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A New Look at Afghanistan

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Although for some time Israeli focus has not extended beyond the borders of Iran, a fresh approach to Iran's eastern neighbor, Afghanistan, could unveil strategic advantages for Israel. While Iran has enormous influence on Afghanistan, events in Afghanistan are mistakenly viewed almost exclusively through Western-American lenses. At a recent INSS conference, Michele Flournoy, former US Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, called on Israel and the United States to reexamine their priorities in order to strengthen their interests in the changing Middle East and help stabilize it; to be much more involved in discussions with civilian leaders and those who are shaping public opinion on social networking sites; to discuss agendas with civilian leaders, their aspirations to govern, and how they intend to govern; to restrain the extremists; and in general, to try to find common ground. She suggested opening channels of communication with civilian figures in tandem with communication with the authorities.

Today most United States transactions in the area are with Pakistan, in preparation for the withdrawal of US forces in 2014. Pakistan has interests in China, Iran, and Russia, and its loyalty after the withdrawal of US forces is highly questionable. Even today, the United States and Pakistan are sharply divided over the issue of drone strikes in the mountainous tribal areas. Pakistan has strongly criticized the US policy that has led to the deaths of civilians in these strikes. Islamabad claims that in addition to killing members of al-Qaeda, the United States is killing members of Afghan militias cultivated by the Pakistani government.

A great deal of money has been sent to Afghanistan from Islamic countries, most of which is used to build mosques and purchase weapons and ammunition, or "Quranic shipping containers," as dubbed by exiled Afghan leaders. Indeed, the Islamist axis is steadily growing stronger.

Three circles of power operate in Afghanistan: the religious groups, the tribal groups, and the civic-national groups. It is often claimed that investing in the religious groups strengthens the connection to Pakistan; investing in the civic-national groups strengthens the connection to India and will provide the (sole) basis for building a civil society with a

good future foundation for the growth of the democratic model; and investing in tribal groups will strengthen the connection to Iran. However, there are some tribal leaders who are distinguished precisely by their civic work for their communities and tribes, and even for the national interest as they understand it.

Afghanistan has a tribal society, and its tribal structure is thousands of years old. The Afghan population is mostly rural and lacks a young, intellectual middle class. Most of the information on events in Afghanistan comes from foreign correspondents, diplomats, human rights activists, and foreign soldiers who report from the major cities through blogs, or else from people who have been exiled from Afghanistan and report from abroad. The most popular and accessible communications medium in the country is radio. Only in the large cities is there television, not to mention internet and social networking sites.

While the discourse on social networking sites is perhaps not representative of Afghani society, it appears that what is posted on these sites is authentic and credible. They shed light on trends in Afghanistan, and especially the attitude toward NATO and US activity; Pakistan's influence on events in Afghanistan; the change in the internal Afghan dynamic; the security-political situation in Pakistan; the peace talks and the dialogue between the West and the Taliban and the West and the Afghan government; and the Taliban's and the Afghans' attitude toward the Karzai government.

Afghanistan's borders with Iran and Pakistan are porous. The border with Pakistan can be penetrated by al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Afghanistan's neighbors are successfully taking advantage of the conflicts in the periphery and the inter-tribal rivalry. One leader of the Pashtun tribe – which sees itself as the descendant of the lost tribes and even calls itself “sons of Moses” – is from a province in the southeast of the country with a population of 2.5 million, one of thirty-four Afghan provinces. A reformist, he seeks a connection with the West through agricultural and economic projects, and his supporters hope that his work will be a main axis for changing the government and uniting the tribes. Indeed, some in Afghanistan and outside the country say that he is the only person capable of uniting the warring tribes into a political and security force. He also suggests that the tribes be armed in order to thwart the Taliban and secure hundreds of kilometers of border with Iran and Pakistan. He is seeking humanitarian aid in order to improve infrastructures, employment, education, and sanitation, and he has called for a government without corruption.

What follows are some of the current trends that appear in published information, including social networking sites in Afghanistan.

Delegitimization of the US and NATO Presence in Afghanistan

There is a broad consensus concerning the need to remove foreign troops from Afghanistan as soon as possible. The basis of the legitimacy for continued NATO and US operations there has declined, both within Afghanistan and outside the country, and is now

almost non-existent. There has been harsh criticism of the moral degradation of foreign forces and the serious damage to the religious and cultural sensibilities of the Afghans.

Time Favors the Taliban and Works against the Allies

Because of the loss within Afghanistan of the basis for legitimacy for Western operations to “liberate” the country, Afghan religious forces are growing stronger at the expense of the nationalist forces. For its part, the United States is losing its momentum. The US interest was to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table from a position of weakness, but in the past year, the equation has been reversed. The Taliban is dictating the conditions and the pace of progress in the talks. The Americans are interested in expediting the withdrawal because within the United States and abroad they are losing the legitimacy for the war, and are turning into the side that can be pressured and that is eager for a settlement, for better or for worse.

The Spillover of Religious Fundamentalism to Pakistan

Because of the proximity of northern Pakistan to southern Afghanistan and their identical ethnic, geographic, and tribal characteristics, it is natural that the Afghan Taliban finds shelter in the border region with Pakistan. The continuing war on terror against the Taliban has propelled troops to cross over into Pakistan, and Islamabad does not prevent them from entering. Pakistan has an interest in strengthening religious fundamentalist forces to prevent the tribal and nationalist forces that are interested in closer ties with India, at the expense of Pakistan, from being strengthened.

Karzai’s Government: A Corrupt Political Leadership

Karzai’s government is perceived as fundamentally corrupt and degenerate, lacking the ability to govern, and lacking any real ability to control events in Afghanistan. There is not a single element in Afghanistan that supports the Karzai government. Furthermore, the Taliban leadership is not prepared to hold serious talks with the central government as long as the “occupiers” have not left Afghan territory. The non-governmental organizations in Afghanistan, especially the Independent Election Commission, are investing great effort in building institutions and good governance. A change in the election law is also on the agenda, including a change in the party structure that will greatly strengthen civil society and the new democracy, in part at the expense of the religious elites.

Until the Withdrawal, No Internal Afghan Settlement Will Be Possible

It is clear to everyone that the future of Afghanistan must be determined by the internal political players, and not by a policy dictated from outside. Any policy formulated by internal political forces, together with NATO and the United States, is doomed to failure. Nevertheless, it is also clear that the pace of the allies’ withdrawal depends on the achievements in the war on terror on the one hand, and on political agreements and understandings between the United States, the Taliban, and the Karzai government, on the other.

The Future: Civil War or an Afghan-Pakistani War?

In the past, Pakistan was the base for the training, instruction, and funding of Afghan mujahidin forces in their war against the Soviet occupation. Most bloggers anticipate two possible scenarios for the day after the withdrawal:

- a. Taliban forces will fight national security forces, local police forces, and the Afghan army, which will lead to renewed civil war within Afghanistan; or alternatively
- b. Taliban forces will continue to cross over into Pakistan, endangering governmental stability and security and leading to a war between the two countries.

