

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: AFGHAN PEACE TALKS

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Contents

Introduction.....	3
Complex nature of the Afghan war.....	6
Afghan conflict as a domestic insurgency	7
Position of Afghan government on peace talks.....	8
Position of Taliban on peace talks	10
Major ideological and political differences	12
A) Islamic Republic or Emirate?	13
(B) Women’s rights.....	15
(C) Sharia and Judicial system.....	16
(D) Foreign policy and external alliances	17
Afghanistan as the theater of regional geopolitical conflict.....	19
Pakistan’s proxy war with Afghanistan	19
Pak-India Cold War in Afghanistan.....	21
Durand Line dispute, a source of tense Af-Pak relations.....	22
Pakistan as spoiler, not facilitator of peace talks	23
Afghanistan as a major battleground in “war on terror”	25
Types of radical Islamist threat in Afghanistan	25
Unbreakable al Qaeda-Taliban alliance	27
Prior reconciliation efforts and pitfalls of appeasement	28
Conclusions and recommended alternatives	30
State-building, key to conquering the “Graveyard of Empires”	31
The Marshal Plan vs the Afghanistan Plan	32
Abandoning the failed appeasement policy towards Pakistan	35
Long-term vision for avoiding or winning “the clash of civilizations”	37
Bibliography	39

Introduction

Afghanistan is one of the worst war-hit countries in the world which has suffered enormously from four decades of constant bloodshed which began with the Soviet invasion in 1979 and continued with Mujahedin infighting, Taliban's rise to power and their subsequent toppling by a US-led coalition. The fall of Taliban regime in late 2001 was seen by the Afghans and international community as the end of decades of violence and the beginning of a new era of peace in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, as events in the following years showed, these hopes were misplaced and the conflict continued to claim more lives and inflict more suffering and misery on the war-hit nation.

After the toppling of their regime, the Taliban changed their combat tactics and recognizing the superior firepower and military capability of their opponents launched a ruthless campaign of terror which utilizes tactics of guerrilla warfare, including planting of IEDs, suicide bombings and other forms of irregular combat. For the past sixteen years, the Taliban have managed to survive against the vastly superior American and NATO forces and their Afghan allies and have steadily extended their areas of influence in many parts of Afghanistan.

Once it became clear to the Afghan government and its Western allies that complete defeat of the Taliban and finding a military solution to the conflict was out of reach or at best very costly; they initiated efforts to persuade members of Taliban to lay down arms and to bring their leaders to the negotiating table. Under President George W. Bush, the goal of US and NATO forces had been total military defeat of the Taliban and other insurgent groups but after inauguration of Barack Obama as the US President in 2009, efforts were initiated to reach out to Taliban leaders and bring them to the negotiating table.

In 2010, the then Afghan President, Hamid Karzai established the High Peace Council of Afghanistan to help end the conflict through peaceful means.¹ Mr. Karzai also authorized release of large numbers of

¹ Alissa J. Rubin, "NATO Has High Hopes for Afghan Peace Council," New York Times, May 30, 2010, , accessed October 19, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/31/world/asia/31afghan.html?_r=0.

Taliban prisoners detained by Afghan and American forces including foiled suicide attackers and those caught on the battlefield.² These overtures not only helped Taliban to strengthen and mobilize their forces but also adversely impacted the morale of Afghan troops who witnessed the killers of their comrades released at the orders of their superiors.

Efforts to bring Taliban to the negotiating table have been nothing short of disastrous but this has not stopped the Afghan government and its Western backers from making repeated calls for peace and reconciliation. While the insurgents continue their military campaign with increasing ferocity and determination, Afghan and international political figures and analysts still consider peace talks as the only viable and realistic option for long-lasting peace and stability in the country.

In this paper, contrary to the popular belief among politicians and analysts of Afghan affairs, it is argued that the Afghan conflict in its present status is simply too complex to be resolved through peaceful means. The fact is that the calls for peace talks with Taliban are inspired not by genuine belief and rational calculations that the talks would bring peace to Afghanistan but by desperation and disillusionment with military operations against Taliban which have yielded little strategic success since the insurgency began. The reality is that not only Taliban have no interest in peace talks in the current conditions but there are too many state and non-state actors with diverging interests and agendas involved in this conflict that satisfying the demands of all parties through a peace deal with the Taliban is impossible.

In analyzing the situation in Afghanistan, it must be acknowledged that the conflict is neither a purely domestic conflict nor are Taliban and the Afghan government the only main parties to it. Like many “civil wars” of the modern era, there are many regional and global actors fueling this conflict whose participation and agreement, while realistically not possible, is a requirement for success of peace talks. To demonstrate the complexity of the conflict and establish that it cannot be resolved simply through an Afghan-led peace

² "Karzai Orders Review of Afghan Taliban Detentions," USA Today, June 06, 2010, , accessed October 19, 2016, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2010-06-06-karzai-afghan-taliban_N.htm.

process, this paper will analyze the Afghan war as a three-tier domestic, regional and global conflict involving multiple actors with divergent objectives and interests.

The main purpose of studying the conflict on these three levels is to identify the multitude of actors involved, establish the difficulty of getting all of them to the negotiating table and demonstrate the severity and unnegotiability of positions and interests of these parties. Initially, the domestic aspects of Afghan conflict will be discussed with special focus on the belligerents' position on the peace talks. Next, the most important differences in ideology, policies and perspectives of the warring parties will be elaborated upon.

Regional actors involved in the conflict and their opposing interests will be discussed next, followed by the study of global actors that are directly involved in this conflict. It is necessary to emphasize that only the actors that play an active role in the war and whose agreement is crucial for its peaceful resolution are of interest in this study.

The next section would focus on dangers and pitfalls of desperate and ill-conceived peace deals. In this section, it is argued that considering past experiences of reconciliation and negotiations between warring parties in Afghanistan, a poorly constructed peace effort borne out of desperation and shortsightedness would fail to end or ease hostilities but would give the Taliban an advantage in their ultimate plot of overthrowing the Afghan government. Also, it would be argued that repeated and desperate calls for peace demoralize the friendly forces while raising the morale of opposition fighters. The aim is to show that the peace efforts at present conditions are not only doomed to failure but also distract attention and resources from devising a long-term winning strategy for the war.

Having discussed the complex nature of ongoing conflict, potential spoilers of peace process and pitfalls of desperate negotiation pleas in the current circumstances, the final section will focus on alternative measures and policies which will hopefully lead to genuine opportunities for peace in the war-torn country. In this section, focus on state building and consolidation of the existing political system in Afghanistan as an alternative to pursuing futile peace talks is emphasized.

Complex nature of the Afghan war

In the recent years, there has been an increasing tendency among political analysts and observers of Afghan affairs in the West to categorize the ongoing violence in the country as a domestic insurgency with limited regional and global implications. As the human and financial costs of war in Afghanistan have risen and the Taliban insurgency has intensified, initial Western over-optimism about positive change and success in the country has been suddenly replaced by an overly bleak sense of inevitable failure.

Headlines such as “Why America Can't Win the War in Afghanistan”³ or “America Digs Its Own Afghan Grave”⁴ continue to regularly appear on prominent Western media outlets. On more than one occasion, American politicians and political observers have questioned the rationale of continued involvement in the costly war in Afghanistan and called for drawdown or complete withdrawal of their military forces from the country. The proponents of this policy generally believe that Western powers are wasting valuable resources on a fragile and inept Afghan government in a domestic conflict which does not impact any of their vital interests.

This view of the conflict is, however, overly simplistic and driven more by frustration than careful and unbiased analysis. In the following sections of the paper, a multitude of domestic, regional and global actors will be identified which are directly involved in the conflict, not out of altruism, emotion or miscalculation but to advance vital interests and address major strategic goals. The main aim of discussing these actors and their interests will primarily be demonstrating the added complexity that their involvement brings to resolution of the conflict through peace talks with Taliban.

³ Daniel L. Davis et al., "Why America Can't Win the War in Afghanistan," The National Interest, March 21, 2017, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-america-cant-win-the-war-afghanistan-19857>.

⁴ Paul R. Pillar, "America Digs Its Own Afghan Grave," Consortiumnews, March 25, 2017, , accessed April 24, 2017, <https://consortiumnews.com/2017/03/25/america-digs-its-own-afghan-grave/>.

Afghan conflict as a domestic insurgency

While framing the Afghan conflict as a mere domestic insurgency devoid of any major regional and global implications is a serious mistake, it cannot be denied that internal cultural, social and ethnic grievances and divisions in Afghani society are a major cause of the continuing conflict.

