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Report – IN-HOUSE MEETING

Delegation from Qatar

February 1, 2019



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PICTURES OF THE EVENT



The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) hosted an In-House Meeting with 2-member delegation from Qatar on February 1, 2019. The delegation included: Dr. Marwan J. Kabalan, Head of Policy Analysis, Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) and Professor Dr. Ibrahim Fraihat, Associate Professor and Program Chair of Conflict Management and Humanitarian Action at Doha Institute of Graduate Studies.

Welcoming the guests, Director General, ISSI Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry said that Qatar is playing a very important role in facilitating the Afghan peace process and Pakistan recognizes this role. He said that after many years, prospects of peace in Afghanistan have been rekindled which will be beneficial for every country in the region; most of all Pakistan as we have also suffered the most from instability in Afghanistan. He said that military operations by Pakistan in the tribal areas have been successful and now the complete writ of government has been established in these areas, and which are being merged with the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK).

However, these gains will not be durable if Afghanistan does not become stable as there are still about 20 terrorist outfits operating there, out of which the most recent one is an off-shoot of Daesh or ISIS which is called the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), in eastern Afghanistan. He said that it is a positive development that the United States has now changed its military approach toward Afghanistan to a negotiating one and is ready to give peace a chance. In this context, Qatar is playing an extremely significant role as it is hosting the peace talks in Doha.

Some progress has been made as the United States has agreed to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan at least in principle which has helped in breaking the deadlock. However, the real issue will be when Taliban and rest of the factions of the National Unity Government (NUG) will have to negotiate among themselves. American withdrawal will also not start immediately and will require a time-period of about 18 months. During this time, a dialogue among all Afghan factions and the Taliban is also expected to begin.

Dr. Kabalan asked the Director General whether he thought that this development was like the situation in the 1990s when Taliban took over Kabul and whether this could be the likely scenario after US withdrawal from Afghanistan?

Ambassador Chaudhry said that this could happen, which is why there need to be certain guarantors of peace, and these could be of two types:

1. Internal guarantors, who could be on ground like a multinational force, or a UN or OIC force to ensure peace.
2. External guarantors or regional consensus, to avoid proxy wars such as India-Pakistan, Iran-Saudi Arabia or US-Russia proxy wars.

He opined that peaceful power-sharing is the only possible way forward however difficult it may be.

Dr. Kabalan asked about what role Pakistan could play in this scenario.

Ambassador Chaudhry maintained that Pakistan can play a very important role in the Afghan peace process as it maintains good relations with not only the Taliban, but all other Afghan factions as well who have relatives on this side of the border. Pakistan has been and continues to be a conduit for a landlocked Afghanistan.

When asked if Pakistan planned to send troops to Afghanistan as a peace force of some sort, Ambassador Chaudhry responded that this scenario had not been discussed.

Dr. Fraihat wondered whether merely maintaining contacts would be enough in this situation?

Ambassador Aizaz Chaudhry maintained that it could be a very effective tool as the factions within Afghanistan are deeply divided and none of them could control Kabul on its own.

Dr. Fraihat said that the Taliban have not provided any evidence or proof of whether they actually plan to become part of a power-sharing mechanism. He further said that similar problem is arising in Yemen as the Houthis are reluctant to share power. The same issue plagues Afghanistan as the Taliban are still the major group and if they refuse to share power at some

stage, then it could unravel the entire peace process. He asked whether Pakistan was observing some indicators that reflect the Taliban's willingness to respect any agreement on power sharing if it were to be signed.

Ambassador Chaudhry said there were several reasons that in his opinion would bind the Taliban to a power sharing mechanism. Firstly, the Taliban can no longer take over the entire country as they would no longer have external support or recognition from any other country like Pakistan, UAE or KSA, which is also evident from their latest public statements. Secondly, Pakistan has also given an indication that it does not want Kabul to be controlled solely by the Taliban and that it would prefer a more neutral government in Afghanistan. Thirdly, the Taliban movement is not as cohesive as it used to be and there are fissures among their ranks and will have to be more amenable toward power sharing.

Dr. Kabalan observed that a similar situation could very soon present itself in Syria as the US has expressed its desire to withdraw. The Director General ISSI responded by pointing out that a complete US withdrawal from Afghanistan might never happen as there is not even consensus within the US government over the nature and extent of this withdrawal.

Dr. Fraihat asked the Director General whether he could imagine the Taliban going to polls as this is what power sharing would practically look like. The Director General replied that it was quite difficult to imagine such willingness on the part of the Taliban as these elections were being facilitated by Americans which is why the Taliban view the current Afghan government as a puppet government.

Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry presented Pakistan's approach by highlighting that as a neighbor it wished to help the process along but without interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs. There is a perception that perhaps the Taliban are a proxy of Pakistan which is most definitely not the case, and therefore, while Pakistan maintains a strong influence on them, it simultaneously maintains good ties with all other factions as well. In this vein, Pakistan has reached out to regional countries like Iran, China, and Russia.

Dr. Kabalan inquired whether peace in Afghanistan could bring Pakistan and the United States close together again. And will Pakistan provide logistic support to US during its withdrawal?

Ambassador Chaudhry said that obviously a step toward peaceful resolution of the Afghan conflict would certainly improve Pak-US relations and the former would provide logistic support to US for withdrawal. However, he further maintained that Pak-US relations do not revolve merely around the Afghan factor as there are many other aspects to this relationship.

As the direction of the discussion shifted, Dr. Fraihat asked what role Pakistan could play in the regional order in the Middle East. Ambassador Chaudhry responded that Pakistan has had close ties with the Middle East, particularly with Saudi Arabia due to the Holy Sites of Mecca and Medina. We also have good ties with Iran as it is a neighboring Muslim country and there are also linguistic and cultural influences in our society. This is the reason that Pakistan is saddened by the Saudi-Iran rivalry and tries to play a mediating role to promote reconciliation between the two. He further explained that Pakistan maintained good ties with Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya and that this region will be better off without external interference.

Dr. Fraihat was of the opinion that Pakistan's role has huge potential for bringing about peace in Middle East. He emphasized that instead of neutrality, Pakistan must use 'fairness' in its policies which means to identify what wrong policy approaches are being adopted towards countries in the region, for example, regarding Iran's role in Syria and KSA's role in Yemen.

The Director General explained that the word 'balance' instead of 'neutrality' must be and is used by us when it comes to Pakistan's policy towards the Middle East. Pakistan has been sending out subtle messages in this regard. For instance, the country joined the Islamic Military Coalition on Counter-terrorism (IMCCT) which could have irked Iran, but we have helped change its orientation from a Sunni alliance to a counter-terrorism coalition. On the other hand, the decision to not send troops to Yemen also sent a message to our closest ally, Saudi Arabia. As the Middle East is a culturally sensitive region, these subtle messages are regularly exchanged between the two sides. Pakistan can play a role to provide sound advice that these countries must resolve their issues on the table, not on the battlefield. Solution of sectarian and intra-Arabian conflicts is only through peace.