

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

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Emerging Light at the End of the Tunnel for Peace Talks

With the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan, both countries seek to break the stalemate of peace process and nudge the Taliban fighters to come to negotiating table. Negotiation for ending the protracted war is the top priority for Kabul government and its international allies, including the United States.

Peace process has been a highly rocky road with many ups and downs for Afghan government since the Taliban fighters' adopted precarious attitudes towards the Kabul's proposal for negotiation with the change of their leadership. Nonetheless, the Taliban's current leader Mullah Haibatullah has constantly been holding out against the truce and intensified attacks against Kabul government. That is, he does not seem to consider negotiation as a second option for resolving the conflict, which inflicted heavy casualties upon civilians in the country.

It is self-explanatory that terrorism is a regional threat. The terrorist attack on Baluchistan Awami Party in Mastung district - which marked the deadliest terror attack in Pakistan since the attacks on Army Public School Peshawar in 2014 and killed 153 people - and the yesterday's deadly attack outside a polling station in Quetta, which also killed and wounded more than 60 people, indicate that terrorism poses a highly serious threat to the region. Both the attacks were claimed by the IS group.

Addressing the "Seventh World Peace Forum" in Beijing on July 14, Pakistan's former Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz said that "terrorism knows no border". He also urged the world must end political tension and tackle their issues through "dialogue" and "diplomacy" which, he claimed, are a peaceful solution to regional peace and stability. Aziz said, "Confrontation between the current powers will be disastrous for world peace, security and prosperity". He added, "It is in the interest of every country to have prosperous, stable neighbors and secure borders".

He also warned the world of the threat posed by the IS group to the regional stability. According to him, although the IS group had lost ground in Iraq and Syria, its ideology still rules there.

In fact, currently there are two big threats to the regional peace and stability: political rivalries and terrorism. To ensure regional stability, the world powers will have to stop cold war and blame game. The recent escalated cold war among world powers, mainly Iran and the US, will further destabilize the region and increase the level of mistrust and hostility. Second, although Afghanistan and Pakistan are highly vulnerable to violence, it is understandable that terrorism is a threat to the entire world.

After all, the vulnerability of a single state or nation has to be a matter of concern for the world since we live in the global village. It is believed that the world will not be immune from the spillover of the ongoing regional stability and terrorist attacks.

Afghan former President Hamid Karzai also pointed out at the Peace Forum that "Pakistan's people" suffered severely as a result of terrorism the same as Afghan people did and terrorism is the common enemy of Afghan-Pak nations.

Afghanistan has changed into a sacrificial lamb and Afghan soldiers and civilians' blood is spilt on day-to-day basis. That is to say, Taliban's current leader seeks to continue the hit-and-run policy turning back to Kabul's olive branch. But it is widely believed if Islamabad uses its leverage with bona fide intention, the Taliban's leader will be persuaded to come to peace table.

Despite the escalated militancy, a gleam of hope for talks emerged for Kabul government for three reasons: First, Islamabad's current determination for bringing the Taliban to the table as the inaugural meetings of the five Working Groups were held on Sunday to strengthen counter-terrorism, peace and reconciliation. Second, Saudi Arabia's support for peace and the joint efforts of Afghan and Saudi religious scholars for campaigning against terrorist attacks and suicide bombings in the country. This campaign is more likely to mitigate the violence in Afghanistan. Third, the Taliban's positive reaction to the ceasefire announced by Kabul government during the Eid holidays has made officials believe they are not reluctant to peace talks.

It is believed that these three reasons are reasonable and the continuation of the joint efforts of Islamic scholars and officials will undermine the militants ideologically and militarily. Both religious scholars and officials will have to continue their efforts with strong determination and genuine intention to put an end to the ongoing conflicts. Based on the popular belief, Islamabad and Riyadh are able to push the Taliban to the peace table and their pressure on the Taliban will bear the desired result. It is hoped Islamic countries and Afghanistan's western allies will bring in peace and stability in the country through peaceful means.

