

## Afghanistan: A Field Report



A security cordon outside the Indian embassy in central Kabul

### Avinash Paliwal

They might not be in a position to take over the city or the country, but the Taliban in Kabul are but a phone call away. My interpreter, Mustafa (name changed), a Tajik from the Panjshir Valley with dark features and a strong build, called Syed Akbar Agha, head of the Jaish-ul-Muslimeen faction of the Taliban and a former 'chief-of-staff level commander' of Mullah Omar around 1.45 pm to seek an appointment. Basic information was shared: an Indian student from a British university studying India-Afghanistan relations wants Taliban's take on India's role. No names were given.

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As we sat in the surprisingly stylish Flower Street Café on Taimani Street enjoying a continental lunch, we did not expect a positive response, at least not for a meeting within an hour itself. How could Akbar Agha be sure of my intentions and identity? He did not even know who Mustafa was. More worryingly, how could I be sure that Mustafa and I would be safe? Scheduled for 3 pm, we were to reach Spin Kalay, just 9 km outside Kabul, and ask for 'Agha Sahib' at the local mosque. Given the lack of street names and house numbers, finding houses in Kabul is much like a treasure hunt.

A Pashtun-dominated town, Spin Kalay houses many Taliban leaders and soldiers, and is not a top priority for logistics companies catering to expats. It is said that the Taliban has a hold in this area strong enough to influence bureaucratic and police appointments. When we reached the mosque in Spin Kalay, the maulvi refused to guide us to Agha's house. If anything went wrong, the Taliban will not let the maulvi live in peace, perhaps not even live at all. Help, however, came from unexpected quarters—a child playing outside the mosque took us to the house

At Agha's doorstep, another child led us to the guest-room in the opposite house. We were fairly anxious by now, and unlike Mustafa, my lack of religious beliefs did not afford me the comfort of the prayer beads rolling steadily between Mustafa's thick fingers. The situation became more tense as four Taliban foot soldiers in shawls came in and sat disquietingly close to us, forming a sort of cordon. Even though we were spared a top-to-bottom body frisk, they shook both my hands for a few seconds longer than usually considered appropriate; I was later informed that it is done to check for rope-burns or other marks consistent with a soldier's hands.

The next twenty minutes were a question-answer session from their side. One of the four Talibs who spoke Urdu wanted details about me and why I was in Afghanistan during “such times”. The others, between long silences, kept Mustafa engaged in conversation. Once the initial questioning was over, there was silence for the next few minutes.

The icebreaker finally came from the least expected person: the Urdu-speaking Talib spoke with a wide grin—“Hindustan Afghanistan ka dost hai,” (“India is Afghanistan's friend”), before speaking in Pashto to Mustafa, “Your Pashto got us confused brother; are you sure you don't have a Pashtun connection?” Akbar Agha entered the room at this point and what followed was a candid interview ending with an offer to be their guests for the evening.

This incident, one of the many during my month-long stay in Afghanistan (April-May 2013), could have been eminently forgettable but for the quick glimpse it offered into the myriad challenges confronting Afghanistan.

It is easy to make the common mistake of judging the Afghan society through an ethnic prism. This overpowering and simplistic tendency can be misleading. It is true that the two dominant ethnic groups, Pashtuns and Tajiks, are wary of each other. But this is only part of the story. There are bonds between different ethnic groups which are deep and abiding, and exert considerable influence on attitudes. Stories of inter-ethnic marriages and families made up of activists from different political and armed movements are common in Afghanistan. The resulting ethnic potpourri means that it is difficult to pin down ethnic loyalties. What seems to be clear-cut lines of ethnic distinction and conflict is often an entangled social network which defies simplistic analysis. In Kabul, political ties and economic patronage often defy ethnic identities and linkages based on kinship.

### **On Class**

These patronage links are best reflected in the emergence of a professional neo-elite post 2001. With degrees from foreign universities and influential family connections in Kabul and the provinces, this neo-elite has altered the class landscape of Afghanistan. Overcoming ethnic differences and dreaming of a utopian neoliberal democratic Afghanistan, these individuals aspire for political power without resorting to violence. They lobby with diplomats and have sympathisers in positions of influence within the government and outside.

The flaw is in the nature of politics the group wants to engage in—it wants to distance itself from the past. This militates against the socio-economic and political structure of Afghanistan. The decision to remain distant from the traditional political class, to which they belong, makes it difficult to negotiate with the power brokers of the country. Thus, pushed to the periphery of the political spectrum, this neo-elite remains insecure about its political longevity and personal safety. Not surprisingly, most of them hold dual nationalities and have their families living abroad. Many of them are making plans to leave the country soon after the US withdrawal.

### **On Security**

The security situation has worsened not only in the South and East of Afghanistan but also in North (Takhar, Badakhshan) and West. The number of bombings and kidnappings has increased in Herat. The Kabul-Jalalabad road is controlled by anti-government elements, including the Taliban after 4pm every day: the Afghan security forces vacate their posts, terming it impossible to secure the road after dusk.

