

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind

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Targeting Civilians Unjustifiable

Afghans suffered severely in the wake of political upheavals throughout the history and paid heavy sacrifices for democratic principles. Political symptoms and civil unrest took their toll on people's life, freedoms, and dignity.

The pain and anguish of Afghan people within the last four decades of conflict and civil unrest is indescribable. The natural and inherent rights and freedoms of individuals were violated flagrantly. Although relative freedoms and moderate approaches of kings and political leaders generated a gleam of hope for Afghans for a peaceful and prosperous life, the pain continues unabated as peace remains elusive.

Religious fundamentalists are still acting as pawns in the political game being launched by mysterious hands and playing self-destructive role. They are a strong drawback before progressive and democratic acts as well as country's development.

Gaining relative freedoms in the post-Taliban Afghanistan, Afghans hoped to live a peaceful life and be able to exercise their rights and freedoms under a nascent democratic administration, but the Taliban guerilla fighters were reorganized and resumed their violent and destructive acts. Now the public air is still filled with fear since the Taliban and other militant groups continue spilling the blood of Afghan combatants and non-combatants, including women and children.

Militant fighters, mainly the Taliban, carry out indiscriminate attacks against Afghan nation. That is, the sacrifices made by Afghans for a peaceful community has not yet borne the desired result. Religious fundamentalists still find democratic principles against their radical ideology and, ironically, shed the blood of people to sell their harsh mindset and trade on religious issues.

It is said that the Taliban and the US representatives will reach an agreement after they held several rounds of talks and the Taliban leadership will start negotiation with the Afghan government, militancy continues unabated. Afghan civilians have been changed into sacrificial lamb in the conflict ongoing between the Taliban and the government. There is much optimism for finding negotiated settlement in the near future, but still no sign of peace is felt in collective life.

Although the self-proclaimed IS group has claimed responsibility for this week suicide attack in a wedding ceremony in Kabul, which killed 63 people and wounded 182, Taliban's engagement in the incident is also reported. A source is cited as saying that the type of explosive shows that the Taliban, in line with Haqqani network, carried out the attack. Condemning the attack, President Ashraf Ghani said that despite the Taliban's denials of responsibility, they still shared some of the blame because they "provide a platform for terrorists". Ghani called it the greatest and the most tragic crime against humanity and urged the international community not to keep silent in this regard.

The Taliban have targeted civilians on several occasions and killed a large number of Afghan women and children without an iota of mercy simply to put pressure on the Afghan government or haggle for higher price at the peace table.

In the wake of this week's attack, Afghan citizens made sentimental remarks against Afghan security officials and called them insufficient. As Afghan officials mark the 100th anniversary of Afghan Independence Day, the social media are inundated with the bloody images of victims of the attack and sentimental and angry remarks are aired against both officials and organizers of the attacks.

As a result of the militants' indiscriminate attacks, life has turned so cheap in Afghanistan and bloodshed is desensitized in the country.

It should be noted that the government could not safeguard the rights and freedoms of the citizens and Afghan officials have been competing for power. The gap between Afghan officials widened in the last five years. Simultaneously, mistrust between state and nation also mushroomed since instability increased and the Taliban extended their control on Afghan soil. Currently, the Taliban hold a checkpoint on Kabul-Kandahar highway in Moqor district, where they collect money from truck drivers. Moreover, the government is unlikely to be able to ensure the security of polling stations and voters' safety. Thus, all citizens do not have the opportunity to cast their votes.

Targeting civilians is a war crime and has no rational or religious justification. Such acts simply unfold the brutality and irrationality of the militant fighters. It further indicates that those militant groups, which claim to fight for religion, lack the very basic knowledge of religion. The surge in militancy shows the Taliban are still playing a foul game as they, on the one hand, negotiate for peace and, on the other hand, intensify their attacks.

Waves of Criticisms and Reactions to Attacks on Wedding Hall in Kabul

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

This is the second dreadful attack within a month which targets west of Kabul civilians; the first attack targeted the security forces but more than 100 civilians and none civilians were killed or wounded too. The second attack happened last Saturday night in a wedding party where hundreds of people were killed or wounded. According to primary reports, at least 63 people have been killed and 183 civilians have been wounded in the attack. It seems that the numbers of casualties are going to increase as almost 1200 people were invited in the wedding Hall.

The attack on the wedding party was widely condemned by government leaders, politicians and foreign diplomats who called it a "terrorist attack" against Afghan civilians. However, the people are not satisfied with just oral denouncement of the officials and international friends; Many Afghan people, especially social network users call on the government to announce Monday as national mourning while millions of money has been invested to celebrate the hundredth Day of Independence in the same day. People extremely blame the security forces for inability, corruption and inattention to the sensitive security situation. They also blamed government for no serious measures against cruel attacks launched successively.

