

U.S. Forces Withdraw From Afghanistan. Secret Negotiations with the Taliban. “Huge Political Change on the Horizon”

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Reporting from Kabul, December 27, 2018. *The announcement of withdrawal of the US forces from Syria and then Afghanistan was truly incredible to many US allies in the Middle East and Afghanistan. Although, some believe that Trump pulled the forces out to add a victory on his presidential track record to win a vote for himself and his party in the upcoming presidential election, this is not true especially about Afghanistan which tells a different story. Part of America's presence in Syria was driven by Israeli interests such as containment of Iranian influence and the decision has infuriated Tel Aviv.*

Since months, the US has been working to recast Afghan policy and the withdrawal of 7,000 troops from the total 14,000 is not a sudden decision, but part of a new agenda which is already noticeable in the recent US movements in Afghanistan.

President Trump's apparently abrupt and insistent decision to remove boots from Syria and Afghanistan that met with reactions, pleas and even resignations from US lawmakers and Generals indicates that the chief decision-making panel is behind the doors to whom Trump only serve as a speaker because unlike common sense, Trump is a nonentity to decide all by himself. The Pentagon before and under James Mattis has defended military presence both in Syria and Afghanistan.

The US has its nine mega bases legalized across Afghanistan and it will keep a few thousand noncombatant soldiers there, as it has already halted or wound down the combat operations.



This is a time the US is not greatly engaged in Afghanistan that the withdrawal would affect its presence or influence. The insurgents have captured more than half of country; conclaves under peace talks are vaguely underway to negotiate the future fate of Afghanistan; the presidential election is scheduled for April 2019, all of which sets the stage for the US to implement the new giant plans.

It has been months since the US special representative for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad (image right) has been bargaining with the Taliban and regional states allegedly about



peace, but the secrets have been unfolding day by day. If the US had decided the withdrawal with most of Afghanistan under government control, it could signal some optimism for a prosperous future. But now with militants seizing the control of major cities and districts, the US exit as well as covert talks with militants namely Taliban in Qatar or UAE reveal that a huge change is on the horizon in Afghanistan to the likely detriment of its nation.

Reports confirm that the US's agreement with Saudi Arabia and UAE have caused the half of American soldiers to depart from Afghanistan. It is also noted that former Pakistani Chief of Staff General Raheel Sharif who has also commanded the Saudi-led Yemen war at the

former's request, has nudged Saudi Arabia and UAE to dispatch forces to Afghanistan. The Gulf States' forces are said to be deployed in southern Afghanistan to "help quell any possible unrest arisen out of US and NATO exit". But if something of sorts happens, it will only mean to take the reins of control from the US, without any intention to bring peace, or in other words, to keep, as two of the huge moneymaking sources, the drug trade and the illegal mining of rare earth elements running.

Following April 2019 presidential election, the new government in Kabul will be designed carefully to be able to secure the US interests. For the US, installing a vigilant, obedient and dedicated government is at the top of agenda. Every time an Afghan president gets nearer to the end of his term, it prompts the US policy makers to deliberate on replacing it with the most loyal candidate. Everyone knows that the current dual leadership government led by President Ashraf Ghani and the Chief Executive Abdullah was hammered out behind the doors under the chairmanship of former Secretary of State John Kerry.

Now at this juncture of time, Trump believes that when the US interests can be maintained without the physical presence of US forces, why should they bear the cost of keeping soldiers and get themselves entangled into violence. Trump and his key policy-makers are of opinion that Afghanistan now has reliable degree of pawns in necktie and arms devotedly loyal to the US to secure its ubiquitous economic and political as well as military interests. It no longer feels the need to remain in large number that may also help it escape long criticism of intervention from inside America.

The US expects the next Afghan president and its government to keep Russia or Iran at arm's length. Afghanistan's judiciary, legislative and executive power is centralized to president who is authorized to take critical decisions without referral or accountability to any other government authority. And this is the reason that a candidate fit and proper for the US can hold the entire nation's fate at hand to rule according to the US's best interests.

But this will not be sufficient and under the new agenda, the US will reportedly rely on Arab (and possibly Pakistani) forces to take lead of Afghanistan, as negotiations are in progress over who should fill the gaps created by partial US departure.

Kandahar's police chief Taadin Khan, the younger brother of former powerful chief Abdul Raziq, has said that Pakistan has sent its own representatives in the guise of Taliban members to peace talks in Dubai in a bid to win more concessions on the threshold of major transition in Afghanistan.

The US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad's hasty frequent trips to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Russia and Arab States in recent months was nothing but efforts to inform and reach a consensus with the involved states about the shift in US Policy on Afghanistan.

One more development that points to the actuality of major policy change in Afghanistan is that Pakistan has started building the barbed-wire fence along disputed "Durand Line" border with Afghanistan in 2018 that is set to be completed by 2019. Before the construction of the fence, militants trained and armed in tribal areas of Pakistan would cross the border into Afghanistan without a minimal resistance from either side.

And now under Ashraf Ghani's government when the Taliban and other militant groups have placed their anchor in respective regions, gained an easy and less-resisted foothold in parts of Afghanistan, built their Afghan brand of training camps and gotten their presence almost

legalized in the face of the Afghan government and the US, Pakistan no longer sees need for its territories to be used for harboring and exporting extremism into Afghanistan as it is conscious of likely twist in the US strategies on Afghanistan.

Kandahar's powerful police Chief Abdul Raziq who was assassinated at an inside job in a suicide attack following a press conference with top US General Scott Miller, had strongly stood up to Pakistan's border fencing when the scheme reached to the stretch of his province. Raziq's murder was partly fueled by his anti-Pakistani stand and resistance to building of fence.

Unfortunately, in such vulnerable times when each foreign state holding a stake in Afghan war struggle to extract more interests, Afghanistan's capital Kabul usually witnesses indiscriminate and illogical armed attacks on non-military government buildings. On Monday, armed assailants stormed the building of the National Authority for Disabled People and Martyrs' Families following a powerful suicide attack in front of the gate, as the employees were preparing to leave the office for the day. The attack killed nearly 50 people as the attackers would fire on civil workers when they moved floor by floor.

No group claimed the responsibility for it, and nor any militant group should accept it, because it is the war of regional intelligence agencies that intentionally take lives of normal Afghan people as a means of pressure against the Afghan government or other involved parties.

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