

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



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Peaceful resolution of Government-Noor rift: A successful pattern for Win-Win Strategy

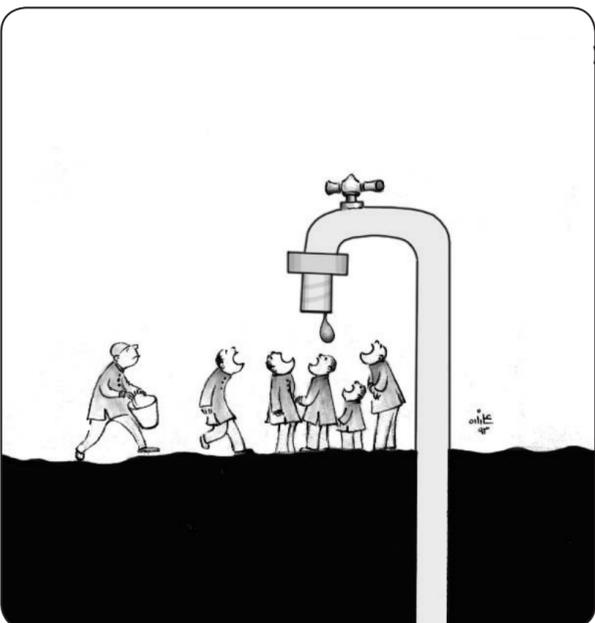
The Government-Noor rift that started about 3 months ago when President Ghani issued an order to accept Noor's resignation as Balkh governor, and it turned into a battle as Noor rejected the order. The rejection of the President order by Atta Mohammad Noor, the previous governor of Balkh province, not only foreshadowed bitter election fight but also further questioned the legitimacy of the national government in the country. Noor defied Ghani, denouncing the "weak, lazy and corrupt" Kabul government in daily rallies with thousands of supporters and warning the government against trying to remove him by force. The standoff, alarmed Western embassies and sparked fears of civil violence, heightened an irritable political climate that threatened to further deteriorate the security situation in the country, and especially in Kabul and Mazar, and even could undermine presidential elections in the next year. Such situation strongly worried the Afghan citizens of new round of civil violence in the country too. Indeed, the standoff had a negative impact on the economic market of Afghanistan and prices of commodities increased in the markets. The removal of Noor was considered by some circles as a move to remove a potential rival and divide Jamiat ahead of presidential election likely to be shaped by the ethnic rhetoric that dominate the Afghan politics.

However, Noor claimed that he will only stepped down once the agreement made between him and the government was fulfilled. He further claimed that, the standoff was about the 2019 presidential election, and claimed that the government has no grassroots support among the people and they are afraid of public figures who are strongly supported by the grassroots. Thus, the government referred to a letter of resignation from Noor that was signed by the president last year during negotiations over a possible national role for Noor. At the same time, Noor said the letter, was conditional on steps that Ghani must take and was refused to go. Balkh which is located on strategic routes into central Asia, was also important for the government in terms of meeting its election pledges to the people, as claiming it will end up to local gulfs of powers. Now, if the government was not able to remove Noor its legitimacy will have further been undermined, and maybe some other powerful provincial governors of Provincial Chiefs of police may followed the same path as Noor did.

Of course, the deal was not a win and lose deal; instead both sides can claim they have won the battle. For Noor, he introduced Ishaq Rahgozar as the new Balkh provincial governor, Najib Aqa Fahim as the State Minister for Disaster Management and Balkhi as the Education minister. On the other side, Ghani can claim that he has fulfilled his presidential election promise and has removed Noor from the Balkh provincial governor office.

What is clear this did not happen in a night time; it took time and massive discussions. Afghan politicians, local leaders, the United States and other Afghan international allies all played a role to put an end to the conflict and of course, there some neighboring countries who fueled the tensions for the sake of their own interests.

The government-Noor peaceful standoff resolution is one of the most successful lessons learned in the Afghan politics. Afghanistan, as country that its political conflicts has nearly always been resolved by force and bloodshed, and its political conflict resolution is "winning or losing", this can be a valuable achievement; rationalization of political conflicts resolution approaches and reducing the costs as much as possible. It is a good step towards political rational behavior in Afghanistan and it just can be institutionalized if the Afghan government and Afghan politicians employ a holistic conflict resolution approach in the country and do not act selectively in terms of political conflict resolution in Afghanistan.



Saudi moderation: How far will Crown Prince Mohammed go?

By James M. Dorsey

In his effort to improve Saudi Arabia's badly tarnished image and project the kingdom as embracing an unidentified form of moderate Islam, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has hinted that he envisions a conservative rather than an ultra-conservative society, but not one in which citizens are fully free to make personal, let alone political choices of their own. Prince Mohammed's vision, although not spelled out in great detail, seemed evident in an interview with CBS News' 60 minutes, his first with a Western television program, on the eve of a three-week trip that is taking him across the United States.

