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Preface

In an interview with BBC, the Saudi Charge d'affairs opposed the Taliban's political office in Qatar and said that it was established out of the framework of the political environment. He also added that they would cooperate with the Afghan government and that they see the Taliban as a "terrorist" group. However, releasing a soft statement in response to Saudi Arabia's position, the Taliban has given some clarification about their political office and has requested from Saudi Arabia to play a "positive" role in the Afghan case and help in ending the "occupation".

Two weeks ago, the Qatari non-resident Ambassador to Afghanistan visited Kabul and requested Afghan government to back Qatar's stance in its confrontation with Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, the Saudi diplomats and officials have also urged Afghan political circles to support these countries against Qatar. Thus, it seems that the Gulf diplomatic crisis has extended its roots to Afghanistan as well. What was the role of the Saudi Arabia in Afghanistan in the past? What is its current position? What can it do for peace in Afghanistan? These are the questions that are analyzed in the first part of the Weekly Analysis of the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies.

In the second part of the analysis, you will read about the delay in the announcement of the new US strategy for Afghanistan. While the ongoing war in the country is getting further complicated day by day, the new US administration's lingering policy will define the destiny of the war. What options does the Trump administration have? What are the factors behind the delay? What should Trump do in Afghanistan? Here you will read in this regard.

Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan



Since two weeks, Saudi Arabia has commented on Afghanistan twice. First, while condemning the attack on the Iraqi Embassy in Kabul, Riyadh vowed to cooperate with the Afghan government to eliminate “terrorism”.¹ Later the Saudi Charge d’affaires in Afghanistan Meshari al-Harbi said during an interview with the BBC that the Taliban is a “terrorist” group² and accused Qatar of supporting the group. He said, “The government of Qatar has embraced the leaders of some of the terrorist groups and backs terrorist groups in Afghanistan.”³

The Saudi anti-Taliban remark is unprecedented in the past two decades. Nevertheless, such remarks, meetings with the Afghan government and the trip of

¹ Pajhwok, Riyadh Vows to Help Kabul Combat Terror, 1st Aug 2017, see it online:

<https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2017/08/01/riyadh-vows-help-kabul-combat-terror>

² BBC Pashto, طالبان ترهگر دي، مشاري بن مزعل الحربي: [Meshari al-Harbi: the Taliban are “terrorists”], 7 Aug 2017, read it here:

<http://www.bbc.com/pashto/40849153>

³ Pajhwok, سعودي: قطر د طالبانو په گډون د ترهگرو ډلو ملاتړ کوي، [Saudi: Qatar backs the terrorist groups including the Taliban, 7 Aug 2017, see it here:

<https://www.pajhwok.com/ps/2017/08/07/%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%B1-%D8%AF-%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88-%D9%BE%D9%87-%DA%AB%DA%89%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%87%DA%AB%D8%B1%D9%88-%DA%89%D9%84%D9%88-%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA%DA%93-%DA%A9%D9%88%D9%8A>

the Qatari Non-resident Ambassador to Afghanistan indicate that the roots of the diplomatic crisis in the Gulf have extended to Afghanistan as well.

On the other hand, in response to the Saudi Charge d'affair's remarks, the Taliban stated that their Qatar political office was open with a motive to resolve the Afghan issue. The Taliban called on Saudi to play a "positive" role in Afghanistan.⁴

What is Saudi Arabia's role in Afghanistan? When did differences between the Taliban and Saudi Arabia emerge? And what can Saudi Arabia do in the Afghan peace process? These and other similar questions are analyzed here.

Saudi's role in the Afghan issue

Historically, due to the existence of the Holy Mosques and places in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan has had warm relations with this country. However, the close ties between the two countries, began when Dauod Khan became the Afghan Prime Minister. At that time Dauod Khan wanted to distance himself from the Soviet Union's allies and eliminate reliance on the Soviet Union. Therefore, he traveled to Saudi Arabia and achieved some aid from this country as well. Nonetheless, after the Saur communist coup d'état and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, relations between Kabul and Riyadh deteriorated.

After the Saur communist coup d'état until the formation of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia helped the Afghan Mujahedin and the Afghan refugees in Pakistan, instead of the Afghan government. During the Afghan Jihad, the Mujahedin and the Afghan refugees vastly relied on the financial and human support of Saudi Arabia.

