taliban have **rejected** despite two limited truces in recent **years**. Many observers **doubt** the Taliban would agree to abandon violence, arguably their main source of leverage, before a settlement, though targeted reductions in violence could pave the way for a more comprehensive ceasefire.

## Afghan Governance

Major differences remain in the sides’ visions for the future of Afghanistan, including both the structure of the Afghan state and what rights the state recognizes for Afghan citizens, especially **women**.

The Taliban, whose main priority has been the withdrawal of foreign forces, have not described their specific proposals on these issues in detail. In his opening remarks, Mullah Baradar **said**, “We seek an Afghanistan that is independent, sovereign, united, developed and free — an Afghanistan with an Islamic system in which all people of the nation can participate without discrimination.” Some analysts posit that the Taliban are **likely** to push for clerical oversight of executive and legislative decision-making.

Afghan leaders express a determination to preserve Afghanistan’s **constitution**, which establishes Islam as the state religion, and its democratic institutions. In an interview in Doha, HCNR Chairman Abdullah **said**, “For me, one person, one vote — I don’t call anything a red line — but that’s critical . . . and compromises on these things will not get us to peace.” The Afghan government has rejected speculation about a possible power-sharing arrangement.

## U.S. Policy

Speaking at the opening of talks, Secretary of State Pompeo **encouraged** Afghans to preserve democratic gains while highlighting the limits of U.S. influence, saying, “the choice of your political system is of course yours to make. . . . the United States doesn’t seek to impose its system on others.” He added that the U.S. government believes “firmly that protecting the rights of all Afghans is indeed the best way for you to break the cycle of violence.”

The United States is currently withdrawing forces from Afghanistan in line with its February 2020 agreement with the Taliban. Some **Members of Congress** and others question the credibility of the Taliban’s counterterrorism assurances on which the U.S. withdrawal is conditioned. Administration officials **reject** claims that withdrawal decisions are motivated by domestic political concerns and that U.S. military withdrawal reduces the Taliban’s incentives to remain in, and conclude, negotiations. It is unclear whether the United States would halt or reverse that withdrawal if intra-Afghan talks collapse. Some Members of Congress have **proposed** limiting funding for U.S. military withdrawals unless the Administration certifies that they will not compromise U.S. national security or Afghan social and political gains made since 2001.

Beyond military forces, the main U.S. leverage in Afghanistan arguably is financial assistance (which has totaled about **\$137 billion** since 2001). Secretary Pompeo **cautioned** intra-Afghan negotiators that their “choices and conduct will affect both the size and scope of United States future assistance.” As Congress considers authorizing and appropriating that assistance, it could alter the amounts, types, and conditions set for U.S. aid based on the course and outcome of intra-Afghan negotiations.

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