The trip is designed to cement relations with the Trump administration following the dismissal of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who Prince Mohammed and his United Arab Emirates counterpart, Mohammed bin Zayed, viewed as unenthusiastic about their hegemonic designs for a swath of land stretching across the Middle East from the Horn of Africa to South Asia, including the Saudi-UAE-led ten-month old diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar.

The visit comes barely a month before Mr. Trump has to decide whether to pull the United States out of the 2015 international agreement with Iran designed to curb the Islamic republic's nuclear program. A withdrawal could lead to the agreement's collapse and spark a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. "Saudi Arabia does not want to acquire any nuclear bomb, but without a doubt, if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible," Prince Mohammed, who is locked into existential battle with Iran, told CBS. It is also intended to project the kingdom as a beacon of moderation rather than a promoter of ultra-conservatism and cutting-edge modernity led by a young reformist but autocratic king-in-waiting. In a meeting in the White House with Donald J. Trump, on the first day of his visit, both Prince Mohammed and the US president touted the economic benefits of the two countries' relationship, with massive US arms sales and other deals, including nuclear sales that would involve reducing US safeguards by giving the kingdom the right to enrich uranium. Both leaders asserted that the deals would significantly boost employment in both Saudi Arabia and the United States. Besides Mr. Trump, Prince Mohammed is scheduled to meet members of Congress, think tanks and academics, oil executives, businessmen and representatives of Silicon Valley's high-tech industry and Hollywood. Both Prince Mohammed and Mr. Trump need to demonstrate economic progress to boost or cement their popularity at home. The crown prince needs to demonstrate to Saudis that he is feted as a leader despite mounting international criticism of his conduct of the ill-fated, three-year old war in Yemen, his domestic power and asset grab under the mum of an anti-corruption campaign, the kingdom's long-standing severe political and social restrictions, and its four-decade long global support for ultra-conservative Sunni Islam.

Beyond concern about the high civilian casualty rate in Yemen and the war having sparked one of the world's worst current humanitarian crises, many fear that potentially destabilizing anti-Saudi sentiment in the ravaged country will persist long after the guns fall silent.

Those fears are reinforced by contradictory Saudi measures. While on the one hand pledging billions of dollars in aid and allowing at least some relief to get into the country, Saudi Arabia has aggravated the crisis in the country by expelling tens of thousands of Yemeni workers in recent months. Prince Mohammed also needs to demonstrate that he can attract foreign investment despite the arbitrary nature of the arrest in November of hundreds of senior members of the ruling Al Saud family, prominent businessmen, and high-ranking officials, and reports

that at least some of them were abused and tortured during their detention. Most of the detainees were released after surrendering control of assets and/or paying substantial amounts of money. The government said it expects to raise \$100 billion from the asset grab.

Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, one of the most prominent detainees and the kingdom's most-high-profile businessman, who seemed to put up a fight during his detention, has since his release in January said that he would be investing in some of Prince Mohammed's pet projects.

Prince Mohammed bolstered his image by vowing to return Saudi Arabia to an unidentified form of moderate Islam; forcing the country's ultra-conservative religious establishment to endorse his reforms; suggesting that the kingdom may halt its massive global funding of Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism to counter Iran's revolutionary zeal; surrendering control of the Saudi-managed Great Mosque in Brussels; granting women the right to drive, join the military, and attend male sporting events; and creating a modern entertainment sector.

Despite the boldness of his moves, Prince Mohammed has sent mixed messages about how far he is prepared to go. Women and men mix at concerts and theatre plays but are segregated in the three sport stadiums that have been declared open to women. While the crown prince has been decisive in his power and asset grab, he has yet to say a clear word about lifting Saudi Arabia's system of male guardianship that gives male relatives control of their lives. Similarly, there is no indication that gender segregation in restaurants and other public places will be lifted. Asked about the guardianship, Prince Mohammed evaded specifics. "Today, Saudi women still have not received their full rights. There are rights stipulated in Islam that they still don't have. We have come a very long way and have a short way to go," he said.

Middle East Scholar As'ad Abu Khalil, whose blog is named The Angry Arab News Service, posted a picture of Prince Salman's meeting with Mr. Trump, noting that there was not one woman on either side of the conference table. Speaking Arabic despite having learnt to speak English by watching movies, Prince Mohammed appeared in his CBS interview to defend allowing a mingling of the sexes in the work place while shying away from ultra-conservative Islam's ban on a man meeting a woman unaccompanied by a male relative in non-professional or non-public settings. "We have extremists who forbid mixing between the two sexes and are unable to differentiate between a man and a woman alone together and their being together in a workplace," Prince Mohammed said. The crown prince conceded that women had the right to determine what to wear if their clothes were "decent, respectful clothing, like men." He did not define what would constitute decent but insisted that it did not have to be a "black abaya or a black head cover." No doubt, Prince Mohammed's social reforms and promised economic change provide him significant arrows in his multimillion dollar public relations blitz. That is getting him the support of the White House. "Getting a strong presidential endorsement of the crown prince's trip to the U.S. to encourage investment in Saudi Arabia, that, I think, could be something that could be done," said Anthony H. Cordesman, the Arleigh A. Burke chair in strategy at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Translating that into real policy and dollars and cent could, however, prove to be a harder sell.

