

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



Quran Copy Burning in Afghanistan and the US 'Exit' Strategy

Shanthie Mariet D'Souza¹

Abstract

The latest violent protestation in Afghanistan over the burning of copies of the Holy Quran has a demonstrative effect. It has yet again brought to light the nature of the international intervention and the challenges of stabilising this war-torn country. While on the surface the incident appears to be a religiously motivated episode, a growing sense of anxiety and seething anger among a segment of the Afghan populace over other issues is being exploited by the Taliban and its allies in the wake of this incident. More importantly, this episode has raised important questions on the possibility of early international withdrawal and prospects for an effective transition of authority into the Afghan hands.

Introduction

The spate of violence and demonstrations that have erupted in Afghanistan over the burning of copies of the Holy Quran issue on 20 February 2012 has raised several important questions. What does explain the high level of violence this time around especially when reactions to previous such episodes have been relatively more muted or limited?² What do

¹ Dr Shanthie Mariet D'Souza is a Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She can be reached at isassmd@nus.edu.sg. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the institute.

² Mr Jones, the Florida pastor, caused an international uproar by threatening to burn the Quran copy last year on the anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks. Among others, the overall commander of forces in Afghanistan, Gen. David H Petraeus, had warned at that time that such an action could provoke violence in Afghanistan

these violent acts signify? Who are the real instigators behind the protests and what are their motives? What does this portend for Afghanistan's stability and the United States' strategy in the near and long-term?

It all apparently started with the Afghan cleaners discovering burnt copies of the holy book in a burn pit in the Bagram military base, north of capital Kabul. Despite the immediate public apologies issued by Gen. John R. Allen, NATO commanding general, and despite US President Barack Obama calling the incident a mistake, thousands of demonstrators gathered at the base. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has urged calm, saying that Afghans should not let the insurgents capitalise on their indignation to spark violence. Yet, the violence has spiralled. Protests have been reported from about half of Afghanistan's provinces. In an escalation, there have been attempts to target American, United Nations' or government sites. Attempts to storm military bases in Baghlan and Khost provinces turned violent and several protesters were shot. Demonstrations spread to Herat and Kabul.³

Differing Perceptions: Players, Motives and Drivers of 'Violence'

There are different perceptions on the levels and impact of violence caused by the present episode. While the street demonstrations captured instant media headlines, the depiction of the episode as religiously motivated was clearly overstated. More than just being an emotive issue, the present episode had less to do with religious sentiment of the Afghan people. It is a demonstration of the deep seething anger, anxiety and discontent among certain sections of the population over contentious issues like the use of force, night raids, civilian casualties combined with the prevailing sense of insecurity and lack of perceived progress among large segments of the Afghan populace. During discussions with the Afghans in Kabul early last month, it was evident that while the Afghans are disillusioned with the lack of progress (gap between raised expectations and tangible achievements on the ground) with the decade-long international presence, they want the international community to stay and help prevent the reversal of limited gains.

and could endanger American troops. Mr. Jones subsequently promised not to burn a Quran copy, but he nonetheless presided over a mock trial and then the burning of the Quran copy at his small church in Gainesville, Fla., on March 20, 2011 with only 30 worshippers attending. The act drew little response worldwide, but provoked angry condemnation in this region. In Afghanistan, thousands of protesters overran the compound of the United Nations in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif, killing at least 12 people. In previous instances, When a Danish cartoonist lampooned Prophet Muhammad, four people were killed in riots in Afghanistan within days in 2006. The year before, a media report alleging that guards at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, had flushed a Quran copy down the toilet set off three days of riots that left 14 people dead in Afghanistan. Enayat Najafizada And Rod Nordland, "Afghans Avenge Florida Koran Burning, Killing 12, The New YorkTimes,(1April2011), <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/02/world/asia/02afghanistan.html?paewanted=all>. Accessed on 23 February 2012.

³ Anger over the burnings led to the deaths of more than 30 Afghans during violent protests, as well as six US soldiers who were shot and killed by rogue Afghan security forces. "Copies of Koran were burned by mistake claims US investigation", Scotsman (5 March 2012), http://www.scotsman.com/news/international/copies_of_koran_were_burned_by_mistake_claims_us_investigation_1_2153552. Accessed on 5 March 2012.