Taliban, the main insurgent group involved in the conflict has considerable support among Pashtun populations, primarily in the southern and eastern Afghanistan as well as tribal areas of Pakistan. Without support from indigenous population, the Taliban could not have resisted and survived in the decade-long fight against technologically and numerically superior NATO and Afghan forces. Taliban fighters usually come from the villages and districts where they fight which partly explains their success in blending in with the local population and efficiently utilizing local resources. The Taliban, while not a Pashtun nationalist or ethnic movement and not officially operating to advance ethnic agendas, is almost exclusively led by Pashtuns. Throughout the movement's history, most of Taliban leaders and fighters have been natives of Kandahar and Helmand provinces in southern Afghanistan.⁵

The above statements don't necessarily mean that Taliban represent the views and interests of Pashtuns. In fact, Taliban as a movement represent the religious, political and cultural outlook of a very small minority of conservative madrassa-educated clerics. The current Afghan government, despite its international reputation for corruption and ineffectiveness, has significantly more support than the Taliban among Afghans including an absolute majority of Pashtuns. At the same time, various polls indicate that a noteworthy portion of Afghan population seems to be ambivalent about supporting either side or equally dissatisfied with them.⁶ An important distinction between supporters of the Taliban and the rest of the

⁵ Barnett R. Rubin et al., *Afghanistan: Reconstruction and Peacebuilding in a Regional Framework*, report (Center for Peacebuilding (KOFF), 2001), 14-15.

⁶Gary Langer, "2005 Poll: Four Years After the Fall of the Taliban, Afghans Optimistic About the Future," ABC News, 2005, , accessed October 19, 2016, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/PollVault/story?id=1363276..>

population is arguably that the pro-Taliban portion of the population seems to be more fanatical and committed in its support of the cause of the movement.

To sum up, the whole point of the discussion is that while Taliban are not a majority force in Afghan society or even close to it, they are still a part of the society and must be engaged with. This means that resolving the conflict will require either integration of the Taliban into the existing political system through a peace deal or their total defeat in a long-lasting and costly military campaign. For the first option to be considered realistic, not only both sides must be genuinely willing to talk to each other but also ready to make meaningful compromises.

To evaluate the chances of a successful peace process, it is crucial to evaluate the position of belligerents on key relevant issues such as their desire for peace, main demands, and pre-conditions for peace talks. Also, major differences between the two sides of the conflict on fundamental issues such as the future structure of political system in Afghanistan, distribution of power among political and ethnic groups, foreign policy, judicial system, and role of religion in politics and society must be discussed. The objective of discussing these differences is to determine whether they are negotiable or will become stumbling blocks in reaching a negotiated peace deal.

Position of Afghan government on peace talks

Considering the intolerably high costs of continued war for Afghan people and the government's inability to defeat the insurgents, it is probably safe to assume that the Afghan authorities have a genuine desire for peaceful settlement of the conflict. The constant pleas of Afghan leaders as well as their Western backers to Taliban to come to the negotiating table strengthens this assumption.

While the government's efforts for disarmament and reintegration of individual Taliban fighters were underway earlier, efforts to negotiate with Taliban as a movement gained momentum in mid-2009, after Hamid Karzai began his second term as Afghan President.

A Consultative Peace Jirga attended by religious and tribal elders from across Afghanistan was held in Kabul the following year to launch the peace process. The Jirga was followed by the establishment of Afghanistan's High Peace Council, headed by former President, Burhan din Rabbani. President Karzai also ordered a review of the cases of Taliban prisoners held by Afghan government and US-led coalition forces. Subsequently, as a part of the appeasement process, hundreds of Taliban fighters including some accused of serious crimes were released. At the request of Afghan government, the UN Security Council lifted sanctions on several Taliban leaders to enable them to travel internationally and participate in potential peace talks. In 2013, a political office was set up in Qatar to house Taliban representatives for future peace talks.⁷

After Mr. Karzai, the new National Unity Government (NUG) led by Ashraf Ghani came to power which also reiterated the previous calls for peace talks. To rejuvenate the stalling peace process, President Ghani appointed Pir Sayed Ahmad Gilani as the new head of High Peace Council of Afghanistan. Ghani also continued his predecessor's tradition of continued pleas to the Taliban to renounce violence and join the peace process.⁸

The repeated calls by leaders of Afghan government, their efforts to set up the High Peace Council and release Taliban prisoners as well as other measures of appeasement leave little room for doubt about the genuine desire of Afghan government for peace talks with the Taliban. Regarding its preconditions for the talks, the government has maintained its position that any peace talks should take place under the framework provided by the current Afghan constitution.⁹ The implications of this condition are that Taliban must

⁷ "Taliban Close Qatar Office in Protest at Flag Removal," The Telegraph, January 09, 2013, , accessed October 19, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/10169161/Taliban-close-Qatar-office-in-protest-at-flag-removal.html>.

⁸ Rahimullah Yusufzai, "Another Chance for Peace," The News on Sunday, 2016, , accessed October 19, 2016, http://tns.thenews.com.pk/another-chance-peace-afghans-taliban-pakistan/#.WAd_cugrKhc.

⁹ "Gains, Respect For Constitution Preconditions For Peace Talks: Govt," TOLONews, October 18, 2016, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/gains-respect-constitution-preconditions-peace-talks-govt>.

engage in peace talks by recognizing the legitimacy of the government and accepting the rights and obligations specified in the constitution.

Position of Taliban on peace talks

While the position of the Afghan government on peace talks has been clear and mostly consistent throughout, there have been varying signals from the Taliban's side regarding their desire for peace and preconditions for participation in peace talks. A sizeable number of former Taliban government officials and their fighters have laid down their arms and cooperated with the Afghan government since the fall of their regime but the movement's leadership has never recognized the legitimacy of the post-2001 Afghan political system.

Despite continued refusals to talk to the Afghan government, the Taliban accepted the proposal to open a political office in Qatar and sent a delegation to Doha in June 2013 with apparent authorization from Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar.¹⁰ Despite drawing criticism from Afghan President, Hamid Karzai and little success in initiating peace talks, the Taliban office continued to operate. In July 2015, it was revealed that Mullah Mohamad Omar had been dead for years which created doubts about whether the Taliban leader had actually authorized the delegation.¹¹

Under their new leader, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, the Taliban reaffirmed the authority of their delegation in Qatar to engage in talks and sent another delegation to Islamabad for talks with representatives of the Afghan government. After, the initial peace talks didn't lead to any meaningful results, the United States killed Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour in a drone strike in Pakistan. The new leader of Taliban, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, who is said to be more radical than his predecessor has, so far, opposed

¹⁰ "Q&A: Afghan Taliban open Doha office," BBC News, June 20, 2013, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22957827>.

¹¹ M. Ilyas Khan, "Mullah Omar death: Why is Pakistan silent?," BBC News, July 30, 2015, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33714623>.

any peace talks.¹² In all stages of these initial peace efforts, the Taliban have continued to focus on their military offensives with increasing ferocity.

According to a report by Long Wars Journal, the Taliban in early 2016 released a statement, entitled “Let’s first define Peace then strive for its implementation,” which clarified that “believers should make peace among hostile believers,” and “in the issue of Afghanistan, one side is Muslims and they are Mujahideen while the invaders make-up the other side who are non-Muslims, invaders and combatants.”

The report concludes that “the Taliban will not make peace with US and Coalition forces, nor will it do so with the Afghan government, which it routinely describes as apostates and Western puppets.”¹³

To sum up, Taliban’s position on peace talks with Afghan government has been mostly negative and at times ambiguous. The reliability of Taliban’s desire to participate in peace talks is further complicated by the fact that the Taliban is a loosely connected movement whose leadership is highly secretive and disjointed and its field commanders and foot soldiers cannot be trusted to accept terms negotiated with their leaders.

The case that Taliban might have any desire for peace talks is also undermined by the fact that the insurgents have been making considerable progress on the battlefield in the recent years. In early February 2017, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) issued a report stating that the Taliban controls, contests, or influences 171 districts out of 400 known districts in the country. Shortly after, the Taliban in its media releases claimed that it controlled or contested 211 districts throughout the country.¹⁴

¹² Sune Engel Rasmussen and Jon Boone, "Afghan Taliban Appoint Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada as New Leader," The Guardian, May 25, 2016, , accessed October 19, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/25/taliban-new-leader-death-confirm-mullah-mansoor-haibatullah-akhundzada>.

