

Blaming Pakistan will not Win U.S. The Afghan War

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Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

اسلام کے تھیولوجی آف کاؤنٹر ٹیررزم

In what appears to be an over-repeated theme, US President Trump recently once again blamed Pakistan for the American failure in Afghanistan during an interview he gave to Fox News on 18th Nov. As the news created ripples in Pakistan, what followed the interview was a series of bizarre tweets by the US President, in which he once again brought up Osama bin Laden and blamed Pakistan for playing a double game, ignoring that his predecessor President Obama publicly said in India, out of all places, that he did not believe that Pakistani leadership knew about bin Laden's exact location. Pakistani PM Imran Khan, who has been compared with President Trump by several commentators, sent out his own series of tweets in which he defended Pakistan and highlighted Pakistan's sacrifices in the war on terror. Pakistani PM's tweets were followed by a statement from the Chief of Pakistani military General Qamar Javed Bajwa as well as a statement from Pakistan's Foreign Office, that summoned US Chargé d'Affaires (US CdA) Paul Jones to register an official protest over President Trump's comments.

This theme which involves both countries blaming each other for the longest war in American history has been repeated so many times in the past that there are several things that I will avoid talking about in this article. But one thing that is new this time is the official admission from Pakistan's Foreign Office, for the first time, that it was the intelligence cooperation from Pakistan that helped track Osama bin Laden. In the past we have heard some similar tales from American investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, who claimed in his writings that Pakistan had kept bin Laden under house arrest since 2006 and elements of the Pakistani military aided US in taking down the leader of al-Qaeda. Initially, these claims from Hersh were trashed by most mainstream American commentators as well as US intelligence and military community but Pakistan's latest admission, which appears to be in line with some of the claims made by Hersh, has poked new holes into the official version of the story of the killing of the al-Qaeda leader.

Many people initially found it hard to believe that how can an American Special Forces team enter Pakistan and carry out such a risky operation without any cooperation or knowledge of Pakistan's Armed Forces and its intelligence community. Initially, the full credit of the operation was taken by the then US President Obama, who was looking to win his second term in the White House, while Pakistani government and security establishment insisted, they didn't know about bin Laden's whereabouts but never once suggested that Pakistan may have cooperated with US in the operation. There can be a dozen theories why Pakistan stayed quiet at that time only to admit it in 2018 that it cooperated with US in tracking the al-Qaeda leader, but none of those theories could be called a fact at this point. Some Western former intelligence analysts I talked to over the years believed that it could have something to do with Pakistan's fear of domestic public backlash as bin Laden is still revered in much of Pakistan as someone who played a role in defeating the Soviets in Afghanistan, but how accurate is this belief cannot be said with hundred percent certainty. What we can say with absolute conviction is that not all the facts are yet publicly known about the operation that took down the notorious leader of al-Qaeda and the official version of the story provides fewer answers and raises more questions.

Today the Afghan war has reached a stalemate and the US-supported Kabul regime is barely able to hold Kabul while, according to some estimates, nearly fifty percent of Afghanistan is ruled by Taliban. Today the United States government is in open negotiations with the Taliban, who now enjoy an office in Qatari capital of Doha.

The Taliban flag flies on top of this office building and the name plate reads 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan', a name which according to the American demands the Taliban weren't allowed to use if they were to negotiate with the US government. Taliban, almost every week, claim massive defections from the ranks of pro-government forces from all over Afghanistan. Videos released by Taliban's propaganda channels feature Taliban fighters openly roaming the streets and plains, unafraid of any airstrikes, while other videos show Taliban's military training camps in different locations all over Afghanistan. Seeing their popularity rise among Afghan civilians and after gaining new credibility following its engagements with Russia and more recently with India, Taliban have moderated themselves to a great extent, and are no more the Taliban of 2001. Today, there's a strong consensus among Taliban leaders against attacks on civilians, sectarianism, attacks on non-Muslims, and more.

This shouldn't be surprising, because besides having the experience of actually ruling Afghanistan, Taliban have been here for a long time as opposed to other groups like the Islamic State, and therefore they have learned a great deal from what they consider their past mistakes. Taliban have also learned that gaining support from locals instead of terrorizing them is key to maintaining its hold on territory since the support from locals could be the difference between battle victory and defeat. This certainly doesn't mean that everything is black and white. There are still elements within the Taliban who don't agree with this moderation, and many such militants and commanders have defected to the Islamic State Khorasan chapter, which has also attracted most extreme militants from other groups like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Jaish-e-Mohammed, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Lashkar-e-Islam, etc. But the overall Taliban of 2018 are quite different from the Taliban of 2001, whether it comes to their training, equipment, propaganda, ideology or actions. This is perhaps one reason why US assessed that it is in a position to negotiate openly with the Taliban rather than in secret.

