

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



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Security, Economic and Political Challenges

The security of a nation is a vital element to ensure its viability and survival as well as it is essential for securing an environment which will facilitate the process of national growth. Moreover, the concept of national security in itself deserves a continuing debate to determine its elements which include democracy, good governance, psycho-social and economic aspects besides the obvious imperative of defense.

Afghanistan, for a long time, has been facing serious problems of both, internal and external security. However, lately the internal security has assumed threatening postures. Given the significant geo-political space in which it operates and being somewhat handicapped because of the domestic peculiarities and serving as a buffer state between the world powers, Afghanistan's security quest is almost unending. Unfortunately, with the rise in challenges of insecurity, the country has had to face economic hardships and political instability as well. And, the interplay among the different issues within all these sectors have multiplied the sufferings that the people of Afghanistan have been facing.

A strong and viable democratic, political and economic system is essential to sustain any nation. In case of Afghanistan this element of national power has been quite weak. Emergence of frequent autocratic regimes further debilitated the important national institutions and retarded their growth. The situation was further aggravated due to unholy alliance among the feudal, religious leaders, politicians and business elite. At this stage in Afghanistan's life there is an urgent need to ponder and find ways and means for developing a genuine democratic process leading to political stability, good governance and economic development. Unfortunately, Afghanistan's political system remains inadequately institutionalized and highly personalized. The country has alternated between long periods of clashes and wars and unstable governments controlled by small elite of landed and tribal and religious leaders. Our political system, in fact, is confronted by direct action, endemic violence and powerful primordial loyalties that have come to dominate all political and economic disputes. Democracy has not been able to institutionalized and kept on revolving around the individuals. The legislature and executive have not been able to complete their promises and duties of strengthening themselves and the overall democratic system.

Meanwhile, the elections have been dominated by fraud and corruption. Imperative electoral reforms that could support in strengthening the democratic system have not been taken into consideration and therefore the systems of elections for both the president and the parliament have not been able to offer much. Currently, the doubts about the parliamentary elections and the election reforms have further raised doubts about the system.

In addition, the ambiguity regarding the role of the President and Chief Executive has persisted and the evolution in their authorities and responsibilities that were to take place simultaneously has been forgotten. This has raised doubts and uncertainties about the nature of the political system that the country would have.

On the other hand, we have forgotten that we are living in an age of economic competitiveness. In fact, all elements of national power in present times are being directed towards achievement of economic objectives. The economic aspects are crucial especially for Afghanistan as a majority of our people are living below the poverty line and suffering various deprivations. Without improving the quality of the lives of our people we cannot emerge as a nation with honor and dignity.

Fortunately, we are endowed with sufficient bounties of nature to be self-sustained in the fields of basic necessities of life. The dire need is to harness our human and other natural resources and ensure that the benefits are equitably shared by all the people. The impediments to our economic growth need to be examined and overcome through innovative strategies. We need to understand that with spectacular progress in the field of science and technology, the whole world has shrunk into a global village. It is considered that economic development is the only secure foundation for domestic, regional and global peace and security. It is also true that origins of conflicts lie deep in socio-economic deprivations, disparities, denial of human rights and true participatory democracy. The prerequisites of a modern civil society are the establishment of the viable democratic institutions, participatory democracy up to the grass-root level leading to good governance.

Only then a stable and responsive social order can be established ensuring peace, stability and economic development. This, in turn would serve as a means to channel political energy and help in creating a conducive environment for healthy cross fertilization of cultural values between our multi-ethnic society.

These changes can only be brought about by the collective will and support of the people at large. Hence it is imperative that our political leadership, economic guardians and our intellectuals embark upon a strategy of compassion and cooperation with all the communities living in Afghanistan so that the quality of the lives of our people could improve and a sense of dignity, purpose and commitment infused in the society.



Terrorism – A Serious Threat to Afghanistan and Pakistan

By: Hujjatullah Zia

Terrorist networks are most likely to intensify their attacks both in Afghanistan and Pakistan despite strong operations being carried out against them. Although the IS group has lost ground in Iraq and Syria and its leader was reportedly killed – which is not confirmed yet – it still seeks to extend its reach and recruits new soldiers in Afghan-Pak soils. The Monday attack on Iraq's embassy in Afghanistan was also claimed by IS group.

The Taliban insurgents have intensified their attacks in Afghanistan, including the capital Kabul, within recent months which led to heavy civilian casualties. Their ideologue leader Mullah Haibatullah and his radical deputy Sirajuddin Haqqani – the head of Haqqani network – are caught in a time warp in spite of the fact that Kabul government repeatedly called them for peace negotiation. The two leaders – the Taliban and Haqqani group – operate in tandem to put pressure on Afghan-Pak governments. What is highly painful is that civilians bear the brunt of terrorist activities since the militants show no respect to the international humanitarian law (IHL).

