

Afghan Taliban stand no chance post-2014

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In the past two decade, Taliban have earned notoriety as perpetrators of massive atrocities. Besides losing ground among their own sympathizers, they are also losing support among rural communities

‘Afghan people view Pakistan’s establishment and its policies with suspicion. They do not trust Pakistan,’ says Orzala Ashraf Nemat in an interview with Viewpoint.

A guest scholar at CMI, Norway, and a PhD candidate at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, Orzala is a noted commentator on Afghan affairs. Read on:

Farooq Sulehria - Afghanistan remains as instable as 12 years ago. Don’t you think the US occupation of Afghanistan was an arrogant blunder from the beginning?

Orzala Ashraf Nemat – No doubt Afghanistan is still an instable country. But to claim that it is the same country as 12 years ago would be a simplistic view. A lot has changed over the past decade to the good and sadly in some ways gone awry.

The improvements are enormous and often these positive changes are portrayed as a justification for a continuous military intervention by the advocates of military intervention as well as all such people who in one way or the other have benefitted from these changes (i.e. ordinary people) to the extent that every internal matter is linked to the debate “What happens if we leave Afghanistan”!

For instance, consider the coverage in the Time magazine of Aysha whose nose was chopped by her husband who was later portrayed as Taliban. Ironically, nobody pointed out that the said tragedy unfolded in Uruzgan where a military base is located. In my view, to connect every success or failure directly to the military intervention is not helpful. From either aspect (being for or against it), it becomes problematic.

The matters that have taken a bad turn include the phenomenal scale of corruption. Unfortunately, corruption has been mainstreamed within a system created with the help of international players. The key failure of the post-9/11 system was to invest on people who lacked a clean record either in the case of governance or human rights.

Ignoring the issues such as war crimes and massive human rights abuses committed in the preceding two decades, in fact helped strengthen the war-time networks and the patronage-based politics. All of this provided the space not only for financial corruption and nepotism but also contributed to instability and return of insurgency.

The US shares a huge responsibility towards Afghanistan. This responsibility stems from the fact that Washington created and supported radical forces that fought the anti-Soviet war. In my view,

the USA and its western allies are strappingly responsible for the radicalisation of Afghan and partly Pakistani societies.

I, in my capacity as a humanitarian aid worker since 2001, have advocated that a military invasion was not the solution. I insisted on the world's support in development and reconstruction to help rebuild Afghanistan. I advocated that they should not invest on people having blood on their hands. But obviously those days no one would listen to such pleas. Some people viewed my arguments as unrealistic. But I still believe that if the world, particularly the US, was able to give a strong voice to Afghans who were not known as the warlords, there was a high chance for Afghanistan to follow a completely different course than the one on display.

Will the USA really draw down post-2014? Or is it the case that Washington will maintain a tactical presence?

Well, this is not very clear hitherto. We are still in a situation where our neighbouring countries, particularly Pakistan, are counting days to see the full withdrawal of troops in order to forge a future strategy.

Similarly, Iran too can't wait to see them leaving because Tehran feels threatened by the presence of a strong rival next door. In my view, Russia and China do not appreciate a massive presence of US military forces in Afghanistan either. Afghanistan's main fear is that upon the military withdrawal [an enormous funding comes with it], will either dispatch the country back to chaos or invasion by one of its neighbours. Yet Afghans positively view the promises made by different countries to support Afghanistan post-2014 even if the troops completely withdraw.

To the extent that I am aware of, the USA on the other hand is not spelling out openly its strategy post-2014. Washington has not categorically stated publicly if it will stay, leave, or maintain tactical presence. Once again, like in the past, for the USA Afghanistan is only a theatre. If Washington maintains troops or withdraws in toto, if it is beneficial, depends very much on its relations with the countries in the region.

Do you expect Taliban to overrun Kabul yet again post-2014?

No. I do not expect the Taliban to take over simply because I believe such a perspective is more a propaganda than a reality. I also do not think the Taliban remain an organized faction capable to take over. Neither Afghanistan is in the same position as it was back in 1996 when the Taliban took over. In 1994-96, when they overrun the country, they were unknown to Afghans and they were not involved in the civil war of the 1990s. Largely, Afghans did not know how they would treat the people. In the past two decade, they have earned notoriety as perpetrators of massive atrocities. Consequently, besides losing ground among their own sympathizers, they are also losing support among rural communities who suffered huge losses in terms of life and property. Also, they were humiliated and raided by international forces due to Taliban presence. Afghanistan and its people have changed in the past decade, despite all the failures; there is no chance for an exact same return of Taliban in the country. That is for sure.

Do you think the talks between Taliban and the USA, even if 'successful', will yield negative consequences for women rights?