Electoral Complaint Commission Needs multipronged strategy to ensure transparent, credible elections

By Mohammed Gul Sahibbzada

Now election for the Parliament and District councils is on its verge. It is a matter of few months and the election will be the reality. There are around 9 million voters registered so far, with almost 3 million women voters. International community has expressed its full confidence in the election mechanism. UNAMA has called on Afghan parties to support the election process as it constitutes one of the fundamental aspirations of the people of Afghanistan. SRSG of UNAMA Yamamoto Tadamichi says as quoted in media, that, 'It is very easy to be skeptical, but I think we should take this very seriously. ...We should respect this desire of Afghan people'. On the same day, UN Security Council called on all the stakeholders to do everything to create the conditions for credible and transparent elections.

International community has expressed full faith in the demonstrative capabilities and competencies of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and Independent Electoral Complaint Commission (IECC) to steer the election process with appropriate responses to constructive criticism and donors pledged to fund an additional to \$57 million to the election budget in its 3rd project board meeting. International community is supporting Afghanistan with high expectations, as credible and transparent election will have the trust of Afghans in democracy and Afghan institutions, which will lead to all inclusive peace, security and development.

At the same time, the country is also gearing for the election process and the political landscape is taking shape. Its dynamics are changing. Alliances are broken, new alliances are formed and this process of 'breaking and forming' will continue even after election. First Vice President Dostum is back to the country and he was welcome at the Airport by the Second Vice President and National Security Advisor. With his returns, the demonstrations in north provinces got dissipated and another new alliance, National Salvation Alliance, started taking momentum with its first open meeting on 26 July 2018 attended by him, Atta Mohammad Noor and Mohaqiq. Alliance also announced that they aimed to work for, inter alia, holding of transparent election.

Everyone has been giving a call for the transparency and credibility of the process, be it the UN, the government, political parties and the people of Afghanistan. Independent Election Commis-

sion is entrusted to ensure it. Integrity of the election process with inclusivity, quick remedial mechanisms, prompt investigation and decisions will surely contribute towards the realization of the above call. My views published in Daily Outlook Afghanistan under opinion (http://outlookafghanistan.net/topics.php?post_id=21114), which sought to set up a strong functional mechanism of Electoral Complaints Commission to address every complaint quickly and efficiently and taking measures under the Election Laws and Afghan Penal Code.

Now, Independent Electoral Complaints Commission started functioning but little bit delayed and it is being extended to provinces. On 25 July 2018, IECC informed that 883 complaints have been received and out of these 200 are under evaluation. Nearly 40 complaints have already been decided upon. Political leaders including Hekmatyar and Atta Mohammad Noor have expressed the existence of millions of fake voters, estimating to be in the range of 4-5 millions. Many complaints of irregularities were reported during the registration process. Now, the IECC is concentrating on the complaints against the candidates as that matter is on priority. The process of vetting should continue with objective criterion and inbuilt appellate mechanisms following the natural principles of justice. This process will facilitate to filter the tainted candidates and uphold the expectations of people to know their candidates better. Same time, previous complaints raised during the voter registration which are election related should be pursued to bring them to logical conclusions leading to affixing responsibilities and finding ways to prevent their further adverse implications.

IECC may be strengthened more with appropriate resources and expertise creating it as the focal point of the multi-pronged strategy for prompt fact findings and investigations of each election related complaint including through third party sources such as news media. Only after such mechanisms, IECC can demonstrate itself a strong, independent, competent and capable institution. Efforts are to be made to address the issues so that such claims are investigated quickly and findings are made public, which will remove skepticism. IECC should be in position to admonish the political parties or even discipline them, who are trying to vitiate the electoral environment, if facts are found to be contrary.

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Saudi oil shipment halt: A potential watershed in the Yemen war

By James M. Dorsey

A spike in oil prices as a result of a temporary halt in shipments through the strategic Bab el Mandeb strait may be short-lived, but the impact on Yemen's three-year-old forgotten war is likely to put the devastating conflict on the front burner.

The halt following a Saudi assertion that Iran-backed Houthis rebels in Yemen had attacked two Saudi oil tankers traversing the waterway drives home the threat the conflict poses to a chokepoint in international trade and the flow of Gulf oil to world markets. The Houthis said they had attacked a Saudi warship rather than oil tankers.

An estimated 4.8 million barrels of oil are shipped daily through Bab al Mandeb that connects the Red Sea with the Arabian Sea off the coast of Yemen, Djibouti, and Eritrea.

