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Preface

The issue of Afghan refugees in the countries in the region and the world is a challenge that existed even from the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG). In the past several years of the NUG, thousands of Afghans have returned from the neighboring countries particularly Pakistan due to these countries' mistreatment with the Afghan refugees. Moreover, the refugee crisis emerged in Europe which also affected the thousands of Afghan refugees in European countries. In the meanwhile, due to the ongoing war in the country, the internal displacement also increased, which in turn challenged the Afghan government.

Speaking at a gathering for the migrants' day (18 December), the Afghan Minister of Refugees and Repatriation said that the NUG's policy towards refugees was a success. The condition of the Afghan refugees during the NUG and the NUG's policy are issues that you would read in the first part of the Weekly Analysis of the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS).

In the second part of the analysis, you would read about the remarks of the officials in the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) about their preparedness to open a political office for the Taliban in Kabul. It comes at a time that the government's peace policy and HPC's role in the reconciliation process is highly criticized by the peace activists. What does opening such an office for the Taliban in Kabul mean? Will such efforts pave the way for peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban?

The assessment of the NUG's policy towards the Afghan refugees



The Afghan Minister of Refugees and Repatriations Sayed Hussain Alemi Balkhi said last week that two million refugees had returned to Afghanistan since the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG), 70% of which were unregistered refugees and that there were still approximately 6 million Afghans refugees in various countries of the world.

Balkhi added that during the refugee crisis in the Europe, the deportation of 80 thousand Afghans from Germany was probable but that it was due to the policies of the Afghan government that only 580 people in 2015 and 754 people in 2016 were returned to the country.

What was the NUG's policy towards the refugees? Did this policy produce any positive outcomes? These are the questions that are analyzed here.

The NUG's stance regarding the Afghan refugees

The Afghan refugees are an important part of the Afghan nation and many of them are literate, professional, businessmen, and other likewise people that their return to the country could vastly contribute in the construction of the country. In 2015, during his speech in the Afghan Senate, the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said that the Afghan refugees were part of the Afghan nation and that without their repatriation the Afghan nation was incomplete.¹

Coincidence with its formation, the NUG faced the challenges related to the refugees. These challenges had several aspects; more than 1.2 million internally displaced peoples (IDPs), the returnees from Waziristan, the undetermined fate of the returnees from Iran and Pakistan, the deportation of the Afghan refugees from these two countries, and the mass migration of the Afghan youth to Europe. In the meanwhile, another issue for the new government's Minister of the Refugees and Repatriations was to eradicate corruption in this ministry and attract funds because due to corruption, the US had stopped its aids with this ministry.

The government's policy towards the refugees in the neighboring countries

In 2015, the Afghan refugees in the neighboring countries faced some challenges. These challenges included the forced deportation of the refugees from Iran and Pakistan, the expiration of the date of the registered Afghan refugees' cards in Pakistan, and the fate of the unregistered Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran.

At first, about the forced returning of the Afghan refugees from Pakistan, the Afghan Chief Executive said to the media that the decision about the Afghan refugees in Pakistan would be made soon and that an Afghan delegation was to be sent shortly to discuss the issue with the Pakistani authorities.²

¹ <http://morr.gov.af/fa/news/41816>

² <http://www.khaama.com/persian/archives/22956> and Muhammad Hasan Khetab, Abdullah Concerned about refugees in Pakistan, pajhwok news, feb 16, 2015. See it online: < <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2015/02/16/abdullah-concerned-about-refugees-pakistan>>

During an interview, the Afghan Minister of Refugees and Repatriation Sayed Hussain Alemi Balkhi said that the return of the Afghan refugees was in the priorities of the Afghan government and added, “the Afghan government hopes that Pakistan will stop the forced repatriation of the Afghan refugees and this repatriation must occur in a way that the Afghan government be prepared to integrate them in the society.”

Balkhi traveled to Pakistan and Iran and after that the issue of the unregistered Afghan refugees were resolved. Officials in both neighboring countries promised to register the unregistered Afghan refugees and stop their forced deportation from both countries. In addition, the agreement was made to extend the expiry date of the registered Afghan refugees in Pakistan for another two years.

The repatriation of the Afghan refugees from Pakistan was directly in interrelation with the Pak-Afghan relations. Between 2015 and 2016, these relations were tenuous and that is why the flow of the Afghan refugees towards Afghanistan had increased and the Afghan unregistered refugees were not registered, as it was promised, nor was the expiry date of the registered Afghan refugees extended.

The government’s policy towards the Afghan migrants in Europe

Based on the statistics of International Organization for Migration, between January 2015 and January 2016, almost 1.103496 million people had arrived to Europe through illegal paths. The Afghans were the second largest refugee population after Syrians.³

In 2015, due to the ongoing war in their respective countries, many people from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and northern and southern Africa headed toward Europe, which caused the “refugee crisis” there. That is why many European countries undertook efforts to deport those migrants that have arrived to Europe due to economical purposes.

