

Reintegrating the Taliban after the Death of Osama bin Laden **By Prof. Alpaslan Özerdem***



Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda leader, was killed by US forces in Abbottabad, near Islamabad, Pakistan on 2nd May 2011. Nearly 10 years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks coordinated by al-Qaeda, this was “the most significant achievement to date” in the war against terror as pointed out by the US President Barack Obama [1]. There has been worldwide jubilation, particularly in the US and Secretary-General of the UN, Ban Ki-moon expressed his delight as follows: ‘Personally, I am very much relieved by the news that justice has been done to such a mastermind of international terrorism. I would like to commend the work and the determined and principled commitment of many people in the world who have been struggling to eradicate international terrorism.[2]’ Since his death there has also been worldwide media frenzy and speculation about the way the operation was undertaken, how he was killed and whether or not his body was disposed in the ocean. There are also a series of

questions about the possible implications of his death on a number of global security issues such as possible immediate revenge attacks by al-Qaeda against Western targets around the world; the future of al-Qaeda and whether or not it would continue to pose a security threat to the West; the withdrawal date of Western forces from Afghanistan; and the links and future of cooperation between the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is in such a context that the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP) Review Conference took place in Kabul on 10-11th 2011.

The significance of this conference is that in post-Osama bin Laden Afghanistan; the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of the Taliban that the APRP aims to achieve will now have a stronger message for what it represents for the future of peace in the country. The APRP was initiated by the consultative Peace Jirga in July 2010, and its main objective is to create reintegration opportuni-

ties for those Taliban members if and when they decide to stop fighting and return home. However, as pointed out in my Afghanistan article in one of the previous issues of *Political Reflection*, the APRP is based on a number of major assumptions such as the willingness of the Taliban to stop fighting in return of an amnesty and financial reintegration benefits. The argument used by the international community to explain why it is possible to attract some elements of the Taliban in such a reintegration process is to some extent, quite sound. It is argued that within the Taliban there are a number of sub-groups such as those 'ideological', 'opportunistic', 'criminal', 'poor' and 'vulnerable' Taliban. For the APRP, the approach to the ideological group which is formed by the Taliban high command and those combatants fighting for *jihad* and other identity related issues, will be centred on political negotiations and grievance resolution, while the APRP considers the livelihoods generation type programmes as its main approach for the other Taliban sub-groups. It is expected that even political negotiations may take a while to settle and complete, in the short-to-medium term there would be a real chance to convince other Taliban groups to give up their weapons for financial incentives. The APRP also argues that most of the Taliban members are actually home based and their participation into fighting is almost like seasonal employment. Therefore, the tangible peace dividends would likely to be a significant enticement for them. In fact, regardless of whether they are home-based or not or they would need a political approach rather than a more humanitarian and development based assistance, the death of Osama bin Laden may still have a significant impact on all of these possibilities, as it is expected that the relationship between al-Qaeda and the Taliban is likely to change and possibly weaken in coming days.

The impact of Osama bin Laden's death on the Taliban and Afghanistan will be seen over the next few months, but what is already evident is what the APRP has so far achieved since its inception almost a year ago. The Joint Secretariat for APRP lists them as follows: the establishment of Provincial

Peace Committees in 28 provinces; a comprehensive outreach campaign to involve various groups from Ulemas, influential persons, women and youth groups to community leaders; a stronger level of coordination among security ministries (i.e. Defence, Interior) and line ministries (i.e. Agriculture, Public Works, Rural Rehabilitation, Labour, etc.); and finally wider community mobilisation through an improved level of trust between people and government. Overall, the programme has so far demobilised 1,100 Taliban members and negotiations with nearly other 2,000 combatants of different ranking are ongoing. However, as pointed out in the background document of the APRP Review Conference, the 'programme execution has been slow as compared to the urgency of the needs of the provinces and communities, especially in areas where reintegration has intensified in recent months.' Therefore, the Review Conference that was attended by all major donor countries which so far disbursed \$ 133 million (i.e. Japan, UK, US, Denmark, Finland, Australia, UAE) and various organisations working on APRP (UNDP, USAID, IOM, World Bank, ISAF, etc.) and a number of Ministers, Governors, and representatives of other national authorities, aimed to identify key challenges and programmatic shortcomings.