¹³ Bill Roggio, "Taliban demands prisoners released, sanctions removed before joining peace negotiations," FDD's Long War Journal, January 24, 2016, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/01/taliban-demands-prisoners-released-sanctions-removed-before-joining-peace-negotiations.php>.

¹⁴ Bill Roggio, "Afghan Taliban lists 'Percent of Country under the control of Mujahideen'," FDD's Long War Journal, March 28, 2017, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/afghan-taliban-lists-percent-of-country-under-the-control-of-mujahideen.php>.

As stated earlier, there can be little optimism about Taliban's genuine desire for peace talks when their prospects of a military win over Afghan forces are better than ever.

Major ideological and political differences

The prospects for successful resolution of Afghan conflict are undermined not only by lack of Taliban's genuine interest in peace talks but also by major ideologic disagreements between the two warring sides. While most of scholarly writings and publications on Afghan peace process focus on devising mechanisms for peace talks, they generally sidestep the serious and substantive issues that need to be discussed and agreed upon during any perspective peace talks.

A realistic evaluation of the current situation in Afghanistan requires the acknowledgement of the fact that religious and ideological differences between the progressive and conservative factions of Afghan society are at the root of the current conflict. Despite the illusion held by many international observers, the Afghan society is not uniformly conservative and its divisions are not only along tribal and ethnic lines. Like any other society in the world, Afghans can be placed on a political spectrum from highly religious and conservative to moderate and secular. It is often forgotten that decades earlier, Afghanistan had a homegrown Marxist movement with considerable support in the military and urban centers of the country.

The Taliban is primarily an ideological movement which represents the overly conservative faction of the society that is opposed to modernity and peaceful coexistence with groups that have different interpretations of religious norms and cultural values. It is obvious that in a conflict which is primarily about ideology and culture, appeasement through offering financial resources, ceding the control of a few provinces or government positions to its leaders or accepting parts of their demands is definitely not sufficient to lead to a long-term peace deal.

Any peace agreement expected to bring long-term stability and peace to Afghanistan requires substantial ideological compromises by the main warring parties on several highly sensitive and divisive issues including the future of the country's political system, potential power sharing mechanism, rule of Sharia in

judicial system, women's rights, foreign policy and external alliances. It is important to mention that the list of major ideological and political disagreements discussed below is not exhaustive and some additional disagreements and spoilers might also arise if peace talks with Taliban were ever held.

A) Islamic Republic or Emirate?

After capturing most of Afghanistan from Mujahedin factions between 1994-1996, the Taliban set up their own version of the institution of Emirate in the country. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan established by the Taliban was a theocratic government modeled on Islamic caliphates of the past. On April 4, 1996, the Taliban leader and founder, Mullah Omar, during a special ceremony attended by hundreds of his followers went into the Shrine of Cloak of Prophet Mohammad in Kandahar and proclaimed himself as the Commander of the Faithful or Emir ul Momenin.¹⁵

For his followers, Mullah Omar was not a mere political leader but a mythical figure whose piety and purity gave him unquestionable legitimacy. In the model of government desired by the Taliban which is also consistent with the vision of government espoused by Salafists as well as mainstream Sunni jurisprudence, the state must be led by an Emir whose primary responsibility is to enforce the Sharia. Obedience to Emir is obligatory as long as his orders are not in contradiction with the Sharia. The Emir is in power for life and his powers are not checked by any worldly authority.¹⁶

The Taliban spokesman, Mullah Abdul Wakil Mutawakil, shortly after Mullah Omar assumed the title of Emir ul Momenin in an interview with the popular Saudi magazine al Majalla said, "For us consultation is not necessary. We believe that this is in line with the Sharia. We abide by the Amir's view even if he alone takes this view. There will not be a head of state. Instead there will be an Amir al-Mu'minin. Mullah Omar

¹⁵ Tim Weiner, "A NATION CHALLENGED: THE LEADER -- Man in the News; Seizing the Prophet's Mantle: Muhammad Omar," The New York Times, December 06, 2001, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/07/world/nation-challenged-leader-man-seizing-prophet-s-mantle-muhammad-omar.html>.

¹⁶ Pennell, Richard (11 March 2016). "What is the significance of the title 'Amīr al-mu'minīn?'". The Journal of North African Studies. 21 (4): 623–644.

will be the highest authority, and the government will not be able to implement any decision to which he does not agree. General elections are incompatible with Sharia and therefore we reject them.”¹⁷

After the Taliban regime was overthrown in 2001, Mullah Omar retained the title of Emir ul Momenin. After Mullah Omar’s death in 2013, his predecessors, Mullah Akhtar Mansour and Mullah Hibatullah also claimed the religious title. The Taliban in their media releases and official communication continue to use the title of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan for their movement. The religious title of Taliban leaders continues to hold legitimacy, not only for the Afghan insurgents but also international extremist groups, most notably al Qaeda.

Al Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden had pledged his allegiance to Mullah Omar in a video recorded mid-2001. “My pledge of allegiance to the Emir of the Believers [Mullah Omar] is the great pledge of allegiance, which is mentioned in the chapters of the Koran and the stories of the Sunnah,” bin Laden said in the clip. “Every Muslim should set his mind and heart and pledge allegiance to the Emir of the Believers Mullah Muhammad Omar for this is the great pledge.”¹⁸ After bin Laden, current al Qaeda leader, Ayman al Zawahiri continues to swear allegiance to Taliban leaders.

In sharp contrast with the Taliban system of governance, the current model of political system in Afghanistan is inspired by Western constitutional and liberal democracies. Based on Afghan Constitution adopted in 2004, Afghanistan is an Islamic Republic led by a President elected through direct votes of all eligible citizens. The President’s primary duty is to uphold the constitution and other laws of the nation. The President’s powers are checked by an elected Parliament and independent judiciary. The President is elected for four years and the same person cannot be elected for more than two terms. The Constitution of

¹⁷ Interview with Taliban Spokesman Mullah Wakil, Al-Majallah, October 23, 1996.

¹⁸ Thomas Joscelyn, "Ayman al Zawahiri swears allegiance to the Taliban's new leader," FDD's Long War Journal, June 11, 2016, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/06/ayman-al-zawahiri-swears-allegiance-to-the-talibans-new-leader.php>.

2004 also guarantees equality and basic freedoms and rights of all Afghan citizens including ethnic and religious minorities and women.¹⁹

The government of Afghanistan has reiterated that any peace talks with the Taliban should be held with respect to the framework provided by the Constitution. It is obvious that the governance systems advocated by the two sides of the conflict are wildly different and reaching a common position on the nature and structure of political system requires substantial compromises. It is difficult to envisage a structure of government in which both systems would be accommodated. Either the Taliban will have to renounce their claim of the Emirate or the existing Afghan political structure would have to be abandoned or at best significantly modified. Considering the fact that compromise is not a quality commonly associated with the Taliban movement, it is difficult to see both sides reaching an agreement on this issue in the unlikely scenario of peace negotiations.

(B) Women's rights

During the Taliban's time in power, oppression of women in Afghanistan was unprecedented, even for the historically conservative Afghan society. According to Amnesty International, during the Taliban regime women were banned from going to school or studying, working, leaving the house without a male chaperone, showing their skin in public, accessing healthcare delivered by men (with women forbidden from working, healthcare was virtually inaccessible) and being involved in politics or speaking publicly.²⁰ When Taliban were in power, violation of any of these draconian laws resulted in humiliating and serious punishments. In flagrant disregard for human rights and Afghani culture, the Taliban abducted hundreds of women and sold them into slavery to al Qaeda fighters in the border regions with Pakistan.²¹

¹⁹ Afghan Constitution, § 3-5 (2004).

²⁰ "Women in Afghanistan: the back story," Amnesty International, October 25, 2015, , accessed April 24, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/womens-rights-afghanistan-history>.

²¹ Tim McGirk, "Lifting The Veil On Taliban Sex Slavery," Time, February 10, 2002, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,201892,00.html>.

Under the current regime, while serious challenges remain, women's rights have seen marked progress. In Afghanistan, women have the constitutional right to vote and run for elected offices. In the areas under the government control, millions of women and girls are going to school and work. A considerable number of Afghan women work in civil service, police force, military, judiciary and private sector. Women also occupy important positions as cabinet ministers and members of parliament. While the current condition of women's rights in Afghanistan is by no means ideal, it is remarkably better than the Taliban era.

Since being removed from power, the Taliban have continued their opposition to women's rights and freedoms. Taliban insurgents have continually attacked and torched girls' schools across the country and targeted female students and teachers.²² Since there are no indications that Taliban will reverse their policies on women, the issue is certainly going to be a major obstacle in reaching a peace deal with the insurgent group.