³ http://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/situation_reports/file/europe-mediterranean-migration-crisis-response-situation-report-28-january-2016.pdf

Some European countries such as Germany recognize the Afghan refugees as economic migrants and that is why the German Chancellor Angela Merkel said last year that her respective government had started discussions with the Afghan government about the repatriation of those Afghan refugees whose application for refuge in Germany was rejected.⁴

The German Federal Minister of Interior Thomas de Maiziere also came to Kabul in an official trip. He said that he had come to an agreement with the Afghan government to return those Afghan migrants in Germany whose refugee applications were rejected. He also added that the Afghans cannot go to Germany as “migrants” because, he said, the situation was relatively good in Afghanistan and there existed safe places in the country. In the meanwhile, the Afghan Minister of Refugees said in an interview, “We have always called on the host countries to consider the situation in Afghanistan and decide about the Afghan refugees considering their individual cases. We have signed no agreement with any country that authorized the forced repatriation of the Afghan refugees.”⁵

Balkhi clarified his stance about the Afghan migrants in Europe saying that his respective ministry would never sign any agreement with any country that entailed the forced repatriation of the Afghan migrants. He added that he would not accept the repatriation of the following five categories of refugees:

First, those who are below the age of 18. **Second**, the disabled. **Third**, families that do not have a caretaker. **Fourth**, households headed by a woman. **Fifth**, households whose head was accepted as refugee in the host countries.⁶

In the meanwhile, after returning from Europe, the Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs said in the Afghan Parliament that he had clarified to the European countries that the forced repatriation of the Afghan refugees from those countries were not acceptable.

⁴ <https://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/22065-berlin-kabul-start-talks-on-repatriation-of-afghans-merkel>

⁵ <http://www.dw.com/en/afghanistans-minister-of-refugees-no-agreement-on-taking-back-deportees-from-germany/a-19020715>

⁶ <http://www.etilaatroz.com/33616>

Conclusion

If we evaluate the government's policy regarding the refugees in the past years, on the one hand, we see that the Minister of Refugees and Repatriation have fulfilled some of his promises such as the development of the five-year strategic plan for the ministry and reaching agreements with the neighboring countries about some of the issues. For instance, the agreement with the Pakistani government about registration of the unregistered Afghan refugees and extension of the expiry date of the refugee cards of the registered Afghan refugees. Overall, there existed criticism about the government's this policy regarding the refugees because the critics said it was not a fundamental solution.

On the other hand, the Afghan government did not have coordination in some other issues. For example, in an interview during his trip to Europe, the Afghan President had said that he had no sympathy for the Afghan refugees in Europe, while, as mentioned above, the Afghan Minister of Refugees and Repatriations had a different stance regarding the Afghan refugees in Europe.

Therefore, the Afghan parliament criticized the uncoordinated policies of the Afghan government regarding the refugees, which in 2015 and 2016, as they put it, opened the way for discriminatory behavior against the Afghan refugees in Europe.

Moreover, in this regard it should also be noted that the returnees and IDPs are left reliant on their own resources and aids of the foreign humanitarian NGOs.

HPC and the scheme to open the Taliban's Political Office in Kabul



The Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) has, for the first time, spoken out about the preparations to open the Taliban's political office in Kabul. According to the officials in this council, if the Taliban showed willingness to join the peace process, they would facilitate the opening of their office in Kabul.

In this regard, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, the Afghan Chief Executive, said that if the Taliban were determined to engage in the negotiation process, there were no barrier on the way of the formation of their office in Kabul, lack of a specific address of the Taliban for peace talks is one of the key obstacles on the way of the peace process.

However, after the official inauguration of the Taliban's political office in Qatar in 2013, the Afghan government did not recognize it. This office still exists and the Taliban still announce it as their only address for peace talks.

What are the outcomes of the HPC's announcement about the possible opening of the Taliban's office in Kabul? How much is this scheme feasible? Will the peace process succeed by such efforts? These are the questions that are analyzed here.

HPC and the peace talks with the Taliban

Considering the performance of HPC in the past seven years, one can say that this council would not arrive anywhere with its current peace strategy.

Officials in the Afghan government and HPC consider this council as mediator and the only address for peace talks at a time that, in the past seven years, this council has not even succeeded in establishing contact with the main party of the Taliban.

Lack of the required authority and independence, the presence of the government officials in its formation, utilizations of the positions in HPC as political bribe, the presence of anti-Taliban figures in this council, lack of coordination among its members, the issue of the conception of “peace”, and overall lack of a specific mechanism and strategy for peace talks are the main impediments that hinder the triumph of HPC’s efforts.