Women's rights have historically been used as a bargaining chip by different rivals in Afghanistan's contemporary history. Consider the case of King Amanullah Khan. The fall of his reign apparently owed to the forms of freedom and liberty he granted to women by opening the schools for girls and by bringing his wife into the public. However, his women-friendly policies were a pretext to trigger

tribal revolt by appealing to conservative tribal instincts.

As a matter of fact, Amanullah's reform policies in general (but also his military reform policies) annoyed local rivals while his foreign policy worried the British imperialism. London did not want an independent Afghan nation right next to British India. Hence, in the name of women, King Aman was removed through foreign intervention in collaboration with local lords.

It is hardly different in the contemporary phase. Women in Afghanistan have always (including under the Taliban time) been actively fighting for their rights. This struggle will continue under any situation in future, I believe. The past decades have opened up at least some more space for women to emerge as independent leaders rather than as proxies to male-dominant forms of structure. Women have also paid a high price for such roles. The struggle for women's rights is a long-term and an on-going mission. It may assume new forms, but it will continue under any circumstances.

How do Afghan people view Pakistan's role in Afghanistan?

Afghan people view Pakistan's establishment and its policies with suspicion. They do not trust Pakistan. Afghans believe that Pakistan has always seen Afghanistan as a sub-ordinate. Or as a country judged by Pakistan either as enemy or an ally of India.

Still certain elements in the Pakistani establishment claim that they do not recognize Afghan government and they declare Taliban insurgency as Jihad. This is why Afghans (and at times Afghan government) do not see Pakistan as a trust worthy partner.

Afghans at the same time have great respect for Pakistani people who have been hospitable and supportive when millions of refugees arrived in the 1980s.

Often these two aspects are confused and Afghanistan is portrayed as an anti-Pakistan nation. This is not realistic. In my view, Afghans will not see Pakistan as an enemy if Pakistan begins to pursue, genuinely and honestly, a transparent policy towards Afghanistan that is based on mutual respect and recognizing Afghanistan as a sovereign and independent state. Winning Afghanistan's trust is only possible through such an approach and by refusing safe sanctuaries across the border for those who are blowing ordinary civilians up in Afghanistan.

What about India and Iran? Will they continue supporting Northern Alliance and anti-Taliban factions?

The story of India and Iran in some ways is not very different from that of Pakistan. Yet, the reason the scale of propaganda is not as high is because Pakistan's overt and covert support to insurgents directly results in the killing of Afghans. Bombings and suicide attacks has intensified Afghan trouble. On the contrary, Iran and India continue to support Afghan government.

The Northern Alliance (NA) story is old now. This coalition does no longer stand as before. It is largely broken. There are new faces and new agendas. Not to say that these are any better but it is not like the old days. You may find it interesting that Iran is no longer merely support Shiite groups or NA, instead it is in search of new partners in Afghanistan, one example is direct support to the Afghan government. Likewise, India's support is no longer a direct covert support to NA rather it is one of the major countries from the region that supports reconstruction and democratisation. Having said that, we as Afghans do realise that maybe each of these countries whether it is Iran, Pakistan or India, all have their own axe to grind. It will largely depend on our (Afghan's) talent, capacity and beyond all conscience on how to tap these sources of support in Afghanistan's interest while maintaining neutrality and Afghan independence.

Will China side with Pakistan in post-2014 scramble in Afghanistan?

I do not know much about Chinese politics. But my general understanding about China is that it has different way of building relations with countries. For instance, it prioritizes economic interventions over direct military intervention. But in case a military intervention accelerates market expansion, it does not see any problem. For example, in the past, it did support forces in Afghanistan by providing weapons etc.

Afghanistan became member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This is a good move in my view for Afghanistan to build its own alliances with different countries or global and regional institutions. Chinese companies have been given space to bid for Afghanistan's mineral resources. That also adds to efforts on the Afghan side to build more direct relations with China as opposed to have other countries' mediation.

An ideal scenario for Afghanistan will be to remain a sovereign state while maintaining cordial relations with countries in the region and beyond. Also, it should not allow any force/country to use its space against any other country. Domestically, there is a critical need for reform and transformation. We need a strong dedicated government that cleans up the mess wrought by corruption and nepotism. Top leadership should be held accountable for the war crimes, stealing our country's wealth and human rights abuses. If this small circle is taken care of, our nation will certainly find ways to deal with troubles.

Will Russia and Central Asian Republics (CARs) be more assertive this time unlike 1997?

Russia and Central Asian Republics are all concerned about the Afghan situation as instability and radicalism may spill over to their region. Paradoxically, this concern sometime make Russia publicly oppose withdrawal of US forces. Although, this is not a view shared by all the CARs owing to different economic, strategic and political reasons.

I must emphasize, there is a general consensus among our regional neighbors for continuous support of Afghanistan in its development and reconstruction efforts. This is necessary not only in order to save Afghanistan but the whole region and thereof the world. A complete abandonment of Afghanistan by the world would result in new tragedies.

P.S.

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