(C) Sharia and Judicial system

The judicial system of Taliban and current Afghan government is also radically different. The Taliban government imposed the Hudud punishments as described by Sunni jurisprudence with extreme fervor. Under the Taliban regime, the chopping of limbs for crimes such as theft and robbery, lashing for alcohol consumption and stoning for adultery were commonplace and performed in public venues. The Taliban continue to operate Sharia courts and hand out these punishments in the areas that are under their control today.²³

Since the fall of Taliban regime, the Afghan government has observed a moratorium on imposition of Hudud punishments and tried to modernize the judicial system according to international conventions of human rights. The Taliban have viciously targeted judicial institutions of Afghan government on many

²² Abdullah Saljoqi, "Taliban burn down girls' school in Afghanistan," The France 24 Observers, November 04, 2015, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://observers.france24.com/en/20151104-taliban-shut-down-girls-school-afghanistan>.

²³ Abdul Qadir Ghafoori, "Disturbing Footage Emerges Of 'Taliban' Stoning In Afghanistan," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, November 02, 2015, , accessed December 03, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-stoning-woman-adultery/27341045.html>.

occasions. To achieve a peace deal, will the Taliban drop their demand for imposition of Hudud punishments or will the Afghan government capitulate to Taliban demands and bring back public stoning, chopping of limbs and other punishments? Neither scenario seems remotely likely which means agreement on this crucial issue will remain elusive as well.

(D) Foreign policy and external alliances

In terms of external alliances and foreign policy, there are also massive differences in the positions of both sides. The Afghan government has close relations with the United States, NATO, European Union and India, who not only support Afghan government financially but many of them have provided extensive military support in the campaign against the Taliban. At one point during the conflict, more than 100,000 foreign troops were stationed in Afghanistan and still around 13,000 foreign troops under the Resolute Support mission of NATO continue to provide advisory and logistical support to Afghan troops.²⁴ Relations between the Taliban and foreign backers of Afghan government have always been unfriendly, to say the least. Not only Taliban demand that all foreign troops must withdraw from Afghanistan as a precondition for peace talks but are opposed to any kind of political and cultural influence of the West on Afghani society.

On the other hand, Taliban have allies that are enormously detested by Afghan government and its foreign backers. It needs no reminding that Taliban are the closest allies of al Qaeda; the terrorist group responsible for the deadliest attacks ever on American territory. Not only had Taliban sheltered and supported al Qaeda leadership before 9/11 but refused to hand them over to the United States, a move which cost them tens of thousands of casualties and resulted in collapse of their regime and near demise of their movement.

Since the fall of their regime, the Taliban have continued to work closely with al Qaeda to this day and there don't seem to be any realistic chances of Taliban giving up their historic ties with al Qaeda. In January

²⁴ Daniele Kurtzleben, "How The U.S. Troop Levels In Afghanistan Have Changed Under Obama," NPR, July 6, 2016, , accessed October 19, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2016/07/06/484979294/chart-how-the-u-s-troop-levels-in-afghanistan-have-changed-under-obama>.

2017, the Taliban released a video celebrating their “undying brotherhood” with al Qaeda which further debunked the claims of Obama administration about a divide between the two terrorist groups.²⁵

As pointed out earlier, Osama bin Laden had pledged allegiance to the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, back in 2001. His successor, Ayman al Zawahiri also swore allegiance to Mullah Akhtar Mansour and Mullah Hibatullah, respectively.²⁶ Not only Taliban are closely associated with al Qaeda but other extremist and terrorist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba and others also have close cooperation with Taliban.

The main condition of the US and its Western allies for peace with Taliban is that they must renounce international terrorism and sever their ties with al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. In 2010, when the efforts to talk to Taliban were initiated, President Barack Obama speaking at a joint news conference with his Afghan counterpart, Hamid Karzai said that he supported Kabul's efforts to "open the door to Taliban, who cut their ties with al-Qaeda and renounced violence".²⁷ A year later when Osama bin Laden was killed in Pakistan, President Obama declared that if Taliban leader, Mullah Omar was found in Pakistan, he would also be targeted in a similar raid. Mr. Obama added that in a peace settlement, "Taliban would have to cut all ties to al-Qaeda, renounce violence and they would have to respect the Afghan constitution".²⁸

Will Taliban accept to become part of a political system that has been built with Western military and economic support and enjoys close military and political ties with United States, European powers and India? In the current circumstances, the possibility of Taliban agreeing to the conditions discussed above,

²⁵ Thomas Joscelyn, "The Final Obama Scandal," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, February 6, 2017, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/thomas-joscelyn-the-final-obama-scandal/>.

²⁶ Thomas Joscelyn, "Ayman Al Zawahiri Swears Allegiance to the Taliban's New Leader | The Long War Journal," The Long War Journal, June 11, 2016, , accessed October 19, 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/06/ayman-al-zawahiri-swears-allegiance-to-the-talibans-new-leader.php>.

²⁷ "US President Obama backs Afghanistan's Taliban effort," BBC News, May 12, 2010, , accessed April 24, 2017, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8676731.stm.

²⁸ Aleem Maqbool, "Barack Obama: US 'would repeat Bin Laden raid'" BBC News, May 22, 2011, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/13478318>.

or the US allowing Taliban to join the Afghan government while maintaining their connections with international Jihadist groups such as al Qaeda, looks nonexistent.

It should be mentioned that the Taliban movement derives its legitimacy in the eyes of its followers and sympathizers from its steadfast opposition to the West, waging Jihad against foreign powers and upholding Islamic Sharia. If the Taliban ever make compromises on any of these principles, they would lose support and essentially pave the way for their own demise. The mere readiness of former Taliban leader, Akhtar Mansour to send a delegation for talks with Afghan government was reportedly seen as betrayal by the more radical elements in Taliban hierarchy. This leads to the conclusion that even if Taliban were to engage in peace talks, they will hardly be prepared to make any compromises and a peace deal with them will not be achieved unless it is entirely on their terms.

Afghanistan as the theater of regional geopolitical conflict

The regional context is often ignored or underplayed in discussions about Afghanistan's situation but is as important as the domestic context when it comes to settlement of the conflict. While several regional actors are involved in Afghanistan's affairs, Pakistan is the most important regional actor that support the Taliban and its interventionist policy towards Afghanistan during the past four decades is arguably the main reason behind continued bloodshed in the country.

Pakistan's proxy war with Afghanistan

Pakistan was a major ally of the Taliban government before 9/11 and has since continued to provide crucial support for Taliban insurgents. While Pakistani officials have often denied supporting the insurgent movement, there is overwhelming evidence that Taliban are still receiving sanctuary as well military and financial support in Pakistan. Even as Pakistan has pretended to be an ally of the United States in the "war on terror", its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has continued to shelter and support the Taliban and al Qaeda leaders and members.

Prominent Pakistani writer, Ahmed Rashid in his book “Descent into chaos: The US and the disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia” on Pakistan’s double dealing with Taliban writes that “a year after 9/11 it was clear to many Pakistanis that Musharraf’s support of the US-led war in Afghanistan was not the promised strategic U-turn that would end the army’s long-standing support to Islamic extremists but rather a short-term tactical move to appease the United States....”²⁹

Fifteen years after the collapse of Taliban regime, it is clearer than ever that the Taliban would have been totally defeated or at least seriously incapacitated without military and financial support and virtually uninterrupted access to sanctuaries in Pakistan. Taliban have been able to use these resources in Pakistan not because of Pakistani government’s weakness or disinterest but with its full consent and direct involvement. After the collapse of Taliban regime, according to Ahmad Rashid, “to maintain influence among the Taliban and Afghan Pashtuns, the ISI developed a two-track policy of protecting the Taliban while handing over al Qaeda Arabs and other non-Afghans to the United States.”³⁰ The role of ISI has been even more prominent in planning and organizing terrorist activities carried by the Haqqani Network which is an operationally independent faction of the Taliban. The former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mike Mullen, in his remarks before the US Senate in 2011 said that “the Haqqani network acts as veritable arm of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency.”³¹

A 2010 report by Matt Waldman of the Carr Centre for Human Rights at Harvard, based on interviews with a number of former Taliban commanders showed that ISI "orchestrates, sustains and strongly influences"

²⁹ Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into chaos: the US and the failure of nation building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (London: Penguin, 2009), 219.

