

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

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Attacks on Sikhs, Attacks on Diversity in Afghanistan

A suicide attack that targeted a convoy of Sikhs and Hindus minority traveling to meet the president Ghani in Jalalabad city left 19 people dead and 20 wounded on Sunday. The fatal events marks one of the deadliest attacks on the Sikh community in Afghanistan during decades of war and violence. Avtar Singh Khalsa, a leader in the Sikh community who planned to run for parliamentary elections in October, was also among the victims.

As reflected in the media, Avtar Singh Khalsa and his companions were going to meet President Ghani in the morning at the provincial governor's compound but the meeting was postponed until the afternoon. When their convoy neared the compound, they were stopped by security forces and ordered to get out of their cars to be checked. "That is when a suicide bomber on foot detonated among us," quoted from an eyewitness.

Khalisa was a patriot Afghan citizen of Sikh faith whose ancestors have been owner land in Afghanistan for thousands of years. "This country is my motherland. We are 14 people in my family and I will sacrifice them all for Afghanistan. The day I get a bullet in my chest for the sake of Afghanistan will be the proudest day of my life," Singh said to BBC a week before his death. Today, all Afghans and non-Afghans are extremely sad about the horrible incident; In fact, attacks on Sikh minority is attack on diversity in Afghanistan.

Therefore, many countries and international organization including UN, US, UK, India, Pakistan, Turkey and other countries have strongly condemned suicide bombing in Jalalabad City, through to separate statements or tweets... The Indian embassy in Kabul condemned the attack, adding that it "again underlines the need for a united global fight against international terrorism without discrimination and accountability of those who support terrorists in any manner." India has offered to take the dead bodies, but at least nine were cremated according to Sikh rites in Jalalabad. A stain on forehead of Taliban, ex-NDS chief, Amrullah Saleh tweeted. We must stand together to fight terrorism and its sponsor in a bid to be freed from menace of terrorism.

"The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) condemns the brutal attacks and expresses its concerns about a recent spate of incidents in which civilians have been killed in attacks on schools and medical centres," said the UNAMA, meanwhile, called for the responsible parties to be arrested and punished. "The architects of this appalling crime must be brought to justice," said Ingrid Hayden, the Secretary-General's Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan.

In the meantime, families of the victims of the Jalalabad suicide attack said that President Ashraf Ghani and local officials from Nangarhar must be held accountable for the attack. While carrying the coffins of their loved these families on Monday chanted slogans against Ghani and Nangarhar police. They questioned how the suicide bomber had been able to enter the heavily-fortified area where the attack took place. "We want the government to defend us," said one Sikh resident in Jalalabad, Gujit Singh. "Honorable governor! We are very angry about this, even we are not counted as a tribe, we have been left without an identity," said another Sikh member. "My brother was martyred, my father-in-law martyred, my loved ones martyred, my uncle martyred. Four of our families were totally destroyed," said Anderpal Singh.

In the past three decades, close to 99 percent of Hindu and Sikh citizens of Afghanistan have left the country. According to a survey reports released by Tolo news, the Sikh and Hindu population number was 220,000 in the 1980's. That number dropped sharply to 15,000 during the 1990's and remained at that level during the Taliban regime. It is now estimated that only 1,350 Hindus and Sikhs remain in the country. Hindus and Sikhs were granted representation in the country's parliament in 2016. "I am clear that we cannot live here anymore," said Tejvir Singh, secretary of a national panel of Hindus and Sikhs. "Our religious practices will not be tolerated by the Islamic terrorists. We are Afghans; the government recognized us, but terrorists target us because we are not Muslims," Tejvir Singh continued.

The so-called Islamic State claimed responsibility for the deadly attacks, justifying the people in the convoy were targeted for being "polytheists". The attack on the convoy occurred less than 24 hours after suspected Islamic State militants targeted a boys' school in Khogyani district and beheaded three workers. Islamic State continues to have a presence in Nangarhar province, despite efforts by Afghan and U.S. forces to remove them from the area. Last month, a joint U.S.-Afghan operation routed Islamic State forces in parts of Nangarhar province.

