

RECONCILING THE AFGHAN INSURGENTS

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Abstract

The conflict in Afghanistan remains unsolved though the Soviets withdrew in 1989 and the Americans are planning to go by 2014. The Cold War's ideological clash morphosed into tribal and ethnic factionalism when it landed in Afghanistan. The US led-NATO invasion in 2001 has achieved little in its ten years of "war against terror." Now the hard option has been abandoned in favour of talks with the insurgents. The Doha process has begun. This study analyses the possibility of reconciliation among the fighting factions and stresses that the reconciliation process be led by the Afghans without interference from external forces. The study suggests practical measures to bring all stakeholders in this political approach.

Key Words: Reconciliation, Insurgents, Afghanistan, Pakistan, US/NATO.

"You can take an Afghan to hell with kindness, but not to heaven by force,"
Afghan proverb.

Introduction

Two different but signal developments in the final decade of the twentieth century can be attributed to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan - the disintegration of the former Soviet Union together with the fall of Communism, and the emergence of radical Islam in the shape of al Qaeda's Jihadist ideology. The 9/11 attacks, the United States (US) military intervention in Afghanistan followed by the invasion of Iraq are among the defining developments of the beginning of the twenty-first century, with far reaching consequences for regional and global balance of power. The trouble is centred in Afghanistan where for over a decade now the US and its allies have been fighting the "war on terror" but with little progress as to its outcome.¹ The US has announced its plans for withdrawal and by acceding to

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¹ Nasser Saghafi Ameri, "Prospects for Peace and Stability in Afghanistan," *SIPRI Afghanistan Regional Dialogue*, paper no. 1 (June 2011), <http://www.sipri.org/research/conflict/afghanistan-regional-dialogue-1/publications-1/ARD01.pdf> (accessed January 24, 2012).

negotiate with the insurgents has indirectly accepted the failure of its military campaign. The causes of the failure include absence of a coherent strategy for reconciliation and establishment of peace. The strategy pursued so far has suffered from “lack of proper planning, shifting policies, inattention to geopolitical realities, diversion of interests and over-reliance on military power without giving the necessary attention”² to the human capacity building of the Afghans.

The current, US/NATO-dominated military operations to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan have little or no chance of success; unless a comprehensive approach³ to harmonize indigenous strategies, including a vigorous humanitarian plan, is adopted in which all stake holders participate. This collaborative framework is necessary to achieve the unity of efforts. History is witness that alone neither the Taliban who are fighting against the US/NATO forces nor the Northern Alliance which is supporting the western sponsored government of Hamid Karzai can restore peace in Afghanistan. This paper discusses the significance of an Afghan-owned peace process in which the militants and the government involve themselves to arrive at a political settlement. It points to some viable reconciliation measures for the Afghan government and society to revive their (*Misaq-e-Milli*) national covenant.⁴ The paper also focuses on Pakistan’s facilitating role in that effort since the geo-political strategic realities of the region make that next door neighbour a natural actor in the scene.

Bringing Reconciliation to Afghanistan

The war in Afghanistan began as an extension of the Cold War. What was ideological in the clash between communists and capitalists degenerated into a tribal and ethnic conflict.⁵ However long after the end of the Cold War the Afghan people are still suffering from the consequences of that war and have been its main victims. Despite the US-led NATO intervention, Afghanistan is still a major concern for the international community. The Afghan civil society is disintegrated; the national economy has been destroyed and millions of Afghans have been displaced from their ancestral homes to become refugees in Pakistan and Iran. The government put in place by the Americans and their allies lacks legitimacy and has no writ outside the country’s capital, Kabul. The last two years have seen increasing Taliban successes and Western casualties.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The term *Misaq-e-Milli* was used by Owais Ahmed Ghani (ex-Governor Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), in discussion with the author, June 3, 2010.

⁵ Dr Marissa Quie, “Peace – Building and Democracy Promotion in Afghanistan: The APRP and Reconciliation with the Taliban,” European standing group on International Relations, September 2010, (accessed December 21, 2010).

