

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



November 22, 2018

## Bloodshed amidst Peace Talks

The death toll of Afghan civilians and soldiers has been counted in national and international reports, terrorist attacks have been denounced strongly, much has been said and hoped for truce with the Taliban, and harsh rhetoric was exchanged between heads of states over Afghanistan's conflict, but insurgency still takes its toll on Afghan people as warring factions, mainly the Taliban, have intensified their attacks against Afghan nation and state.

Afghan clerics denounced the ongoing killings and acts of terror on multiple occasions and called them against Islamic tenets, but they came under several terrorist attacks and the Tuesday was the deadliest of its kind.

Following the Tuesday's attack on Afghan clerics, who had gathered in a hall to mark the birthday of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the Taliban's spokesman Zabihullah Mujahed tweeted forthwith that an attack was carried out on "apostate clerics" in Kabul in which "more than 50 enemies of Islamic Emirate and Jihadi beliefs were killed and tens of others were wounded". But later, he removed his tweet denying the responsibility after the implied claim.

The attack came after US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad held its second round of meeting with the Taliban's representatives in Qatar, Russia hosted "Moscow Summit" with the presence of Taliban's delegates, and Pakistan released some of the Taliban's high-level officials from its prison to facilitate talks. Despite all this, the Taliban have refused to back down from its hardline stance and capitalized on the negotiations ushered in with the US envoy.

In terms of ideology, the Taliban are practicing upon a radical ideology stemmed from the amalgamation of Wahhabi, Salafi and Deobandi. A large number of their recruits, who have been trained in madrasas in certain neighboring and regional countries, are simply mercenaries rather than ideologues and do not know the very basic or primary tenets of Islam, even some, unlike common individuals, do not know their daily prayers. Hence, the Taliban are an insurgent group with recruits from different backgrounds who only know pulling the trigger. Islamic clerics have found the Taliban's practices against Islamic tenets and denounced them strongly.

Although the Taliban claim presence of foreign troops the main reason behind the conflict, the bulk of their targets are innocent Afghan civilians, including women and children, who have nothing to do with the conflict. To cut the long story short, the Taliban's practices are not only against religious principles but also against humane values, moral standard and international instruments.

Despite the Taliban's radical ideology, Kabul government has persistently sought to hold talks with the Taliban's leadership to settle the conflict, as political pundits have recommended, and urged regional stakeholders to advocate "Afghan-led" and "Afghan-owned" peace process. But the Taliban have turned down Kabul's olive branch calling it a "puppet government".

Considering the Taliban's indiscriminate and intensified attacks, the international community has to put pressure on this group to sit around the table with Kabul government and resolve the issue through negotiations. That is to say, the Taliban should be pressured to stop violating humanitarian law and spilling the blood of non-combatants. I have pointed out in my past commentaries if the Taliban are genuine in talks with the US envoy or any other sides, they have to stop their acts of terror or at least stop killing civilians. Worst, the Taliban even have not promised to stop their insurgency if the US pulls out its troops from Afghanistan. Thus, there is still no light at the end of the tunnel in spite of the ongoing talks between US envoy and the Taliban.

The US should not only consider the pullout of its troops from Afghanistan after paying heavy sacrifices but also the establishment of sustainable peace in the country. Accepting the Taliban's preconditions one after another, without making them accept a single precondition such as stopping civilians' killings, is highly naïve of their interlocutors. Hence, much pressure should be put on the Taliban.

Moreover, regional supporters of peace talks have to play their role more actively to stabilize both Afghanistan and the region. It is believed that regional stakeholders have not put necessary pressure on the Taliban. Many have talked of supporting Afghanistan's peace process for years, but there is still no tangible result.

Kabul government is supposed to have a specific definition of the Taliban so as to adopt a clearer strategy rather than being in a dilemma whether to push for talks or intensify military deal. Kabul has to use all its ground and air forces, without hesitation, to combat the Taliban unless both sides reach a political consensus.

Afghan clerics must continue their fatwa and religious and cultural activities against the Taliban's ideology and practices and mobilize the Islamic clergy to issue fatwa against all terrorist acts and that of the Taliban. A seasonal and sporadic struggles will be less effective. Thus, all clergy, whether in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Indonesia, etc., are responsible to campaign against terrorist acts, which are in conflict with Islamic principles.