The talks of the early withdrawal of international forces and the ongoing negotiations with the Taliban have not only raised the levels of anxiety but have also been exploited by various actors as they position and jockey for power in post-2014 Afghanistan. These levels of anxiety have been triggered by the Quran copy burning episode, with religion once again being used as a rallying point.

The negotiations with the Taliban constitute one such source of anxiety. As Americans claim that they have established contacts with the insurgents for peace talks in Qatar, various segments of the insurgency are aiming to outbid each other in order to secure a larger portion of the pie. Not surprisingly, most of the violence has taken place in areas dominated by the Hizb-e-Islami. Its leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is eyeing a major share of the peace deal. His connections with Iran are well known. Iran's role in previous such episodes cannot be overlooked.⁴

There is very little clarity on the US strategy in Afghanistan. While it was more or less understood that it would pull out most of its troops from the war-torn country by 2014, the recent statement of US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta about withdrawal in 2013 has provoked widespread concerns. The emphasis on the US military's changing mission in Afghanistan to that of an advisory role has further compounded the complexities and brought to sharp focus the fragility of the Afghanisation of the security sector. Media reports of Panetta's comments indicate that the US forces would further speed up their withdrawal from that country, when the White House is yet to make any such decision.⁵ As the debate inside US intensifies indicating a deep civilian and military divide over the time frame and numbers of troops to be withdrawn, the US has been embroiled in domestic politics and the presidential election campaign.⁶

Taliban thrives on its propaganda of driving the infidels (kafirs) out of the country. They lost no time in sending such messages. However, to a large extent, this issue of 'forced retreat' of the US forces from Afghanistan is being utilised by every possible power centre in Afghanistan in signalling and at the same time demonstrating its capacities to inflict damage

⁴ Pastor Jones' March 20 sacrilege and the April 1 massacre in Mazar has some interesting pointers. On March 24, simultaneously incendiary alarms emanated from Afghan president Hamid Karzai's office, the Iranian government's propaganda bureau in Tehran, and the Khomeinists' Lebanese proxy Hezbollah. Afghanistan's Tehran-allied Olama-e Shii'a council marshalled the usual fist-shaking rioters to shout the usual slogans in Kabul. Terry Glavin, 'Koran riots are about more than religious zealotry', *The Ottawa Citizen*, (24 February 2012), <http://www.vancouversun.com/opinion/columnists/Koran+riots+about+more+than+religious+zealotry/6206589/story.html>. Talks with One Group Will Not Bring Peace in Afghanistan, Hezb-i Islami Says, *Tolo News*, Kabul, (20 February 2012) <http://tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/5417-talks-with-one-group-will-not-bring-peace-in-afghanistan-hezb-i-islami-says>. Accessed on 21 February 2012.

⁵ Ronald E. Neumann, "U.S. troops will remain in Afghanistan beyond 2014", *The Washington Post* (20 February 2012), http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/us-troops-will-remain-in-afghanistan-beyond-2014/2012/02/13/gIQA3lxFOR_story.html. Accessed on 28 February 2012.

⁶ Amanda Terkel, Newt Gingrich To Afghanistan: 'Figure Out How To Live Your Own Miserable Life', *The Huffington Post* (27 February 2012), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/27/newt-gingrich-afghanistan-miserable-life_n_1305337.html. Accessed on 28 February 2012.

on a retreating army. By inciting higher levels of violent protests and depicting a weaker US position in Afghanistan, they seek to find a place at the negotiating table and in future power sharing arrangement.

There is also something to reflect on for President Karzai as well. In the present instance, there were moments “when he seemed unsure whether he was supposed to play inciter, consoler or victim”.⁷ On previous occasions, he has used the anti-American card to deflect criticism, gain popular support to boost his dwindling credibility or as a pressure tactic to accrue benefits. At a time of negotiating the US-Afghan strategic partnership, this mode of ambivalence could work to his advantage in increasing his bargaining power.⁸

Is the US Transitional and Exit Strategy in Quandary?