The Taliban have attacked cities, extended their control over a large number of provinces, and have shadowed governors and judges working in every province.⁶

A reconciliation programme should provide a healing process for the Afghan society and include “top-to-grass-roots” efforts at forging relationships between the government and the fighters to evolve a stronger “National Pact,” which had been an essential part of Afghan society for the last 250 years till the Soviet invasion.⁷ According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), “reconciliation” is not only a “long-term goal” but a “process” working towards “breaking the cycle of violence and strengthening newly established democratic institutions.”⁸

Reconciliation and reintegration of the Taliban have lately become buzz words. The proponents of reconciliation hope that an agreement can be brokered between the Afghan government and the Taliban political leadership. Reintegration would then allow the Coalition and Afghan security forces to stop fighting against local Taliban commanders by bringing them back into Afghan society.⁹ For the rapprochement, it is necessary to identify the parties which are to be reconciled. There are two major stake holders, the Northern Alliance-led-Karzai government and the Pashtun-led Taliban insurgents. Demographically, the Pashtuns comprise 41 per cent, Tajiks 34 per cent, Hazaras 12 per cent, and Uzbeks 8 per cent of the total population of the country.¹⁰ The Taliban can be further divided according to their names, ideology, cause and methods. President Karzai described the Taliban as “disenchanted brothers” and suggested to reach out to all of the Afghan countrymen, especially the estranged groups who are not part of al Qaeda.¹¹

⁶ Joseph J. Collins, “Afghan Reconciliation,” *Armed Forces Journal*, (March 2010), <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2010/03/4491210/> (accessed December 28, 2011).

⁷ Malik Siraj Akbar, “US’ ‘faulty policies’ Creating Problems in Afghanistan: Ghani,” *Daily Times*, August 20, 2007.

⁸ Lynda M. Granfield, “Afghanistan and Reconciliation: Is Reconciliation with the Taliban a Viable Option for Lasting Peace and Security?,” *George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies*, April 12, 2011, <http://cdm15289.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15289coll2/id/10> (accessed February 3, 2012).

⁹ Zalmay Khalilzad, “The Taliban and Reconciliation,” *New York Times*, February 18, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/19/opinion/19iht-edkhalilzad.html?_r=1 (accessed January 4, 2012).

¹⁰ Kenneth Katzman, *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and US Policy* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2011), 32.

¹¹ Hasan Khan and Pakhtoon Shinwari, “London Conference Pledges to Rebuild Afghanistan, Accepts Karzai’s Reintegration Plan,” *Central Asia Online*, January 28, 2010,

Rapprochement is central to achieving peace in Afghanistan.¹² It is generally understood to mean that the insurgents accept the new order in exchange for amnesty, the right to participate in the political process and physical security.¹³ In this regard, the High Peace Council (HPC) has been established to broker an end to a Taliban-propelled insurgency. The formation of the HPC is a healthy step towards the amelioration of the situation, though it raises some questions which need to be answered. The council has so far no plan of work; the concept of reconciliation is just theoretical; no roadmap of the process has been agreed upon. Yet, inspite of these flaws, the engagement process needs to be continued as it is hoped to break the current impasse.. The dialogue should proceed in a way that involves top-down political engagement of the conflicting factions in deciding the main issues, including rehabilitation and reconstruction of the infrastructure, nation building through recreating the ethnic balance by employing Cultural-Building-Measures.¹⁴

Any imposed and structured peace plan will not only be unable to sustain but hold the potential of further deteriorating the situation by creating divergence of interests. Such attempts failed in the past to generate results because of interference from Washington. Now, when the US itself is calling for an Afghan-directed process, it needs to be executed in its true spirit. The reconciliation process and the attendant negotiations must be led by the Afghan government. Western powers cannot navigate the maze of Afghanistan's ethnic politics.¹⁵ Negotiations between the Taliban and the US which have already been started in Qatar, is a good omen but these dialogues would not last long, because the US is in a hurry to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan. A hasty settlement cannot give the desired results because it may not address the genuine concerns of all aggrieved Afghan segments. What the Taliban have in mind, is negotiating a timetable for withdrawal of coalition forces¹⁶ and what the US has in mind is to get a face-saving exit from its Afghan adventure. These negotiations are fundamentally different from what a reconciliation process is aimed at yielding. They mainly focus on the top brass of political leadership while reconciliation would encompass all segments of the society.

http://centralasiaonline.com/cocoon/caii/xhtml/en_GB/features/caii/features/main/2010/01/28/feature-02 (accessed November 24, 2011).

¹² Riaz Mohammad Khan, *Afghanistan and Pakistan: Conflict, Extremism and Resistance to Modernity* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 328-329.

