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Afghanistan an “Island of Instability”: Rereading Internal and External Roots of Instability in Afghanistan**

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Introduction

The medievalist rule of the Taliban and al-Qaeda has been dismantled and replaced by a US backed government, in December 2001, hoping to establish stability and to reconstruct war-stricken Afghanistan. But the ‘new era of hope’ that Bush pronounced for this country has not yet come to pass for many reasons. Indeed, following the overthrow of the Taliban regime and eradication of the al-Qaeda network in November 2001, it was expected that Afghanistan would be re-established after nearly 25 years of warfare. However very soon serious doubts about the progress of stability in the country appeared. Indeed, the events that followed the defeat of the Taliban proved that Afghanistan not only could not be fully stabilized but also would face worst conditions for instability in future.

The increase of conflicts and violence in some regions of Afghanistan particularly in the north, the existence of armed factional militias, drug trafficking, lack of basic necessities in the cities and rural areas, and assassinations all show that Afghanistan still is an ‘island of instability’. According to observers, security in remote areas of the country is worse than it has been for several years. The assassination of Haji Abdul Qadir, one of the Afghanistan's newly appointed vice-

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presidents, provides a grim reminder of the continuing political instability in the country and the fragility of its new government.¹ Not surprisingly, more than 6 million Afghans have no access to the most basic health services.²

Instability within Afghanistan is linked to many internal and external factors. Domestically, the nature of Afghan society, which is based on ethnic diversity, its historical background, the puppet government itself, economic catastrophe, long-term civil war, the existence of armed groups, returning refugees and remnants of the al-Qaeda or Taliban fighters are the major causes for instability. Externally, the influence of regional and international players in this country and particularly the war on Afghan people under the name of the 'war on terror' has created an environment in which stability became difficult to obtain.

This paper aims to analyze the major factors of instability in Afghanistan and also attempts to present some ideas about stabilizing this country.

Domestic factors for instability

a. Armed groups

Long term fighting in Afghanistan has shaped a group of regional warlords from different tribes. At the moment one of the great threat to the Afghan stability and security comes from these armed groups across the country. The numerous autonomous powerbrokers include Ismail Khan, the governor of four western provinces; Gul Aqa, the governor of Kandahar; and the Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum have posed

¹ Seeking security in Afghanistan, Financial Times, London (UK), Jul 9, 2002; p. 14

² Khabir Ahmad "Regional instability further shows Afghanistan's reconstruction" The Lancet, Vol. 360, Issue 9335, September 7, 2002, p. 736

security problems within Afghanistan.³ Their power comes from their individual forces of thousands of loyal armed troops, funded by control of local trading and smuggling routes. They are among a host of players who are in a position to frustrate the efforts of any central government to generate a national system of governance and stability. To this end, they have not made any major effort to disarm their group, even though "many of them made public statements supporting military integration after the interim government took over".⁴ More significantly, they have been struggling against each other over power and even territory. Open conflict between these warlords, such as the clashes between Dostum's forces and those of Tajik General Atta Mohammed in the north; have severely hampered the desperately needed services of humanitarian agencies.⁵

Although the majority of warlords have accepted the authority of the Afghan interim government (in words) but they are governing their territories as independent rulers in practice.⁶ Interestingly, some of these warring factions would refuse the peace process or at least they would manipulate it to their advantage. This would lead Afghanistan toward new conflict. Above all, the existence of armed groups has been associated with the absence of a governmental armed force and this has made the situation worst. Because in countries "recovering from civil war the most critical requirement for long-term peace is the demobilization of the formerly warring parties and their integration within a unified military" but this has not happened in Afghanistan yet and won't be happened in near future.⁷ However, the process of military integration has already initiated, but it is slow and almost vague. The perennial ethnic, factional, and religious clashes are hampering the progress. In addition, the political factors of post-Taliban transition are

³ Amin Saikal, "Afghanistan after the Loya Jirga", *Survival*, vol. 44, No. 3, Autumn 2002, pp. 47-56

⁴ Anja Manuel and P. W. Singer, "A New Model Afghan Army" *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2002

⁵ See Amin Saikal, op. cit.