When the Taliban captured Kabul, Saudi Arabia recognized the Taliban regime, becoming the third country after Pakistan and United Arab Emirates (UAE) to recognize the Taliban government. After the collapse of the Taliban regime, Saudi Arabia supported the new Afghan government. In 2002, Saudi Arabia promised

⁴ The Taliban's statement in response to the remarks of the Saudi Charge d'affairs, 7 Aug 2017, read it here:

<http://alemara1.net/?p=48032>

<http://alemarah-dari.com/?p=61275>

\$220 in aid to Afghanistan in Tokyo Conference. Saudi provided financial grants to the Afghan government for several times; however, Saudis aids to Afghanistan were far less compared to that of other countries.

Between 1978 and 2001, Saudi Arabia was a key player in the Afghan issue and, to a greater extent” had played an active role in the Afghan peace process. Due to its aids to the Afghan Mujahedin and refugees during the Jihad, Saudi gained some influence over the Afghan Mujahedin. And since the two holy mosques of Muslims are in this country, most of the Muslims honor Saudi Arabia. That is why the former Afghan President Hamid Karzai traveled to Saudi Arabia several times during his tenure and requested Riyadh to play a constructive role in the Afghan peace process. However, these efforts failed, and Saudi Arabia could not play the role it had played during the Afghan Jihad.

The political differences between the Taliban and Saudi Arabia

The first political dispute between the Taliban and Saudi emerged when, in 1998, Osama Bin Laden was accused of blasting some US embassies in the Northern Africa. At that time, the Saudi chief spy traveled to Afghanistan and met the leader of Taliban Mullah Mohammad Omar in Kandahar. According to some books, the meeting did not go well , and a verbal dispute occurred between the two.

After 2001, Saudi Arabia backed the Afghan government. Hence, in 2009, the Taliban diplomat Sayed Tayyib Agha demanded from Saudi Arabia to host them, but Riyadh put two preconditions: first, cutting links with Al-Qaeda. Second, the recognition of the Afghan constitution. However, the Taliban did not accept these preconditions and termed these conditions by Saudi Arabia as its denial for hosting them.

Later, the increased relations between the Taliban and Iran and Qatar also impacted the ties between the Taliban and Riyadh. That is why now, Riyadh is opposing with the Taliban’s political office in Qatar and, at low-level, considers the Taliban as a “terrorist” group.

Afghanistan and the Gulf Diplomatic Crisis

The political crisis emerged in June 2017 when Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates cut their diplomatic ties with Qatar one after another within ten minutes. In the meanwhile, these countries also tried to geographically and economically marginalize Qatar. Apparently, the reason behind the crisis was the fact that some Gulf countries accused Qatar of supporting “terrorist” groups.⁵

Clarifying the Saudi policy towards Afghanistan, the Saudi Charge d’affaires said last week that Saudi Arabia sees the Taliban as a terrorist group and also expressed concern about the Taliban’s relations with Qatar. Saudis opposed the Taliban’s office in Qatar because they believe it is a source of support to the Taliban and through this office the Taliban contact other countries and get aid and support.

Such remarks on behalf of Saudi Arabia come at a time that Qatar’s non-resident Ambassador to Afghanistan “Safar bin Mubarak al-Mansouri” traveled to Kabul several weeks ago and met the acting Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs. Although, the statement of the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not say much about the meeting, according to a source, Qatar has asked for Afghanistan’s support in the Gulf crisis. According to the source, the Afghan government has repeated the same demands the Afghan president had made during his meeting with the Qatari Minister of Foreign Affairs several months earlier. At that time, besides the closure of the Taliban’s office, the Afghan President had demanded from Qatar to cut the financial resources of the Taliban as well as stop the activities of the Pugwash, an international organization that works for issue such as peace.⁶ One and half month earlier, the Egyptian Ambassador to Afghanistan

⁵ CSRS, د منځني ختيځ نوی ډیپلوماتیک بحران او پر سیمه یی اغېزې [the diplomatic crisis in the Middle East and its impacts on the region], 17 Jun 2017, read it here:

<http://csrskabul.com/en/blog/new-diplomatic-crisis-middle-east-impacts-region/>

پښتو: <http://csrskabul.com/pa/?p=3628>

⁶ Pajhwok, سعودي: قطر د طالبانو په گډون د ترهگرو ډلو ملاتړ کوي [Saudi: Qatar backs the terrorist groups including the Taliban], 7 Aug 2017, see it here:

<https://www.pajhwok.com/ps/2017/08/07/%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%B1-%D8%AF-%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88-%D9%BE%D9%87-%DA%AB%DA%89%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%AF->

and the Saudi Charge d'affaires had met Hamid Karzai asking for his support in the Gulf crisis.⁷ Hence, the roots of the crisis in the Gulf have now reached Afghanistan.

On the one hand, if the Taliban are not ready for the talks, the Afghan government wants to ban the group's diplomatic efforts by closing its office in Qatar. On the other hand, the NUG has strong relations with the Saudi Arabia more than any time in the history and; therefore, it may not want to be get involved in the Gulf crisis. However, the Afghan government will have to choose one between the two.

What can Saudi do in the Afghan peace process?

Since the past several decades, Kabul has always looked at Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to resolve the Afghan case. That is why first Karzai and then Ashraf Ghani demanded Saudi's cooperation to end the war in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, Saudi still influences the Taliban. That is why when Saudi called the Taliban a "terrorist" group, the group said nothing in their statement in this regard except some clarification about Qatar's Office and the request from Saudi to play a "positive" role in Afghanistan.

Now there is a good opportunity for Saudi Arabia to mediate between the Afghan government and the Taliban by using its spiritual and religious credibility because both the Afghan government and the Taliban trust Saudi and this country's soft power can have positive effects. In addition, compared to Obama's administration, Trump has better relations with Saudi Arabia which can have a positive role in the Afghan peace process.

<http://www.naraynews.com/?p=8379>

⁷ Naraynews, [Saudi Arabia and Egypt have demanded Hamid Karzai's support in the Gulf crisis], 18 Jun 2017, read it here

<http://www.naraynews.com/?p=8379>

The Trump administration's hesitation towards the US war in Afghanistan



The new US strategy towards Afghanistan was to be announced in mid-July 2017; however, due to divisions among the senior officials in the White House and the assessment of various options to deal with Afghanistan, it is delayed. Trump is not happy with the US strategy in Afghanistan in the past 16 years and reiterates on its assessment and revision. Therefore, the policy-making organizations and senior officials of the US work on the new US strategy in Afghanistan since the past several months; not reaching a decision yet.

The high-ranking US military officials and the senior advisors of Trump have presented many options to deal with Afghanistan, among them is dispatching 5000 additional troops to Afghanistan, putting pressure on Pakistan, and the inclusion of regional approach, the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan, and the privatization of war in this country-sending mercenaries of the security companies such as "Blackwater" and "Dyne Corps" to Afghanistan.

Recently, the US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said on the sidelines of a regional conference in the capital of Philippine that Donald Trump did not want the US strategy to be the same as in the past 16 years. One of the advisors of the national security team of the White House Sebastian Gorka has also said that Trump does not want to repeat the “mistakes” of the past 16 years in Afghanistan. On the other hand, it is said that the head of CIA has traveled to Afghanistan and has brought the scheme of privatizing the war in Afghanistan.

The Phases of US War in Afghanistan 2001-2017

The US strategy in Afghanistan has passed through various stages between 2001 and 2017. After the beginning of the war in Afghanistan, the US strategy in Afghanistan was to overthrow the Taliban regime and to form a new government. At that time, when George W. Bush was the US President, relations between the US and Afghanistan were warm, and the aids of the international community and particularly the US imbued in Afghanistan. In the second phase, when the Taliban reemerged and started their fight against the Afghan government and the foreigners, the US focused upon the battleground and increased its troops in Afghanistan in 2006.

During the presidency of Obama, on the one hand, relations between Karzai and Obama were deteriorated and, on the other hand, the casualties of the US troops were on the rise- raising voices in the US against the US war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Therefore, there was no specific US policy in Afghanistan. First, the US decision makers decided to increase soldiers in this country, and then they determined to withdraw their forces and finally at the end of 2011; the US troops began to pull out from Afghanistan.