¹³ Zalmay Khalilzad, "The Taliban and Reconciliation."

¹⁴ Muhammad Nawaz Khan, "Understanding the Afghan Conundrum," *South Asia Analysis Group*, paper no: 3686, February 28, 2010, <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/%5Cpapers37%5Cpaper3686.html> (accessed February 1, 2012).

¹⁵ Joseph J. Collins, "Afghan Reconciliation."

¹⁶ Zalmay Khalilzad, "The Taliban and Reconciliation."

A successful reconciliation process would be possible when on the one hand, the government and its outside supporters are doing well militarily against the insurgents coupled with providing security and improved living conditions to the population in areas cleared of the insurgents, and on the other hand the insurgents generally conclude that time is not on their side, and that their best interests are served by striking a deal while they still have some bargaining chips in hand. The situation in Afghanistan is a bit different. Militarily, the insurgency has grown stronger in recent years while popular support for the government and the coalition has declined in areas where the insurgents are strong.¹⁷

Reconciliation will have to be steered by the Afghan people; with low-key necessary input and advice from outside sources¹⁸ because indigenous people can better understand the situation and can decide how to make the reconciliation plan possible by solving their long-standing historical grievances. There is general consensus among many experts that after years of faulty US policy towards Afghanistan, there is no military solution or a quick and easy way to escape the current deadly quagmire.

Reconciliation

Following are some of the suggested measures which could be taken for national reconciliation policy in Afghanistan:

Ceasefire

The tribal leaders can play an important role in concluding a ceasefire. The ceasefire coupled with an offer to the militants to discuss the Afghan stalemate through negotiations would be an attractive incentive keeping in view the importance of the historical and cultural traditions of a society, i.e., the traditional Shura, Pashtun code of Pashtunwali and Afghan Jirga.

Regular Jirga's that target different groups in society should be brought together routinely such as the Glencree Center in Ireland undertook with the LIVE program. These Jirgas must also focus on education, peace building, violence, and dispute resolution methods to facilitate a more effective way of dealing with issues.¹⁹

This is especially critical in the rural, highly illiterate areas that rely on traditional forms of local justice. Furthermore, the involvement of elders will increase the chances of success by offering political incentives in the reconciliation and reintegration process. President Hamid Karzai may announce ceasefire on national television. There exists a communication gap

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Riaz, *Afghanistan and Pakistan: Conflict, Extremism and Resistance to Modernity*, 332.

¹⁹ Lynda, "Afghanistan and Reconciliation."

between the leaderships of Northern Alliance-led-Karzai government and the Pashtun-led Taliban factions, and with the ceasefire the communications might resume, which is a necessary step for the ceasefire to work.

Collective vs. Individualistic Approach

To move towards a way forward, it is necessary to focus on all the leaders who are heading the insurgency, in a non-discriminatory manner. According to Deputy National Security Advisor of Afghanistan, Shaida Muhammad Abdali “there’s an ideological motive for an insurgency like this, and the trouble will not be resolved unless you reach out to the leadership; they are the food of the foot soldiers and where they are getting ideological and political incentives.²⁰” There needs to be no “pick and choose” sort of mechanism. Any left-out insurgent leader will continue to be a bone of contention, hence all warring leaders better be taken on board. The reintegration process may focus on the “group” or network, and not the individual fighter; otherwise the efforts will fail. Flexibility and innovation are needed to suite local conditions, which vary from region to region within Afghanistan. The aim should be to accommodate all Afghan ethnic groups in the peace process and not certain personalities. Allowing the process to be hijacked by individuals can defeat the whole purpose of the exercise.

General Amnesty and Incentives

To attract or draw out the militants from their organization, general amnesty needs to be announced, with the offer that all pacified insurgents will be accommodated and provided with jobs, social well being, security and other economic incentives, assuring protection to their families following their surrender on the model of Saudi Arabia’s “Prevention, Rehabilitation and Aftercare” (PRAC) initiative.²¹ This soft power approach will prove helpful in disengaging the militants who are with the Taliban for economic and other reasons. The HPC is willing to give concessions to bring insurgents to the negotiating table.²² The ongoing rehabilitation programmes in Afghanistan have their flaws as they lack coordination, proper training/planning and logical

²⁰ Alissa J. Rubin, “A Reconciliation Plan in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, January 27, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/28/world/asia/28afghan.html> (accessed January 4, 2012).

