

Focus Essay

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The Coronavirus, the War on Terrorism, and the Taliban in Afghanistan

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Abstract

In this focus essay I discuss how the Taliban understand the Coronavirus in Afghanistan. I make the point that they see it as a political event of significance for establishing their legitimacy, as well as to press the US and the Afghan government to come to their terms in the War on Terrorism.

Key words: Afghanistan, Coronavirus, Taliban, War on Terrorism, Prisoners.

The Taliban control 70% area of the war-ravaged Afghanistan. Despite the two decades long War on Terrorism neither have the Taliban been defeated nor has peace returned to the country. The War on Terrorism has rather divided the land, the people, and politics in the country. Now that the US economy is faced with the coronavirus pandemic, the War on Terrorism in Afghanistan seems to be coming to an end. President Trump's administration has already hinted about the withdrawal of troops soon. Once

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that happens the country might be back on the square one of internal fighting among various warring factions.

Meanwhile it is important to ask how the Taliban have been addressing the challenge of the coronavirus in the area under their control? In late March 2020, a video footage became viral showing the Taliban wearing surgical masks, checking temperature of people, and distributing hand sanitizers.¹ The narrator of the footage, with English voice-over, says that the Taliban have made certain necessary arrangements like setting up quarantine centers. The footage also shows how the Taliban seemed to be aware of the pandemic as well as engaging with the people on it. In this way they want to assure the people that they have not only the required tools and knowledge, but also the potential to take care of them. These efforts are also meant to prove their legitimacy, strength, and control in the areas of their control. Moreover, because they compete with the central government in the provision of services their interest in the pandemic seems competitive.

In other reports the Taliban are shown dressed in complete medical gears and seen carrying out medical workshops for the prevention of the coronavirus.² They are said to have instructed the people to follow the guidelines of the World Health Organizations (WHO) in order to control the spread of virus. Accordingly, they have emphasized on the use of masks, gloves, and washing of hands with soap. Moreover, they have accepted the concept of social distancing and instructed the people to strictly follow it. In this regard they have banned public gatherings and large weddings. Above all their flexible policy on collective praying is worth noticing. They have asked people to prefer to pray at homes instead of mosques and to observe social distancing. For instance, in Baghlan province Tariq Khalid Hijram, who is Taliban's newly-appointed director of public health, is reported to have been running a vigorous public awareness campaign. He has ordered for printing and distributing pamphlets to every house.³

In the face of the pandemic, the Taliban have partially changed their attitude toward the NGOs. They are allowing health

workers of NGOs to provide medical assistance to the people in their areas to cope with the coronavirus. Earlier the Taliban had banned entry of the staff of foreign NGOs in their controlled areas. They also used to target, abduct, and kill NGOs staff, especially the foreign ones. Even last year the Taliban banned entry of both WHO and Red Crescent staff to their areas, though Red Crescent staff was later on allowed.⁴ But in the wake of the Coronavirus their policy toward the NGOs has significantly changed in positive way. The Taliban have also enforced lockdowns, especially in the areas bordering Iran due to refugee influx.⁵ Interestingly, the Afghan Ministry of Health has welcomed this move of the Taliban even though they continue to fight with each other.⁶

On the war front the pandemic has had little impact on bringing peace to the country. Rather the imminent withdrawal of the US forces is expected to bring more fighting between the Taliban and the Afghan National Army (ANA). The Taliban have already rejected an appeal for cease-fire in the wake of the pandemic by the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. The Taliban seem to be determined to fight both the pandemic and the Afghan National Army (ANA). In order to get their prisoners released the two parties are also negotiating with each other along with the US who has been playing the key role in this regard. On February 29, 2020 a deal was struck among the three parties in Doha for the mutual exchange of prisoners. Accordingly, the Afghan government was to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners before March 10, 2020 and the Taliban to release 1,000 Afghan security forces by the same time.⁷ Javid Faisal, spokesman for Afghanistan's Office of the National Security Council, said in a press conference in Kabul on June 9, 2020 that the government has released so far 11,000 prisoners--3,000 among them are Afghan Taliban. He told that in return the Taliban have released 450 prisoners among whom 300 are government soldiers and the remaining 150 are Afghan civilians.⁸ Interestingly, the Taliban also made a humanitarian gesture asking the Afghan government to release ordinary Afghan prisoners to protect them from the deadly virus. The release of the Afghan Taliban was a part of the Doha peace deal and also in consideration of the looming threat of the