The government in Kabul works fine behind fortified buildings, but there is a sense of fear among the people in the city. While there is some degree of confidence among the current political class in

their ability to control the security situation and keep the Taliban from returning as they did in the 1990s, they are banking on the capability of the Afghan security forces to a large extent. Many in Kabul are either leaving or planning to leave the country, fearing a civil war after the US drawdown.

The Haqqani Network is a formidable force in East and South and remains a challenge. Even if the new government retains control of Kabul, the writ of the state will be restricted to urban centres with the rural areas remaining hostage to warlords and the Taliban. An example of this is the rearming drive of Ismail Khan in Herat and surrounding villages. There are two aspects to this. One to fortify against possible Taliban military offensive after 2014. Second and equally strong motivation is to keep the country stable so that the flow of international aid is not halted or reduced after the drawdown. Afghan security and western officials during separate interviews talked about the possibility of former warlords, nervous about their waning influence, working with their adversaries (Taliban, the ISI or others) to ensure a volatile environment. The logic is that the only way to draw funds from the international community is to maintain the status quo. This explains the rising number of kidnappings and killing of foreigners, and targeted attacks in Kabul.

As for the Af-Pak frontier region, the number of training camps have tripled in the border areas as well as in Pakistan over the last decade, and the Pakistani army has started positioning units on its western border, where shelling has been ongoing for some time now (for example at Kunar and Nuristan). Although the Afghan forces are coming up as an important counter-force with highly motivated soldiers, their capacity to prevent a Taliban or Haqqani surge remains limited at present.

The impending US drawdown has provoked a desperate scramble among different stakeholders. There are both positive and negative repercussions. On the one hand the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have been successful in containing attacks in major cities and have a degree of legitimacy among people. Despite the ethnic factions within the force, there seems to be cohesion within the units. Though it is often said that the Soviets left a better-trained army than what the Americans are likely to leave, ANSF has the potential of becoming a stabilising force. From this perspective, the number of soldiers is not crucial—as long as there are enough to maintain control over city centres and main trade arteries. Even if questions remain about the ANSF capabilities, there is a public will to see the force succeed.

The force has a tough challenge on its hands. On the ground, it is struggling to secure not only the countryside but also the trade arteries. It remains poorly armed and undertrained to counter a thrust from its archrival on the eastern border, Pakistan. Durand Line is a source of tension between the two countries and has recently seen a rash of skirmishes. For Kabul, the instigation came from Pakistan's alleged decision to issue Pakistani passports to Afghan villagers living in the border areas, and to build a military gate in what is claimed to be Afghan territory. If true, it is a classic technique

of expanding administrative frontiers in otherwise undefined border areas. The Durand Line problem is not something that can be wished away any time soon. There is a greater possibility of Pakistan jockeying for a better and stronger foothold on the border after the US drawdown. This is likely to bring ANSF into direct confrontation with the Pakistani Army.

A serious standoff between Kabul and Rawalpindi without the NATO-ISAF security umbrella could prove to be a disaster for Karzai and his successor. Till now, ISAF air support has been a critical element in ANSF's operations against the Pakistan Army and the Taliban. It was this challenge looming on the horizon which compelled Karzai to make a visit to New Delhi in May 2013 to seek military equipment.

The situation could worsen in 2015. It could be similar to the Pakistani military surge in Afghanistan during the late 90s when Pakistani troops took on anti-Taliban forces in Takhar, Kunduz and Badakhshan. Pakistan had moved 8,000 to 10,000 troops to Afghanistan to defeat Massoud's forces. According to some of the eyewitnesses I met, the Kunduz airlift was mostly an operation to remove Pakistan troops from Afghanistan (in addition to Taliban leadership and others) and went on for days. At the end of the day, a scenario without the Western armed support looks grim.

Another incident reflecting the regional complexities playing out in Afghanistan was the seizure of 1,300 kg of explosives on its way to the Salma Dam in March-end 2013. The dam is being built by India. The decision to blow up the dam reportedly came from the Quetta Shura and the explosives from Iran. Being the lower riparian on the Hari Rud River (on which the dam is located), Iran has been wary of the Salma Dam. Senior Afghan officials believe that Iran and Pakistan were working together with the Taliban to maintain a destabilised environment in areas closer to the Iranian border in western Afghanistan.

### **On Foreign Troops post-2014**

It is widely believed in Afghanistan that the US military presence is likely to remain formidable but will operate from pre-determined bases. The US military's principle task in 2015 and beyond is to ensure that the country does not slip into a civil war immediately after the drawdown. Drone attacks will continue. The ambit of the Drone attacks may expand but will not be of much help in containing the Taliban insurgency or pushing back the Haqqani Network's control of eastern areas. Drones can, however, make a difference in case of a serious standoff between Kabul and Rawalpindi on Durand Line. The unmanned aerial vehicles could step in to help the Afghan forces by neutralising Pakistani artillery and infantry positions.