³⁰ *Ibid*,

³¹ Elisabeth Bumiller and Jane Perlez, "Pakistan’s Spy Agency Is Tied to Attack on U.S. Embassy," *The New York Times*, September 22, 2011, , accessed March 13, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/23/world/asia/mullen-asserts-pakistani-role-in-attack-on-us-embassy.html>.

the insurgents, and that the ISI are even "represented as participants or observers on the Taliban supreme leadership council, the Quetta Shura".³²

US President, Barack Obama and other American officials in the past repeatedly called on Pakistani leadership to take serious military actions against Taliban and al Qaeda operatives in their territory.³³ Despite US drone strikes on Taliban targets inside Pakistan, including the killing of Taliban leader, Mullah Akhtar Mansour in Baluchistan, Pakistan's policy towards the Taliban has remained unchanged. Akhtar Mansour was returning from a trip to Iran with a Pakistani passport when he was targeted and killed. Many sources had claimed that Akhtar Mansour was running businesses in the Gulf states as well as had travelled to Russia using his Pakistani passport.³⁴ Pakistan's stubbornness in supporting the Taliban leads us to conclude that Pakistan's support of Taliban must be intended to serve important objectives and interests of the Pakistani army establishment.

Pak-India Cold War in Afghanistan

Many experts of Pakistani politics believe that the country's policy of supporting the Taliban is a response to friendly ties between Afghan government and India and the threat that Pakistan feels regarding Indian involvement in the affairs of its eastern neighbor. According to Ahmed Rashid, the Pakistani army felt threatened by the fact that the Karzai government established after the fall of Taliban regime was dominated by anti-Pakistan and pro-India groups.³⁵ In an interview with the Guardian in 2015, Pervez Musharraf, Pakistani President between 2001-2008, admitted that when he was in power, Pakistan sought to undermine

³² William Dalrymple, "This is no Nato game but Pakistan's proxy war with its brother in the south | William Dalrymple," The Guardian, July 01, 2010, , accessed April 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jul/01/afghanistan-pakistan-proxy-war-with-india>.

³³ "Obama calls Pakistan's Zardari, urges more effort," Reuters, October 26, 2010, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/pakistan-usa-obama-idUSN2617022220101026>.

³⁴ Jon Boone and Sune Engel Rasmussen, "US drone strike in Pakistan kills Taliban leader Mullah Mansoor," The Guardian, May 22, 2016, , accessed April 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/21/us-airstrike-taliban-leader-mullah-akhtar-mansoor>.

³⁵ Rashid, *ibid*, 221.

the government of Afghanistan by supporting the Taliban as a proxy force because Karzai had “helped India stab Pakistan in the back”³⁶

The bitter rivalry with India is probably the most important feature of Pakistan’s history as a new nation established in 1947. Since Pakistan was established, the two countries have gone to war against each other three times. The most damaging of the wars for Pakistan was the war of 1971 which resulted in independence of Bangladesh and stripped Pakistan of more than half of its population and with nearly one-third of its army in captivity. The nightmare of 1971 has prompted Pakistan to view the repeat of such a scenario as a threat to its survival as a nation. Owing to these bitter historic experiences, Pakistani officials feel that close ties between India and Afghanistan are a serious danger to national security and territorial integrity of Pakistan, particularly considering the contentious status of its eastern border with Afghanistan.

Durand Line dispute, a source of tense Af-Pak relations

The existing border between Afghanistan and Pakistan known as Durand Line was drawn in 1893 at a time that the British Empire occupied India and controlled Afghanistan’s foreign policy. This arbitrary line drawn from Afghanistan’s north eastern border with China to south west to its border with Iran divides the Pashtun population living in the region. While this line is recognized as the official border between the two countries by the United Nations, United States and other nations, its legal status has been opposed by Afghanistan since its independence in 1919. Additionally, the indigenous tribes living on both sides have historically opposed efforts for demarcation and imposition of border restrictions.³⁷

In a Huffington Post article on the importance of Durand Line for Pakistan and Afghanistan, Joseph V. Micallef writes: “The question of the legitimacy of the Durand Line borders has poisoned Afghan-Pakistani relations for the better part of a century. For Afghanistan, the loss of half of the traditional Pashtun territories

³⁶ Jon Boone, "Musharraf calls for end to Pakistan and India 'proxies' in Afghanistan," The Guardian, February 13, 2015, , accessed April 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/13/pervez-musharraf-pakistan-india-proxies-afghanistan-ghani-taliban>.

³⁷ Arwin Rahi, "Why the Durand Line Matters," The Diplomat, February 21, 2014, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/02/why-the-durand-line-matters/>.

divided its largest tribal grouping. Moreover, the loss of Baluchistan left it landlocked, without any access to the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean except through Pakistani territory. For Pakistan, the issue of the Durand Line is an existential one. The territory in question amounts to some 60% of its present sovereign territory.”³⁸

Pakistani authorities thus believe that a strong and secure Afghanistan which doesn't recognize the Durand Line and has friendly relations with India would support separatist movements in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and pose a serious threat to territorial integrity of Pakistan. In order to prevent this scenario from ever happening, Pakistani military establishment has supported extremist groups fighting against Afghan government and in the process, has transformed border areas with Afghanistan into the breeding grounds for extremist Jihadists loosely under Pakistan's control.³⁹ This policy began with supporting Mujahedin groups against Soviet-backed Afghan government in 1980s and has continued with providing support for Taliban and other militant groups until now.

Pakistan as spoiler, not facilitator of peace talks

While it is difficult to establish the exact measure of Pakistan's influence on Taliban's war decisions, it is obvious that Pakistan will not welcome a peace deal between Afghan government and Taliban and would actively sabotage the peace process in order to preserve its strategic interests in Afghanistan.

In March 2010, Afghan President, Hamid Karzai had established secret contacts with Taliban's second in command, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar to pave the way for further peace talks. Weeks later, Pakistan arrested Mullah Baradar in an effort to undermine the nascent peace process which sparked angry reaction

³⁸ Joseph V. Micallef, "Afghanistan and Pakistan: The Poisoned Legacy of the Durand Line," The Huffington Post, November 15, 2015, , accessed October 19, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-v-micallef/afghanistan-and-pakistan_b_8590918.html.

³⁹ Jon Boone, "Musharraf Calls for End to Pakistan and India 'proxies' in Afghanistan," The Guardian, February 13, 2015, , accessed December 03, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/13/pervez-musharraf-pakistan-india-proxies-afghanistan-ghani-taliban>.

from Karzai's government.⁴⁰ There are also other anecdotal accounts of Pakistan arresting or assassinating Taliban leaders who have shown interest in talks with Kabul government.

In two scenarios, Pakistan's cooperation in Afghan peace process can possibly be ensured: First; if the costs of supporting Taliban and other insurgent groups exceed the short term and long term, actual and potential advantages of supporting them. This would include substantial diplomatic pressure by international community, severe economic sanctions and potential threat of military intervention by the United States and its allies against insurgent hideouts in Pakistan. Would the international community and United States actually go that far to ensure Pakistan's genuine cooperation for the peace process in Afghanistan? At the moment, this scenario seems as far-fetched as that of Taliban agreeing to a peace deal with Afghan government.

Another route that may be taken to help ensure Pakistan's cooperation would be to resolve the roots of the regional conflict and mistrust among the actors involved. This would potentially mean continuation of the failed appeasement policy towards Pakistan and providing assurances that Afghanistan would recognize the Durand Line as the legitimate international border between the two countries and would not intervene in support of separatist movements in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan. Substantial improvement of relations with India and significant trust building between India and Pakistan would also be required to improve the prospects of Pakistan's cooperation against the Taliban.

Realistically, neither recognition of Durand Line by Afghanistan nor resolution of hostilities and mistrust between India and Pakistan is achievable in the current circumstances. Also, there are no guarantees that Pakistan would change its policies towards Afghanistan if the abovementioned conditions were met. There are good reasons to believe that the powerful Pakistani army establishment perceives Afghanistan not as an equal but as its "little brother" and essentially wants to control its foreign policy in a similar way to British

⁴⁰ Dean Nelson and Ben Farmer, "Hamid Karzai held secret talks with Mullah Baradar in Afghanistan," The Telegraph, March 16, 2010, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/7457861/Hamid-Karzai-held-secret-talks-with-Mullah-Baradar-in-Afghanistan.html>.

Empire's control of Afghan foreign policy between 1880 to 1919. Considering these realities, it is safe to assume that even if serious internal disagreements were overcome and a peace deal was reached between the Afghan government and Taliban insurgents, Pakistan will act as the spoiler of peace process making the entire effort ineffective and potentially dangerous for Afghanistan.

