

Afghanistan: Reading Between the Lines

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The new coalition in Westminster is parsing all the words about Afghanistan and coming up with a very different interpretation

The movement to “get the troops out now!” has found unlikely converts in the form of the Conservative-Liberal Democratic [coalition](#) in Britain . The election campaign suggested nothing new could be expected from any of the parties on Afghanistan , despite the fact that over 70 per cent of Britons want the troops home.

So eyebrows were raised with the news that Afghan President Hamid Karzai was Prime Minister David Cameron’s first visitor at Chequers. They went higher still when Foreign Minister William Hague made his first foreign destination Kabul , where he called for the withdrawal of troops as soon as possible.

Accompanying Hague, Tory Defence Secretary Liam Fox seconded the new approach, saying, “We have to reset expectations and timelines. National security is the focus now. We are not a global policeman. We are not in Afghanistan for the sake of the education policy in a broken 13th century country. We are there so the people of Britain and our global interests are not threatened.”

Britain ’s new coalition government also announced it would reduce the defence budget by at least 25 per cent as part of massive cuts across the board to try to save the bankrupt British economy.

Cleverly taking advantage of the electorate’s revulsion with the war, Hague’s bold call for withdrawal was no doubt sparked by Karzai’s address at the US Institute of Peace last week, where he once again predicted an extended US commitment to Afghanistan that would last “beyond the military activity right now ... into the future, long after we have retired, and perhaps into our grandsons’ and great-grandsons’ — and great-granddaughters’ — generations. This is something the Afghan people have been seeking for a long, long time.” Clearly, unlike the unborn great-granddaughters of Afghans, the Brits want no part of any such plans.

The only way withdrawal will be possible, of course, is if accommodation is reached with the Taliban. So it is no surprise that [talk of peace talks](#) continues to make headlines. What was referred to by Al-Jazeera as the second meeting between Taliban and Afghan government officials hosted by the Maldives (a Muslim statelet that actually issues visas to Afghans on arrival) took place last week. It was organised by Feroz and Jarir Hekmatyar, the son and son-in-law of Gulbadin Hekmatyar, an Afghan warlord and leader of the insignificant Hezb-e-Islami party.

Karzai was rumoured to be unhappy that the talks are taking place, but nonetheless sent observers. Hekmatyar sent a delegation to Kabul for talks in March, clearly trying to use the opportunity to upstage the main Taliban opposition.

Qari Zia-ur-Rehman, a Taliban commander in Kunar province, told Pakistan's *The News*, "The reports of negotiations between the Islamic Emirate and Karzai regime are bogus and no leader of the Islamic Emirate is engaged in talks with the puppet administration in Kabul," reiterating that the unconditional and immediate withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan was a precondition for any peace talks. He explained that Karzai is using such talks as a ruse to convince the US that he can divide the Taliban and negotiate them into submission. Former Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence director Hamid Gul asks, "How can Taliban hold talks with a government which has never been recognised by them?"

Western officials were not present at the non-talks though the US State Department said it was aware of them. "We continue to support efforts by the Afghan government to open the door to those Taliban who abandon violence and respect human rights of their fellow citizens," US State Department spokesman PJ Crowley droned.

The meeting comes ahead of a grand jirga of Afghan tribal and community leaders, to be hosted by Karzai, which will demand the insurgents lay down their arms and accept asylum in another Islamic country from where they can negotiate with the Afghan government. The jirga, already postponed twice, is scheduled for 2 June and will last only three days. No representatives of the Taliban are due to attend.

There is little incentive for the Taliban to cave in to pressures to disband, visit sunny Maldives or retire to even sunnier Saudi Arabia. Kabul MP and former presidential candidate Ramazan Bashardost last week called for NATO troops to evacuate Kabul to avoid further civilian casualties. The call came two days after a suicide bomber rammed a convoy of NATO forces in Kabul, killing 12 civilians and six foreign soldiers, including visiting Canadian Colonel Geoff Parker. But if NATO troops can't function in Kabul — the only part of the country the Karzai government "controls" — when can they function?

After the NATO campaign in [Marja](#), it is once again in Taliban hands in all but name. As the Taliban launch their spring offensive, talk is of the Taliban "surge" as opposed to the would-be NATO one. NATO casualties have been increasing at an alarming rate, with the year's NATO toll 215. The number of British troops killed and wounded in Afghanistan has more than doubled compared to last year. The 200,000 rupee bounty Taliban fighters are awarded for each NATO soldier killed is paying off.

Another Canadian officer, Daniel Menard, is to direct this summer's NATO [campaign in Kandahar and Panjwaji](#), where troops from the Royal Canadian Regiment will take the lead. "This conflict is our D-Day," boasted this colonial representative of Queen Elizabeth II, great-great-granddaughter of Queen Victoria, who presided over the British invasions of Afghanistan in the 19th century. In his obscene comparison between the liberation of occupied France in WWII and the US occupation of Afghanistan, Menard added, "The first guys on the beach here are the Canadians."

But the Canadians are very much high-and-dry after their base in Kandahar came under heavy attack three times in the past week and as they solemnly hoist the flag-draped coffin of their unfortunate guest Colonel Parker aboard a jet for Canada. To expect that they and

the Karzai government will prevail is a fantasy which surely no one any longer believes.

None of the 130,000 foreign troops has any understanding of Afghanistan 's culture and traditions, or even speaks one of the local languages. Their only communication with locals is through the barrel of a gun. Only six per cent of locals polled support the current Kandahar offensive. Afghans can only take pride in repelling these unwanted invaders.

As if a sign from Allah, Hague and British media idol David Beckham had their flight to Kandahar diverted mid-air to Helmand province, when the Kandahar airport came under attack. Rather than Karzai, it is Bashardost, the angry British troops and their mounting body count that Cameron and Hague are now heeding, and it is about time.

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