

By Scott DesMarais with Caitlin Forrest

Key Takeaway: *Stalled negotiations between Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his political rival Balkh warlord Mohammad Atta Noor may lead to a protracted conflict that would endanger the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. Atta has negotiated with Ghani for over a year in order to gain a greater share of power for himself personally and for his political party, Jamiat-e Islami. Atta has threatened imminent mass demonstrations if Ghani does not agree to electoral and constitutional reforms that would likely set favorable conditions for Atta to run for president in 2019. U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan met separately with key Afghan leaders to de-escalate the crisis on January 30. President Ghani stated on January 31 that he will make constitutional changes, but did not give a deadline by which he will make those changes. The most likely outcome of this crisis is a negotiated settlement that expands the political power of Atta and his party, Jamiat-e Islami, but ultimately delays enacting a power-sharing deal that would alter and legitimize the temporary, extra-constitutional positions that the U.S. helped to create in order to bring forth a National Unity Government (NUG). The power-sharing deal would enshrine CEO Abdullah Abdullah's position as Prime Minister and give him, and Jamiat, additional advantages in government. The most dangerous outcome could be that the country fractures and the National Unity Government loses all control over Northern Afghanistan as warlords essentially secede their power bases.*

Tripwire: Mohammad Atta Noor has threatened imminent mass protests unless his party, Jamiat-e Islami, and Ghani's National Unity Government reach an agreement. Atta reportedly issued a [final warning](#) to the National Unity Government on January 29 that threatened mass demonstrations if negotiations do not progress. Jamiat is demanding electoral reforms that will likely increase its representation in parliament and influence in government, while Atta is likely maneuvering to set favorable conditions in advance of 2019 Presidential elections. Ghani and Jamiat had reportedly [reached an agreement](#) on several of Jamiat's conditions [see Chart 1] on January 18, 2018. The two sides have agreed to implement parts of the National Unity Government agreement, including establishing a constitutional amendment commission and holding a constitutional Loya Jirga after parliamentary and district council elections (although elections are unlikely to occur as planned in 2018). They have not made progress discussing amendments to the election law that would likely give Jamiat an additional share in parliament before the 2019 Presidential elections. It is not entirely clear what amendments Jamiat is referencing; however it is likely they are referring to the National Unity Government-mandated Special Election Reform Commission's 2015 proposal to create a [mixed proportional representation system](#) that would allocate one-third of parliamentary seats to "political parties with a national consistency."¹

¹ **Technically**, Afghan electoral law stipulates that political parties must have representatives from at least 22 provinces amongst their founders to be considered a "national party." No political parties, including Jamiat, would now qualify. Jamiat could seek to use an already agreed upon constitutional amendment commission to alter the electoral law so that the proportional system would benefit Jamiat.

Background: Atta is a powerbroker in the Jamiat e-Islami political party. He commanded elements of the United Front, the northern military grouping primarily of ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras that fought the Taliban in the 1990s, which evolved into the Northern Alliance with which the U.S. worked to topple the Taliban government. He has served as the governor of Balkh Province since 2004. He had backed Ghani's rival, and fellow Tajik and Jamiat member, Abdullah Abdullah, in the contested 2014 presidential election.

The U.S. brokered the National Unity Government agreement to resolve the disputed Afghan presidential election and avert a crisis. The [NUG agreement](#) established a power-sharing agreement between Ghani and Abdullah. A Presidential decree established a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) position "with the functions of executive prime minister" and gave that office to Abdullah Abdullah. Part of the agreement outlined plans to hold a constitutional Loya Jirga to consider turning the CEO formally into a constitutionally mandated-Prime Minister position.

Ambiguities in the text of the NUG agreement led to [tensions](#) between Ghani and Abdullah. Based on the text of the NUG agreement Abdullah and his supporters [expected](#) an equal share of governing power, while Ghani has [operated](#) with the belief that the presidency's established constitutional powers give him final say in governance. Abdullah's supporters—especially Atta and Jamiat—have increasingly [criticized](#) him for failing to "[protect](#)" their political interests and for his failure to assert his role in what Jamiat leaders believed was "[genuine power-sharing agreement](#)."

