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Tangoing With Taliban

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Despite the US military 'surge', Afghanistan is proving more challenging than Iraq.

Unlike the general Iraqi distaste and hostility for al-Qaeda's methods and objectives, Osama bin Laden's network remains the Taliban's most potent strategic partner in its fight against the central government and its US patron.

Al Jazeera has learnt that in the last several months, al-Qaeda has spearheaded certain Taliban offensives and tried to bridge and coordinate between the various Talibans, notably the Afghan and Pakistani groups.

It has been mission impossible for the US thus far to sift the Taliban into so-called moderate vs radicals and hardcore vs pragmatists silos. Separating the Taliban from al-Qaeda has also failed.

In the process, the Taliban have reportedly opened new fronts in the northern regions after they consolidated their grip on the southern and eastern regions. They introduce their version of security and justice to these regions, like a parallel government.

The US and the international coalition's frustration with the Afghan army and its incapacity to counter the insurgency's offensive, sooner rather than later, could force the US to rethink any illusions of victory.

If the US withdraws in any meaningful way in the next couple of years with clear victory against the Taliban/al-Qaeda, as President Barack Obama suggested when he supported the surge, the Karzai government would fall in no time.

Perception of US failure and Taliban success would have a far-reaching psychological and political impact on opposition and notably Islamist movements in the region with strategic ramifications for US interests and its role in the Greater Middle East.

Strategy trumps all

All of which explains why the London meeting on Afghanistan has turned its eyes to finding alternative strategies to the military escalation and put emphasis on regional solutions.

Notably, Washington and London are eager that Pakistan and more directly Saudi Arabia play a more prominent role in reaching political accommodation in the country between the Karzai government and the Taliban.

For Riyadh, Afghanistan is part of its open cold war with Tehran over influence in the Islamic world, whether on behalf of Washington or its own camp in the region.

As in Yemen, Iraq, Palestine or Lebanon, Saudi Arabia is keen to project influence where it has assets and that includes Afghanistan and the Wahabi-influenced Taliban.

Considering Saudi Arabia has taken the US side in Afghanistan, its past support of the Taliban stemming from their religious commonality suggests that Riyadh still has leverage.

Options

Strategically, the US-sponsored Saudi-Pakistani influence seems the best way to contain Iranian/al-Qaeda influence. Tehran considers Afghanistan to be part of its area of influence and would not hesitate to confront the US and its allies there if Washington were to threaten it or isolate it further.

For Pakistan, Afghanistan has emerged as a central front of its cold war with India. Islamabad is bothered by the US-India rapprochement and the way in which Washington's strategy in Afghanistan ended up exporting the Taliban/al-Qaeda challenge to its territory in very violent ways.

This means Pakistan has two options: Export the Taliban/al-Qaeda challenge back to Afghanistan - and its intelligence services reportedly have sufficient leverage to do it. Or, insist

on being centre stage to any future arrangements in Afghanistan. It will not tolerate being a spectator.

It is not clear in the final analysis whether the Saudi-Pakistani role under US patronage would aim to reach 'functional' or 'territorial' division between the Karzai government and the Taliban.

The first entails ambitious reconciliation, even if limited to the so-called moderate Taliban, which aims to bring them into the governing fold.

And the second would lead to de facto, pragmatic albeit transitional division of the country into Karzai and Taliban (14?) controlled regions.

Two challenges

Any accommodation with the Taliban - as partners not deserters - will revolve around two important issues, al-Qaeda and Taliban Wahabism.

With no global ambition, the Taliban's main objective is to rule Afghanistan according to its version of the Islamic Sharia. Despite their serious 'moral' and strategic commitment to al-Qaeda, bin Laden still comes second.

For the US and its coalition partners, the main objective is al-Qaeda's isolation and defeat. Social norms in Afghanistan, even if they are committed to change them, remain secondary.

Do not be surprised if there are compromises on secondary issues, allowing the Taliban to impose its rule and the US to declare victory against al-Qaeda.

Either way, all of the regional and international powers are dancing to the tunes of the Taliban. Not exactly the victory gig they had envisaged.