

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



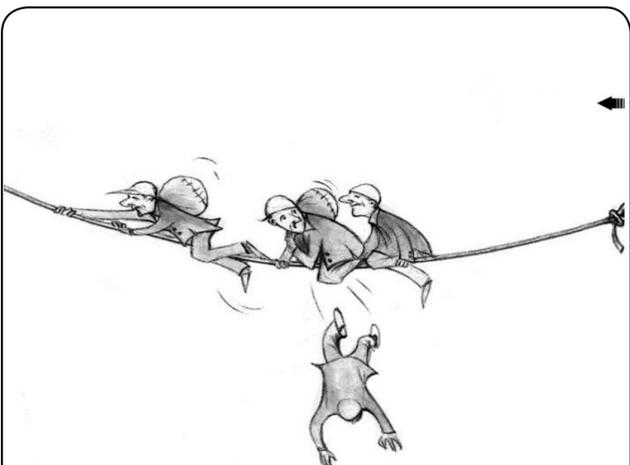
January 04, 2016

## Peace Talks Should End the Violence

While the peace efforts are being revived, ending the violence in the country is one of the key demands of the Afghan government as part of a peace deal with the insurgent groups. A four-way meeting is set to be held on January 11 to consider a framework for resumption of peace talks between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. Representatives from Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States and China are going to participate in the talks in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad. The talks in Islamabad are the first such initiative over the peace efforts since the fledgling negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban stalled in July. The initiative was agreed between Afghan officials and visiting Pakistani army chief last month after Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had fresh talks for renewing efforts to kick-start the peace process in Afghanistan.

The most notable aspect of this round of efforts for getting the peace negotiations back on track is that it involves four nations which, in addition to Afghanistan and Pakistan, also include the United States and China. The Afghan government hopes to see Pakistan committed to its obligations and promises in the process through participation of the United States and China, who has considerable political and economic influences over Islamabad, in the meetings for launching the peace process. In last years, China started to play a role in the efforts for peace in Afghanistan, and the country is increasingly interested in the regional efforts for resolving the Afghan conflict. Getting China involved in the process has been one of the main goals of the national unity government in the efforts to persuade Pakistan to play a supportive role in the Afghan peace process.

The negotiations over the framework of the peace process are coming while the Taliban continue to launch offensives against Afghan security forces in embattled provinces. The trend of violence in 2015 and the ongoing insurgency in the country suggest there will a tough year ahead for the Afghan security forces battling to contain the insurgency. Disregard of the peace process - which is far unlikely to produce a concrete result for ending the violence in near future - Afghanistan will see another bitter seasonal campaign of the Taliban in 2016. Given the widespread insurgency, the Afghan government seems to be in a hurry to resume peace negotiations with the Taliban to reach a deal with the group to end violence in the country. However, the desperation of the Afghan government in the current round of peace efforts practically gives the upper hand in the war and peace efforts to the Taliban. Despite talks over the resumption of the peace talks, the Taliban have again attempted to scale up the level of violence across the country to have a better position in the haggling over peace conditions. An uncompleted and ongoing peace negotiations itself provides a stimulation to the Taliban to wage a more escalated war against the government. Therefore, it is crucially important for the Afghan government to escalate the anti-insurgency campaign and take the war to the Taliban rather than expecting end of violence through conclusion of the peace process. The government needs to wage a bitter campaign against the insurgent groups in the current winter season as the Taliban are not well-fitted for a winter campaign. This will help the government strike a harsh blow to the Taliban at a time when they are most vulnerable. Only by a partial supremacy on the battleground, the government of Afghanistan will be able to pursue a viable peace deal with the Taliban. The most daunting challenge to the peace process would be lack of a room for compromises between the Afghan government and the Taliban over key issues such as the Afghan constitution and a prolonged presence of foreign troops. The government of Afghanistan - and Pakistan - aim to persuade the Taliban to denounce violence by political and economic concessions. This may prove very hard for the Taliban elite to negotiate on such concessions with the Afghan government as the Taliban leadership is now in a weaker position than any time before for controlling the various factions of the militant groups. Leaving the Taliban aside, reaching a common ground would be difficult in the first place among the stakeholders of the process including the Afghan political spectrum. However, the Afghan government has indicated its willingness for negotiating the constitution except the parts relating to rights of citizens and nature of the country's political establishment. What is crucially important at current stage is end the devastating violence in the country. The Afghan government forces are currently battling with various militant groups, some of which are not under control over influence of the Taliban. This would particularly make the achievement of a sustainable ceasefire with the insurgents unlikely. Still, any concrete peace process should oblige the militants, particularly the Taliban, to denounce violence and end the bloody conflict in the country. Without a concrete achievement for stopping the bloodshed in the country in the very initial phases of the peace process, no peace deal agreement would last for long. Therefore, the government needs to communicate will all the stakeholders in the process and promote its demand for a lasting ceasefire with the Taliban.