Pattern: Tensions have been mounting between Ghani and Atta since friendly negotiations broke down in early 2017. Atta began [negotiating](#) with Ghani in late 2016 on behalf of Jamiat because CEO Abdullah had failed to use his post to advance Jamiat's interests. Atta confirmed he was discussing a "[role](#)" in the central government on January 30, 2017, and Jamiat subsequently announced its [support](#) for Atta's ongoing negotiations. Ghani may have offered Atta a key position in the government during these [discussions](#) in order to weaken Atta by bringing him closer into the National Unity Government in Kabul and removing him from his power base in Balkh. As negotiations progressed, Ghani [formally re-appointed](#) Atta to be Balkh governor on February 20 (Ghani [decreed](#) all provincial governors would serve in an acting capacity would ultimately be replaced upon taking office. Atta [refused](#) to leave his post, and Ghani quietly allowed Atta to remain the acting governor). Atta thanked Ghani for the re-appointment while saying he would consider [resigning](#) as Balkh governor "to participate in the upcoming elections" on March 21, which fueled speculation that Atta would [align](#) with Ghani for the 2019 elections.

Negotiations faltered shortly after a series of security breaches. A spectacular May 31, 2017 [attack](#) targeted the German Embassy in Kabul. Separately, the Deputy Speaker of the Afghan Senate's son was killed by Kabul police when protesting the embassy attack. Then, unidentified militants attacked his funeral, which many Jamiat leaders attended. These attacks prompted Atta's initial [criticism](#) of the government. Atta then formed the political [opposition coalition](#), the Coalition for the Salvation of Afghanistan (CSA), with other former Northern Alliance figures such as exiled First Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum and Deputy CEO Mohammad Mohaqiq in June 2017. Atta and the CSA have repeatedly criticized Ghani's administration since and [called](#) for a number of "systematic reforms" that include the full implementation of the National Unity Government power sharing agreement in addition to altering the central government's security, budgetary and administrative systems.

Ghani unexpectedly announced he had “[accepted](#)” Atta’s resignation on December 18, 2017. Atta immediately [rejected](#) his alleged resignation and refused to leave his post. Atta [reportedly](#) had previously submitted an undated conditional resignation letter, which Ghani surprisingly resurfaced and attempted to use as a means to remove Atta. Although Atta has confirmed the veracity of the letter, he stated he [would not resign](#) because Ghani has not met the conditions they had established after which he would resign. This unexpected surfacing of the resignation letter has led to a protracted dispute.

Timing: Ghani is attempting to remove opposition warlords from Afghan politics.

He began by allowing his embattled First Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum to [travel](#) to Turkey in May 2017 and then [preventing](#) his return in July 2017. Ghani also likely intends to neutralize the CSA and may be working with Turkish President Erdogan to keep Dostum exiled in Turkey. The Afghan National Directorate of Security [arrested](#) several Turkish dissidents living in Afghanistan on December 12, 2017 and was reportedly planning to [extradite](#) them to Turkey, a conciliation that Ghani made to Erdogan with whom he [met](#) the following day.

Ghani’s dismissal of Atta in December 2017 was likely Ghani’s attempt to remove Atta from his Jamiat power base and from Balkh province. First, Ghani managed to gain the support of CEO Abdullah and the Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani—the acting leader of Jamiat. Abdullah [claimed](#) he and Jamiat’s leadership supported Atta’s removal prior to the announcement. Ghani immediately appointed a successor to Atta’s governorship, Mohammad Dawood, who [claimed](#) Rabbani suggested him to Ghani.

Ghani likely assessed he could effectively oust Atta at this time for three reasons. First, powerbrokers from Atta’s own party reportedly supported Ghani. Second, Dostum’s exile undermined the CSA. Third, Ghani likely thought the U.S. and NATO would support his efforts. Ghani was allegedly “[emboldened](#)” when President Trump said the U.S would continue to support Afghanistan in August 2017. Additionally, NATO commander General John Nicholson was [reportedly](#) “angered” when Atta prevented NATO fuel contractors from entering Balkh in November 2017. Finally, NATO also [reportedly](#) helped Ghani prevent Atta from attending an opposition political rally in Kandahar on December 2, 2017, [organized](#) by Kandahar Police Chief General Abdul Raziq and another opposition party with [links](#) to former President Hamid Karzai.

U.S. policy supports negotiations. Both U.S. Vice President Mike Pence and the American ambassador to Afghanistan John Bass [expressed the need](#) for a negotiated settlement to defuse the crisis on January 17 and 18, 2018. The U.S. therefore was unlikely to support any military operations to remove Atta. The two sides [reportedly](#) made progress towards a negotiated settlement, but their failure to resolve the crisis prompted an official White House statement that [reiterated](#) the need for both sides “to quickly and peacefully resolve” the crisis on January 24. Finally, US Deputy Secretary of State John J. Sullivan [discussed](#) “the importance of maintaining political stability” during meetings with Ghani, Abdullah, and Rabbani on January 30. Following this meeting, Ghani’s first public comments on the dispute likely indicated he would seek a peaceful negotiated settlement. Ghani [said](#) the dispute would be solved through constitutional and legal means while adding that there is no one, not even himself, who has “the right to endanger” the interests of Afghanistan.

