

Fragile future for Afghanistan's security, and the repercussions for its neighbours

Rabia Nasimi, MSc student in the Department of Sociology at the LSE reports on a conference held at Portcullis House, Houses of Parliament on the 19th October 2015. The conference was titled: *Afghanistan's New Reality: the Unity Government, Development, Human Rights and (In) Security*.

On 19th October, the Afghanistan & Central Asian Association (ACAA) and its sister organisation, the European Campaign for Human Rights for the People of Afghanistan (ECHRA) hosted their Annual Conference at the Houses of Parliament in London. This year's conference focused on the impact of Afghanistan's new government, with a specific focus on human rights, security, development, and the dilemma of Afghan refugees. As an NGO they are dedicated to improving the lives of Afghans both in Afghanistan and the diaspora.

"The ACAA believe that by bringing people with unparalleled experience and expertise together, we can create an exciting platform to promote constructive change in Afghanistan".

What will it take to regain the security of Afghanistan, has been a question many have asked over the past few weeks. The international community has sacrificed a lot and spent a vast amount of time and money to bring stability to Afghanistan. However recent events have led many to think that the Taliban are moving forward and there is a risk Afghanistan will once again sponsor terrorism.



Dr. Massoumeh Torfeh, research Associate at LSE and SOAS, was one of the speakers on the security panel, she stated that 'all Afghanistan's neighbours, especially Pakistan, share the potentially "devastating threat of Islamic extremism'. This suggests that it is important to focus on Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. Primarily because it is Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) which has the most influence on Taliban who are in turn, according to official accounts, causing a serious challenge in 25 out of 34 provinces of Afghanistan. Taliban's recent success in Kunduz, implies that they are capable of effective military action even in the northern areas of Afghanistan and their terror operations are not limited to the southern and eastern areas from which they originate. It seems as though the Taliban have a much more simple yet effective strategy capable of foiling government intelligence. In some complex operations it is clear that they do not act alone.

President Ashraf Ghani's peace talks with the Taliban generated distrust. Ghani moved too fast before ensuring his intelligence apparatus was onboard. Moreover the National Unity Government does not seem to be united over the modality of the talks and the level of cooperation with

Pakistan. The failure of that initial effort now makes peace talks even more distant. Dr Torfeh stated that 'the most immediate danger for the region is the recent major advances made by the Taliban and the potential that they would occupy Afghanistan as they did in 1996'. She reminds us that it was the fall of the northern province of Afghanistan that led to the Taliban military take over of Afghanistan in 1996.

However, according to Dr. Torfeh it seems as though ISI has little interest in pushing for peace talks. This reluctance to enter cooperation with the new Afghan Unity Government is partly due to the fact that ISI has questioned the Government's stability and durability questioning whether it can be considered as a long-term geopolitical ally. There is also serious distrust between Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS) and ISI.

Ghani's endeavour to maintain closer contacts with Pakistan, and his policy of appeasement towards Islamabad has undermined Kabul's relations with New Dehli. Dr. Torfeh argues that 'this was not the gratitude that India deserved after being Afghanistan's fourth largest donor for 14 years, offering support both politically and in several infrastructure projects such as building roads, highways, transport links and schools and even the country's parliament'. Therefore is important that President Ghani reinstills confidence with New Dehli. She also argued that President Ghani's close relations with Saudi Arabia was not favourably regarded by Afghanistan's other important neighbour, Iran, who regards Saudi Arabia as an arch rival in the region.

The instability in the northern parts of Afghanistan also alarmed Russia and the Central Asian republics which share over 2000 km of border with Afghanistan. Russia regards these republics as its southern border and is seriously concerned about Taliban attacks in the northern provinces of Kunduz, Faryab and Badakhshan. It is particularly concerned about the presence of ISIL amongst the fighters in the north. Dr. Torfeh argued that 'the Russian and Iranian leadership must also be brought onboard for finding solutions'.

Dr. Torfeh concluded that 'the Afghan government is in a denying mode, yet the facts are clear. Two-thirds of provinces in Afghanistan are under serious challenge, Afghan forces have lost 65 percent more soldiers this year compared to the same period last year'. It is clear that the Taliban are posing the greatest threat to Afghanistan, and even if they accept peace talks they would demand key positions in the government, a change in the constitution of Afghanistan and a reverse to Sharia law – conditions which would set back all the achievements of the past fourteen years. Therefore the Government of Afghanistan must seek the support and cooperation of new leaders in all neighbouring countries to reverse this trend and avoid returning Afghanistan to a centre for terrorist activity.

However International NGO's are more reluctant than ever to send their staff to Afghanistan, as it is regarded as the most dangerous country to conduct aid, the situation in Afghanistan looks very different now, and not as encouraging.

What needs to be done to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a centre of terrorist activity in the region? How much longer will it take to address the Afghan Armies basic flaws? Will the goal of a self-reliant army be reached anytime soon?

The conference was very well attended with distinguished guests from the Polish, Slovakian, Lithuanian, Kuwaiti and Afghan Embassy.