Pakistani officials claimed that they had destroyed the sanctuaries of the outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Karachi. Contrary to this statement, reports say that the banned outfit is seeking to re-establish its financial network in the city so as to strengthen its capability to launch terrorist attacks. Pakistan's Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) has said, "The TTP was most likely to focus on re-establishing their financial support networks in Karachi and rebuilding the capability to launch large-scale attacks on public places or security forces."

Similarly, the officials added that Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LJ) was seriously weakened in Karachi, but this is still a matter of doubt. LJ is increasing its activities mainly in Sindh province with the support of the IS group. "While their ability to conduct large attacks has been mitigated, LJ retains a large support network and cadres in Karachi, who are most likely to either merge with other groups, such as IS, or create independent splinter cells to conduct targeted killings," Pakistan's CTD is cited as saying.

The IS lacked a "formal structure" in Pakistan's soil claimed the security officials, but reports said that it was operating in some parts of Sindh with the help of sectarian outfits and reportedly attracted "educated militants" of Karachi. The Pakistani security officials assessed that the recent emergence of Ansarul Sharia Pakistan in Karachi – the outfit which was involved in a number of attacks targeting a former army of-

ficial and several policemen – posed a serious threat to law enforcers.

Likewise, the recent suicide attacks carried out by the Taliban and IS group in Afghanistan inflicted heavy casualties upon combatants and non-combatants alike. A report released by UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said that 1,662 civilians were killed and more than 3,500 wounded with deaths in the capital Kabul accounting for nearly 20 per cent of the toll in the first half of the year. Based on the report, the majority of the victims were killed by anti-government forces, including the Taliban militants and in attacks claimed by IS group.

The explosion of the truck bomb in late May in Kabul, which killed and wounded hundreds of people, was the deadliest incident to hit the country since 2001. The report added that a total of 174 women were killed and 462 wounded, an overall rise in casualties of 23 per cent on last year, while 436 children were killed in the same period, representing a nine per cent increase.

"The statistics in this report, horrifying though they are, can never fully convey the sheer human suffering of the people of Afghanistan," UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein is quoted as saying. "Many Afghan civilians are suffering psychological trauma, having lost family and friends, and are living in fear knowing the risks they face as they go about their daily lives."

Considering the aforementioned issues, the cycle of civilian casualties never stops since terrorist networks continue their attacks without respect to human rights or humanitarian law. They show no tendency towards peace talks, either. Afghanistan and Pakistan which are beset by terrorism for years need to be on friendly terms with each other so as to minimize the persistent threats posed by terrorist networks which intend to strengthen their ideological loyalties to one another. For instance, notwithstanding losing grounds in Syria and Iraq, the IS insurgents recruit soldiers in Afghanistan, Pakistan, etc. hunting for establishing strongholds in the two countries.

It is a highly serious issue to see that the IS group baptizes naïve individuals in tribal belts and urges for their allegiance in one way or another. It is an unmistakable fact that ideological parties do not only fight but also incubate through spreading their ideology. To sum up, besides combating terrorism, the Kabul and Islamabad governments will have to stem the rising tide of terrorists' ideology and false preaching in order to mitigate the insurgency.

Hujjatullah Zia is the permanent writer of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan. He can be reached at zia_hujjat@yahoo.com

Playing both sides against the Middle: Saudi Engages with Iraqi Shiites

By James M. Dorsey

Saudi Arabia, with the Islamic State on the ropes in Iraq, is forging ties with Iraqi Shiite leaders and offering to help fund reconstruction of Mosul and other predominantly Sunni Muslim cities that were devastated in the military campaign against the jihadist group.

The Saudi outreach to Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and controversial Shiite scholar, politician and militia leader Moqtada al-Sadr, who last week held rare talks in Jeddah with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, aims to contain significant Iranian influence in Iraq. Mr. Al-Sadr is widely seen as having balanced his strong sense of nationalism with his relations with Iran. It was his first visit to the kingdom in more than a decade.

Mr. Al-Sadr's visit was a far cry from the days not so long ago when as a firebrand he railed against the kingdom, prompting an Iraqi poet to declare that "with Moqtada's help we will destroy Saudi Arabia."