## Everything Went Wrong in 2015

By Hujjatullah Zia

Terrorism is the root problem which plagued Afghan nation within the past decade. The insurgency was escalated with the draw-down of US-led NATO forces and the emergence of the self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The "war on terror" failed to bear the desired result and the peace talk was derailed with the revelation of Mullah Omar's death- Pakistan's struggle was proved abortive in nudging the Taliban to sit around the table of negotiation. However, the Taliban held a grand council in Pakistan for the appointment of Mullah Akhtar Mansour as their leader - who signaled peace talk as "enemy's propaganda" and organized deadly attacks which led to the death and injury of dozens of Afghan civilians. Subsequently, the relation between Kabul and Islamabad turned sour. The Taliban insurgent group continued its "spring offensive" without cessation and captured Kunduz province in late September 2015 - the first time the extremists had managed to capture a major city since 2001. Similarly, The Taliban fighters attacked the Afghan Parliament on June 22, 2015 as lawmakers were about to review a government nominee for defense minister. Few days back, they captured Sangin district of Helmand province and killed more than hundred of Afghan soldiers. And these presented the National Unity Government (NUG), which has been alarmed about insurgent advances in the surrounding province for a year, with a demoralizing setback less than a year after the formal end of the NATO combat mission in Afghanistan. These all worsened the Afghan-Pak relation and Pakistan's lip service to peace and security in Afghanistan was received coldly. Zamir Kabulov, the Russian President's special envoy for Afghanistan, said in a recent statement that the situation in Afghanistan remains tense, with "high or extraordinary" security threats present in 27 of the 34 Afghan provinces, as Taliban militants intensify their activities in different parts of the country. He also called the US and NATO mission in Afghanistan a complete failure. According to him, the ongoing "Decisive Support" training mission, which the US and their allies in Afghanistan are currently conducting, has also shown very little result. In the meantime, the US warns of the emergence of al-Qaeda training centers in Afghanistan - it is believed to be an indirect confession of failure of defeating terrorism in the country. Speaking on the Eve of first drawdown anniversary, US officials said that they are not happy with the current situation, arguing that the Taliban has gained ground in the country. They said the Taliban has seized many parts of Afghanistan in the past year - the most since their regime was toppled in 2001. Officials further added that Afghan casualties among security force members have surged by 26 percent this year. According to US officials, at least 7,000 Afghan security force members have been killed

between January 2015 and the beginning of December. Afghan security officials also believe that the "war on terror" has become more complex and terrorists are better equipped than they were in the past. Officials have frequently said that the Taliban's heavy attacks are organized from across the border and Pakistan's military operation Zarb-e-Azb led to little achievement, if it was ever fruitful. "The world witnessed that Osama Bin Laden was killed in Pakistan as well as Mullah Omar. Even Mullah Akhtar Mansour was wounded on Pakistani soil. The world endorsed those terror nurseries and hideouts operating in Pakistan, therefore pressure was mounted on Pakistan at an international level," historian Ghulam Mohammad Mohammadi is cited as saying.

