



[Intra-Afghan Peace Talks Begin in Doha](#)

This past week, intra-Afghan peace talks between officials from both the government and the Taliban commenced in Doha, Qatar. The negotiations, which are the first direct talks with representatives from the two entities and are a condition under the U.S.-Taliban deal brokered earlier this year, were supposed to begin in March but were delayed due to the Taliban's continued attacks on Afghan forces and disagreement regarding the exchanging of prisoners. Since the U.S.-Taliban deal, violence levels in Afghanistan have risen, leading to concerns regarding the prospects for peace between the Afghan government and the Taliban. During the first half of 2020 alone, nearly 1,300 Afghan civilians have been killed, according to the United Nations. Ultimately, it took nearly six months to get the two sides to the negotiating table, and experts point out that the most challenging part of getting them to reach an agreement still lies ahead.

The prospects for dialogue between the two sides began with a conditional U.S.-Taliban accord back in February of this year, which established a timetable for the withdrawal of American troops in exchange for counter-terrorism guarantees. Under the terms of the deal, the United States and its allies agreed to withdraw foreign troops within 14 months if the Taliban met certain conditions, such as preventing al-Qaeda and other extremist groups from operating in areas under their control and committing to engage in talks with the Afghan government. With respect to the latter, intra-Afghan negotiations were therefore scheduled to begin in March, however disagreement regarding a required prisoner exchange between the Afghan government and the Taliban led to these talks not taking place as planned. Eventually, following months of insurgent attacks and an uptick in violence, arrangements were made for the exchanging of the final prisoners, opening the door for the current Doha peace talks to begin.

Coming into the peace talks, the Afghan government is largely focused on securing a lasting ceasefire as one of its main objectives. Even as the negotiations began this past weekend, insurgent attacks were reported in more than a dozen Afghan provinces, highlighting the importance of addressing this issue and the continued violence in the country. Diplomats and officials contend that getting the Taliban to agree to a permanent ceasefire immediately is challenging because they will be reluctant to give up their main leverage before the finalization of a political settlement with the Afghan government. However, if nothing else, government representatives are aiming to at least come to an agreement with the Taliban on the implementation of a humanitarian ceasefire, which would put an end to the ongoing attacks against civilians. Another major hurdle that Afghan forces face in their negotiations with the Taliban is how to make compromises with the group while still protecting civil liberties and the rights of women and minorities in a future political system. Some fear that the substantial progress the country has made with respect to increased freedom of speech and women's rights is not compatible with a scenario in which the Taliban has a say in the governmental process.

In the end, these issues and the high level of mistrust between the two sides, which was evident in this year's negotiation delays, pose a significant obstacle to overcome. However, most observers seem to acknowledge that engaging in direct talks is still a positive development, regardless of the challenges.