

Will the Islamic World Save Afghanistan?

Between the complex internal dynamics of the Taliban and the western trick of conditional aid, it is the Muslim world that must act to save Afghanistan

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Global Research, December 23, 2021

[The Cradle](#) 21 December 2021

Region: [Asia](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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Afghanistan was at the heart of the 17th Extraordinary Session of the Council of Foreign Ministers representing 57 nations at the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC).

It was up to Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan to deliver the keynote address to the session, held on 19 December at the Parliament House in Islamabad.

And he [rose to the occasion](#): “If the world doesn’t act, this will be the biggest man-made crisis which is unfolding in front of us.”

Imran Khan was addressing not only representatives of the lands of Islam, but also UN officials, the proverbial “global financial institutions,” scores of NGOs, a smattering of US, EU and Japanese bureaucrats and, crucially, Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi.

No nation or organization has yet formally recognized the Taliban as the new, legitimate Afghan government. And quite a few are frankly more interested in engaging in an elaborate kabuki, pretending to deliver some sort of aid to the devastated Afghan economy after 20 years of US/NATO occupation instead of actually coordinating aid packages with Kabul.

The numbers are dire, and barely tell the full extent of the drama.

According to the UNDP, 22.8 million Afghan citizens – over half of Afghanistan – are facing food shortages, and soon, acute hunger; while no less than 97 percent of Afghans could soon fall under the poverty line. In addition, the World Food Programme stresses that 3.2 million Afghan children risk acute malnutrition.

Imran Khan emphasized that the OIC had a “religious duty” to help Afghanistan. As for the ‘hyperpower’ that stunned the world with its humiliating withdrawal show after 20 years of occupation, he was adamant: Washington must “delink” whatever grudges it may hold against the Taliban government from the destiny of 40 million Afghan citizens.

Imran Khan did ruffle a few Afghan feathers – starting with former President Hamid Karzai, when he observed that “the idea of human rights is different in every society,” referring to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which borders Afghanistan.

“The city culture is completely different from the culture in rural areas ...,” he said. “We give stipends to the parents of the girls so that they send them to school. But in districts bordering Afghanistan, if we are not sensitive to the cultural norms, then they won’t send them to school despite receiving double the amount. We have to be sensitive about human rights and women rights.”

This was interpreted in a few quarters as Pakistani interference – part of a secret, devious strategic narrative. Not really. The prime minister was stating a fact, as anyone familiar with the tribal areas knows. Even Afghan Foreign Minister Muttaqi said the prime minister’s words were not “insulting”.

Imran Khan also observed that there are already over three million Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Moreover, Islamabad is sheltering more than 200,000 refugees who overstayed their visas. “They can’t go back. We are already suffering from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. We are not in a position to deal with an influx of refugees.”

Would you ever trust NATO?

Then there’s the ultimate nut to crack: internal Taliban dynamics.

Diplomatic sources confirm off the record that it’s a non-stop struggle to convince different layers of the Taliban leadership to allow for some concessions.

Discussions with the NATO block are for, all practical purposes, dead: bluntly, there will be no help without visible concessions on girls’ education, women’s rights and the heart of the matter – on which everyone agrees, including the Russians, the Chinese and the Central Asians – a more inclusive government in Kabul.

So far, Taliban pragmatists – led by the Doha political office – have been on the losing end.

The OIC meeting at least came up with practical suggestions involving Islamic development banks. Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi was keen to emphasize the necessity of getting Kabul to access banking services.

This is the heart of the problem: there are no solid banking channels after NATO departed. So it’s technically impossible to transfer financial aid into the system and then distribute it across hard-hit provinces. Yet, once again, this is ultimately linked to those lofty western humanitarian aid pledges crammed with conditionalities.

In the end, Qureshi, together with the OIC Secretary-General Hissein Brahim Taha, announced that a ‘humanitarian trust fund’ will be established as soon as possible, under the aegis of the Islamic Development Bank. The fund should be able to incorporate international partners, non-politicized westerners included.

Qureshi put out his bravest face, emphasizing that “the need is felt to forge a partnership between the OIC and the UN.”

Taha, for his part, was quite realistic. No funds whatsoever have been pledged so far for this new OIC humanitarian operation.

As Qureshi mentioned, there is one thing which Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan and other actors may decisively help with: investment “in the people of Afghanistan, bilaterally or through the OIC, in areas such as education, health and technical and vocational skills to the Afghan youth.”

So now it comes to the crunch – and fast. It’s up to the OIC to play the leading role in terms of alleviating Afghanistan’s dire humanitarian drama.

The official declaration calling on all OIC member states, Islamic financial institutions, donors, and unnamed ‘international partners’ to announce pledges to the humanitarian trust fund for Afghanistan will have to go way beyond rhetorical flourish.

At least, it’s all but certain that from now on, it will be up to the lands of Islam to decisively help Afghanistan. A bitter, defeated, vengeful, internally corroded NATO simply cannot be trusted.

Nobody today remembers that the Empire had concocted its own version of the New Silk Road over 10 years ago, announced by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Chennai in July 2001.

That was no ‘community of shared future for mankind,’ but a very narrow obsession on capturing energy resources – in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan; ‘stabilizing’ Afghanistan, as in perpetuating the occupation; giving a boost to India; and ‘isolating’ Iran.

The energy supply routes to the west should have gone through the Caspian Sea, and then across Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey – the three actors of the BTC pipeline – thus bypassing Russia, which was already then being depicted in the west as a ‘threat’.

All this is dead and buried – as post-occupation Afghanistan alongside the five Central Asian ‘stans’ are now back as one of the key foci of interest of the Russia-China strategic partnership: the heart of a Greater Eurasia spanning from Shanghai in the east to St. Petersburg in the west.

Yet to make it happen, it’s imperative that the OIC helps Afghanistan as much as the Taliban must help themselves.

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Featured image: An earlier meeting between Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi (Source: The Cradle)

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