Afghanistan as a major battleground in “war on terror”

Not only the war in Afghanistan is fueled by internal disharmony in Afghan society and regional geopolitical rivalries, it is exacerbated by the ever-intensifying confrontation between the West and Islamic radicalism. While American and Western assistance and military involvement in Afghanistan since 9/11 might be partially due to humanitarian concerns, it would be naive to assume that the United States and its allies are bearing the enormous costs of the war primarily out of concern for the well-being of Afghans.

The main reason for American and Western military presence in Afghanistan as well as many other Muslim countries in the Middle East is to counter the threat of radical and militant Islamist groups. The radical Islamist threat to the West emanates from an array of non-state actors that want to revive the global Islamic empires of the old and rid Muslim countries of the military and cultural influences of the Western powers. These non-state actors which are comprised of several Islamist groups and normally fight inside national boundaries, reject the legitimacy of nation states and national boundaries. Deriving ideological support from Salafist and Wahabist traditions but also mainstream Sunni doctrine of Islam, they aim to eventually revive the Islamic caliphate which would rule all Muslims and represent their common interests as Islamic Ummah against non-Muslim powers.

Types of radical Islamist threat in Afghanistan

Islamist groups operating around the world can be divided into three categories on the basis of their current theatres of operation: A large majority of these groups fight against the “near enemy” which are national governments of different ideological tendencies in Islamic countries. These include groups like Afghani Taliban, Pakistani Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Boko Haram, Al Shabab, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

and others. The groups in this category generally operate inside national boundaries and target specific territories and governments.

The second type of Jihadist groups operate mainly across national boundaries and direct their attacks mostly against the “far enemy” which includes the United States and other Western powers. These groups see the United States and other Western powers as the main backers of what they view as corrupt and non-Islamic regimes in Muslim countries. They aim to attack and drive out the Western powers from Muslim territories to pave the way for establishment of their envisioned Islamic caliphate.

Al-Qaeda is the most prominent and perhaps only organization that fits into this category. It has specifically attacked Western targets and has made few direct efforts to overthrow local regimes in Islamic countries or to control territory. Instead, it has mostly relied on the local groups in the first category to provide it with sanctuary, operating bases, fighters and other resources. In Afghanistan, the Taliban is the local ally of al-Qaeda which provided it with bases prior to 9/11 attacks and continues to have intimate operational and ideological ties with it.

The terrorist group known as Islamic State or ISIS which came to rise in Iraq and Syria in 2014 constitutes the third category of radical Islamist groups which are not only keen to overthrow national governments across the Muslim world but also directly attack Western powers and engage in global Jihadi operations.

The ongoing conflict in Afghanistan is complicated by the fact that it seems to include groups that fall into each of these categories; Taliban is the main local fighting force against the Afghan government and the US forces, al Qaeda has been present in the country for decades and still enjoys very intimate ties with Taliban and other regional Jihadist groups and the Khurasan branch of ISIS is an emerging menace threatening Afghanistan and the wider region.⁴¹

⁴¹ Heather Barr, "From the Taliban Frying Pan to the Islamic State Fire," Foreign Policy, September 27, 2016, , accessed October 19, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/27/from-the-taliban-frying-pan-to-the-islamic-state-fire-afghanistan-nangarhar-isis/>.

Unbreakable al Qaeda-Taliban alliance

Based on documents retrieved during the US raid that killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, it can be concluded that the al Qaeda leader prioritized defeating the Afghan government and its NATO allies as a precursor to expanding the war to other parts of the region. “The general approach drafted by Jihad leaders is that the first Jihadi objective is the establishing of an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan; its establishment will become a tool to implement Islamic Shari'ah in the remaining regions and countries.”⁴² In a document titled, “to Emir Al-Mo'mineen” which is most probably a letter addressed to Mullah Omar, bin Laden writes, “We are your soldiers and we are with you heart and soul in supporting the religion of God Almighty.”⁴³

Considering the facts presented above, it is clear that Afghanistan remains a major battleground for the West in the war against al Qaeda and global Islamic radicalism. It is also obvious that the al Qaeda and Taliban alliance is virtually unbreakable and is based on practical considerations as well as shared ideological goals. As discussed earlier, the main US condition for peace talks with Taliban is that they must sever ties with al Qaeda which leads to the conclusion that under present conditions peace talks have virtually no chance of progress.

Even if the Taliban leadership agreed to do the unthinkable and severed ties with al-Qaeda as well as agreed to other conditions for peace, there is a very real chance that the extremist support-base of Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as majority of its field commanders and foot soldiers would defect and set up a new movement to continue fighting the Afghan government and its Western allies. In that scenario, a peace deal would have virtually no impact on ending the conflict in Afghanistan.

⁴² "Jihad in Pakistan," DNI.gov, 7, accessed April 23, 2017, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Jihad%20in%20Pakistan.pdf>.

⁴³ "To Emir Al-Mo'mineen," DNI.gov, , accessed April 23, 2017, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/To%20Emir%20Al-Mo%E2%80%99mineen.pdf>.

Prior reconciliation efforts and pitfalls of appeasement

For those enthusiastic about peace talks with Taliban, the history of past reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan's four decades of war should serve as a caution that even when warring parties decide to participate in peace talks and commit to a cease fire and reconciliation process, they are not usually honest in their intentions or keen to fulfill their commitments. During the four decades of war in Afghanistan, multiple national and international efforts have been made to reconcile the warring parties. The results of these efforts show little impact in bridging differences in the long-term. Conversely, warring parties have used temporary cease-fires and negotiation opportunities to gain more legitimacy, resupply and prepare for more war.

The National Reconciliation (Ashti Milli) process which was launched during the Soviet era by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) with the aim of reconciling Mujahedin groups that were fighting against the regime with US and Pakistani support is eerily similar to the current peace process and provides useful insight about dangers of reluctance in military campaign and appeasing militant groups who have no genuine interest in peace. The PDPA National Reconciliation policy launched by President Najibullah in 1986 called for a ceasefire, general amnesty for combatants, and a unity government. According to Michael Semple, the National Reconciliation process made some short-term progress by bringing some opposition commanders to temporary agreements with the government.

“The most famous protocol of all was that signed between Ahmad Shah Masood's Shura Nizar and the Afghan government in 1986 providing for a truce in the Panjshir Valley. This truce provides a classic example of strategic exploitation of an agreement. Both sides agreed to the Panjshir protocol in response to war weariness, having suffered heavy casualties in offensives in the Panjshir Valley. The Afghan government and Soviets derived some benefit in terms of deflecting Masood away from the capital and protecting their supply line through the Salang Pass. However, Masood relied upon the Panjshir protocol to allow him to shift his focus to the northeast and to build up his Shura Nizar structure, which was crucial

to his future war effort. Ultimately, an evaluation of the Panjshir protocol is complex. It failed the test of intentions, in that it is now clear that both sides were intent on returning to the conflict after availing of the strategic pause.”⁴⁴

In his evaluation of Najibullah’s Reconciliation policy, Semple claims that the process was more successful than efforts by previous PDPA rulers and enabled the regime to prolong its stay in power. Ultimately, he admits, that the process failed to end the conflict and bring peace. “. . . the lesson must not be lost that Najib was ultimately unsuccessful in achieving a comprehensive political settlement, despite many efforts. The national reconciliation strategy, became a process for warding off defeat rather than winning the war.”⁴⁵

After the PDPA regime was overthrown by the Mujahedin, largely thanks to opportunistic cease-fires and appeasement, the Mujhaedin engaged in devastating infighting which continued until the arrival of Taliban in 1994. From 1992 to 2001, multiple peace efforts sponsored by various parties were launched to bring the opposing sides to negotiating table and end the conflict without any success.

“Although, the United Nations persisted with mediation track through the Mujahedin and Taliban periods, and the Secretary General appointed a succession of envoys (Mohammad Mistiri, Norbert Holl, Lakhdar Brahimi, and Francesc Vendrell), it had no major role in the accords that were signed. The international role in the failed rapprochement consisted of Pakistan hosting the accords, Saudi Arabia blessing them and, the United Nations watching them fall apart.”⁴⁶

As Bill Roggio in an article for Long Wars Journal has explained, the Taliban similar to previous Mujahedin groups use the current negotiation efforts for tactical gains, not to further peace. “If the past is any indicator, the Taliban would use negotiations to simply achieve its tactical goals. For example, the release of its

⁴⁴ Michael Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009), 17.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 21.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 22.

leaders and followers from Western and Afghan prisons, removal of its officials from sanctions lists, and the legitimization of its political office in Qatar.”⁴⁷

Conclusions and recommended alternatives

Having studied the complexity of the ongoing conflict and evaluated the monumental domestic, regional and global obstacles that lay ahead of a comprehensive, long-lasting and effective peace deal, it is safe to conclude that peace in Afghanistan through negotiations is not achievable. It is also obvious that lack of any legitimate desire for compromise and peace by the Taliban means that any efforts to appease the radical movement are ill-advised and dangerous.

