

## US AND GROWING TALIBAN INSURGENCY IN AFGHANISTAN

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Eight years into the US led intervention of Afghanistan and the country continues to be entrenched in turmoil with no visible decrease in insecurity, violence and casualties. Afghanistan continues to present the greatest challenge to the international community. Pledges made by former President Bush to rebuild Afghanistan, transform its economy, and liberate the masses turned out to be mere words.

The country continues to be confronted by a weak, ineffective and corrupt government and a thriving opium trade that accounts for than 90% of the world's opium production. Afghanistan is 174th out of 178 countries on the U.N. Human Development Index, and is 176 out of 180 countries in Transparency International's corruption perceptions index. Huge amounts have been dispensed to help rebuild Afghanistan's shattered infrastructure and economy.

However, most of the money allocated for Afghanistan has been spent on military operations whereas reconstruction and development has been slow and dogged by allegations of corruption and waste on the part of the government, aid agencies and contractors. According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) contractor abuses have occurred during its oversight of \$25.6 million in US -funded rebuilding projects in Afghanistan, as charged in the U.S. Agency for International Development report published in June 2008. Stephane Dujarric, spokesman for UNDP, said the agency expected to repay \$1.5 million provided by USAID for rebuilding Afghanistan's infrastructure.

Despite the presence of more than 70,000 US- NATO forces, the country has witnessed a growing Taliban insurgency that has gained momentum and continues to escalate, with an alleged Taliban presence in 72% of the country. Particularly since 2006, the security situation in Afghanistan has gone from bad to worse. Till date, it is believed that more than 22000 people have died since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001. Throughout his presidential campaign, President Barack Obama had expressed that Afghanistan - the "central front" in the battle against terrorism, would be an important foreign policy objective as he wanted to shift the focus on Afghanistan- which has been neglected due to the war in Iraq.

Hence, for Obama and his team Afghanistan, unlike Iraq, is the legitimate war on terrorism and is a top priority agenda. Inheriting the Bush administration's failed policy in Afghanistan, it is imperative that the new Obama administration must clearly chalk out and define its policy in Afghanistan by addressing key issues that the Bush administration ignored. Obama's policy for Afghanistan is based on a military commitment backed by a vigorous and long-term investment policy focusing on reconstruction and development. With greater collaboration from its NATO allies, the Obama administration will focus on engaging Afghanistan more deeply than was demonstrated by the Bush government. Efforts will revolve around strengthening the

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Afghan government, accelerating training of the Afghan forces, reducing corruption, and increasing economic development and negotiating with the moderate Taliban.

On the issue of the Taliban, the followings views expressed by the Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, Ms. Robin Raphel, best sum up the US position today. While speaking at United Nations in New York, on November 18 1996, she said:

"Despite nearly universal misgivings about the Taliban, it must be acknowledged as a significant factor in the Afghan equation and one that will not simply disappear any time soon. The Taliban control more than two-thirds of the country; they are Afghan, they are indigenous, they have demonstrated staying power. The reasons they have succeeded so far have little to do with military prowess or outside military assistance. Indeed, when they have engaged in truly serious fighting, the Taliban have not fared so well. The real source of their success has been the willingness of many Afghans, particularly Pashtuns to tacitly trade unending fighting and chaos for a measure of peace and security; even with severe social restrictions...It is not the interest of Afghanistan or any of us here that the Taliban be isolated<sup>1</sup>."

Unfortunately it has taken 8 years of violence, bloodshed and unrest for the US and its allies to accept that there can be no peace in Afghanistan until a sincere and legitimate political reconciliation effort is initiated with the Taliban. The new US administration of Barak Obama has expressed support for reconciliation talks with members of the Taliban or former Al-Qaeda supporters who reject violence. According to Hilary Clinton, they should be offered an honourable form of reconciliation and reintegration into a peaceful society, if they are willing to abandon violence, break with Al-Qaeda, and support the constitution. The US must spare no effort to bring back to Afghanistan and to normal life all those from the ranks of the Taliban who have no association with Al-Qaeda and are willing to embrace peace and accept the constitution.