One thing that sets Taliban apart from groups like the Islamic State is the fact that a vast majority of the Taliban are Afghan locals who live there, essentially making it near to impossible to uproot them. And it cannot be dismissed that the Taliban came into being as a reaction to the brutality and injustice of the Afghan war lords, many of whom were merged into the Kabul regime post US invasion. Today these same war lords claim to be the official rulers of Afghanistan, bringing the same problems with them that gave birth to the Taliban, causing discomfort among the civilians while simultaneously giving more credibility to the Taliban with their every action. On the other hand, airstrikes and ground operations by pro-government forces continue to produce mass civilian casualties. One example of Kabul regime's promotion of bad actors was the notorious Afghan war lord General Abdul Raziq, who was given important positions in the regime in exchange for his services, which included torturing civilians and carrying out mass extra-judicial killings. When General Raziq was killed recently in a Taliban attack, Kabul regime went into public mourning, completely oblivious of how unpopular he was among Afghans. To add salt to the wounds of Afghans, Kabul regime then appointed Tadin Khan, General Raziq's younger brother, the chief of Kandahar police. Tadin Khan, a man who was running a shop of automobile parts before his brother's death, was given the rank of the general and with that the entire Kandahar to manage. This kind of terrifying mismanagement has been a consistent theme of Kabul regime, that has promoted bad actors who then went on to deliver bad governance.

As long as groups like the Taliban are providing better governance to locals than the actual governments, they can never be defeated with military force. Mismanagement is not something unique to the Kabul regime. The main backer of Kabul regime, the United States, has also contributed its fair share to this mismanagement. For starters, the US mismanaged the Afghan war from day one because its attention was focused on Iraq and in later years on Syria and Libya. Any chance that US had of defeating the Taliban and convincing Pakistan to give up its Taliban assets was in the first year of the Afghan war. And indeed, Pakistan did give up most of its assets at the time and also aided US in capturing and killing several high-profile terrorists. But very soon the then leadership of General Pervez Musharraf in Pakistan realized that US was mismanaging the war and that the Taliban will be back in no time, which led Pakistani leaders to revisit some of their initial assessments. Somewhere between 2003-2005 it became very clear to the Pakistani leadership that it cannot afford to turn Taliban into an enemy because of the vast porous border Pakistan shares with Afghanistan, and therefore a window must be kept open for the time when Taliban are back. As we know now, the assessment of Pakistani leadership turned out to be right.

American leaders were in no mood for defeating the Taliban militarily when they invaded Afghanistan. In their own words, they had no problem with the Taliban if the Taliban would just give up Osama bin Laden. So, when Taliban disappeared from sight after the initial invasion, Americans didn't pursue them and instead preferred to forget about them. Multiple people in the US administration asked their superiors at the time: Where are the Taliban? Where did they go? Did they vanish in thin air? They were told not to worry about it. Except, as we now know, there was obviously a lot to worry about. The Afghan war will now soon enter into its 18th year and the situation in Afghanistan for US is grim. Most American analysts and observers now agree that winning the war is not an option anymore and that the US must now find a face-saving to militarily exit Afghanistan. Blaming Pakistan for the defeat of NATO, the greatest military alliance in the history of mankind, at the hands of a small group of backward militants, seems to be the ideal face-saving route taken by the US government. But it fails to take into account several facts, including that Pakistan is literally the only country that could offer greater leverage to US in any negotiations with the Taliban. The other countries talking to the Taliban directly are Iran, Russia and China. All three of these countries see US as their prime adversary.

But that's not the case with Pakistan, which has historically been a close US ally. Pakistan also provides supply route for NATO forces in Afghanistan through its territory, and continues to do so even after repeated condemnations from US government as well as domestic public backlash. What US government sees as a double game by Pakistan is seen by Pakistani leaders as protection of Pakistan's interests. And while the accusations of double game against Pakistan are convenient for Americans, Pakistani leaders can just as easily turn around and accuse the US of the same, while pointing towards use of Afghan soil by anti-Pakistan terrorist groups. The fact that Pakistani leaders don't publicly make such accusations means they understand that such accusations do irreparable damage and are still willing to cooperate with the US in the war on terror. But that doesn't mean that Pakistani leaders will turn Taliban into an enemy and start a new war on the country's northwestern border.

Photo: Washington Post