Assessment: Ghani’s efforts to depose Atta and split Jamiat are failing. Atta is actually consolidating power within Jamiat. Rabbani turned on Ghani after the formal announcement of Atta’s “resignation” likely partly because Atta received strong “grassroots” [support](#) from within Jamiat. Rabbani is now leading the Jamiat negotiating team on Atta’s behalf and has visited

Mazar-e Sharif to confer with him several times. Atta is also expanding support within the broader Tajik base. He met with Ahmad Wali Massoud, the late Ahmad Shah Massoud's younger brother, in Mazar-e Sharif on January 21 and 22. Ahmad Wali Massoud had previously expressed his [opposition](#) to Ghani, but he did not initially state his [support](#) for the ongoing negotiations. Massoud [announced](#) his support for Atta after they met and called on the government to fully implement the National Unity Government agreement.

Jamiat's demands also evolved as Atta consolidated power within the party. Initially, both Atta and Jamiat [focused](#) on improving Jamiat's position within the National Unity Government. Specifically, Jamiat [sought](#) control of the Ministry of Education and the Economy and two embassies in addition to choosing Atta's [successor](#) as Balkh governor. Atta has increasingly [promoted](#) a populist reform agenda that emphasizes improved security, ending corruption, electoral and constitutional reforms, and the "fair distribution of resources across Afghanistan." [Both sides agreed](#) in January that the governor and police chief in Balkh will "be determined on the basis of a recommendation by Jamiat-e Islami," and Jamiat has agreed that Atta will resign once "key" conditions are accepted by the government. Additionally, the two sides were in the process of negotiating Jamiat's control over two ministries. Despite reaching an agreement on his original demands, Atta is now threatening protests unless the two sides reach an agreement on broader electoral reforms. Additionally, Atta recruited the support of other political parties to strengthen his and Jamiat's position in negotiations. On February 01 eight political parties including Jamiat, Hizb-e Islami, Mehwar-e Mardum as well as the parties of the other CSA founders [called](#) on the Afghan government to amend the election laws to expand the "role of political parties and movements" in upcoming parliamentary and district council elections.

Most Likely Outcome: The most likely outcome is that the two groups will reach a negotiated settlement that will strengthen Atta and Jamiat before the 2019 Presidential elections. In this course of action, Atta would likely resign as Balkh governor after the government agrees to electoral reforms that would strengthen Jamiat's position in parliament. He would likely maintain significant influence and possibly outright control over the new Balkh governor. Ghani's administration would mostly agree to implement a number of overdue reforms they were supposed to have implemented by 2016 under the terms of the National Unity Government Agreement. This settlement will likely calm current tensions, but will set the stage for future conflict when Ghani's administration is unable or unwilling to enact the agreement's reforms.

Most Dangerous Outcome: The most dangerous course of action is a military conflict between Atta and the Afghan National Security Forces. Both Atta and Ghani have [reportedly prepared](#) for a possible military operation to remove Atta as the Balkh Province governor using force. Military conflict between Atta and the National Unity Government will severely undermine the U.S. and NATO missions and further destabilize the country.

A military conflict is more likely in two scenarios. The first scenario might occur if neither Ghani nor Jamiat is willing to compromise over the final points of contention, which is possible since neither side has made any major concessions. The second scenario might occur if Ghani is able to reverse Atta's consolidation of power within Jamiat. Ghani may be able to exploit existing divisions within Jamiat to split the party if he offers an anti-Atta Jamiat faction an attractive negotiated settlement. Some Jamiat leaders, including Rabbani, are [reportedly](#) interested in the possibility that Ghani run for reelection with a Jamiat member as his vice president.

Indicators of potential military conflict: Increased reporting that Atta is preparing his militias with supplies or training, or reports of his militias traveling south towards Kabul, may



indicate that Atta intends to initiate a military conflict with Ghani and the National Unity Government. Alternatively, if Ghani continues discussions on military options, it may indicate Ghani intends to abandon negotiations and launch an operation to remove Atta from the governorship by force. If Atta calls for protests and they turn violent, it may prompt a military response from Atta or Ghani that would lead to armed conflict. Some Jamiat leaders reportedly believe it might be possible to force Ghani to resign through massive civil demonstrations in Kabul. If there is evidence of a large number of Jamiat supporters traveling to Kabul it may indicate they are planning such a demonstration. Attempts to compel such resignation may turn violent. Additionally, groups like ISIS and the Taliban may capitalize on the protests by attacking them in order to incite conflict. This could prompt a military response from Atta against the responsible group, which would severely complicate ongoing U.S. and NATO counterterrorism operations.

