

The prospects of Afghan *Inteqal* and Pastor Terry Jones

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Last month two seemingly unrelated events occurred in quick succession. On Tuesday 22 March, 2011 Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai named the first seven areas of the country which are to pass through the process of "Inteqal." Under this process the security responsibility of relatively secure districts and provinces are to be transferred out of the control of coalition troops into the hands of the ANSF or the Afghan National Security Forces. The "Inteqal" or handover is foreseen as a critical step in a transition of power before the foreign troops end the combat operations in the year of 2014.

The second event took place in the peaceful and relatively prosperous Northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif; one of the cities marked for this Inteqal. On April 1st at the end of the Friday prayers, angry mobs stormed a UN compound brutally killing eight foreign UN workers. The crowds were apparently incensed by the mock trial and the burning of the Holy Quran by the US pastor Terry Jones on March 20, 2011. Dr. Christine Fair, in her article carried in the Express Tribune (*Explaining the inexplicable: Murder at Mazar*, 9th April 2011) has tried to make some sense out of the "savage butchery of innocent people." In her search for explanations, she rejects the "frustration with International occupation and episodic but gruesome human rights violations of US and International troops" as having enough "explanatory power," as according to Christine, "we should see this in Iraq." But we did see this in Iraq-a few years ago at least. Iraqi cities were sites of gruesome and equally senseless acts of violence unleashed by a number of actors, who have since then given up the fight and have been politically mainstreamed.

The purpose here is not to explore the merits and demerits of what has now become an almost reflexive invocation of the Iraq example among the US analysts. More interestingly, Christine holds President Karzai wholly responsible for inciting the deadly attack by calling attention to the Koran burning episode in a press release condemning the act. Granted; President Karzai could be held obliquely responsible for drawing attention to an incident which may or may not have passed unnoticed in Afghanistan, had he not done so. The question is: can he be held solely accountable for a growing sense of anger on the Afghan street reported much before the sad theatrics of Pastor Terry Jones.

Mosques in Kabul, Kandahar, and Jalalabad in Friday sermons had been spewing anti coalition sermons for the past few months. Aid agencies, International NGOs, and UN staff had been reporting this growing anger and deteriorating security. The mobs could breach the UN compound precisely because security in the city center is under the Afghan National Police

whose numbers at the time of the mob attack were woefully inadequate. The process of 'Inteqal' is likely to increase the diminishing outreach of aid workers and resultant public hopelessness.

Coupled with this premature *Inteqal* is the coalition plan of *Key terrain districts*. This is an ISAF/NATO recipe meant to make the most out of the shrinking number of combat troops likely to be available as the President Obama mandated draw down date of July 2011 approaches. ISAF has designated around 100 out of Afghanistan's 400 districts as 'key terrain districts.' The coalition's scarce resources will likely be focused on these areas, turning certain towns and district centers into veritable fortresses packed with troops, police and militias. The operating logic being that the expanding security bubbles held up by the concentration of Coalition troops and fortified with extra material resources will incrementally increase the writ of the Afghan state. However in practice, the plan is likely to exacerbate existing divisions between Afghanistan's various ethnic groups. The populations in a number of the 'Key Districts' are far from uniform. For example, the district of Baraki Barak in the central Logar Province was identified as a 'Key district' almost a year ago. The improvements since have mainly concentrated around the Dari speaking District center. The plan is likely to increase the marginalization of the Pushtun's who have been left out of the coalition funded development loop and war economy wind-falls.

President Karzai has become everybody's favorite fall-guy. Putting a human face to colossal mistakes distracts from a clearer focus on what needs to be fixed in the coalition's Afghan strategy.

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