Mr. Al-Sadr, who has criticized powerful Iranian-sponsored Shiite militias fighting the Islamic State alongside the Iraqi army as well as Iran's backing of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, was preceded by Mr. Al-Abadi who was received in the kingdom in June despite having voiced days before his visit opposition to the two-month old Saudi-UAE led diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar.

Rivalry with Iran is one of the core issues in the Gulf crisis. The Saudi-UAE alliance has demanded that Qatar curtail its relations with Iran, with which it shares the world's largest gas field.

The Saudi outreach also signals a rare Saudi recognition that Iranian influence is a fact in a vicious proxy war that so far has been largely fought by the kingdom as a zero-sum-game. The proxy war prompted Saudi Arabia's ill-fated military intervention in Yemen that has brought Yemen to the brink of the abyss as it battles famine and epidemics, aggravated Syria's brutal civil war, and sparked sectarian tensions across the Muslim world.

Ibrahim al-Marie, a retired Saudi colonel and Riyadh-based security analyst, voiced Saudi expectations of its outreach when he noted that "the significant improvement in Saudi-Iraqi relations, official and non-official, doesn't mean that Iran's domination of Iraq has decreased or will decrease. Dealing with all political currents in the Arab world is expected from a country of the kingdom's size and stature." The Saudi outreach, despite Saudi Arabia's designation of Iranian-backed Lebanese militia Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, constitutes the second time in six months that the kingdom has opted for engagement rather than confrontation.

Saudi Arabia in February reversed its cancellation of \$3 billion in military aid to Lebanon, where Hezbollah is one of the country's foremost political forces and part of the government; appointed a new ambassador; rescinded its advice to Saudis not to visit Lebanon, a popular Saudi tourism destination; increased flights to Beirut by its national carrier; and

welcomed Lebanese President Michel Aoun, a Christian ally of Hezbollah, on a visit to the kingdom.

Prince Mohammed reached out to Mr. Al-Sadr as the kingdom's security forces were cracking down on activists in the predominantly Shiite, oil-rich Eastern Province. The Saudi interior ministry reported earlier this week that a police officer was killed and six others injured when their patrol was attacked in the town of Al Awamiyah. Al Awamiyah was home to Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, the Shia scholar whose execution in early 2016 sparked a rupture in Saudi-Iranian diplomatic relations.

Canada, which sold \$15 billion worth of armoured vehicles to Saudi Arabia, last week launched an investigation into claims that they had been employed in crackdowns on Shiites. The investigation was based on videos released by Saudi human rights activists that purported to show the use of Canadian vehicles in past crackdowns in the Eastern Province rather than the current operation in Al Awamiyah.

Saudi engagement with Iraqi leaders comes in advance of Iraqi provincial and parliamentary elections scheduled for next year. Mr. Al-Sadr's visit to Jeddah took on added significance because of his opposition to Mr. Al-Abadi's rival, former Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, who is widely seen as a major Iranian asset. The visit raised questions of what role Mr. Al-Sadr may want to play in countering Iranian influence in cooperation with the kingdom.

Messrs. Al-Sadr and Al-Abadi hope that Saudi Arabia will not only help in funding reconstruction of predominantly Sunni Muslim cities that have been left in ruins by the campaign against the Islamic State, but also in building bridges to a community that feels that it has been marginalized since the 2003 overthrow of Saddam Hussein's minority Sunni regime. They believe that Saudi Arabia will be able to leverage not only its financial muscle but also the fact that many Iraqi Sunni tribes share a common lineage with Saudi clans.

Mosul, Iraq's second largest city prior to its takeover by the Islamic State in 2014, has been virtually destroyed. Its infrastructure will have to be rebuilt from scratch at an estimated cost of tens of billions of dollars. Rebuilding other cities ravaged by the anti-Islamic State campaign has been slow to get off the ground.

Some optimists suggest that there may be more to Saudi moves. They hold out the possibility that Prince Mohammed is looking for a back channel to Iran, a role Mr. Al-Sadr could fulfil as one of the few Iraqi Shiite politicians who has reasonable relations with both the Islamic republic and the kingdom. More likely, however, Prince Mohammed sees an opportunity to exploit differences within the Iraqi Shiite community towards Iran and the government's need of help in forging bridges to its Sunni citizens.

"One thing is for sure. The Saudis did not invite a major Iraqi Shiite cleric to Jeddah just to inquire after his health," quipped Middle East scholar Juan Cole.

Dr. James M. Dorsey is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture.

Chairman / Editor-in-Chief: Moh. Reza Huwaida

Vice-Chairman: Kazim Ali Gulzari

Email: outlookafghanistan@gmail.com

Phone: 0093 (799) 005019/777-005019

www.outlookafghanistan.net



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