

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



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Bleeding Amidst War and Violence

Despite the fall of the Taliban's regime in 2001 and establishment of democracy, Afghan civilians are still bleeding as a result of war and insurgency. Disregarding human rights and humanitarian law, the Taliban guerilla fighters inflicted heavy casualties upon the nation following the "spring offensive" and "Omari Operation". The peace talks, which are in conflicts with the Taliban's radical ideology, did not bear the desired fruit and came to a standstill after the death of Omar and his successor.

Reports say that the Taliban and Afghan government have resumed peace talks in Qatar last month, which was later denied by the Taliban's spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid. The escalated militancy shows there is no resumption of peace talks and the Taliban fighters continue their offensives without hesitation. It is most likely that there is no formal negotiation in Qatar to represent the Taliban's central office and if any local Taliban from splinter group have ushered in talks, it will be no more than a waste of time. Similarly, the Taliban's newly appointed leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada does not seem to be in mood of negotiation.

The protracted war and Taliban's heavy offensive increased the death toll. The UN reports that war has caused more than 8,000 civilian casualties, including nearly 2,600 deaths, in the first nine months of 2016. "In the first nine months of 2016, UNAMA documented 2,461 child casualties, a 15 percent increase on the same period in 2015. Ground engagements caused more than half of all child casualties in 2016," said the report blaming Taliban-led anti-government forces for causing 61 percent of all civilian casualties. It further added that air strikes by pro-government forces caused 72 per cent increase in civilian fatalities; one third was caused by the international military forces. The UNAMA documented more than 11,000 conflict-related civilian casualties in 2015, marking the highest number of fatalities since 2009. The militancy is estimated to have caused 70,000 civilian casualties, including over 25,000 deaths since 2009. "Increased fighting in densely populated areas makes it imperative for parties to take immediate steps to ensure all feasible precautions are being taken to spare civilians from harm," UNAMA Chief Tadamichi Yamamoto is cited as saying.

The lurid reports about civilian casualties fill the air with fear and disappointment and reveal the escalated militancy in the country. In other words, Afghans, including women and children, are bleeding amid war and violence. Although democracy was established in the post-Taliban Afghanistan to protect the rights and liberty of the nation and alleviate its pain and sufferings, the dream for a peaceful Afghanistan is yet to come true and the nascent democracy is to be strengthened. Constitutionally, the state will have to "establish an order based on the peoples' will and democracy; Form a civil society void of oppression, atrocity, discrimination as well as violence, based on rule of law, social justice, protecting integrity and human rights, and attaining peoples' freedoms and fundamental rights; strengthen political, social, economic as well as defense institutions".

It is believed that the frequently gruesome reports about the high graph of combatant and noncombatant fatalities will demoralize the soldiers who are devoted to fight against the insurgents. Therefore, a large number of soldiers desert from military. Moreover, the heavy casualties and unmitigated insurgency will be a stain on the National Unity Government (NUG) and besmirch its reputation at national and international level. It is feared that if the same trend continues and counter insurgency does not intensify, Afghanistan will be changed into second Iraq. In a nutshell, since Afghanistan is deemed the "Heart of Asia", it is vulnerable to the regional war and insecurity and members of warring parties may infiltrate the country. Why have members of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) group gained foothold in the country?

Following the death of Mullah Omar, the appointment of Mullah Akhtar Mansour led to splinter group. The splinter party under Mullah Mansour Dadullah and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) allegedly shifted allegiance to the ISIL group and paved the way for their foothold in the country. Dadullah refused to pledge loyalty to Akhtar Mansour. Despite the fact that the radical ideology of the Taliban and ISIL is somewhat contradictory and ISIL has surpassed the Taliban's mindset and practices more fundamentally, some members of the Taliban, mainly the splinter group, still show inclination to ISIL.

To undermine the terrorist networks and alleviate the pain and sufferings of the nation, the government must reinforce the soldiers, strengthen the intelligence service and tighten border control. Moreover, targeting the Taliban's high ranking officials and increasing air strikes will demoralize the Taliban fighters.

It is hoped that the international community and Afghanistan's allies will not let the country to be changed into Iraq through pursuing the Taliban elements inside and across the border and continuing the drone strikes so as to eliminate their hubs wherever they are.