⁶ See Hooman Peimani, "Afghanistan-based international drug trafficking: A continued threat" *The Analyst*, May 8, 2002

⁷ Anja Manuel and P. W. Singer, op. cit.

not prepared for establishing a united army. The interim administration installed has never answered clearly basic questions about the size, composition, and tasks of a national army.⁸

In the meantime, the USA itself has created a situation in which the warlords not only could survive but also they have been armed and supported by America. The United States and allied forces attacked Afghanistan to defeat the Taliban government and al-Qaeda network; but demobilizing the country's military groups was not on the agenda. As a result, "the operations may have abruptly suspended the civil war, but they have created only a tacit truce without dismantling the full war-fighting capabilities of the armed groups".⁹ Equally important, the dangers of fragmentation have been heightened by the US tactic of arming and otherwise supporting various strongmen for the purpose of hunting down Taliban and al-Qaeda remnants. Interestingly, the USA "has taken the view that there is no alternative to dealing with warlords until there is a strong central government to replace their authority".¹⁰ Nevertheless this practice, together with the rejection of America and its allies to enhance the role of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to cover areas outside Kabul, risks undermining any hope of establishing solid central power.

b. The interim regime

The US backed government in Afghanistan itself is part of problem. First of all the president, Hamid Karzai and his leadership team are far from claiming a national base of support. More importantly, Karzai himself has no solid national standing.¹¹ Secondly, from the tribal point of view the Pashtun, the largest ethnic group who nevertheless make up fewer than half of Afghanistan's roughly 26 million people, hobbled by its own divisions and opposition from other minority groups,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Amin Saikal, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Ibid.

such as Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras. In particular, "many ordinary Pashtuns thus suspected that the interim government was just a vehicle for minority ambition".¹² More importantly, the Pashtun tribes and the village clergy visualize Afghanistan as an occupied country run by a puppet administration imposed by Western-Christian powers. Hence, to them Afghanistan has lost its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In addition as the interim government is likely to play role mainly at the behest of the USA, it has no real power. Thus the Karzia's power is fundamentally limited and he wields so little power outside the capital that he is spoken of as the mayor of Kabul. In other words, the authority of the government, led by Karzai, is limited to Kabul, where a 4,500-member international security force maintains a measure of law and order.¹³ Yet, many parts of the country, especially outside the main cities and towns, are out of control.¹⁴

c. Taliban and al-Qaeda

The existence of Taliban and al-Qaeda within the territory of Afghanistan as a major threat to the country's security and stability should not be forgotten. However, some senior their leaders have been captured or killed, they cannot be viewed as a spent force. Surprisingly, according to some observers both groups still enjoy popular support among many Pashtun nationalists in southern Afghanistan and the tribally administered border regions of Pakistan.¹⁵ Yet, there would not be any possibility for these groups to participate in the future regime of Afghanistan but they might be seeking to strike the government and causing security problem across the country.¹⁶

¹² See Anja Manuel and P. W. Singer, op. cit.

¹³ "Afghanistan at risk", New York Times, New York, N.Y. March 27, 2002, p. A.22

¹⁴ See Christina Lamb "Old Fears in the New Afghanistan", New York Times, New York, N.Y., December 8, 2002, p.15A. , Amin Siakla, op. cit., and Anja Manuel and P. W. Singer, op. cit.

¹⁵ For example see Anja Manuel and P. W. Singer, op. cit.

¹⁶ Interestingly, the recent reports indicate that some of the Taliban armed forces are used as the government's police in some part of Afghanistan.

According to the news Karzai's government has reportedly voiced concerns to US officials that Taliban forces are regrouping in areas along the Afghan-Pakistan border in preparation for a new wave of terror.¹⁷

d. Economic catastrophe

Western promises that Afghanistan would never again be forgotten collide with reality. However, a year after the overthrow of the Taliban and imposition of a US-backed regime, there has been little development in the lives of most Afghanistan's people, few of whom possess televisions or fine clothes or care about the luxury of free speech. These people spend their days struggling to feed their children on an average annual income of \$75. Therefore, for many ordinary Afghans the burning issue is not the fate of Bin Laden or the Taliban but finding food and shelter.¹⁸ One Afghan resident in Kabul has said "You can shave and put on Western clothes but that is noting. You cannot feed yourself by shaving, can you?"¹⁹ Afghanistan's grain production has fallen by more than 50 per cent in the past two years, its livestock herds are severely depleted and its irrigation systems extensively damaged.²⁰