President Ghani also condemned the inhumane attack on the wedding hall. "My top priority, for now, is to assist the families of victims in the barbaric attack," he said. "In response to this targeted attack, I have called an extraordinary security meeting to review and prevent such security lapses." Taliban also condemned the incidents which target women and children but Mr. Ghani said, "Taliban cannot absolve themselves as they pave the ground for such terrorist activities". Previously Taliban has claimed the responsibility of several attacks in Kabul while they had pledged to do more to protect civilians; it continues to stage deadly attacks against Afghan security forces what is seen by many as an attempt to strengthen its position at the negotiating table. The group says the election in Afghanistan has no legitimacy in the presence of foreign forces in the country.

Meanwhile, Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah "strongly condemned the terrorist attack in a tweet" and said this "heinous and inhumane attack is a crime against humanity". The European Union mission in Afghanistan said in a tweet that "whoever perpetrated or inspired the suicide blast at the Kabul wedding hall, are enemies of humanity". It added that such acts are beyond condemnation. Iran and US Ambassador in Afghanistan John Bass also condemned the attack and said in a tweet that it was an act of "extreme depravity".

Yet, no group has claimed responsibility for the latest attack, but both the Taliban and local affiliate of the Islamic State group carried out series of bloody attacks in the capital, especially in west of

Kabul. In November of last year, a similar attack was carried out in a wedding hall in Kabul at least 55 people killed while most of them were Muslim religious scholars and clerics had gathered to mark the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. The Taliban had denied involvement in an attack that bore the hallmarks of the Islamic State affiliate.

The Islamic State most often claimed the responsibility for such attacks on civilians. In fact, they made a habit of going after minority groups, particularly Shias. The Takfiri group aims to spread fear among the Afghan population, choosing targets which will inflict maximum civilian casualties. The Taliban, on the other hand, goes after the state, hoping to weaken the government and law enforcement as it tries to gain control of more territory.

The Takfiri group has tried to create sectarian division in the country, but failed to reach their sinister goal. Fortunately sectarian tensions have been relatively muted in the past but the relentless onslaught of Takfiri attacks could change the trend if the government and people lose its consciousness. Some of its fighters are foreigners, recruited from the ranks of the TTP and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Despite being an essentially foreign force, in the last couple of years it has been able to expand from Nangarhar province in the east to much of the north and northeast of the country. Therefore, the government has to make more efforts against terrorist groups as the terrorists have been unprecedentedly grown in few last year.

In general, the west of Kabul, especially the Hazara residents have been successively attacked by Daesh Takfiri group. They carried out multiple attacks on mosques, educational centers, sports clubs, voters' registration centers and other social gatherings. Thus, Hazara routes to central region became more insecure in recent years. According to UN reports, last year more than 3,800 civilian including more than 900 children, were killed in Afghanistan by the terrorist groups and other actors. As a result, millions of people are forced to leave the country to known or unknown destination.

There are also some other analysis explaining why such attacks are carried on certain locations, certain people and certain time. From one hand, the government made a lot of preparation to celebrate the Independence Day, and on the other hand, the US-Taliban talks reached at a sensitive step. The attack could have several aims at the same time; first all of it may convey a message to Khalilzad that Taliban are not the only group who fight in Afghanistan. Secondly, it tried to interrupt the celebration of Independence Day and change the happiness to mourning. Thirdly, it targeted a certain group of people to ignite sectarian division in the country as they have always tried to do so.

Mohammad Zahir Akbari is the permanent writer of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan. He can be reached at mohammadzahirakbari@gmail.com

Tilting at More than Windmills in South Asia

By: Richard N. Haass

"Tilt" is a word with a history in South Asia. Nearly a half-century ago, Pakistan's government brutally repressed its citizens in the eastern part of the country. Millions of refugees streamed into India, which mobilized its armed forces. Pakistan attacked, and India responded. Full-scale war ensued. When the dust settled, Pakistan had been dismembered, with its eastern part becoming the independent country of Bangladesh.

The US government watched these events unfold with concern. India's claim to be non-aligned was not taken seriously, and President Richard Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger judged victory for India to be a gain for the Soviet Union. In addition, the South Asia conflict occurred just as the United States (with Pakistan's assistance) was seeking to establish a relationship with the People's Republic of China. Nixon and Kissinger feared that China's interest would diminish if the US appeared unwilling to stand up to India, a country backed by the Soviets and one with whom China had fought a war a decade before.