Since HPC is established by the government, it can play an efficient role as the representative of the government in the peace talks, but recognizing it as the only mediator of the peace negotiations and thus preventing the formation of an impartial mediator party is a serious hinder on the way of the peace process.

The findings of a recent survey by the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS) also indicate that the majority of the people (76.39%) believe that HPC cannot play the role of mediator in the reconciliation process and that the formation of a real and impartial mediator party was essential for the success of the this process.

The Taliban, as the main party of the peace talks, recognize this council as a government organ and target its members as their enemy.

Therefore, if one evaluates HPC in one sentence, one can say that this council do not have a tangible achievement in the peace process and its preservation as the only door for peace talks and mediation would not lead the country anywhere; however, keeping it as the representative of the government would lead to the success of the reconciliations.

An Office for the Taliban in Kabul?

Talking to the media, the spokesperson of the Taliban has stated that the Taliban did not want any office from the Afghan government. In the meanwhile, he reiterated on the Taliban's old stance about the complete withdrawal of the foreign forces from Afghanistan.

In an environment of mistrust, where the government calls the Taliban as a proxy, wild, and alien group and the Taliban do not recognize the Afghan government, the announcement of such a scheme, despite being a good step to show the good will of the government, does not seem realistic.

In order to prevent the bloodshed in the country and commence the real peace talks, there is a serious need to build trust between the parties engaged in war by an impartial mediator party, as the first step. The formation of an office is something that is feasible through mutual talks and agreements, not through announcing messages to the Taliban through the media!

Coincide with the announcement of the scheme to open an office for the Taliban in Kabul, HPC shared the news about a gathering in Indonesia as well. While organizing a gathering to condemn the Taliban does not heal any pain, through the formation of an impartial mediator group, acceptable for both parties, HPC could reduce the distance between the Afghan government and the Taliban and eliminate the obstacles that prevent the success of the peace talks.

Practical efforts to start the peace talks

While talking about the real peace talks, before the formation of any office or address for the Taliban, the following points are worth mentioning about establishing a real mediator group and building trust between the engaged parties:

First; the realistic peace strategies and mechanisms: the Afghan government is yet to have a specific peace mechanism and strategy. Sometimes, the Afghan government try to enter the peace process through the door of foreign policy, particularly through engaging Pakistan in the peace process and, some other

times, the Afghan government want to bring the Taliban to the negotiation table by force, and sometimes it undertakes some other useless strategies to achieve this end. Therefore, instead of calling the Taliban as an alien and non-Afghan group, the recognition of this group as part of the nation would itself be a positive change of the past failed policies and would open the doors for peace.

Second; recognition of some realities on behalf of the Taliban: although the Taliban continue their current war under the “war against the foreigners”, the Taliban must realize the facts that the victims of the war are Afghans, the Afghan government is a reality, and that negotiations with the government is the only way for peace in the country. If the foreigners wanted peace in the country, peace would have been maintained years ago.

Third; preconditions: the withdrawal of foreign soldier from Afghanistan as preconditions of the peace talks on behalf of the Taliban, to stop the war and accept the current Afghan constitution by the Afghan government were the preconditions of the two parties until now. However, the peace experience in the world has shown that such issues were discussed around a table and were resolved. Nevertheless, HPC has recently announced that it has no precondition for the commencement of the peace talks with the Taliban but in practice such preconditions have led the peace process to a deadlock.

Fourth; to substitute the war strategy with the peace policy: based on a recent report by SIGAR, the Taliban controls over the 40% of the Afghan territory and, in the Afghan issue, they are a force to be reckoned with politically and militarily. In the past one and half decades, the war has continually increased. Therefore, insisting on the war strategy is a betrayal of Afghans. As long as the strategy of suppression and war and the usage of the term “peace” in the sense of the Taliban’s surrender to the government is not altered to a real peace policy, the current peace process would not produce desired outcomes.

Fifth; the US and international community’s role: although after the withdrawal of a greater part of the foreign forces, the current war is not being fought among Afghans, the foreign forces are still present in the country and, in every statement and conference, the Taliban indicate this point. Therefore, one of the elements

behind the failure of this process is that the US does not see itself as a party of the issue and tries to play the role of a mediator, as the presence of the US in the quadrilateral talks.

Sixth; a real willingness for peace: currently, the Afghan government is facing many challenges. While some governors and a commanders do not obey the decree of the President, how can peace with the Taliban, which puts the interests of some people at risk, be accepted in the country?! Therefore, as long as those who oppose peace are present in the formation of the government, the government would not have a real willingness for the peace process and the current peace efforts will not produce any tangible outcomes.

The End

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Note: Please let us know your feedback and suggestions for the improvement of Weekly analysis.