However, the Afghan-Pak relation improved to some extent after Afghan President Muhammad Ashraf Ghani attended the Heart of Asia Conference in Islamabad last month where Pakistan signaled its willingness to help revive stalled peace talks between Afghanistan and the Taliban. Moreover, Afghanistan's High Peace Council (HPC) reiterated its calls to Pakistan to step up efforts and break the negotiations stalemate with the Taliban. Last week, Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff Gen. Raheel Sharif held talks with President Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah on bilateral cooperation between the two countries, counter terrorism and peace in Afghanistan. Additionally, Pakistan's national security advisor Sartaj Aziz said that a four member commission comprising representatives from Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the US will be formed to facilitate the resumption of peace talks. In a nutshell, the relation between Kabul and Islamabad ebbed and flowed and the reconciliation process did not come to fruition in 2015. Pakistan pushes for resumption of peace talk in 2016. Speaking while inaugurating Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said, "It is our firm belief that a robust and meaningful reconciliation process owned and led by Afghans, is vital for long term peace and stability in Afghanistan. Pakistan is ready to extend support to a meaningful process, wherein both the Afghan Government and the Taliban can move forward, in a spirit of accommodation and reconciliation." 2015 would be recorded the bloodiest year compared to the past since a large number of Afghan combatants and non-combatants were killed in terrorist attacks. Moreover, scores of individuals took refuge to foreign countries to flee militancy and political turmoil. Insurgencies continued unabated and the Taliban fighters gained the ground. However, there is no hope for the best in the year of 2016 since rumor says that the ISIL militant group will stage its attacks in the coming spring - if the prediction comes true and the government does not foil the would-be attack, it will be no less intensive than the Taliban's spring offensive.

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## Gulen's Wake-Up Call for Muslims!

By Muhammad Rasool Shah

More than one and a half billion Muslims around the world are engulfed with frustration, fear and regret after every terror attack perpetrated in the name of Islam. After any such incident, we repeat our trademark statement that 'Islam is a religion of peace and it does not support terrorism in any form' but gradually, our words are also losing their effect. The situation shows that something is wrong somewhere. Either, we have not understood our religion or there are some flaws and leaks in our faith and social systems or something else but definitely, something is terribly wrong. The prominent Islamic scholar of the world, Fethullah Gulen has tried to show the true side of the picture in an op-ed article in a respected French daily 'Le Monde'. The article was published on December 17 by the title 'Muslims, we have to critically review our understanding of Islam!'

After expressing his sadness for the loss of lives in terror attacks, be it in Paris or Iraq or any other part of the world, he comes up with certain shocking but actual reasons responsible for extremism, violence and terrorism on the name of faith. I would like to summarize some of the important points of this article:

The habit of blaming others

It has become our habit to blame others for all our miseries and mistakes. In some cases, it might be true but mostly, this prevents us from seeing our own mistakes and shortcomings. In some cases, we resort to this habit deliberately as it makes our work easy while in some cases, it may not be deliberate as it has become a part of tradition to blame others. Due to this habit, we have developed the habit of ignoring the problems that stem from inside our societies and from our individual or collective behaviors and that might be cause of suffering that Muslims are enduring around the globe.

Humanity First

Gulen asserts that all the faiths put the humanity first and it becomes the responsibility of the followers of all the faiths to uphold the sanctity of life and respect the dignity of all humans. This is true for our religion as well as it also asserts emphasis on the worth of a human life and the death of a single human being has been termed equal to the death of humanity.

Equal Treatment for all

The acts of terror should be condemned wherever it is perpetrated and we must show our sympathy with all those who lose their lives in such terror acts, be it in Paris, or Beirut or Iraq. We need to treat and show sympathy with victims regardless of their geographic location, race, religion or color.