The attacks which usually carried out by Islamic State are more dreadful and very meaningful in comparison to Taliban; they have always tried to target the main values of the Afghan nation such as unity, diversity and democracy. In recent years, a large number of Hazara were targeted aiming to inflame sectarian conflicts in the country. In December 2017, 41 killed and dozens were wounded. In July 2016, at least 80 Shia Muslims were killed in two bomb blasts carried out by Daesh in Kabul. In November of the same year, at least 27 people were killed after a large bomb explosion hit a Shia mosque in Kabul and many more were killed in voter registration center west of Kabul. The purpose of the Islamic State is to scare the people of Afghanistan into staying away from polls, further weakening the government and striking at the legitimacy of democracy and diversity.



The New Era and Afghan Women Political Expansion (Part 2)

By Hamid Bamik

After the removal of the Taliban, according to the Bonn Conference Agreements, the Ministry of Women's Affairs of Afghanistan was established in the framework of the Interim Administration of Afghanistan in Qawas of 1380. Also, several other women's organizations that were established either before Bonn Conference or After, heightened their activities for paving the way for Afghan women participation in social, cultural, economic, and political processes in Afghanistan.

The Afghan Women's Network (AWN) which is a non-governmental organization (NGO) was created in 1996 by Afghan women following the World Conference on Women in Beijing with the aim of empowering women and ensure their equal participation in Afghan society. Currently, it operates in Kabul, Herat, Balkh, Kandahar, Bamiyan, Paktia, Nangarhar, and Kunduz. This organization has more than 3,500 individual members (exclusively women) and 125 women's organizations with memberships. It is said that AWN is the biggest and the most politically influential Afghan women organization in Afghanistan. Likewise, another political organization that encourages women to take part in political processes is Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) founded in 1977. RAWA is one of the most prominent Afghan women's organizations. According to RAWA's website, this organization has been working since 1977 for the liberation, democracy and the rights of women in Afghanistan.

In the political and social life of Afghanistan after the Taliban, 2009 was one of the most important years in contemporary history Afghanistan. Afghanistan witnessed the second round of presidential elections in pursuit of democracy and peace, the adoption of democratic institutions and practices in the administration of the country and reliance on citizens' rights and freedoms. The campaign for 2009 presidential election provided civil society and women's rights activists with an opportunity to share their common demands with government officials, and to make the community more responsive to their needs. Taking the provided golden opportunities, the women's empowerment group was formed that began their activities under Afghan Women Fifty Percent Campaign. This organization fights for women's participation in voting and running for political positions and track the demands of women from Afghan politicians and international gatherings. On the eve of the Bonn Conference, a statement issued by this organization wanted the participants in the conference and the Afghan government not to bargain on women's rights with Taliban. As per the statement of The Fifty Percent Campaign activists, women make up half the population or half of the voters, and Afghan presidential candidates must pay attention to the demands of women in order to win their votes.

Sima Samar, a well-known woman's and human rights advocate, activist and a social worker within national and international forums, who served as Minister of Women's Affairs of Afghanistan from December 2001 to 2003, and the current Chairperson of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) founded the Martyrs Institute in 1989. It is a non-governmental and non-profit organization. This institute is to protect the health of Afghan citizens, especially women and children. The Martyrs Institute is currently operating in nine provinces of Afghanistan. It is the oldest non-governmental organization in the region and the largest woman-led NGO that was active in the tough times of the Taliban period. Dr. Sima Samar, the founder of the Martyrs Institute, has received several human rights and peace prizes and had been nominated in 2009 for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Unlike the previously mentioned Afghan women organizations, the Young Women for Change, a nonprofit organization was established in 2011 in Kabul by two young Afghan women, Noorjahan Akbar, and Anita Haidary. Next, this is the only movement that young men along with young Afghan women are advocating against sexual discrimination and inequality in Afghanistan. It has dozens of male and female voluntary members. The members of the Young Women for Change are committed to women's empowerment through economic, social, political, and participation in the society. The institute is well-known among the youth of the country.