²¹ Christopher Boucek, *Extremist Re-education and Rehabilitation in Saudi Arabia* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 212-223.

²² Sayed Salahuddin, “Afghan Peace Council to Offer Concessions to Taliban,” *Reuters*, October 21, 2010, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2010/10/21/uk-afghanistan-talks-idUKTRE69K2MM20101021?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews> (accessed January 29, 2012).

strategy.²³ The people involved in these programmes need to be highly educated having deep understanding of the Afghan culture and society.

Peace Council Members

There are doubts in the minds of the people about the composition of the HPC.²⁴ They question the credibility of the members of peace council²⁵ which will not be able to deliver unless it includes people who are non-controversial and their selection is based on mutually agreed principles. Both the governmental spheres and insurgents may be asked to nominate people they trust and there could be an equal number of representatives from both sides because a council with unequal representation may raise doubts in the echelons of the parties.

Non-discriminatory Approach in National Politics

It is clear that good governance, rule of law, safe and secure environment, access to basic needs, and a sustainable and viable economy are still out of reach of the average Afghan. However, every individual has the right of self-expression and he/she needs to be provided with equal opportunity to participate in national politics. Enshrined in numerous international instruments, including conventions of the United Nations and the International Labor Organization, the concepts of non-discriminatory and equal opportunity, are rooted in universal principles of human rights, fundamental freedoms, and equality.²⁶ So being Afghan citizens Mullah Omer/Gulbadin Hykmetyar etc and their followers must get an equal chance to participate in national politics. A multiethnic country like Afghanistan cannot sustain without a good pluralistic government. A reconciliation process must therefore be supported by a gradual sharing of power, an honouring of

²³ Monica Bernabé, “Reintegration of Taleban in Badghis: A Success or a Nightmare?,” *Afghan Analysis Network*, September 2, 2011, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=2052> (accessed December 17, 2011)

²⁴ Thomas Rutting, “The Ex-Taleban on the High Peace Council: A Renewed Role for the Khuddam ul-Furqan?,” *Afghan Analysis Network*, http://aan-afghanistan.com/uploads/20101020TRutting_ExT_in_HPC.pdf (accessed January 18, 2012).

²⁵ Thomas Rutting, “Afghan Reaction to High Peace Council,” *Afghan Analysis Network*, October 14, 2010, <http://aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=1227> (accessed January 17, 2012)

²⁶ “Good Practice Note: Non-Discrimination and Equal Opportunity,” *International Finance Corporation*, no. 5 (January 2006), [http://www.ifc.org/ifcext/enviro.nsf/AttachmentsByTitle/p_NonDiscrimination/\\$FILE/NonDiscrimination.pdf](http://www.ifc.org/ifcext/enviro.nsf/AttachmentsByTitle/p_NonDiscrimination/$FILE/NonDiscrimination.pdf) (accessed January 31, 2012).

each other's political commitments, the creation of a climate conducive to human rights and economic justice.²⁷

Listening to the Just Demands of Militants

The local insurgents' demand for total departure of foreign forces from Afghanistan is crucial for success of any Afghan-steered peace process. Yet, there is a consensus among the Afghans against foreign occupation whether they are militants or not. After US president Barak Obama announced reduction in troops from 2011 till 2014, it is relatively easier to convince the militants for the commencement of the reconciliation process. Once the foreign troops withdraw Afghanistan would need a government to run the country and assist in its security for this purpose the pacified insurgents could be incorporated in the Afghan National Army on the pattern of Nepal where the members of the defunct Unified Communist Party of Nepal – Maoists' (UCPN-M) have been absorbed in the regular army.²⁸ The challenge in the reconciliation process lies in the creation of a peaceful co-existence mechanism and political harmony among all Afghan ethnic and sectarian factions. There is a need to develop an accommodative approach to solve their differences by touching upon the areas of mutual agreement.

Step by Step Approach

Reconciliation is a long-term process that may take decades or generations, and the one based on ambiguity will not last. The process and its details may be publicly discussed. If the process is to succeed the government will have to play an active role with the support of the media, schools and civil society in this broad sense – Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), advocacy groups, and religious institutions.²⁹ Immediate results would not be forthcoming as reconciliation would require a step by step approach towards conflict management.