The three main implications of these conclusions are as follows:

First, the Taliban as a domestic insurgent group are largely irreconcilable and need to be militarily defeated or severely degraded. They are not the lone destabilizing force in Afghanistan and there are many other militant groups such as ISIS-K, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Laskhar-e-Taiba, Tehrik Taliban Pakistan...etc that contribute to the ongoing violence in the country. To achieve the goal of defeating these militant groups, international support for building a strong Afghan state is crucial. In short-term, this may require increased international military involvement and substantial long-term investment on training and equipping Afghan security forces.

Second, the Afghan conflict is also a symptom of the regional rivalry between Afghanistan and Pakistan in which India is an important actor. To address this aspect of the problem, Afghanistan’s vulnerability to Pakistani intervention needs to be reduced and costs of continued double-dealing and intervention for Pakistan should be increased. Pakistan’s international isolation, imposing financial sanctions on its military institutions, limited strikes on militant targets inside Pakistan are only a few of options for the US and its

⁴⁷ Bill Roggio, "Taliban demands prisoners released, sanctions removed before joining peace negotiations," FDD's Long War Journal, January 24, 2016, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/01/taliban-demands-prisoners-released-sanctions-removed-before-joining-peace-negotiations.php>.

allies in pressuring Pakistan. A more capable Afghan security force with viable deterrent power is also helpful in this regard.

And finally, the conflict in Afghanistan is also partly a symptom of global wave of violence perpetrated by radical Islamist movements which necessitates international involvement in Afghanistan and defeat of the movements globally. A functioning Afghan state is also crucial for any counter-extremism and de-radicalization policy to work in the region.

State-building, key to conquering the “Graveyard of Empires”

Referring to Afghanistan as the “Graveyard of Empires” has become a favorite catchword for many observers who lack deep knowledge of Afghanistan’s history. In the Western media, it is frequently used by commentators who try to justify the failures of Obama administration, pro-Pakistani propagandists, pacifists, and isolationists.

The often-unstated aim of using this term is to perpetuate the stereotype of Afghanistan as a wasteland swarming with angry, violent tribesmen who are often at war with each other and lack social cohesion and intellectual capacity to coexist under complex modern-day state institutions. These commentators claim that the failed state of Afghanistan has perpetually been a quagmire for great powers and would likely remain like this forever. These observers, while exaggerating underdevelopment and lack of cohesion in Afghan society, completely ignore the devastating impacts of past foreign interventions in the country which transformed it from one of the most rapidly developing countries in the region in the first half of 20th century to the failed state of today. They categorically ignore the desire of ordinary Afghans for peace and the country’s massive domestic potential for economic development and modernization.

Anyhow, it is an undeniable fact that today’s Afghanistan is by many measures a fragile or failing state.

According to Fragile State Index 2016, published by Funds for Peace, Afghanistan is the ninth most

fragile state in the world.⁴⁸ Also, according to Corruption Perceptions Index 2016, published by Transparency International, Afghanistan ranks as eight most corrupt country globally.⁴⁹

Considering such damning statistics, it is difficult to expect Afghan government to effectively combat insurgents or provide satisfactory services to its citizens. General John Nicholson, the commander of US forces in Afghanistan said in December 2016 that the biggest challenges affecting the performance of Afghan security forces were poor leadership and corruption. The General said that ineffectiveness and corruption in the supply system have left some Afghan soldiers on outposts without water, food or the ammunition they need to fight.⁵⁰

The Marshal Plan vs the Afghanistan Plan

In addition to deploying tens of thousands of troops to Afghanistan and taking substantial casualties in the war, the US and its Western allies have spent vast financial resources in the country since 2001. A study published by Watson Institute shows that from 2001 to 2016, the US Departments of Defense and State had spent roughly 783 billion dollars in Afghanistan.⁵¹

According to a report by SIGAR, between 2001 and 2014, the US has provided 104,104 billion dollars in aid to Afghan government. “Of the total amount of aid, \$66 billion – or approximately 70 percent of total US funds – has gone to support the Afghan military and police, including policing and combatting the

⁴⁸ "Fragile States Index 2016," The Fund for Peace, accessed March 17, 2017, <http://fsi.fundforpeace.org/>.

⁴⁹ "Corruption Perceptions Index 2016," www.transparency.org, accessed April 24, 2017, http://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016.

⁵⁰ Carla Babb, "Top US General: Leadership, Corruption are Afghanistan's Biggest Challenges," VOA, December 02, 2016, accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.voanews.com/a/afghanistan-leadership-corruption-nicholson-united-states/3621452.html>.

⁵¹ Neta C. Crawford, US Budgetary Costs of Wars through 2016: \$4.79 Trillion and Counting, report, Watson Institute, Brown University, 7. <http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2016/Costs%20of%20War%20through%202016%20FINAL%20final%20v2.pdf>

narcotics trade. The remaining 30 percent has been spent on projects related to governance and development and more immediate humanitarian assistance.⁵²”

In July 2014, John Coy of Bloomberg wrote, “The Marshall Plan delivered \$103 billion in today’s dollars to 16 European countries between 1948 and 1952. That has now been topped by congressional appropriations for reconstruction in Afghanistan, which so far have come to \$109 billion in today’s dollars. The difference: The Marshall Plan helped Europe get back on its feet, while Afghanistan is a chaotic mess.”⁵³

While the amount of roughly 104 billion dollars in aid to Afghan government is substantial, there are many factors that explain aid ineffectiveness and reduce the utility of comparing post 9/11 Afghanistan to post WWII Europe. Corruption and lack of effective leadership in Afghan government is the often publicized and probably most important cause of ineffective state building. Having said that, blaming the Afghan government for the entirety of the massive aid waste is unjustifiable. Indeed, there have been many flaws in the state-building effort for which the donor countries are entirely or partly responsible.

Lack of an overarching state-building strategy by the international donor community has resulted in channeling the bulk of funds through NGOs with lack of proper oversight mechanisms and accountability, prioritization of short-term projects over long-term ones and lack of coordination among different donor agencies. In short, while there was a carefully designed “Marshall Plan” for Europe’s reconstruction after World War II, in 2001 there was no comprehensive “Afghanistan Plan” prepared on the basis of priorities set by the Afghans. The comparison of Marshall Plan with Afghanistan’s post-2001 reconstruction efforts ignores major differences between the two aid programs. The Marshall Plan was implemented after the

⁵² Catherine Lutz and Sujaya Desai, US Reconstruction Aid for Afghanistan: The Dollars and Sense, report, Watson Institute, Brown University (2015), 3.
<http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2015/US%20Reconstruction%20Aid%20for%20Afghanistan.pdf>

⁵³ Peter Coy, "Afghanistan Has Cost the U.S. More Than the Marshall Plan," Bloomberg.com, July 31, 2014, , accessed April 24, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-07-31/afghanistan-has-cost-the-u-dot-s-dot-more-than-the-marshall-plan>.

war had ended in Europe while Afghanistan's reconstruction efforts were undertaken as the war was raging on in many parts of the country. Also, the Marshal Plan was prepared by European nations on the basis of their priorities while the aid to Afghanistan was provided entirely based on the donors' preferences and priorities who, despite their generosity and good intentions, had little understanding of local requirements.

It should also be mentioned that in the early years of American involvement in Afghanistan, international focus on state building was minimal. Due of lack of investment in Afghan security forces after the fall of Taliban regime, for years Afghan President Hamid Karzai was protected by US special forces isolated from the rest of the population in his compound in Kabul. In his early years in power, Karzai continued to complain about inability of his government to pay the salaries of employees and channeling of foreign aid to NGOs rather than government institutions.⁵⁴ It was after the Taliban made a comeback and security situation in the country got increasingly worse between 2004-2006, that the US and its allies responded with troop surges and costly, incoherent, and rashly planned reconstruction and state building efforts.

The annual breakdown of total US aid to Afghanistan since 2001 shows that it was only after President Obama took office that more generous support to Afghan government was provided and efforts to train and equip Afghan security forces gained momentum. Considering that in late 2001, the US inherited an Afghanistan which had no functioning government institutions, more funds should have been directed to towards state building than military deployments.