coronavirus pandemic.⁹ According to the Prisons Affairs Office till May 16 a total of 600 prisoners were tested for the coronavirus out of which 50 came positive.¹⁰ The testing sent an alarm in Afghan prisons and substantiated the Taliban propaganda to pressurize the Afghan government to expedite the process of release of prisoners. The Afghan government has set up Quarantine centers in the provincial prisons to keep the suspected prisoners in isolation. The government has also set up 150-bed hospital in Kabul's Pul-i-Charkhi prison where so far 47 prisoners have tested positive.¹¹

The process of prisoners' exchange however has remained slow. The Afghan government has used delaying tactics to slow down the process. Initially, it also tried to argue that it was not party to the Doha deal because the deal was signed by the US and the Taliban only. However, later with the US pressure the Afghan government showed readiness to release Taliban prisoners, but with the exception of those who were involved in large terrorist incidents. On the other hand, the Taliban have not agreed to this condition and insist for release of all of their members.

It is worth mentioning that the Taliban have also requested the US government to release the last Afghan prisoner, Asadullah Haroon, from the Guantanamo Bay detention facility due to the coronavirus. The author in February visited Haroon's family who resides in Shamshato camp, a large refugee camp located 25 kilometres southeast of Peshawar.¹² Roman Gul, the elder brother of Haroon, told the author that Haroon was arrested in 2007 from Nangarhar province for his alleged connections with the Al-Qaeda, but the US didn't provide evidence to the family. Haroon's family has connection with the Hizb-ul-Islami headed by Gulbadin Hikmatyar. Haroon's lawyer in London Clive Stafford Smith told the BBC that the US failed to prove charges against him. Smith's co-counsel Mahwish Rukshana told the author that the Afghan government should ask the US to release Haroon on three grounds: first, no charge was proved against him, second, while following the US-Taliban peace deal prisoners are being exchanged, and third, because of the coronavirus.¹³

As the exchange of prisoners is proceeding slowly the fight between the Taliban and the Afghan forces has renewed. This renewed fighting is taking place in the backdrop of a withdrawing US. According to the Doha peace deal the US is going to reduce its troops from 12,000 to 8600 by mid-July and finally withdraw the rest in the next fourteen months. With the outbreak of the coronavirus the Trump administration is considering to withdraw its troops even before the agreed timeline. The Afghan government is however not happy with the withdrawal of the military support. Now it has to brace up to the big challenge of stopping the spread of the Taliban forces to the capital. And the imminence of an all out war between the Afghan forces and the Taliban can be guessed from the response given by the Afghan government to the cold-blooded attack on a maternity hospital. The Afghan government asked the security forces to adopt offensive approach against the Taliban even though the latter did not claim responsibility for the attack. It seems that in the aftermath of the US withdrawal Afghanistan will be once again at the verge of a civil war.

Notes:

¹ Jackson, "For the Taliban, the Pandemic Is a Ladder."

² Kumar, "Taliban Launches Campaign to Help Afghanistan Fight Coronavirus."

³ Kumar, "Taliban Launches Campaign to Help Afghanistan Fight Coronavirus."

⁴ Baheer, Esmat. (BBC Correspondent), in discussion with the author. May 20, 2020.

⁵ Anwar, Saeed. (BBC Correspondent), in discussion with the author. May 6, 2020.

⁶ Baheer, Esmat. (BBC Correspondent), in discussion with the author. May 20, 2020.

⁷ The Nation, "Full Text of US-Taliban Peace Agreement."

⁸ "سفر درستی ز لوی پاکستان ی د ته کابل"

⁹ Bayani, Farhad. (Afghan Government Spokesman), in discussion with the author. May 20, 2020.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Gul, Roman. (Elder brother of Haroon), in discussion with the author. February, 2020.

¹³ Rukhsana, Mahwish. (Co-Counsel of Haroon), in discussion with the author. May 12, 2020.

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