The halt of oil shipments could provoke an escalation of the conflict with external powers intervening in a bid to assist Saudi Arabia and the UAE in defeating the Houthis and dealing a blow to Iran's regional presence.

By the same token, the halt potentially offers Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates an opportunity to focus international attention on resolving a civil war aggravated and turned into a regional conflict by the two Gulf states' military intervention in March 2015.

Rather than proving to be a swift campaign that would have subdued the Houthis, the intervention has turned into a quagmire and a public relations fiasco for Saudi Arabia and the UAE. International criticism of their conduct of the war is mounting as a result of its devastating human cost. Voices in the US Congress, the British parliament and other Western legislatures as well as human rights groups calling for a halt of arms sales to Saudi Arabia are growing ever louder.

The armed services panels in the US House and Senate released earlier this week joint defense legislation that demands that the Pentagon tell Congress whether US or Arab coalition forces violated federal law or Pentagon policy. Another provision restricts mid-air US refuelling of coalition aircraft if the UAE and Saudi Arabia fail to demonstrate efforts to support United Nations-backed peace talks, resolve the growing humanitarian crisis, and cut down on civilian deaths.

The war has killed at least 10,000 Yemenis and left more than 22 million people - three-quarters of Yemen's population - in need of humanitarian aid. At least 8 million Yemenis are on the brink of famine, and 1 million are infected with cholera.

In a most immediate response to the halt, the United States and Britain, eager to benefit from increased arms sales, are likely to step up their support of the Saudi-UAE effort in the Yemen war. Viewed from Washington as well as Riyadh, the war is one more front in US efforts to force Iran to halt its support of Middle Eastern proxies.

Since the war began, the US and the UK have sold more than \$12bn worth of weapons to Saudi Arabia alone - including some of the warplanes and the payloads they drop.

The US military, moreover, provides mid-air refuelling for Saudi and UAE aircraft, and both British and US personnel assist

the Saudis as they target their strikes.

The US, Britain and other powers could look at expanding operations of an anti-piracy alliance in the region created in 2008 in response to Somali piracy. The alliance includes warships patrolling regional waters from all five United Nations Security Council permanent members - the United States, China, Russia, Britain and France - as well as other European and Latin American nations, Australia, Japan, Pakistan, Singapore, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Thailand.

The potential for a breakthrough in peace efforts increases when the halt to oil shipments is coupled with a Saudi-UAE threat to besiege the strategic port of Hodeida that could jeopardize the crucial for the flow of humanitarian supplies potentially creates an opportunity for more forceful efforts to bring the Yemen war to an end.

In a letter to US congressional leaders, UAE ambassador to the United States Yousef al-Otaiba said in June that the Saudi-led Arab force fighting in Yemen is giving the Iran-backed Houthi rebels "the greatest possible opportunity" for a peaceful withdrawal from Hodeida.

UN envoy Martin Griffiths last week put forward a proposal that would avert a fight for Hodeida that has yet to be accepted by all parties.

The plan reportedly calls for a phased Houthi withdrawal from Hodeida and two other nearby ports, a gradual pullback of UAE forces, UN assistance in staffing the port with Yemenis who would also govern the city of 60,000, and the revival of stalled peace talks.

The possibility of the halt to oil shipments propelling efforts to end the war is enhanced by the fact that the Saudi move has ramifications that go beyond energy security.

The Middle East's multiple conflicts, including the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the dispute between Qatar and a Saudi-UAE-led alliance that has imposed a 14-month old diplomatic and economic boycott of the Gulf state has spilled across the Horn of Africa with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and China competing for influence by gaining control of ports and establishing military bases.

The UAE's strong military and commercial presence in the region is one reason why Chinese President Xi Jinping recent stopped in the Emirates for three days on his way to a tour of Africa.

China likely would favour capitalizing on the Saudi halt to propel peace efforts while the Trump administration more probably will lean towards military intervention that confronts Iran.

Said scholar and author Ellen R. Wald: "The Red Sea is a very important shipping lane. If there is a major disruption European powers, Egypt and the United States would all have reason to intervene. They have significant interests in protecting the freedom of the seas through the passageway. An international intervention against the Houthis may be just what Saudi Arabia wants."

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