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Afghanistan: New year Starts with Successive attacks

By Mohammad Zahir Akbari

After proposal of free precondition talks everyone was hopeful for opening a new political chapter in the country but On contrary to the whitehopes, the new year has commenced with multiple terror attacks in major Afghan cities. The first deadly attack in new year, happened in Kabul capital city in which at least 32 people were killed and at over 50 others were wounded when a suicide bomber detonated their explosives near Kart-e Sakhi shrine on 21 March. This attack was conducted during celebrations of the Afghan New Year (Nowruz) and that those targeted were mostly Hazara people.

It is widely believed that the event was in continuance to the systemic annihilation of Hazaras purposefully carries out by ISIS group and they commonly claimed responsibility for such attacks. However, similar attacks continued by a blast targeted a protest camp in Chamani-Hozori area killed one person and wounded 13 others. The sit-in camp was started earlier in March by some Afghans who are calling for an end to what they say is the persecution of ethnic Pashtuns in Pakistan's federally administered tribal regions. Generally, the insurgent groups have always attempted to target major cities to show their presence and power in the heart of strategic locations.

After two days of new year and Kabul deadly attack, the other fatal attack happened in Lashkargah City in Helmand province in which at least 15 people were killed and 51 wounded after a suicide bomber detonated a car loaded with explosives. As reported the explosion occurred outside a stadium in Lashkargah City when spectators were leaving the stadium after a wrestling match had finished and sadly the children, women and other civilian were among those killed and wounded. Overall, the succeeding explosions indicates the fragile and worsening security situation in new year although the government had already launched new security plans and new strategies to tighten security in the wake of several earlier attacks took the life of thousands. As usual, many countries and organizations strongly condemned the terror attacks; President Ashraf Ghani condemned the attack and added, that "the enemies of Afghanistan cannot prevent the celebration of traditional, religious and cultural events in the country". While, he had earlier pledged the Taliban's reintegration in Afghanistan's political and administrative structures if they lay down the arms and willingly morph into a political party. Thus, UNAMA condemned the incident and said "Attacks directed at civilians are clear violations of international humanitarian law and may amount to war crimes." Yet no group has claimed responsibility for the second explosion in Helmand while reportedly Taliban has had some presence in the outskirts of Lashkargah city in southern Helmand province for the past few years. As per TOLO news reporters, this area has been under the control of

the Taliban for more than the past two years. They said the Taliban militants have presence in many parts of the third and 10th police districts of the city. Thus they, have visited the Boshran area in the PD10 of the city where he says the Taliban's flags can be seen few meters away from the main road and that the government forces are fighting the militants from a short distance. Helmand Police Chief Abdul Ghafar Safi says they will continue their efforts to retake those parts of the city in the near future.

By and large, it seems that security in Afghanistan is deteriorating comparing to the last year, despite the fact there were more than 10,000 civilian casualties. Recently UNAMA released its annual report indicating 3,438 deaths and 7,015 injuries happened in 2017 but according to Pazhwak News Agency, 14,600 had been killed and 10,277 were wounded which shows that Afghanistan has really become the largest human slaughterhouse. Anyway, it is said that the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) - suicide and non-suicide - by armed groups led to the majority of the casualties last year, with ground engagements accounting for the second-highest number of victims.

Everyone is dissatisfied from government and international partners for unaccountability and that only condemning from behind of cement walls which does not heal people's pain. Some social and political analysts raise concerns that the insecurity crisis and deadly attacks in Kabul and other cities will further cause poverty, migrations and distrusts. Others mainly blame security and intelligence departments for their inability to prevent the string of deadly attacks that have rocked not only the capital but also the country especially in few last years. Typically, NUG is responsible for the current crisis in the country and they have to end the insecurity crisis at any cost.

Lastly, the insecurity crisis has really reached in the level that no one is safe but the government frequently fails to resolve problems whereas a fierce new fighting season is expected to kick off in the spring and summer. However, both government and international allies have really approached with the most flexible tone which was unprecedented since 2001 but it seems that talks would not work without military pressure. Because, in addition to proposal of free precondition talks, it was emphasized that we must have the courage to listen to grievances, analyses the root causes and drivers of conflict, and hear a diversity of proposals for reconciliation. This is a critically important part of the proposal. It was also hoped that the constructive approach would guide the future talks. So, at this stage, it was the best opportunity for Taliban to present their own wants instead of presenting their bombs.

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