## On Pakistan

Pakistan figures prominently in almost every conversation about Afghanistan's future. Despite a negative public image, many Afghans believe Pakistan is a crucial player. Pakistan has not remained content with its past tie-ups with the Taliban and other Pashtun groups. In the last few years, Rawalpindi has invested considerable time and effort in developing a rapport with the Tajiks. The objective is to take advantage of the Karzai-Tajik rift and to drive a wedge between the former Northern Alliance members and India.

This strategy seems to be working to Pakistan's advantage. Over the last few months, according to observers, while anti-Pakistan sentiment has risen exponentially in the Pashtun-dominated South and East, the Tajik leadership has struck a conciliatory note towards Pakistan. In a frank interview, Ahmad Wali Massoud, brother of the late Ahmad Shah Massoud, said that “they [Pakistan] wanted me to meet the head of the ISI in whichever part of the world I like...they ask me why are we fighting each other when we can be friends...there is a logic there”. Wali Massoud is not the only leader who has received such requests from Pakistan—others include Hazara and Uzbek warlords. These developments could be disconcerting to New Delhi but fit well with the dynamics of the local Afghan politics.

Barring some Pashtuns, other ethnic groups are not averse to brokering a deal with Pakistan. Anti-Karzai sentiment forms a point of convergence for Pakistan and Karzai's domestic detractors including the Taliban. If it were not for the staunch anti-Pakistan public opinion, links between Rawalpindi and these political factions would have been out in the open by now. Even though a 90s-like Taliban resurgence is highly unlikely, it cannot be dismissed off hand. The situation has changed to such an extent in the last decade or so that the Taliban fears challenge more from its Pashtun adversaries than the Tajiks. Karzai's request for arms from New Delhi is in some measure also motivated by this factor.

## On India

India also figures prominently in most conversations. Although the general tone is positive towards India and its generous assistance, it is punctuated with concern about India's future outlook and policies vis-à-vis Afghanistan. The overarching concern is how India is likely to manage apparently contradictory policies vis-a-vis Pakistan. It is clear in Kabul that India wants a deeper engagement with Pakistan, but it is also wary of Pakistan's negative role in Afghanistan.

There are clear contradictions. India's stated goal is to remain neutral in Afghanistan, but its past association with the non-Pashtun Northern Alliance has sown doubts about the veracity of this

claim. Then there is the fact that although New Delhi has made considerable investments in Afghanistan's development, questions remain among the Afghan elite about its end goal in the country. Support to Karzai is viewed as biased and has affected India's relations with its friends from the north. Ironically, even Karzai is being advised to take India's commitment of support with a pinch of salt. The phrase “Afghans are paying for their friendship with India” has gained currency in Kabul, including among those who are New Delhi's friends.

## **On Taliban Talks**

Everyone, including the former Northern Alliance warlords and current Afghan government leadership, is open to talks with the Afghan Taliban and drawing them into the political mainstream. Such an intra-Afghan dialogue, however, is seriously undermined by Washington's efforts to engage directly with the Taliban.

Pakistan's role makes the process even more knotty. Kabul agreed to the idea of political reconciliation in order to get the Taliban out of the Pakistani Army's grip, and to weaken the mobilisation capacity of the former (an idea to which senior Indian leadership came to terms with in 2010). Rawalpindi's interest is no less transparent—it wants the Taliban in Kabul on “Pakistani terms”. Given these contradictions, the reconciliation process (and even the UK-Afghanistan-Pakistan trilateral) is increasingly becoming irrelevant. Not surprisingly, Pakistan uses India's visible and expanding role in Afghanistan as a pretext to pursue its core “strategic depth” agenda with the help of its proxies like the Haqqani Network and the Taliban.

Nevertheless, the Karzai government is not averse to hammering out a mutually beneficial arrangement with Pakistan. This explains the rise of the Hizb-e-Islami members in the Karzai cabinet and the advisory board. Even the non-Pashtuns are today talking to Pakistan. This jockeying for political space in a post-US Afghanistan is likely to have a significant influence on the events in the run-up to the drawdown and beyond.

## **On 2014 Presidential Election**

Who after Karzai is a fruitless question at present. The best recourse, for people in Afghanistan as well, is to create a list of candidates and then speculate. What is interesting is the excessive importance given to the US in Afghanistan's domestic political affairs. It is clear that not a single possible presidential candidate would take a stand against the US in a way that would really matter—even a 'Hizb' candidate will need the US support. The decision then comes down to the domestic political equation. In this, attempts are being made to find a candidate of 'consensus'. It may seem difficult, but it will not be too hard to find a person who fits the bill, considering the fact

that even former Northern Alliance members have become acceptable to Pakistan. Overall, despite the possibility of another violent phase, the political situation in Afghanistan can stabilise provided there is a strong international commitment post 2014. The alternative is only grim.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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