

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



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## Negotiation Alongside Operation Works

We should imbibe it that peace is not the absence of conflict, but the way conflict is lead to an agreeable but peace owning ending. The harms inflicted to poverty stricken Afghanistan can not be reciprocated with endless butchery of the misled and betrayed militants and terrorists. Certainly, the segregation of militants intended to serve the vested interests from the one unknowingly fighting for the installment of peace, is timely necessity.

The dual approach (negotiation and operation) exercised by National Unity Government (NUG) to seek an end to decade long bloody conflict, is justifiably agreeable. The government proposing peace talks to the disgruntled faction of militants amidst executing military operation to inflict crushing defeat to those challenging the writ of government. Nonetheless, the government falling short of widening the security net, created security vacuum which is duly filled by emerging militants of ISIS. The growing activities of ISIS in the wake of Taliban's "spring offensive" multiplied governments concerns. Earlier president Ghani admitted that the group poses a serious threat to regional security whilst terming it worse than al-Qaeda. Apparently, the targeted attacks by twin groups fortify government complications.

Following the aforesaid course the Afghans longing for eternal peace turns nightmare, despite years of infighting that have claimed awful toll. Purposeful, negotiations renders the sole political solution to put an end to this predicament. Previously, the efforts were underway to stage talks with Taliban. Reportedly, Pakistan enjoys good ties with Afghan Taliban, who disbanded their ties with Pakistani faction of Taliban. Pakistan can play a significant role, narrowing down the understanding gap by mediating talks between the two factions; government and Taliban. Nevertheless, with emergence of Daesh, query awaiting proper reply is, should the government tempt talk them too? Or, the government should draw out of the disparity of interests between Daesh and Taliban given both are fighting a similar religious-political dominance; the latter being local and former foreign elements. Drawing the favor of Taliban through tangible peace talks, the other insurgent group of ISIS can be pushed back.

Previously it was reported by credible media that Afghan government and the Taliban were preparing to hold face-to-face talks in the following days as a result of efforts by Pakistan and other stakeholders. Taliban never relied Kabul government to be the sole authority that should be talked, to chart out the future course of action. The in-depth trust deficit found between disgruntled factions, served a dominant factor restraining this settlement.

The encouragements to initiate talks were well received by US, China and formerly India. In this course the efforts were made to arrange the talks in Kabul in an effort to show that the process is Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.

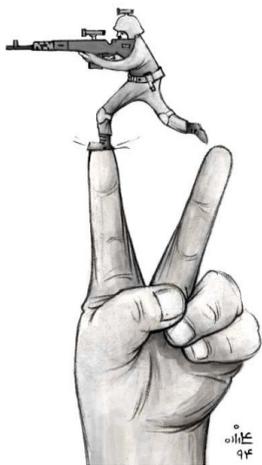
Following the successive developments, Afghan Taliban and the government are about to devise a roadmap to finalize peace talk. The Pakistani army and diplomatic officials in their former visit to Afghanistan had declared Afghan Taliban have signaled their willingness to initiate peace talks. According to report surfaced the venue is still undecided; preferably out of Islamabad, Kabul, Beijing or Dubai one might be chosen where talks could further.

The aforesaid progression bridges the credibility of the former report stating the Government of National Unity had offered posts to senior former Taliban leaders in the new cabinet which were not formally announced. It is said that the Government of National Unity had considered offering posts of the Ministry of Rural Affairs, the borders and Hajj and Religious Affairs, besides appointing Taliban governors to three southern provinces -Nimruz, Kandahar and Helmand. It's a good omen that broad based reconciliation between Afghan government and Taliban could bring true the "peace" dream of ordinary masses of this piece of land.

There are vital developments witnessed echoing even in constitutional avenues of US and elsewhere. It should be to none surprise, US tempts not to call Taliban, terrorists then onward, given, earlier the White House issues statement, reiterating that the Taliban were not a terrorist outfit while Al Qaeda is. The distinction carved underlines; the US's deep-rooted global interests are endangered by later than former. Broadly speaking it seems to be a sub plan of another master plan where Taliban are given space to join back the political domain and disband militancy.

There are some hard born reservations Taliban still assert to be primarily considered on peace talks agenda; they eye constitution to be Islamized, Taliban be given greater share in the new setup. The government displayed complete silence about over all developments. Earlier, the presidential palace had said the nation would be informed about major developments in talks with the armed opponents.

Even if talks were to be used as a last resort to install peace then some serious breakthrough must have worked out that could soothe the insurgents to an agreeable demand prior to sitting. The most significant are the demonstration of shift instilled in Taliban's resolve to disband militancy, dissociate Al-Qaida and surrender to constitution of the country. This move practically is unachievable given that Taliban deem to having upper hand in the fight, never surrender to government's demands instead dreams of ousting Kabul government.