## Afghan Would Restart a Warmer Friendship with US if They Really End the War

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

After 17 years war and destruction, the warring sides seems willing to start meaningful negotiations. Following the Qatar peace talks, Officials from the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) says the United States has probably reached on an agreement to set a timetable for withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan. According to HPC, the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, the release of Taliban prisoners, and removal of some Taliban figures from the UN blacklist are the key conditions of the armed group for entering into peace talks with the Afghan government. Haji Din Mohammad, the Deputy Head of HPC said that they met with the Taliban delegation on the sidelines of the recent Moscow summit and that the Taliban has shown the intent to end the ongoing war.

With creation of new hopes, the former Afghan President Hamid Karzai has welcomed the United States' approach towards the Afghan peace process, saying it is most likely to produce a result for the stability of Afghanistan and the region. Speaking in an interview with foreign media, Karzai said that due to the wrong policies of the United States in the last 17 years, the level of insurgency with the presence of Daesh militant group has raised in Afghanistan. He stressed that the U.S. has attacked Afghan houses, put the people in prisons as well as ignored the sanctuaries beyond the borders and that the issue has overshadowed the co-operation of regional powers including Russia, China, and India with the United States in his war-weary country. However, Karzai welcomed the U.S.'s recent move to reach a political settlement in Afghanistan by appointing Zalmay Khalilzad as Washington's envoy for Afghan peace.

Karzai said that in case of the continuation of Afghanistan war and Washington's rivalries with major powers in the region, "the presence of the United States in Afghanistan will not be tenable." The former Afghan president, meanwhile said that he sees the recent Moscow meeting on Afghanistan - where the Taliban and Afghan High Peace Council delegations met and discussed peace process - as a positive step. "A first step that will definitely give us results and we hope that it will continue to keep convening and keep looking for a solution eventually that suits all of us," Karzai said.

Regarding U.S.-Taliban peace talks in Qatar, Karzai stressed that the talks should be in form of an intra-Afghan dialogue. "The direct talks between the U.S. and the Taliban is a reality now, and Taliban are a reality in Afghanistan too. That reality should be taken into consideration. The talks should be an inter-dialogue between Afghans and Taliban, and it should reflect the will of Afghan people from across the country," he said. Karzai emphasized that the talks should have also the support of major regional

powers like China, Russia, and India as it will give a "real power" to the Afghan peace process." The role of neighboring countries on these talks will be of great importance," he said.

Finally, he said, "I wholeheartedly welcomed as the right thing in Afghanistan and an approach that will hopefully and most likely produce a result for Afghanistan and for the region towards peace and stability." Regarding the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan he said: "If they bring peace to Afghanistan. If they become partners in peace and security and development for Afghanistan, the Afghan people would like to keep them in Afghanistan." Meanwhile, Karen Decker, the Deputy Chief of Mission of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul says the step that the Afghan government has to take is to formulate an authoritative negotiating team for peace talks with the Taliban. As quoted from Karen Decker said that the U.S. has sent a strong signal for reaching a political settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan government by appointing Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation. "...so the next step the one that the Afghan government is taking now is to formulate an authoritative negotiating team that is ready for political talks with an authoritative negotiating team from the Taliban," she said.

Earlier Zalmay Khalilzad also called both Afghan government and Taliban to establish an advisory team to work on peace talks. From the government side, President Ashraf Ghani has already started meetings with political parties' leadership and other social groups to discuss issues around the advisory board that will advise the government and HPC on peace process including the composition of a representative negotiating team. Thus, Ghani met a youth representative group on Saturday; he said the Afghan youth needs to play a significant role in the peace process as any achievements and adding that new generation represents the new Afghanistan and the ones that are willing to forget the past and look towards the future.

The president has reiterated in the meetings that any peace agreement must be ratified nationally before taking effect while the meetings would be continued for several coming days. He also made it clear to the government that this board should be fully inclusive and represent all people of Afghanistan. By and large, the new approaches of US and the saying of president is hopeful, and if these really come true it is more likely that Afghan people would wholeheartedly restart a warmer and more meaningful friendship with the US and other stakeholders. Afghans extremely wish to change it from land of hostility and confrontation to the land of friendship and contribution.

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## The Inconvenient Truth About Saudi Arabia

By: Richard N. Haass

The 2006 documentary "An Inconvenient Truth" highlights former US Vice President Al Gore's efforts to alert his fellow Americans to the perils of global warming. What made the truth inconvenient is that avoiding catastrophic climate change would require people to live differently and, in some cases, give up what they love (such as gas-guzzling cars).

For nearly two months, we have all been living with another inconvenient truth - ever since Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist working for The Washington Post and living in the United States, disappeared after entering Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul. A large part of the truth is undeniable: Khashoggi was murdered by individuals with close ties to the Saudi government and its de facto leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (widely known as MBS). Weeks of official Saudi denials and lies only reinforced the conclusion - now also the reported judgment of the CIA - that the murder was premeditated and approved at the top. MBS's direct role may not be 100% proven, but most observers familiar with Saudi Arabia harbor little doubt. This is not a system that tolerates much freelancing.