Besides pulling out its troops from Afghanistan, the US wanted to have military bases in Afghanistan; therefore, when the National Unity Government (NUG) was formed in Afghanistan, and consequently relations between the US and the Afghan government improved, the Bilateral Security Agreement was signed to facilitate US bases in Afghanistan. As a result of the newly improved relations, Barack Obama decided to stop the US soldiers’ withdrawal from Afghanistan, as

requested by the Afghan government. Once again, the US troops were allowed to carry out night raids, which were stopped due to the opposition of the former President Hamid Karzai. Most importantly, the Afghan government remained silent against the civilian casualties in the attacks by foreign forces. Therefore, the role of the US troops in the battle ground enhanced and besides the vast casualties of the Afghan civilians and troops, the mortality rate of the foreign forces has also increased.

The Factors behind the Delay in the Announcement of the new US Strategy

The Afghan issue was not one of the priorities in the debates of the election campaigns of the US in 2016 because the US Republicans had started this war and the Democrats failed to end it. Trump had only a few comments about Afghanistan during his campaigns and even after the elections. Trump's such silence about such major issue of the US policy indicates his reluctance about the continuation of the war in Afghanistan. That is why Trump's administration works on the revision of the US strategy in Afghanistan in the past 16 years, and several senior US officials have traveled to Afghanistan until now.

The US war in Afghanistan is the longest and the most expensive war of the US. While besides losing thousands of its troops on the Afghan battlefield, the US has spent hundred billions of dollars in Afghanistan, one-third of the Afghan soil is out of the control of the Afghan government and the war is more intensified than ever. As the US officials state, it seems that Trump does not want to treat Afghanistan the way it was dealt with in the past 16 years and thinks of changing the US military strategy in Afghanistan, as Rex Tillerson has said that Donald Trump has asked "tough questions" from his advisors about the war in Afghanistan. The Trump administration is divided over a series of issues including the privatization of the war in Afghanistan. According to the reports, the advisors of Trump "McMaster" and "Steve Benin" have for several times used harsh language against each other during debates about Afghanistan in the White House.

Another reason behind the delay in the announcement of the new US policy is US's involvement in the Middle East and its confrontation with Russia, North Korea, etc. The rivalry between the US and Russia in Afghanistan has also affected the Afghan issue and has made the Trump administration reluctant in this regard.

The Necessity to End the War in Afghanistan

The US and NATO war in Afghanistan started after the overthrow of the Taliban regime and has continued up until now with a slight change, and it does not seem to end anytime soon. Although the number of the US forces has remarkably decreased, the US is still deeply engaged in this war-torn country.

Some Afghans believe that the US wants the prolongation of war for its interests. In the meanwhile, there are analyses that one of the interests of the US in this region is the encirclement of its rivals such as China and Russia however they have not yet achieved it and nor have they accessed the resources of the Central Asia. Therefore, according to this line of thinking, the US is also behind the emergence of ISIL in Afghanistan. Given such analysis, it is needed for the new US policy to clarify these vague points because if the US' objective in the region is not the continuation of war, the past 16 years has proved that we will not reach a stable Afghanistan through war.

Increasing the number of foreign forces in the battlefield in Afghanistan or the privatization of war will further strengthen the morale of the armed opposition of the government and will put an adverse effect on the peace process. In the meanwhile, giving the responsibility of war to the private security companies will have negative consequences because the private security company of Blackwater has a long history of violence and misdeeds and is accused of violating human rights. Moreover, there is no guarantee that it will lead to the success of the US strategy in Afghanistan.

In fact, the prolongation of the war in Afghanistan costs Afghan lives every day and even it faces the US with substantial financial and human losses. Therefore, the US can play the role of a guarantor and thus end its longest war, the war it started 16 years ago. The Trump administration must realize that peace in

Afghanistan is not only in the best interests of the Afghans but also the Americans and the world.

The only achievement for the US in its 16-years-long war in Afghanistan is its presence in the region and the prolongation of the war. Does the international community want to resolve the Afghan issue; they must allow Afghans to try for themselves, reach a consensus and resolve their issues by themselves.

The end

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