After the horrific events of 9/11, despite the fact that the perpetrators were not from Afghanistan, no sincere and serious efforts were made to negotiate with the Taliban. The US spent barely a month in deciding the fate of Afghanistan-by unanimously deciding to launch operation freedom- and thus began its operation on October 12, 2001. Despite their callous version of Islam, had the US been serious in engaging the Taliban and negotiating with them over the repatriation-handing over of Osama bin Laden, instead of hastily launching operation freedom, al- Qaeda, might not have been able to establish itself in Afghanistan and the region.

President Obama, unlike the former Bush regime, knows that Afghanistan cannot be stabilized unless the issue of Pashtun alienation is addressed. The 14 million Pashtuns represent 42% of the Afghan population making them the largest ethnic group. The Taliban who are Pashtun, need to be brought into the political process, and need to be accepted as a legitimate part of the Afghan society. In an interview to The New York Times, on March 8, 2009, Obama declared that the US was not winning the war in Afghanistan and that the door was open to a reconciliation process in which the US military would reach out to moderate elements of the Taliban. The Taliban like other factions need to have a legitimate share in the Afghan government, as do all other

factions. Hence, trying to make some break through with the Taliban will be a top priority of the Obama administration.

Having made a strong and steady comeback, the Taliban are actively operating in more than 72% of the country up from 54% in 2007- proving to be stern adversaries. Within a span of a year (2007-08), the Taliban's presence in the country has increased by a staggering 18%. Their presence and influence has not been confined to the group's traditional areas of control such as Zabul, Helmand, Urzgan and Kandahar. Since late 2007 the group has been actively operating in the provinces of Logar, Wardak, Ghazni and the capital Kabul. Since their ouster, the Taliban have managed to effectively contest the government's control and achieve tactical victories over a highly trained and equipped adversary. In June 2008, the group was successful in what has been referred to as a 'nightmare', a prison raid that freed 1,000 prisoners including 400 Taliban fighters in Kandahar. 80 Taliban fighters took part in the Sarposa prison break, which was the third biggest setback for the US-NATO and the Afghan government in 2008, following the attack on a parade attended by President Hamid Karzai in Kabul (April 2008) and the attack on the Serena hotel in Kabul (January 2008). Hence it appears that the Taliban are in no particular hurry to hold talks, as the group is confident that they are winning the war - not only in military terms, but their presence and influence is growing among the masses.

Under a 2002 amnesty program that was highly criticized by many in Afghanistan and the West, President Karzai managed to convince many to lay down their arms and reconcile with the government, out of which quite a few former Taliban were elected to the Afghan parliament and senate. Karzai has long campaigned for reconciliation with the Taliban as a key way to stamp out the growing insurgency in Afghanistan. Although opposed by the Bush administration, President Obama has stressed on talking to the Taliban and reconciling with the relatively moderate members –often referred to as the 'reconcilable'- those that can be separated from the most hard-core elements as was the case with Mullah Salam Ullah- a former high-ranking Taliban commander and currently governor of Musa Qala in southern Helmand province.

Hence Obama is expected to encourage such programs, and focus more on understanding, cooperating and reconciling with the imbalanced tribal structures by working with local leaders to ferret out militants. Proposals for providing tribal councils with more opportunities for economic development and greater autonomy in running local affairs are being considered. By empowering tribal councils, tribes would be able to recruit men for "local security forces" by evicting insurgents rather than provide them shelter thus weakening the Taliban's ability to exploit tribal rivalries. Many suspect that Obama's real aim behind the surge and increase in the number of troops and reinforcements is to try and shift the military balance in favour of US and NATO, away from the growing military strength of the Taliban- and thus force the Taliban to either retreat or come to some sort of a compromise by negotiating. However, this clearly has not been the case since the Taliban's insurgency has gained immense momentum and continues to escalate. Hence it is unlikely if the increase in troops will alter the balance in a significant way.