In the general ward of Kabul's main children's hospital sick children lie three to a bed, one oxygen tank passed among them. According to the hospital administrator, children have died on the operating table because the oxygen failed when the power went out, as it frequently does. The hospital has no backup generator. The average life expectancy in Afghanistan is 46 years, and approximately 25% of Afghan children die before their fifth birthday. Six million Afghan people do not have access to basic health care services. There is a critical shortage of physicians, nurses, and other health care workers in rural

¹⁷ "Year after Kabul's fall, victory not yet declared", ABS-CBN News, November 11, 2002

¹⁸ "Year after Kabul's fall, victory not yet declared"

¹⁹ Quoted in Year after "Kabul's fall, victory not yet declared"

²⁰ Horst Rutsch, "Afghanistan on the road to recovery, UN Chronicle, Vol. 39, Issue 1, March-May 2002, pp. 7-11

areas and grossly inadequate supplies of medicines, vaccines, equipment, and fuel.²¹

In a recent piece for the London Sunday Telegraph, Christina Lamb assessed U.S. and Western assistance to Afghanistan. On the streets of Kabul, she found a woman named Nadina who had walked five hours from her village to bring her son, Gulajan, to a hospital after he had fallen into a coma in his local hospital when it ran out of food. Three-year-old Gulajan weighed 13 pounds. “Life is no different in our village than before”, Nadina told Lamb. “We have no food because of the drought. We hoped the foreigners would come, but no one has. We don't know why.”²²

e. Drug trafficking

The opium and heroin production in Afghanistan and Afghanistan-based international drug trafficking are a byproduct of over twenty years of lawlessness, chaos, and poverty caused and reinforced by the conflict which lasted until the collapse of the Taliban. When the anti-terrorist operation was launched in Afghanistan, there were hopes that simultaneously with the defeat of the Taliban, drug trafficking would be vanished. But this has not happened. This can be understood from the President Karzai words “We have to eradicate the cultivation of poppies and the production of narcotics in Afghanistan out of our national interest. The agriculture of Afghanistan is being destroyed [by the illegal drug trade]. The gardens and fruits that Afghanistan is famous for across the world will be destroyed. Our wheat production will be destroyed. And the money made by poppy cultivation is not enough to make our farmers rich”.²³ The reports from the region indicate increase of drug trafficking. Pravda in October 2001 reported, “The scale of drug-

²¹ Gro Harlem Brundtland “Afghanistan: Rebuilding a health system”, JAMA, Vol. 287, Issue 18, Chicago, May 8, 2002, p. 2354

²² Quoted in David Corn, op. cit.

²³ Cited in Ron Synovitz, “Afghanistan: Kabul Continues To Struggle With Poppy Cultivation, Drug Trade”, Radio Liberty, 2001

trafficking from Afghanistan into Tajikistan has markedly increased since the beginning of the U.S. anti-terrorist operation, a spokesman for Russia's Federal Frontier Guard Service has told RIA Novosti".²⁴ According to Pravda the increase in drug trafficking from Afghanistan would expected in Kazakhstan in connection with the opening of mountain passes in 2002.²⁵

Now the question is which factor or factors has/have helped to increase drug trafficking in Afghanistan even in the post-Taliban era? H. Peimani has pointed to the four major factors contributing to the operation of the drug "industry": rampant poverty, lack of a viable economy, ethnic rivalries and the absence of a strong central government.²⁶ Among them the first two factors have encouraged many Afghan, particularly in the rural areas, to substitute non-profitable traditional farming with financially rewarding opium production, while generating a large army of recruits for drug trafficking. Indeed, the absence of a strong central government in control of the entire country, the prevailing lawlessness and the impoverishment of Afghanistan have created a suitable ground for the production and trafficking of narcotics under protection of the local warlords, argued H. Peimani.²⁷

External Factors

Undoubtedly, the most involved country in the recent events of Afghanistan is the United States of America. The very first question is whether US engagement is owing to American concern about the people of Afghanistan or it is because of the damage on its own society? Many observers believe that the events of September 11, led the USA to play such role in the Afghanistan affairs. A. Saikal, for instance, has argued:

²⁴ Pravda, October 16, 2001

²⁵ Pravda, July 12 2002

²⁶ Hooman Peimani, "Afghanistan-based international drug trafficking: A continued threat", The Analyst, May 8, 2002

²⁷ Ibid.