The US dispatched an aircraft carrier to the Bay of Bengal, ostensibly to deter further Indian military action, but in fact more as a signal of American support for Pakistan. The show of force did not change the trajectory of the crisis, but the US decision to tilt toward Pakistan (a phrase that made its way into newspapers) was infamous in India for decades to come.

The US continued to favor Pakistan in the wake of the 1971 war. Pakistan was a close US partner in the effort to raise the costs to the Soviet Union of its occupation of Afghanistan, teaming up with the Americans to arm the local Afghan opposition. But with the end of the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan in February 1989 - and the end of the Cold War just months later - the US chose to reconsider its stance toward both India and Pakistan.

Successive US presidents sought improved ties with India, owing to India's growing economy, robust democracy, and the increasing importance of the Indian-American community. More recently, India has come to be perceived in some quarters as a potential partner in balancing a rising China. At the same time, US relations with Pakistan deteriorated, initially over its nuclear program, but, after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, also because of its ties to the Taliban and other extremists.

Now, the question is whether thinking in Washington, DC, is again evolving and the US is considering another "tilt." After nearly two decades of sacrifice, the US is looking for a way out of Afghanistan, and Pakistan, which has provided a sanctuary to the Taliban, is seen as critical to America's ability to withdraw its troops without enabling the group to overthrow the Afghan government. At the same

time, there is frustration with India over its trade policies.

The new tilt was manifested weeks ago when Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan visited the White House. US President Donald Trump made the stunning declaration that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had asked him to mediate the Kashmir dispute, the most sensitive issue dividing India and Pakistan since partition and independence in 1947.

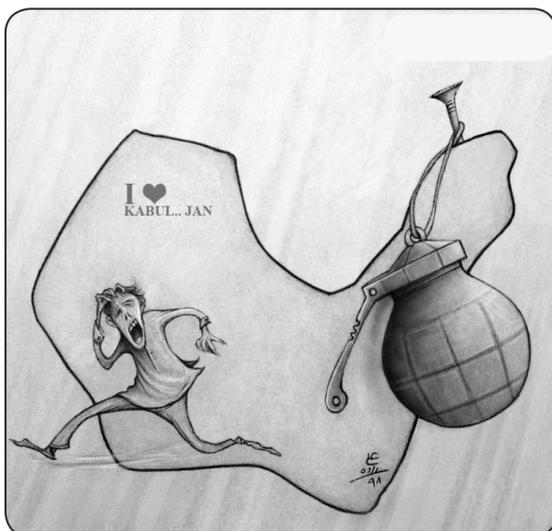
Such a request by India would represent a fundamental shift in its policy, and India's government was quick to deny that such a request had been made. This was followed by India's announcement that it planned to strip much of this Muslim-majority region's autonomy. There is a possibility that Pakistan will respond by renewing its support for terrorism, which could lead to another war between Pakistan and India, two nuclear-armed countries.

Against this backdrop, the US would be unwise to turn to Pakistan as a strategic partner. Pakistan sees a friendly government in Kabul as vital to its security and competition with arch-rival India. There is little reason to believe that the military and intelligence services, which continue to run Pakistan, will rein in the Taliban or rule out terrorism.

Equally, the US would be unwise to alienate India. Yes, India has a tradition of protectionist trade policies and often frustrates US policymakers with its reluctance to cooperate fully on strategic issues. But democratic India, which will soon surpass China as the world's most populous country and will boast the world's fifth-largest economy, is a good long-term bet. It is a natural partner to help balance China. India has rejected participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative, whereas Pakistan, struggling economically, has embraced it. The US would also be unwise to race for the exits from Afghanistan. Peace talks with the Taliban mostly look like a means to extract US forces from the country. The process is reminiscent of Vietnam, where a 1973 agreement between the US and North Vietnam provided a pretext for US withdrawal from the South but not a basis for peace. The notion of a coalition government, with power shared by the current government and the Taliban, is optimistic at best, fanciful at worst.

Instead of embracing fantasy, the US should continue to keep a modest number of troops in Afghanistan to ensure the government survives and the country does not again become a terrorist haven. What is required is an endurance strategy, not an exit strategy, based on local conditions, not political calendars. As has long been the case, South Asia is at best a region to be managed, not a problem to be solved.

Richard N. Haass is President of the Council on Foreign Relations and author of *A World in Disarray*.

Daily Outlook
AFGHANISTAN
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Chairman / Editor-in-Chief: Moh. Reza Huwaida

Vice Chairman / Exec. Editor: Moh. Sakhi Rezaie

Email: outlookafghanistan@gmail.com

Phone: 0093 (799) 005019/777-005019

www.outlookafghanistan.net

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