Now that the upcoming parliamentary and district election is approaching, and the candidates need women's votes, the issue of women's participation is getting more pivotal for candidate. As a usual and ironic question, how do Afghan po-

litical elites, candidates, and public think about women's participation in political processes? It can be said with certainty that majority of parliamentary candidates and political elites in Afghanistan have an exploitative approach toward women's participation in the political processes. This means that women's political participation is circumscribed to the polling centers. Such an exploitative understanding of women's political participation is a serious obstacle to women's political and social development. Since Afghanistan is a highly collective and traditional society, the grassroots mindsets are also influenced by the society's elites' perspectives. Most of the families in Afghanistan consider girls and women's roles limited to doing households, and other spheres that are less dominated by males such as being a teacher at schools and serving at a hospital as a doctor. A few Afghan families let their women and girls become politicians and social scientist.

So, to expand the participation of women in male dominated areas, we need to change our understanding of women's political participation in the political processes and let them appear in public as men do. But how women can experience such changes practically in the society is a daunting challenge and question both for the government and women themselves. In order to help women engage in the political, social, cultural, and economic spheres equally with their male counterparts, the government of Afghanistan and other related organizations should take the following measures:

Recommendations for Policy Implications

First, a significant issue in political and social participation is political socialization. Political socialization is a continuous learning process in which individuals, through acquainting themselves with the political system, learn from their rights and roles in society through information and experiences. This process helps women adapt to the accepted forms of organized social life, and teaches them the talents, essential social desires, and in particular the social roles that women must play in society. Ultimately, it helps women attend various social fields.

Second, education is the most important element of political and social participation and, ultimately, the development of a community. The most important element in the development of a community is the people of that society - men and women, who must have cultural and political awareness and knowledge. As Emile Durkheim states: Education is a process in which a woman learns through practices that are functional in a community or group in the political, social, and intellectual fields. To educate women about the importance of participation and awareness by the press, audio and visual media, active organizations in the society. These measures should be consistent with women's specific circumstances, talents, and motivations. In particular, the necessary social education must be carried out through K-12 education and higher education in the form of textbooks and curricula so that women from the same age receive the pre-requisites for social and political activities.

Third, the communities, government, and other social organizations should have a rational and reasonable approach toward the character of girls and women, and let them taste the importance of ownership, thought and creativity. If women are provided opportunities to explore their talents, enhance their self-confidence, think about their own fate, the society will flourish manifolds faster. It will provide better opportunities for women's political and social participation in the society. Of course, it should be noted that for women to have a positive social status in society, it is necessary that educational institutions and environments such as the family, sports clubs, working offices should have the necessary conditions for the development of the social character of women.

Last but not the least, creating suitable opportunities for female participation in various scientific and practical scenes, such as universities, research centers, factories and other social activities can provide the motivation for increasing women's political and social participation. Therefore, if women's social and political participation is increased in the light of these factors, given that many social science thinkers, including Samuel Huntington, consider the social and political participation of people as one of the tools of community development. It can be concluded that increasing the political and social participation of women means increasing their contribution to the development of society.

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Saudi Religious Diplomacy Targets Jerusalem

By James M. Dorsey

A United Arab Emirates-backed Saudi effort to wrest control from Jordan of Islam's holy places in Jerusalem signals a sharper, more overt edge to Saudi religious diplomacy and the kingdom's quest for regional hegemony that risks deepening divides in the Muslim world.

The effort also serves to support Donald J. Trump's plan for a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has split the Muslim world even before it has officially been made public and been clouded by the US president's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

At the very least, Saudi Arabia hopes at the risk of destabilizing Jordan, where Palestinians account for at least half of the country's almost ten million people, to drop its resistance to the Trump initiative.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE's focus on Jerusalem has wider regional implications as they battle Turkey for ownership of the Jerusalem issue. The two countries tried to downplay the significance of two Islamic summits in Istanbul convened by Turkey to counter Mr. Trump's move.

Turkey and the Gulf states are also at odds over the Saudi-UAE-led economic and diplomatic boycott of Qatar and policy towards Iran.

The power and geopolitically-driven effort constitutes a marked shift in Saudi religious diplomacy that for much of the past four decades involved a \$100 billion public diplomacy campaign to globally promote Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism. More recently, Saudi Arabia has sought to project itself as a beacon of tolerance, inter-faith dialogue and an unidentified form of moderate Islam.

