January 2010

Point of View: To Bring Peace to Afghanistan, the International Community Must Understand Pashtuns

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that these people are stakeholders in both countries.

The creation of the Taliban in Kandahar, the royal and cultural capital of all Pashtuns, seems to have been another effort to decimate Pashtun identity. The Taliban, a movement native in composition but proxy in nature, should not be clumped with Al-Qaeda and other foreign mercenaries. Most of the Taliban rank and file are not hardened ideologues. They fight due to a complex combination of tribal, ethnic, religious, political, economic, and social reasons. For example, the symbolism of fighting international forces in southern Afghanistan is not lost upon the Taliban. The front lines of this area, particularly the provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, are often the very sites where Afghans battled and defeated imperial Britain in the 19th century.

Instead of taking absolutist positions, one must look at the Taliban in their regional context. If the clerical parties of Pakistan, the parent organizations of the Taliban, can be part of Pakistan’s electoral process, then the Taliban should be allowed the same in Afghanistan. The religious right garners a minute percentage of the vote in Pakistan; let us see how much they manage in Afghanistan. The vast majority of insurgents are rational players who can be convinced to make peace, but only if the United States makes a credible commitment to the region. A valuable window of opportunity was lost early on when the focus, and resources, shifted to Iraq. In all the tragedies that Afghanistan has had to endure, perhaps the greatest has been the coming to power of a village cleric.

Pashtuns on either side of the Durand Line are one. The sensitivity of either segment of Pashtuns to the conditions of the other means that there can be no peace in Afghanistan until the Pashtun population of Pakistan is politically emancipated. Thus the Pashtuns in Pakistan need to be collected in a single province in which secular political parties are provided a level playing field vis-à-vis religious elements, their language and culture celebrated, and their economy improved. It is important to celebrate the transnational nature of the Pashtun population instead of trying to subsume their ethnic identity into a larger religious framework through the propagation of militant Islam. Efforts in this regard in the past have had disastrous consequences for the world.

Three million Afghans, including Pashtuns from Pakistan, died in the war against the Soviet Union, a conflict that helped bring down the Berlin Wall and liberate Eastern Europe. It seems that the United States was willing to wage that war until the last Afghan. However, the current conflict is not being fought as a reward for those services. It is being waged for the security of the United States, indeed the world (as exemplified by the United Nations mandate for the effort), whose interests align with the interests of ordinary Afghans, since a stable Afghanistan is a prerequisite to denying Al-Qaeda a foothold in the region. If the United States were to leave before Afghanistan establishes its institutions of state (and in a country wracked by three decades of war this might take some time), then the American public should also not rule out the recurrence of a calamity on a scale that was witnessed in New York on the second Tuesday of September, nine years ago.

Ayaz Khan Achakzai ’09 was a double major in mathematical sciences and economics at Colby and spent a year studying at Oxford University. He grew up in Pakistan, where he now resides. Achakzai belongs to Qilla Abdullah Khan, a district of Pakistan that borders Afghanistan.