Problems in Islamic Societies

Some problems have been identified in Islamic societies that are directly or indirectly supporting extremism and providing with opportunities to the terror groups to hire from among us. These are domestic abuse, totalitarian behaviors, neglect of youth, lack of a balanced education, absence of absolute rule of law, and problems in provision of rights and freedoms to the citizens.

These problems are more or less valid as majority of the Islamic countries are only democratic by name, the youth are suppressed or neglected, the basic rights and freedoms are granted until they do not create problems for the rulers, and domestic physical abuse of women is a sad reality in majority of our rural areas. In majority of illiterate Muslims, there is almost no concept of rights of women.

The education system is based on theories to safeguard the status-quo and make the people obedient to their leaders. The historic facts are tempered and fabricated statements and details are included for specific purposes. Such a system of education mostly deprives the young minds of questioning and open thinking. This also makes room for those extremist or perilous thoughts or ideas that are accepted without any questioning. Number of countries are ruled by totalitarian rulers and there are large number of people in our families with authoritarian approach, making

others obey them without any questioning.

Decontextualized Interpretation of Islam

Many groups interpret the Islamic teachings according to their own wishes and use them for their heinous acts. Similarly, in the Middle Ages, religious verdicts were issued for political purposes. It falls as the responsibility of religious scholars to bring the actual teachings to people and also unveil how different groups have shown the distorted picture of Islam. Misleading interpretation of Quran and Sunnah are used by the leaders of terror groups to brainwash the suicide bombers and keep their militants motivated for fighting and committing crimes against humanity.

Clash of Civilizations

Usually, such acts are entitled as clash of civilizations but according to Fethullah Gulen, there is no clash of civilizations and it is a mislead theory. There is only one clash and that is of humanity and barbarism.

Disagreement within Democratic Practices

We must train our youth to show their disagreement or disapproval within democratic practices, keeping away from violence or extremism. For this, it is necessary that democratic values should be made an essential part of our school curricula to inculcate the culture of democracy in young minds. No room for any terror organization

All the terror groups must be condemned and terror should not be tolerated at any cost and for any reason. There is no room for terrorism in our religion and it must be clearly understood by all. With this, we will end the mental divide found in our society where some people have soft-corners for terror organizations using the name of Islam.

Joining Hands Together

Religious scholars, government officials and members of civil society must join hands together to tackle this situation. They need to point out vulnerable youth, give them proper guidance, help their families and provide all the assistance to save them from falling prey to the terror groups. We need to tackle extremism in all its dimensions: political, economic, social or religious.

Character Speaks Louder than Words

We need to set virtuous examples through our lives. If we claim to be a good Muslim, we need to make this claim as part of our lives and prove by our character and action. Only claims and no action would disappoint others, especially our youth and a disappointed youth might soon turn into an angry youth.

Advice for European Muslims

Despite all their fear and complaints, European Muslims need to work with their local or national governments and try to be an active part of the society. This will keep their youth attached to the society and not let them fall into the hands of terror groups.

Duty of Muslims

As Muslims, we have two duties; first, to condemn terror in all its forms and secondly, to make efforts to help repair the image of our religion as it has badly been hurt by the acts of terrorists who use its name to commit their crimes.

Reviewing our understanding of Islam

Muslims need to review critically their understanding and practices of Islam, keeping in mind the conditions and requirements of our age. However, it does not mean that we should turn away from our Islamic teachings and traditions rather it should be an intelligent questioning to confirm the true teachings of Quran and guidelines of our Prophet (PBUH). This would be an effort to remove all those impurities that were later added to serve some political or personal needs.

Freedom of Thought within Religious Values

We need to promote freedom of thought while keeping attached to our religious values. It will promote dialogue and suggest solutions to the problems of incivility and extremism.

The article of Fethullah Gulen suggests a complete course of action to tackle extremism and address this problem at its roots.

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