Role of Pakistan

Pakistan was sucked into the Afghan conflict primarily because of its geographical proximity and has had to suffer from the spillover effects of the

²⁷ Luc Huyse, "The Process of Reconciliation," in *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict: A Handbook*, ed. David Bloomfield, Teresa Barnes, and Luc Huyse (Stockholm: Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2003), 21, http://www.idea.int/publications/reconciliation/upload/reconciliation_full.pdf (accessed December 12, 2011).

²⁸ "Nepal Army Preparing to Induct PLA Combatants," *News Xinhuanet*, December 2, 2011, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2011-12/02/c_131285398.htm (accessed January 3, 2012).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

conflict since 1979. Its economy has suffered greatly estimated at approximately US \$100/- billion together with untold, human losses and damages to infrastructure. The Pakistani Armed Forces have lost more than 40,000 soldiers, with another 6,400 injured. They sustain an average of 10 casualties each day, and approximately 35,000 Pakistani civilians have been killed by suicide bombers and terrorism.³⁰ Conflict and militancy in both the countries have been mutually reinforcing,³¹ if there is peace in Afghanistan, peace in Pakistan would be a natural outcome. Pakistan's future prospects are closely linked to the situation in Afghanistan.

The thirty years history of Afghanistan crises shows that Pakistan has played a major role because of the peculiar demography, unique ethnic overlap, cross-border affiliates and the fact that it can influence the Taliban insurgents who are mostly Pashtun with blood ties on both sides, and the majority of them living in Pakistan³² in addition to approximately 2.5 million Afghan refugees.³³ Pakistan can use this social and cultural bridge with the help of Pashtun elders on both sides to bring the dissidents to some point of agreement acceptable to all the parties, including the West, the neighbouring countries and all Afghan factions. Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani put it that in a nutshell when he said "we believe the peace process will have to be an Afghan-led process but no negotiations would succeed if Pakistan is excluded from it."³⁴ Pakistan's stance is clear on the Afghan issue. It wants a solution that brings peace and stability to not only Afghanistan but also its neighbourhood and the region as a whole.³⁵

Conclusion

The post-Taliban Afghanistan is an irreversible reality. This is the international consensus. The country cannot be handed over back to the Taliban but the Taliban can be absorbed in the new power structure as a pacified group through the process of reconciliation, and later even democratically through elections. The notion that the Taliban will take control if given a share in

³⁰ Muhammad Munir & Muhammad Nawaz Khan, "US Threats & Pak Response," *Pakistan Observer*, October 24, 2011.

³¹ Maleeha Lodhi, "History's Lessons," *News (International)*, August 30, 2011.

³² "Demographics of Pakistan," *View Pakistan*, <http://www.viewpakistan.com/demogrph.html> (accessed January 3, 2012).

³³ Dr Shahid Qureshi, "Pakistan Should Deport 2.5 Million Afghan Refugees," *London Post*, September 18, 2011, <http://www.thelondonpost.net/sep162011000140.html> (accessed December 3, 2012).

³⁴ Kamran Yusuf, "Reconciliation Sans Islamabad Doomed: PM," *Express Tribune*, October 23, 2010, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/66455/reconciliation-sans-islamabad-doomed-pm/> (accessed November 4, 2011).

³⁵ "Afghan Solution must not Imperil Pakistan," *Dawn*, February 1, 2012.

power is ill conceived. But for this to come about, America and its allies will have to eschew war as a primary instrument of their policy. This appears to have been done already as one can see in several favourable statements by US officials about Mulla Omar and in the opening of a Taliban office in Qatar for negotiations. Concerns however remain about the withdrawal of foreign forces by 2014, a date that has further been advanced recently in view of the presidential elections in America. It is feared that if a residual force remains behind after the withdrawal, it would continue to irritate some of the more diehard elements in Afghanistan who can use that as a pretext to incite and revive militant resistance. Total drawdown could strengthen Afghan government efforts for reconciliation. The nature of the force if any that stays behind would therefore be important in this respect. It would go well with the Afghan people if it is about development work and not security related. In sum, peace and stability in Afghanistan will depend on an indigenous process of political reconciliation that the Afghans own and take the responsibility for. The role of regional and other powers will have to be of a supportive nature merely in the task of nation building and economic development of a country that has been a battle ground of foreign forces for over three decades. ■