## The Fight for Winning Hearts and Minds

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

In a gathering of clerics in Kabul, hundreds of Afghan clerics and members of the Ulema Council condemned the ongoing war in the country and declared their backing to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The mullahs announced their support to a religious sanction issued by the Saudi Arabian Mecca preacher against the Islamic State group and other militant groups who kill innocent people. The clerics also backed the government's call on the people to support and stand alongside the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in the fight against militant groups. The clerics also called on the Afghan government to seek peace with the Taliban rather than war. The announcement of Afghan clerics' and the Council of Ulema's stance on the ongoing insurgency across the country is coming at a time that there are many military offensives going on in various provinces as the militants have resumed their deadly spring offensive.

The religious scholars' robust denouncement of the increasing violence in the country is markedly unprecedented. The Afghanistan Ulema Council and the religious clerics have been criticized in past for not condemning the insurgency and the Taliban and other militant groups' violence under the name of Islam. The government of Afghanistan has been trying for a long time to discredit the Taliban and the groups' campaign of violence as un-Islamic by seeking religious sanctions from the clerics and religious figures. In a hope to help disuade the Taliban's mainstream from waging the deadly war against the government, the government has facilitated in the past a number of high-profile gatherings of clerics from the Muslim world. However, the efforts yielded little results as the Ulema Council and the Afghan clerics remained reluctant in taking a clear position in condemning the Taliban.

Recently, President Ashraf Ghani suggested an extensive Jihad against the militant groups. The declaration is now an opportunity for the government to seize and build on to fight the Taliban's ideology and religious legitimacy. In Afghanistan, the religious figures have considerable influence among the public particularly in rural areas where the Taliban attract their recruits the most. If the government of Afghanistan and the government-backed Council of religious scholars manage to promote a more effective anti-Taliban campaign targeting the group's legitimacy, the mainstream supporters of the Taliban will start shrinking and the Taliban will gradually lose their legitimacy. So far, the initiative to promote an anti-Taliban legitimacy campaign through religious scholars has been passive and reactive to the day-to-day incidents of violence by the militant groups.

Fearing to give a saying for the more conservative segment of the society, the government has so far avoided considering a serious role for the religious clerics and the Council of Ulema in the efforts for delegitimizing the Taliban ideology as well as for making peace with the Taliban. Despite asking the religious figures and clerics for many times to suggest a solution for the ongoing crisis in the country, the government has abstained from bringing the Ulema to the center

stage for talks with the Taliban and de-legitimization of the militants-waged violence. After Friday prayers in Kabul, a top cleric criticized the High Peace Council (HPC) and called on the government to bring clerics who are not affiliated to the government into the peace initiative led by, emphasizing that the Ulema can bring peace in the country.

The condemnation from the Ulema Council is coming while the Taliban are waging a deadly spring war in many provinces as the ANSF are fighting to push the resurgent insurgency back. The government has urged the people to stand by the ANSF and support the ongoing operations across the country. The announced support from the Ulema members is a promising move that, if continued, would help public image of the army and police. In recent days, the ANSF operations have been underway in Helmand, Ghazni, Badakhshan, Zabul, Kunduz and Baghlan provinces. The ANSF needs public support including from religious circles and the more conservative parts of the society to battle the hard-line Taliban and other militants.

This year, military response from Afghanistan's security agencies to the Taliban spring offensive came late as the militants had been wrecking havoc in a number of northern provinces. Lack of leadership from the ministry of defense was also a major factor for the late robust response to the Taliban spring offensive. The National Unity Government has been unable to introduce a nominee for the top security ministry. Many believe that this had considerable impacts on the lack of leadership and decisive response from the ministry. However, the security agencies finally came to the point to launch a decisive operation across the country to counter the violent campaign of the Taliban. In order to prevent the Taliban of making gains on the ground and depriving them of taking any political advantage from territory gains, the military needs to decisively respond the militants on the field.

Public support and political support from the government and all political leaders is crucial for the military offensive against the Taliban. The government has taken the right path in encouraging public support for the Afghan police and army in the ongoing fierce battle across the country. The government should take more cohesive approach and pursue an extensive plan for galvanizing the public in support of the ANSF fighting on the ground. For this, backing of the religious entities including the Ulema council is very crucial. Enhancing public support for the ANSF security operations will remarkably boost morale of the army and police forces fighting in the battlefield and protecting the villages and cities. To counter the insurgency, the government needs to integrate the peace diplomacy with enhanced public support for the ANSF. It is highly likely for the peace initiative to doom to failure if the government fails to gain backing of the public as well as the Ulema society for the anti-insurgency campaign. The peace process diplomacy would work much better if it is integrated with extensive anti-insurgency military campaign and a strategy for winning the hearts and minds of the public and the anti-Taliban religious scholar's society.

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## Taliban's Increasing Influence, Military Operation and Joblessness!