What makes the truth inconvenient is Saudi Arabia's strategic importance. The Kingdom still accounts for over 10% of global oil output. Its sovereign wealth fund sits on an estimated \$500 billion. Saudi Arabia is the most influential Sunni Arab country, occupying a special role within the Muslim world, owing to its role as the custodian of Islam's holiest sites. It is central to any policy of confronting Iran.

Moreover, MBS, for all his faults, is something of a reformer, understanding that his country must open up and diversify if it is to thrive and the royal family is to survive. He is also popular at home, especially with younger Saudis, who constitute the bulk of the population.

The problem is that the faults of the young and impulsive Crown Prince are many. In addition to his role in the murder of Khashoggi, he recklessly ordered the Saudi attack on Yemen that triggered his country's equivalent of the US war in Vietnam - a strategic and humanitarian catastrophe. He kidnapped the Lebanese prime minister, did all he could to undermine Qatar, arrested wealthy Saudis who refused to embrace his consolidation of power, froze diplomatic relations with Canada over a critical tweet, and imprisoned political activists, including women seeking greater rights.

The Saudi strategy for dealing with the outcry over Khashoggi's murder is clear: hunker down and weather the storm. MBS and his inner circle are calculating that the world's outrage will fade,

given their country's importance. He has good reason to believe that other Sunni Arab states will stand by him, given the subsidies he provides.

Israel, too, has indicated support for MBS, owing to his willingness to move in the direction of normalizing relations and, more important, the two countries' shared interest in countering Iranian influence in the region. And US President Donald Trump's administration is standing by its man, so far refusing to acknowledge his role in Khashoggi's murder and resisting calls for sanctions against Saudi Arabia.

What, then, should be done? Former US Secretary of State James A. Baker recently drew a parallel to US policy toward China in 1989, at the time of the massacre of protesting students in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. George H.W. Bush's administration (of which I was a part) worked hard to thread the needle: introducing sanctions to convey displeasure with the Chinese government, but limiting the punishment and keeping lines of communication open, given China's importance.

Would a similar policy toward Saudi Arabia prove viable? Ideally, the US and European governments would let it be known that they would be more open to working with Saudi Arabia if the power of the Crown Prince were reduced. There should also be limits on US arms sales and intelligence support, which, fortunately, the US Congress is likely to impose.

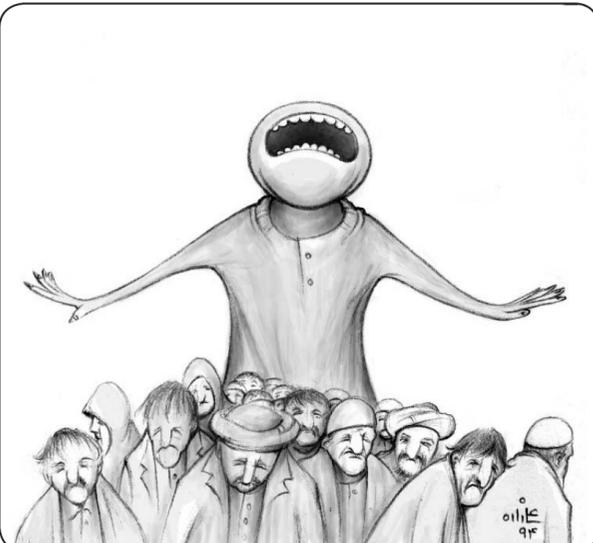
But more important than any sanction would be ratcheting up public and private pressure on MBS regarding what is needed and what needs to be avoided. What is needed is a concerted push to end the Yemen conflict. What needs to be avoided is exploitation of the Trump administration's anti-Iran animus to provoke an armed confrontation that would force others to overcome their qualms and side with Saudi Arabia.

A war with Iran would be costly and dangerous. MBS should be made to understand that the US will be a strategic partner for Saudi Arabia only if he acts with greater restraint in Yemen and elsewhere, and with greater respect for US interests.

Consultations should also be held with China and Russia. Unlike the US, both have working relationships with Saudi Arabia and Iran, which gives both a stake in preventing such a war from starting and shutting it down quickly if it does.

All too often in the Middle East, a bad situation becomes a worse situation. MBS has created a bad situation. The aim should be to establish sufficient limits so that it does not become worse.

Richard N. Haass is President of the Council on Foreign Relations. His most recent book is *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order*.



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