As the new US administration under President Trump is reviewing its strategy in Afghanistan, in addition to any additional troop deployments, it must focus on equipping and training Afghan forces. The US policy in Afghanistan, must ensure that in the long-run, the Afghan government is able to become financially self-reliant and effective. To devise a long-term winning strategy for Afghanistan, it is an imperative for Trump

⁵⁴ Christina Lamb, "President of hell: Hamid Karzai's battle to govern post war, post Taliban Afghanistan," The Times & The Sunday Times, June 29, 2003, , accessed April 24, 2017, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/president-of-hell-hamid-karzais-battle-to-govern-post-war-post-taliban-afghanistan-7nxdzj7pc3v>.

administration to learn from the mistakes of previous US administrations and consider priorities and suggestions of Afghan government in its policy making. The early signs are that the Trump administration is considering sending extra troops to Afghanistan to train and advise Afghan security forces⁵⁵ and keen on helping Afghanistan towards economic self-reliance.⁵⁶

Abandoning the failed appeasement policy towards Pakistan

As discussed earlier, Pakistan's support of Taliban and other armed groups in Afghanistan is a major cause of continuing violence in Afghanistan. The US policy towards Pakistan in the past decades has focused on diplomacy, and economic and military aid to the country in return for its support in the "war on terror". From 2001 to 2013, Pakistan had received roughly 26 billion dollars in aid from the United States⁵⁷ and as a designated major non-NATO US ally continues to receive substantial military and development aid.⁵⁸ By now it is patently clear that the appeasement policy towards Pakistan has failed to achieve effective cooperation in the war against Taliban, al Qaeda and other extremist groups. Continuation of this failed approach is only going to cost the US more financial resources and embolden Pakistan in employing terrorism as a foreign policy tool.

While Pakistan's support of terrorist groups was evident from the early years after 9/11, only recently have some American politicians called for a tougher stance towards Pakistan. The US National Defense Authorization Act of 2017 conditioned the release of 450 \$ million in aid to Pakistan on effective measures by the country to crack down on the Haqqani Network. "The bill requires the Pentagon to certify that

⁵⁵ Andrew DeGrandpre, "Amid calls for more boots on the ground, Trump will send top adviser to Afghanistan," Military Times, April 12, 2017, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.militarytimes.com/articles/hr-mcmaster-afghanistan-donald-trump>.

⁵⁶ Benny Johnson, "I Had Dinner With the Afghan Ambassador. What He Said About the Differences Between Trump, Obama Is Stunning," IJR - Independent Journal Review, March 23, 2017, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://ijr.com/2017/03/822619-i-had-dinner-with-the-afghanistan-ambassador-what-he-said-about-the-differences-between-trump-obama-is-stunning/>.

⁵⁷ Mubashir Hassan, "Pakistan 'received \$25.91b' from US since 9/11," The Nation, June 27, 2013, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://nation.com.pk/national/27-Jun-2013/pakistan-received-25-91b-from-us-since-9-11>.

⁵⁸ "Non-Nato status for Pakistan approved," DAWN.COM, June 03, 2004, , accessed April 24, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/360800>.

Pakistan is conducting military operations to disrupt the Haqqani network, not letting the network use North Waziristan as a safe haven and actively coordinating with Afghanistan's government to fight the network along their border.”⁵⁹

In September 2016, the “Pakistan State Sponsor of Terrorism Designation Act” was proposed in the US House of Representatives which directed “the Department of State to submit a determination regarding whether the government of Pakistan, including any of its agents or instrumentalities, committed, conspired to commit, attempted, aided, or abetted: (1) any of specified acts constituting an act of or support for international terrorism, or (2) any other act that constitutes an act of international terrorism.”⁶⁰

Also in September 2016, a number of former senior US diplomats and military officials who had been deployed to Afghanistan in a memo called on the incoming US administration to forge enduring partnership with Afghanistan and pressurize Pakistan to abandon its support of terrorist groups. Some of the signatories of the memo were former Ambassadors to Afghanistan including Ryan Crocker, James Cunningham, Robert Finn, Zalmay Khalilzad and Ronald Neumann and military commanders such as John Allen, John Campbell, Stanley McChrystal and David Petraeus. ⁶¹

Zalmay Khalilzad in a debate hosted by Hudson Institute in April 2017 said that the soft approach of United States towards Pakistan had failed and it was time for tougher measures including economic sanctions and increased unilateral attacks on militant targets inside Pakistani territory. He suggested that these tougher measures alongside “hardening Afghanistan against Pakistani intervention” would hopefully result in meaningful changes in Pakistan’s policy. ⁶²

⁵⁹ Patricia Zengerle, "House seeks to tighten restrictions on Pakistan aid," Reuters, May 19, 2016, , accessed March 13, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-defense-pakistan-idUSKCN0YA31K>.

⁶⁰ Pakistan State Sponsor of Terrorism Designation Act, H.R. 6069 , 114 Cong. (2017).
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-bill/6069/text>

⁶¹ "Forging an Enduring Partnership with Afghanistan," The National Interest, September 14, 2016, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/forging-enduring-partnership-afghanistan-17708?page=show>.

⁶² "U.S. Options in Afghanistan and Pakistan," YouTube, April 13, 2017, , accessed April 24, 2017, <https://youtu.be/rtgMHVFjQE>.

Long-term vision for avoiding or winning “the clash of civilizations”

The enormous economic and military costs of the post-9/11 “War on terror” in Afghanistan, Iraq and the larger Middle East and their mixed results have led to increasing unpopularity of American involvement in this part of the world. Today, many in the West believe that their governments should stay out of domestic and regional conflicts in the Middle East. According to the Costs of War study conducted by Watson Institute, “as of August 2016, the US has already appropriated, spent, or taken on obligations to spend more than \$3.6 trillion in current dollars on the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Syria and on Homeland Security.”⁶³

When Barack Obama first came to power in 2009, the primary objective of his administration was to end the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and close the Guantanamo Bay detention center. During his electoral campaign, Mr. Obama had been an open critic of Bush administration’s extensive military campaigns in the Middle East. At the end of Obama’s two term in office, not only is the United States still engaged in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan but has gotten militarily involved in several other Middle-Eastern countries such as Syria, Yemen, Libya and Somalia and is under pressure from military and political experts for not being more active in Syrian War. Obama’s decision to withdraw from Iraq was seen by many, including his successor, Donald Trump, as a disastrous mistake that led to the rise of ISIS and his withdrawal timetable from Afghanistan has also been roundly criticized by military and political experts.⁶⁴

The new US President, Donald Trump, while also keen on curtailing his country’s costly foreign adventures, will have no option but to stay involved militarily in the Middle East. In his inauguration speech, President Trump said that under his leadership, the United States will “...reinforce old alliances and form

⁶³ Neta C. Crawford, US Budgetary Costs of Wars through 2016: \$4.79 Trillion and Counting, report, Watson Institute, Brown University.

<http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2016/Costs%20of%20War%20through%202016%20FINAL%20final%20v2.pdf>

⁶⁴ Mark Landler, "For Obama, an Unexpected Legacy of Two Full Terms at War," New York Times, May 14, 2016, accessed October 19, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/15/us/politics/obama-as-wartime-president-has-wrestled-with-protecting-nation-and-troops.html>.

new ones – and unite the civilized world against Radical Islamic Terrorism,” which he promised to “eradicate completely from the face of the Earth.”⁶⁵

As discussed earlier, the Middle East and Afghanistan are a crucial part of the global war between the West and Islamic radicalism; a war which many believe is the manifestation of the “Clash of Civilizations” theorized by Samuel Huntington after the end of Cold War. While the theory has its skeptics, there is increasing consensus that the wars which began with terrorist attacks of 9/11 are going to be multi-generational.

After Obama announced that US forces will remain in Afghanistan after his presidency, Christopher Harmer, a military analyst at the Institute for the Study of War said, “it took the U.S. 40 years to win the Cold War. The war against radical terrorist organizations like the Taliban and ISIS will take at least that long.”⁶⁶ Unfortunately, it seems that stability and durable peace in Afghanistan, the Middle East and the rest of the world will remain elusive until the post-9/11 “clash of civilizations”, “war on terror” or “campaign against violent extremism” draws to a definite conclusion.

⁶⁵ "The Inaugural Address." The White House. January 30, 2017. Accessed April 24, 2017. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural-address>.

⁶⁶ Christi Parsons and W.J. Hennigan, "With Afghanistan decision, Obama abandons goal of ending wars he inherited," Los Angeles Times, October 15, 2015, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-afghan-us-troops-20151015-story.html>.

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