

Nov 04, 2016 by *M. Ashraf Haidari*

## **Beyond OBL, public diplomacy in Afghanistan** <sup>[1]</sup>

Over the past ten years since 9/11, event after event in and outside Afghanistan has overshadowed the need to connect with the Afghan people and to deliver on their basic expectations for peace, justice, and prosperity. Even though NATO member-states increasingly appreciate the importance of public diplomacy at home and abroad, they have largely faltered to engage and listen to the Afghan people on how to secure Afghanistan.

Foremost, as the primary victims of Al Qaeda and the Taliban atrocities for almost a decade, the Afghan people had been saying, albeit without being heard, that the threat of terrorism lies beyond Afghanistan's borders. More than five million Afghan refugees, who returned home in the early years following 9/11, knew from firsthand experience in Pakistan that when the Taliban regime was defeated in Afghanistan, most of its fighters simply crossed over the Durand Line into Pakistan where they were sheltered.

The Afghan people had been warning the international community that the Taliban would sooner or later surge back across the Durand Line into Afghanistan, with the support of Al Qaeda and their sympathizers in Pakistan, unless they were completely defeated. But these early popular calls for maintaining the momentum in Afghanistan went unnoticed and hardly reported by the press, while Afghanistan's principal ally, the United States, took its eyes off addressing regional tolerance for extremism and, instead, went to war in Iraq.

Consequently, the Taliban and Al Qaeda were gradually allowed into Pakistan to stage and launch terrorist attacks into Afghanistan. Year after year since 2004, the security situation got worse in the country, as the Taliban and Al Qaeda continuously gained control of much of ungoverned parts of Afghanistan, without resistance. These negative security trends have continued well into 2011—increasingly endangering regional stability and international security.

Almost ten years after international re-engagement in Afghanistan, Afghans continue to call on the international community to help institutionalize democracy in their country. Despite increased insecurity, 62 percent of Afghans feel that Afghanistan is moving in the right direction, while a whopping 86 percent of Afghans support the current government. By contrast, only nine percent prefer extremist rule, in part because of the absence or weak presence of the current government in areas under the control and influence of the insurgents, who intimidate people into submission.

Hence, in the wake of the death of Osama bin Laden, Afghanistan's nation-partners must listen to Afghans and help them consolidate their shared democratic gains so far. Today, Afghanistan has a democratically elected president and parliament, with the most progressive constitution in the region. Moreover, some eight million Afghan girls and boys are going back to school, and over a dozen universities are operating across Afghanistan. Access to

electricity and healthcare has expanded each year since the fall of the Taliban, while some 12 million Afghans are using mobile phones and thus connected with the outside world for the first time. At the same time, thousands of small, medium, and large infrastructure projects have been implemented across Afghanistan, enabling Afghans to achieve economic self-reliance through increased internal and regional commerce and trade.

Afghans believe that these significant achievements, in partnership with the international community, constitute the key building blocks of success in Afghanistan . They should be consolidated to deepen democracy in the country and to effect an orderly and irreversible transition of military and civil responsibilities to full Afghan sovereignty beyond 2014.

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