Dramatic change came to Afghanistan not because the world community suddenly decided that the Afghans were a people worth saving from the regime that was tormenting them, but because the Taliban and their allies finally engaged in activities that directly harmed the United States. Had it not been for the apocalyptic attacks of 11 September on New York and Washington, the Afghan people, in all probability, would still be suffering under Taliban rule.²⁸

Although it is claimed that the foreign forces, the America's is included, are in Afghanistan to keep peace and security the post war events have shown that these forces themselves have been generate insecurity.²⁹

Another external factor, which can cause problem for Afghanistan's security and stability, is its northern neighboring countries, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. These newly independent republics themselves are called the arc of instability. Ethnic conflicts, conflicts between these states or their neighbors, dictatorship regimes, economic obstacles, are some issues that surely would endanger Afghanistan security.³⁰

The way ahead

To ameliorate the effects of these factors in order to stabilize Afghanistan is not a simple job and it would take long time. In addition, building civil institutions, disarming militias, securing participation of all ethnic groups in government, continuation of international contributions, and empowering central government are some important initiatives that have to be considered seriously. Currently, the existing circumstances

²⁸ Amin Saikal, op. cit.

²⁹ See CNN, BBC, and local and world journals

³⁰ On the issue of the impact of the Central Asian republics on Afghanistan see Frederick Starr "The United States, Afghanistan and Central Asia" Newsletter of Asian Studies, Special issue on 'Central Asia One Year After', Fall 2002 and 125 Alec Rasizade, "The New 'Great Game' in Central Asia after Afghanistan", Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, Vol.1, No.2, Summer 2002

jeopardize security and stability within Afghan society. Alastair McKechnie, World Bank Country Director for Afghanistan says: “Lack of security outside of Kabul is a constraint to reconstruction. This not only affects the ability of the international community to provide assistance that reaches the people, but improved security is also an area where the international community could provide further assistance”.³¹

In the final analysis, Afghanistan remains a scene of tremendous potential instability. To establish stability in this country first and the foremost the future of Afghanistan must be left in the hands of the Afghans and the foreign forces have to be withdrawn. If we have learnt anything from the past 150 years of Afghan history, it is surely that solutions imposed from outside do not work. Of course, the international community should provide assistance but the form of government and the process that leads to its establishment should be up to the Afghan people. Indeed, the people of Afghanistan have exhausted by armed conflicts that threatened the very existence of their nation, need the sustained support of the international community to successfully pursue the road to recovery. The UN should play the leading role in any transition. Only the UN has the global reach, the instruments and the expertise to provide effective relief and reconstruction in Afghanistan, although it will need to do this in active partnership with committed states. All countries should be ready to devote the resources required to carry out its broad range of tasks across the world.

Furthermore, a very strong state's armed force should be established without influence of any foreign country. This force has to contain personnel from all major tribes. And more importantly all warlords and their groups must be disarmed but of course they can join the government's military force.

Conclusion

³¹ *Khabir Ahmad, op. cit.*

When the United States-led coalition overthrew the Taliban in November 2001, Afghans were promised a new era of stability, democracy and respect for human rights. For many Afghans, the end of the Taliban's uniquely oppressive rule was like liberation. Yet more than one year later, the human rights situation in most of the country remains grim and people suffer from insecurity and poverty. This has happened not simply because of the inherent difficulties of rebuilding an impoverished, devastated country, but because of choices the United States and other international actors have made, and failed to make. Thus, after decades of interminable instability, the challenges facing the country are daunting and still fraught with danger.

Despite wide range of propaganda produced by America to show that stability has return to Afghanistan, in reality still it is a mater of debate. In other words, the expectations of a new order of stability emerging in the post-Taliban era have not been met. What is apparent is that the present uncertainties will continue and the Afghan people will be forced to endure suffering for a while longer.³²

In fact, despite concentrated efforts by the aid community and elements of the local political infrastructure, Afghanistan is by no means a safe, secure or stable place at the moment. The security environment is worse than during any time under the Taliban. Therefore, it is fair to say that Afghanistan has a very long way toward stability.

³² M M Ali, *Subcontinentnal drift-toward instability, war and constitutional changes* ,The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, Vol. 21, Issue 5, Washington; Jun/July 2002, pp. 34-35