The recent spate of violence, no doubt, has thrown the US transitional strategy in Afghanistan into a quandary. At a time, when the US and its allies are looking for an early exit and are in search of a political solution to end the long war, these turn of events has created new complexities. The 25 February killing of two US Army personnel by an Afghan within the secured complex of the Ministry of Interior⁹ and consequent withdrawal of civilian advisers by NATO has further led to the deepening of the debate in the west. It has sharpened the debate in the US on the nature of the US assistance during the transition process (shift from fighting to train and assist mission) and seems to have strengthened the hands of those in Washington who argue for a faster reduction of US troops.¹⁰ Moreover, it has created a trust deficit between the Americans and their Afghan counterparts. Despite an American-led training effort that has cost huge billions of dollars¹¹, the Afghan security forces are still widely seen as riddled with dangerous levels of infiltrations, unreliable soldiers and police

⁷ Terry Glavin, ‘Koran riots are about more than religious zealotry’, The Ottawa Citizen, (24 February 2012), <http://www.vancouversun.com/opinion/columnists/Koran+riots+about+more+than+religious+zealotry/6206589/story.html>. Accessed on 25 February 2012.

⁸ US Suspends Talks On Afghan Strategic Agreement, TOLO news, Kabul (4 March 2012), <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/5538-us-suspends-talks-on-strategic-agreement>. Accessed on 5 March 2012. Shanthie Mariet D’Souza, The Emerging Faultlines of the US-Afghan Strategic Partnership, ISAS Brief No. 210.(10 August 2011), http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/Attachments/PublisherAttachment/ISAS_Brief_210_-_Email_-_The_Emerging_Faultlines_15082011115335.pdf. Accessed on 28 February 2012.

⁹ Rahim Faiez and Amir Shah, "Afghanistan Violence: 2 Americans Killed At Interior Ministry, Officials Say", Huffington Post (25 February 2012), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/25/afghanistan-nato-officers-killed_n_1300918.html. Accessed on 26 February 2012.

¹⁰ Max Boot, Afghans Don't Hate America, The Wall Street Journal, (28 February 2012), http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204653604577249363870929358.html?mod=googlenews_wsj. Accessed on 29 February 2012.

¹¹ Since 2001 the US has spent \$52 billion training and equipping the Afghan national security forces. Officials say that the majority of these costs were for start-up, and that future costs will be much lower – \$5.7 billion in 2013 compared to \$11.2 billion in 2012. Still, Afghanistan, with its \$18 billion GDP, will be unable to cover the costs of security forces for quite some time. Mary Kaszynski, “Cutting veterans’ benefits to save the war budget”, Report of the Afghanistan Study Group, (16 August 2010), http://www.afghanistanstudygroup.org/NewWayForward_report.pdf. Accessed on 23 February 2012.

officers.¹² Moreover, the recent announcement to cut the size of the Afghan army and police to 230,000 by 2014 from 352,000, due to issues of funding, will be detrimental in the long run. These turns of events are surely not encouraging signs if the goal of building capable and independent Afghan security forces is to be actualised.

The recent episode is indicative of the need for a rethink of the US exit strategy in Afghanistan. That the gains made in a decade of war are highly tenuous has been underlined by the current phase of protests and violence. Beyond narrow domestic political considerations and a re-election bid, the Obama administration needs to understand that the present strategy of announcements of early withdrawal and consigning this unstable country into the hands of recalcitrant insurgents through negotiations is bound to be counter-productive. If the goal of effective transition of authority to Afghan hands has to be actualised by 2014, these are signs that cannot be ignored. Ahead of the upcoming summit in Chicago in May this year, it is crucial to bring about clarity on the transition time tables and recast strategies.

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¹² About 70 members of the NATO-led force were killed in 42 insider attacks from May 2007 through the end of January this year. Some of these incidents have been carried out by Afghan security forces reacting to the recent Quran copy burning, some have been due to private grievances and others have been carried out by Taliban insurgents who infiltrated the security forces. Hamid Shalizi, "Afghan army says Taliban infiltration very sophisticated", Reuters, (3 March 2012), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/03/us-afghanistan-taliban-infiltration-idUSTRE82208H20120303>. Accessed on 4 March 2012. Matthew Rosenberg And Thom Shanker, Afghan Uproar Casts Shadows on U.S Pullout, The New York Times (26 February 2012), http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/27/world/asia/burning-of-korans-complicates-us-pullout-plan-in-afghanistan.html?_r=2&pagewanted=all%3Fsrc%3Dtp&smid=fb-share. Accessed on 27 February 2012.