Proposals for including the Taliban into Afghan politics and allowing them to take part in the upcoming general elections through political parties or running independently

are under consideration. Other proposal such as changing the Afghan constitution and taking senior Taliban figures off the UN blacklists, are also being discussed. Afghan President Hamid Karzai also called on the UN to remove the names of Taliban leaders - who are not part of al-Qaeda from its blacklist, as a first step towards peace talks. The United Nation's consolidated list includes the names of 142 individuals associated with the Taliban and 254 with al-Qaeda, and provides for sanctions, including freezing assets, travel ban and arms embargo.

President Barack Obama's since coming into office has attempted to establish relations with the Muslims, on a new footing. His apparent willingness to improve relations with the Muslim world, and possible reconciliation with moderate Taliban, have sent strong and positive signals throughout the Muslim world. Although the Taliban welcomed Obama's views regarding the Muslim world, the Taliban chief spokesman, Qari Yusuf Ahmadi said that the group had "no problem with Obama" as long as he withdrew US forces out of Afghanistan<sup>2</sup>. Ahmadi advised the new US administration to learn lessons from the mistakes of former US president Bush and the Soviets, while reiterating the group's cardinal demand that talks would only take place once all foreign forces were out of Afghanistan. Until then, the group would continue to fight<sup>3</sup>. The Taliban of today were in fact the Mujahideen of yesterday, created by the US, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan to fight the Soviets during the Afghan jihad. These fighters have over the years evolved into what clearly seems a dedicated nationalist force- whose main aim is to 'liberate Afghanistan from foreign forces'. In 2008, the Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar stated that the Taliban 'were /are fighting to free the country. We are not a threat to the world<sup>4</sup>.'

President Karzai has made numerous attempts to initiate talks with the Taliban and has offered key positions in the government to insurgent leaders (such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar) who are willing to put down their weapons and join the political establishment. The Taliban have remained adamant, sticking to their principled demand, that negotiations or dialogue would take place under certain pre-conditions, which include the complete withdrawal of US and NATO forces and that Shariah- a conservative brand of Islamic law, be enforced. In a telephone interview to the Nine Eleven NEFA Foundation, Taliban Spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, said that taking over the government was not the Taliban's target. If that were the aim, the Taliban could have continued to rule simply by handing over Osama to the US<sup>5</sup>.

In fact, it appears that the Taliban see no need to negotiate with Karzai or the West for that matter, because of the poorly conducted war in Afghanistan. Because of the weak government and poor state of affairs, the Taliban have become stronger than before. Due to the US's mismanaged poorly -conducted war in Afghanistan, battle for the hearts and minds has also been lost. The masses who initially welcomed the US as liberators who would rescue the Afghan people from turmoil and suppression have in fact once again turned towards the Taliban. Fully aware of how the West abandoned Afghanistan after the Soviet pullout; the masses know that one day the US-Coalition troops will withdraw from Afghanistan. Whereas the Taliban despite their numerous faults, will not abandon Afghanistan and will continue to prevail, proving that the Taliban are a legitimate part of Afghanistan and the people, and therefore cannot be ignored or pushed aside as the Bush administration thought they had done.

Despite statements from the Taliban refusing talks with Karzai or the US, there have been reports that the group is somewhat divided and at odds on the issue of holding talks with the government. There are reports that the Taliban are ready for some sort of an amicable, peaceful settlement. Allegedly talks were held in September 2008, under Saudi arbitration in the holy city of Makkah for possible reconciliation between Afghan officials and the Taliban's former foreign minister, Maulvi Wakil Ahmad Mutawakkil and former Taliban envoy to Pakistan, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef. However, both the Afghan government and Muttawakil denied such talks taking place. Muttawakil, told the Pakistan-based AIP news agency, that meetings with delegations from different countries took place in Saudi Arabia, regarding Afghanistan's problems where concerns were expressed. But there were neither formal negotiation, nor did Taliban representatives attend those discussions. Speaking to the APF, Afghan Presidential spokesman, Homayun Hamidzada revealed that Afghan religious scholars visited Saudi Arabia during the holy month of Ramadan in 2008 and attended a dinner with King Abdullah but there were no negotiations with the Taliban. The government did however want such talks in order to find a way to end a Taliban-led insurgency, he added.