By Muhammad Rasool Shah

Recent increase in the influence and power of Taliban in a number of Northern provinces of the country is much alarming. After their losses and continuous strikes of our security forces, it was expected that, this terrorist group would become extinct with the passage of time but unfortunately, the exact reverse of it is happening. In their recent invasions, three districts of Kunduz province almost fell into the hands of Taliban. Our security forces have also launched a wide-scaled military operation to retake the areas and bring them into the government's control. However, this is not going to be an easy task as reports show that large numbers of militants are fighting in these districts.

Usually, the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar have been considered the breeding places of Taliban and northern areas of the country were peaceful when the southern areas were considered the most dangerous parts of the country. There were so many reasons behind this scenario. Taliban got their birth in 1994 in Kandahar province and later on, this province became the functional base of their government. In the same way, Helmand was supportive for Taliban when the residents of the province provided them with immense moral, material and physical support. It is the reason why, large numbers of Taliban officers and commanders belonged to this province and the name of province became synonymous with Taliban and militancy. It is the reason why, even after the restoration of peace and order in almost all parts of the country, Kandahar and Helmand were still the most restive parts and military operations against Taliban never came to halt. At the end of 2014, when British forces withdrew from Helmand and ISAF forces left Kandahar, some of the areas of these provinces were still not under the proper control of government. Last year's attack and domination of a number of areas of Helmand by Taliban was a great challenge for security forces when our forces remained busy for weeks to take back the control of the places that had gone into the control of Taliban. At the same time, the northern areas of the country were different from the southern part of the country in two respects. One, there was very less or almost no existence of Taliban or other militant groups. Secondly, people of the area did not grow addictive drugs.

However, in last two years, we witnessed a gradual change in the scenario. Though the southern provinces remain under the constant threat of Taliban, northern part of the country is no more a safe and secure place. In these provinces, people gradually started cultivating addictive drugs when they saw that their normal crops were not meeting their expenses. Having a look at the lucrative income from this cultivation, the trend expanded to more and more areas and now, these drugs are cultivated on a very large area in a number of Northern provinces. In the same way, a group of 'Mullahs' was slowly brought into existence that believed in extremist ideas. This was in fact an indirect arrangement to pave way for the emergence of Taliban in the region. Later on, Taliban became more organized by the formation of their hierarchy. According to informal reports, a complete bureaucratic setup of Taliban exist in these provinces that includes of the governor, assistant governor, police and security chiefs and others. They also have an informal system of tax collection and courts. With all these, they made a vast network of hiring

militants and it is the reason why, large numbers of people joined them as militants, which enabled them to stretch their control to increased number of districts and provinces in the Northern areas of the country.

According to political and economic analysts of the area, it was not the case right from the beginning. When the democratic government was established, large numbers of projects were launched in different parts of the country and there was a general wave of prosperity in every corner of the country. People realized that this flow of prosperity would continue only if they kept peace and order in the country and for that reason, they were strong supporters of peace and opposed strictly all those factors that might endanger their prosperity. Large numbers of people were having jobs, they were earning well, and there was no time with them to heed to anyone who might talk against government. However, in last years, the things started changing. With fear of the exit of foreign forces, international donors stopped their donations and almost all the projects were wrapped up. In the same way, many NGOs left the country, leaving behind large number of people unemployed. Fear of future uncertainty also deterred the businesses to make expansions and in many cases, people find it safer to roll back the business, collect their investments and buy property from it in abroad. Due to these reasons, economic activities came to a halt and financial conditions of people badly deteriorated. All these adverse circumstances were very favorable for the emergence and expansion of Taliban. Due to their financial worries, people were not happy of the government and when Taliban emerged, they were indifferent to this as they were already suffering in the time of government. The increase in the poppy cultivation in the northern areas of the country is also due to the same reason. In order to tackle joblessness and financial problems, people were left with very limited options. Getting a decent job was very difficult so they had to rely on jobs with very less income. However, in most of the cases, such jobs were also rare or unavailable. It is the reason why, we see that large number of people are doing jobs with meager salaries, not good enough to run their families. Next, they had the option of going abroad. It is the reason why, thousands of Afghans head to foreign countries but hundreds of them are killed on the way, many more are caught, imprisoned and deported to Afghanistan and many more end up with jobs that are still less attractive. In such circumstances, Taliban opened an option for the jobless people. Taliban are paying from 300-400 dollars a month for their normal members while the high ranked officials are paid even better. It is the reason why, large numbers of people joined Taliban and we see that thousands of Taliban have emerged from nowhere.

As we saw, economic failure and lack of action by government to provide people with decent jobs is the only reason for the increasing influence of Taliban in our country. To tackle this problem, first of all government must work seriously on establishing new factories and attracting local and foreign investors to invest in the country so that more and more jobs are created. This is the most important step government can take to address the actual causes of the problem. After this, the links of Taliban with their foreign masters and sponsors can be cut so that they should not be able to pay to their soldiers. As far as military operation is concerned, it may clean an area of Taliban but then they would move to another area and the problem would remain the same.

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