Saudi Arabia has not officially announced its quest to wrest control from Jordan of the Haram al-Sharif or Temple Mount, home to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third most holy site after Mecca and Medina, but evidence is piling up against the backdrop of ever closer relations between Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain.

Flexing the kingdom's financial muscle, Saudi King Salman told an Arab summit in Dhahran in April that he was donating \$150 million to support Islam's holy places in Jerusalem.

The donation constitutes a multitude of Turkish bequests to Islamic organizations in Jerusalem and efforts to acquire real estate.

But contrary to Saudi Arabia, Turkey can capitalize on the fact that it maintains diplomatic relations with Israel to organize Islamist tours to the city. Thousands of Turkish supporters of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Democracy Party (AKP) visited the city in the past year. Turkish activists allegedly participated in last year's protests on Haram al-Sharif.

Striking a different cord from that of his powerful son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has been vocal in his support for M. Trump and empathy with Israeli positions, King Salman denounced the "invalidity and illegality" of the US decision to recognize Jerusalem.

Saudi Arabia, in opposition to the Jordanian endowment that administers Haram al-Sharif, last year backed Israel's installation of metal detectors following an attack that killed two Israeli policemen.

Some Jordanians saw the Saudi support as a precursor for a US-backed agreement with Israel that would give Gulf states a foothold on Temple Mount by allowing Saudi and UAE personnel to be posted at its entrances.

In competition with Turkey, the UAE, according to Kamal Khatib, an Israeli Palestinian Islamist leader, as well as Arab media reports, is seeking to purchase real estate adjacent to Haram al-Sharif. Mr. Khatib asserted that the UAE was operating through an associate of Mohammed Dahlan, an Abu Dhabi-based former Palestinian security chief with presidential ambitions.

Jordan and Saudi Arabia clashed in December during a gathering of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union when the kingdom attempted to challenge Jordan's custodianship of holy places in Jerusalem.

Saudi Arabia together with the UAE and Kuwait pledged US\$ 2.5 billion to Jordan after mass anti-government protests rocked the country earlier this year in a bid to gain leverage and prevent it from turning to Turkey for help.

Al-Monitor quoted Raed Daana, a former director of preaching and guidance at Al-Aqsa Mosque Directorate, as saying that Saudi Arabia had secretly invited Palestinian Muslim dignitaries in a bid to garner support for a Saudi power grab.

Saudi officials are further believed to be pressuring Palestine Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to allow Saudi Islamic scholars to visit Palestine. In a rare outreach, Iyad Madani, a Saudi national and secretary-general of the Jeddah-based, 57-nation Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), visited Haram al-Sharif in January.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have used Bahrain, a financially weak state whose ruling family was bolstered in 2011 by the intervention of a Saudi-led military force to counter a popular revolt, as a front for some of their overtures towards Israel.

Bahrain, which last week granted entry to an Israeli delegation to participate in a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) meeting, has been at the forefront of the Gulf states' religious diplomacy and propagation of inter-faith dialogue.

Israel's only official presence in the Gulf is its under-the-radar mission to the International Renewable Energy Agency in Abu Dhabi that is widely seen as the Jewish state's embassy to the region.

A prominent American rabbi, Marc Shneier, and evangelist Reverend Johnnie Moore, a member of Mr. Trump's faith advisory board, keynoted at a dinner in Washington in May hosted by the Bahrain embassy. Reverend Moore led a delegation of Bahraini and expatriate civic and business leaders on a visit to Israel last December, days after Mr. Trump had recognized Jerusalem as Jewish state's capital.

The delegation's Palestinian reception suggests that Saudi-UAE efforts to gain a geopolitically-driven religious foothold in Jerusalem may not be straight forward. Palestinian guards barred the delegation from entering Haram al-Sharif while protesters in Gaza blocked it from visiting the strip.

Said Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) executive committee member Hanan Ashrawi in a comment about the visit that could have applied to the broader Saudi-UAE effort: I don't believe "this whole lovey-dovey approach of 'we're here to show tolerance'. Then go home and show tolerance at home."

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