In the latest round of alleged talks, Western officials, the Afghan government and Taliban-linked mediators have been engaged in secret negotiations to bring Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, head of the Hizb-i-Islam into Afghanistan's political process. Hekmatyar would be offered asylum in Saudi Arabia, after which he would be allowed to return to Afghanistan with immunity from prosecution. The British government is said to backing that element of the deal. Ghairat Baheer, one of Hektmatyar's two son-in-laws, who was released from the US prison at Bagram airbase in Afghanistan in May 2007, after six years in custody, is believed to be instrumental in the talks that have been taking place in Dubai, London and Afghanistan since the beginning of 2009. Gulbaldin Hekmatyar, the former Afghan prime minister, has been in hiding for seven years. The British, unlike the US have been supporting the reconciliation process, and it is believed that British Intelligence officials have been instrumental in engaging with members of the Taliban through Jirgas. Brigadier Ed Butler, who commanded the 22 SAS and 16 Air Assault Brigade in Helmand in 2006, was of the view that 'the ultimate legacy would be a government in Afghanistan, in X years' time, with Taliban representation<sup>6</sup>.' In fact the British were responsible for brokering the deal in 2007, with a former Taliban commander, Mullah Salam Ullah, who is currently the governor of Helmand province.

Hence, considering the above, the prospects of talks seems quite bleak and unlikely, as the West and the Karzai regime will never agree to such demands, unless Obama decides to show immense flexibility. However what is important here is the fact that those members of the Taliban who have been running the insurgency and hold the key to ending the violence in Afghanistan, the so called hardcore Taliban. This hard core group of Taliban have relentlessly refused all reconciliation attempts, sticking to their principle demand that negotiations will only take place once all foreign forces withdraw. Even if differences or divisions have come up within the Taliban, the group appears to have a unified stance when it comes to the demand of foreign withdrawal from Afghanistan. Therefore Obama, will either try to reach out to the so called hardcore Taliban- convince them to put their arms down and come to the negotiating table, or will simply try to create divisions within the group- by reaching out to the moderate Taliban in hope of splitting the group. Dialogue with rank-and-file insurgents is unlikely to persuade the senior – hardcore members of the Taliban, including the leadership, to

renounce violence or stop recruiting, as has been demonstrated in the past. However, talks led by Islamic Afghan clerics and Saudi officials, might just end up being useful.

Violence never has been, nor will be the solution to relative stability in Afghanistan. The only way forward is through dialogue and consultation. The US-NATO-Coalition partners must realize and acknowledge as some have done, that there can be no peace until the Taliban are included in the political process. Poor diplomacy and culturally insensitive policies towards the Pashtuns must stop. Obama should engage in consistent dialogues with Pashtun leaders in an effort to establish a relationship of mutual cooperation. The Pashtuns are not terrorists, unlike al-Qaeda, a global network that has brought terror to the Pashtuns. This is not to advocate that the US should accept or allow a return of the pre-2001 Taliban government, but all parties to the conflict will have to find a middle path- as there has to be some give and take on both sides. A possible compromise could be achieved if the US insists that the Taliban; renounce violence, accept the Afghan constitution, be included in the political process and seek power through the electoral process. In return, the west will have to agree to at least two principles; an exit strategy with a timetable for a possible early pullout of foreign forces and the establishment of a neutral interim government, until free and fair elections are held. History has shown that all insurgencies, (no matter how long) by and large are ultimately resolved or curbed through negotiations. Hence talking to the Taliban is the only viable solution.

### References

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