Considering that it was after all a donor conference, the discussions and dialogue between the central and provincial representatives were considerably candid and open. A number of issues that emerged from these discussions can be summarised as follows. First of all, the High Peace Council that has the full responsibility for the peace process in the country and headed by Professor Rabbani, dedicated its efforts to re-assure the donor community, particularly the US that the APRP process and negotiations with the Taliban does not mean readiness to sacrifice all has been achieved so far in terms of human, civic and women rights in the country. Rabbani defined the approach as the Afghan government's 'flexibility for its own people' rather than a weakness towards the Taliban. He identified the APRP as a way of dealing with the root causes of the Taliban's insurgency, and he stated that 'if negotiations are what required for peace then it needs

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to be done for the people of Afghanistan'. Furthermore, according to Rabbani, the death of Osama bin Laden gives a new hope for peace in the entire region and the APRP and negotiations with the Taliban are particularly timely now.

The second prominent issue in the discussions underlined an intractable problem of Afghanistan, which is the divide between the capital, Kabul, and the provinces. In other words, the way that the provinces feel left out by the central government emerged as a significant issue from those comments made by almost all provincial governors attended to the conference. For example, the Governor of Kunduz complained that the reaction by Kabul to a world event such as the recent tsunami in Japan would be almost instantaneous, but a crisis in a province in Afghanistan might go on for four months before the Afghan government knows about it or understands it!

The third issue that was again pointed out by provincial governors was the way the APRP initiatives would need to deal with real problems of the rural population. The Governor of Badghis identified them for his province as security, reconstruction and tribal unity. His people were suffering in the hands of ideological Taliban, drug smugglers, and poorly trained and uncoordinated security forces, but more importantly he prioritised the provision of clean and safe water, electricity and accessible road infrastructure as what the people of Badghis would really need in terms of peace dividends. The Governor of Uruzgan also described the security needs from a much wider perspective, including the need for livelihoods, social justice and basic services.

Fourthly, the governors from various provinces complained that for a number of years now they have been making many promises as to what would be described as potential peace dividends such as the above mentioned infrastructure provisions and employment opportunities. However, they said that they knew they could not keep them as they tho-

ught that the APRP could turn into more broken promises. The Governor of Faryab's criticism was even more striking for the future of APRP. He pointed out that those who went through the APRP process so far 'had no positive experience and shared these experiences with others', discouraging them from participating in the process. Overall, the donor community and Joint Secretariat of APRP had a 'reality check', as rightly pointed out by Michael Keating, Deputy Special Representative of Secretary-General of the UN Mission in Afghanistan.

Overall, the discussions at this donor conference pointed out that for the APRP to be successful a number of prerequisites should be ensured: first, solutions for sustainable reintegration need to be tailor-made to the needs of people and utilise all possible opportunities to liaise with communities; second, there should be a clear and effective dissemination of information on APRP, particularly in inaccessible, rural areas; third, with vocational training courses it is important remember that such

opportunities cannot manufacture jobs so building skills set should be undertaken in line with market demand – giving particularly priority to construction and cash crop agriculture sectors; enable the meaningful participation of youth and women in all aspects of APRP initiatives; fourth, engage religious and spiritual leaders such as the Ulema of districts; and finally, it is critical that both civil society and the media play a key role in the implementation of programmes as effective community mobilisation will be one of the most critical aspects in the successful implementation of APRP. **PR**

Notes:

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- 1) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-13256676>
- 2) <http://unama.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=1741&ctl=Details&mid=1882&ItemID=13422>

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