Prioritizing Education

By Mohammad Zahir Akbari

Despite some progresses, there is a wide gap between the quality of the Afghan education system comparing to regional and global standards. With 31 percent the country retains one of the lowest literacy rates in the world. It seems that a key factor in these low literacy rates is Afghanistan's severe lack of educators and low quality teaching. The statistics state that 170,000 teachers are currently working to educate over 8 million students. Among this small amount of teachers, only 24 percent are legally qualified for instruction, meaning that they completed two years of educational training after high school. In certain areas, the shortage of instructors are so severe that schools are employing teachers that have only passed sixth or seventh grade despite the fact that this is illegal. The university graduated talents are not willing to become teacher either due to low salary or variety of corruptions. In some areas, teachers must bribe to get salary or wait for three to six months so that they can get their salary. Furthermore, the number of female school instructors representing are just 30 percent of teachers nationwide. Afghan girls face many obstacles when it comes to their education, including early marriage, conflicts and inaccessibility to nearby schools. As a result, only 9.2 percent of girls reach secondary school, compared to 28 percent of boys.

In addition to low teaching quality, there are many other issues such as old shabby school buildings, overcrowding, which mean that multiple students must share a desk or up to ten students must share a textbook especially in the discriminated areas. Most schools have resorted to operating on split shifts wherein students only receive three hours of instruction each day. While this makes up for the extreme overcrowding, the quality of education in Afghanistan is further weakened. Child labor has also been a serious issue in Afghanistan, and it has hindered many children to get education. According to UNICEF, approximately one quarter of children ages 7 - 14 were working in recent years, with higher numbers occurring in more rural areas. Child labor makes it much more difficult for many to attend school, while it keeps some from education completely. Students who are enrolled often fail to attend school on a regular basis due to outside obstacles like early marriage, child labor and most importantly security issues.

Quantitatively, Afghanistan is still one of the countries where many school-age children have no access to schooling. According to the UN Children's agency (UNICEF), a large portion of the children living in conflict zones are deprived of schooling, with Afghanistan the fourth worst-affected countries after South Sudan, Niger and Sudan and a staggering 40 percent of school-age children in Afghanistan are out of school. It is obvious when children are not in school they are at an increased danger of abuse, exploitation, and recruitment into armed groups. Conflict and fragile security impedes delivery of school supplies, enrolment, monitoring and school supervision

these challenges are exacerbated by entrenched tribal norms that oppose the education of girls. Early marriage also often interrupts the education of such girls as may have been fortunate enough to enter school. Overall, around Sixty percent of the 4.2 million out-of-school children are girls, and there are no female students enrolled in grades 10-12 in 200 out of 412 urban and rural Districts throughout the country.

Like many other sectors, the education is also undermined by corruption. According to a previous probe there are many ghost schools receiving funds while there is no staff or students, or the number of staff and students are fabricated. The issue highly brings the last decade achievements of Afghanistan's education sector under question. The existing challenges to the education sector underscore the need for the national unity government to take actions in addressing the challenges in the sector.

It seems that education is not in priority of Afghan policy makers; the prestige of the teaching profession rather than other professions and occupations are the lowest in the country comparing to other countries; as learning example, in Japan the elementary teachers ranked 9th and 18th in public esteem, out of 82 occupations. Principals' prestige was higher than that of department heads of large corporations, public accountants, and authors. Elementary teachers enjoyed higher prestige than civil and mechanical engineers, white collar employees in large firms, and municipal department heads. University professors were ranked third, below court judges and presidents of large companies, but above physicians. So, the Competition for becoming a formal teacher continues to be intense; for example, there are 200,000 applicants annually for approximately 38,000 vacancies in Japan public school system.

Consequently, there are huge gaps in education standard in Afghanistan comparing to advanced countries that can play a learning role for our policy makers. For instance, Japan has 100% literacy rates and Russia has 99.7%, Turkey 95%, Kazakhstan 99.8 and Malaysia 94.6% in the world while Afghanistan has one of the lowest literacy rate, currently estimated at about 31% of the adult population and Female literacy levels are on average 17%, with high variation, indicating a strong geographical and gender divide. Japanese teachers' get around 7500\$ per month whilst ours get around 100\$ per month. Many countries have 100% qualified teachers while we have 76% unqualified teachers which mean they are under 14 grade. Many developed countries, including France, Germany and Norway, have provide preschool programs for three and four-year-olds for decades. But Afghanistan with 10 millions uneducated people has the lowest level of participation in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in the world. Legally many countries have a compulsory education law while it is optional in Afghanistan.

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Managing Compromise in the Middle East

By Nabil Fahmy

The Middle East, and especially the Arab world, is experiencing a period of fundamental change and even more fundamental challenges. But the region's ability to meet the many challenges that it faces has been complicated by national, regional, and international disagreements about what form change - both across the region and in individual societies - should take.