Indicators of peaceful negotiation: Atta and Jamiat have made multiple warnings that they will call for protests if a settlement is not reached; however, Atta's most recent deadline expired on January 30 without an agreement and without any demonstrations. Should protests fail to materialize in the coming days it could indicate both sides are close and committed to a peaceful solution. If Atta were to call for protests that remain peaceful, they might place pressure on Ghani to negotiate a settlement with Jamiat. Ghani has already indicated he seeks a peaceful settlement by constitutional means. If Ghani is genuine, he may offer a settlement that significantly expands Jamiat's share in the government while asking for patience in enacting electoral reforms or Ghani could request one-on-one negotiations with Atta.

Implications of the Crisis: It will be difficult for Ghani to salvage his legitimacy. Jamiat is not likely to have much incentive to compromise at this point, since it is unlikely Ghani could risk the consequences of a protracted military conflict. Given the security situation in Kabul, it would be difficult for Ghani to justify a military operation to remove a governor whose province is one of the most secure in Afghanistan. Therefore, any negotiated settlement is likely to empower Atta and Jamiat, possibly setting a precedent for resisting Ghani's authority. Any negotiated settlement is unlikely to address systemic issues in the failed National Unity Governments power sharing agreement, making an intense and possibly violent competition for control of the Afghan government likely in 2019.

Status of Jamiat-e Islami's Reported Demands of the National Unity Government

AGREED	NOT AGREED/IN PROGRESS
To establish a constitutional amendment commission based on the political agreement of the National Unity Government. The National Unity Government has agreed to create a commission that will propose the necessary amendments in the constitution within six months.	To discuss amendments to the election law that would create a parliamentary mixed proportional representation system before the planned 2018 elections.
To hold parliamentary elections on schedule this year (despite the fragile security and political considerations).	To re-elect members of the election commissions. While the government has not agreed to re-elect the commissioners, they have agreed to reform the election commissions.
To hold the constitutional amendment Loya Jirga after the parliamentary and district council elections, and before the presidential elections. The two sides agreed that the Loya Jirga can be held after the presidential elections if unspecified preconditions are implemented completely.	To establish the process of issuing electronic ID cards.
To allocate to Jamiat a share of appointees in the National Unity Government based on the National Unity Government political agreement.	To have the US Ambassador to Afghanistan and a UN delegation oversee the implementation of an agreement that resolves the current dispute with the government, which Jamiat proposed and the government rejected.
To appoint the governor and police chief of Balkh province based upon a recommendation by Jamiat.	To expand Jamiat's share in government based on the power-sharing principles of the National Unity Government Agreement (the two groups have not agreed on which candidates will occupy the two ministries; though it appears that both sides have agreed that Jamiat will have representatives head two unnamed ministries.)
The National Unity Government agreed to provide clear information about the nature of the attack on the funeral ceremony of Salem Ezedyar.	
To establish a High Council of Political Parties, though no further details were provided.	
To allow Atta to remain governor of Balkh until the two sides reach a final settlement on Jamiat's outlined demands. The two sides agreed that Atta will step down from the governorship if "key [unspecified] proposals" are accepted by the National Unity Government.	
To create a joint commission that will oversee the implementation of the agreement between Jamiat and the National Unity Government.	



Crisis Timeline

January 30 2017: Atta in discussions with Ghani for a “role” in the central government

February 20 2017: Ghani formally re-appoints Atta to Balkh governorship

May 31 2017: German Embassy attack in Kabul sparks Atta’s criticism of Ghani

June 29 2017: Atta, Dostum, and Mohaqiq form Coalition for the Salvation of Afghanistan in opposition to the NUG

July 18 2017: Ghani prevents Dostum’s return to Afghanistan; effectively exiles him to Turkey

December 18 2017: Ghani escalates by announcing Atta’s resignation and sparks the current crisis

January 18 2018: Jamiat and the NUG reach an agreement on several conditions, but not all

January 24 2018: White House releases a statement encouraging a peaceful resolution to the crisis

January 29 2018: Atta threatens mass protests if negotiations do not progress

January 30 2018: U.S. Deputy Secretary of State holds meetings with Ghani, Abdullah, and Rabbani to defuse crisis

January 31 2018: Ghani indicates he seeks a peaceful, negotiated settlement through constitutional means

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