The international community undoubtedly has a central role to play in supporting social and economic reform in the region, and in assisting governments to find both the will and the way to undertake the necessary changes. But it is far more important that Arabs themselves adopt a forward-looking perspective in reckoning with the challenges that they face, and that they take charge of their own destiny.

That much became clear with the Arab Spring revolts in 2011. Even though the region was already being transformed by demographic changes, including rapid population growth, urbanization, and a spike in unemployed, university-educated young adults, the eruption of protests took many Middle Eastern and North African countries by surprise. Arab youths were a major force behind demands for change. So, too, were new digital technologies that freed up information and facilitated communication among ordinary citizens, essentially dismantling the monopolies that many governments held on knowledge and connectivity.

But the greatest reasons for disruption have been rooted in the inability of Arab governments and societies to manage effectively the changes sweeping the region, and their excessive dependence on foreign countries to ensure their security. Many governments, having grown sclerotic and rigid, were quickly outpaced by social and geopolitical forces beyond their control, and have proved unable or unwilling to adapt to any trend challenging the status quo. This also reflects the fact that central features in many governments' domestic and regional agendas are not even of their own making, but were imposed from outside the region.

To move to a more effective, proactive form of governance, Middle Eastern countries need to create a space for genuine politics and civil-society initiatives that redistribute power and foster cooperation. The region is facing problems that are simply too complex and deep-rooted to be addressed with isolated, top-down solutions. The creativity within Arab societies must be tapped. Some countries will need economic and social support to create the necessary domestic conditions, while others will need to address outstanding geopolitical issues.

Consider Tunisia, which many people outside the Middle East see as one of the region's greatest recent success stories. To be sure, political factions in Tunisia have set a good example by often compromising with one another in order to create a viable governance structure; but domestic social and sectarian grievances are still very much a part of Tunisian politics. The Tunisian government must tread carefully, and it cannot assume that all of its citizens are satisfied with the new arrangements.

Creating the space for national, municipal, and even tribal leaders to engage politically is especially important for the region's more unstable countries, which must, as a first step, limit the availability of

weapons that can be used to challenge the authority of legitimate governments. For example, establishing a functioning government in Libya will require international assistance, including a joint force comprising the United Nations, the Arab League, and the African Union, as well as an arrangement among Algeria, Egypt, and Tunisia to monitor and control borders and maritime access.

Egypt is undergoing its own fundamental sociopolitical transformation. Lacking a culture of political compromise, the breakdown of central authority in 2011 was not surprising. Egypt now must restore a broad, constitution-based consensus on the fundamental economic and social rules of the game, which will require all stakeholders in government and civil society to demonstrate a real willingness to reach agreements that account for the legitimate needs of everyone. To help things along, Egyptians should seek ways to use new technologies to include all constituencies in the debates that must shape this process.

Syria - which has become a true humanitarian disaster, with no end in sight - poses the most severe test of the region's ability to compromise and reconcile. Because the conflict is so complex, it will allow no clear military victor. Not even the great powers that are now involved there, the United States and Russia, can manage the transition to peace alone.

Of course, the US and Russia will be indispensable to guide the reshaping of the political and military landscape, through sanctions, military force, or the power of political persuasion. But any viable and lasting peace in Syria will require the cooperation of a large number of actors. Specifically, it will require a multidimensional bargain: between the US and Russia; among Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia and Iran; and between the Syrian opposition and supporters of President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

The need for broad cooperation is apparent across the region, where problems are deep-seated and, therefore, cannot be resolved with simple, quick fixes. Dynamic, peaceful societies will never emerge across the Middle East unless all of their citizens embrace the lost art of compromise and embark on a consensual process of nation building. This will undoubtedly take time and patience, and it will require governments to determine their own destiny and deter regional adventurism by some Arab states.

To help the region meet the myriad challenges it faces, the international community should pursue a three-pronged approach: first by strengthening Middle Eastern countries' governing institutions and putting them on a path toward self-sufficiency; second, by committing unconditionally to preserve and respect the region's nation-state system; and third, by launching a concerted effort to end the violence in the region and create the conditions for new political processes to get off the ground. Bloodshed, division, and hopelessness sow the seeds for terrorism and extremism. Consensus building, compromise, and cooperation within and among Middle Eastern and Arab societies must be the watchwords for banishing those destructive forces from our lives. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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