Who Will Run Afghanistan?

As we approach the date of withdrawal of the bulk of the troops of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan, the internal political situation there has a tendency of further aggravation. This is evidenced by the expansion in 2014 of the military activity of the Taliban and other armed opposition groups to virtually whole of the country, the establishment by extremists of control over a number of provinces where they are imposing their government structures and the increasing number of lost lives not only among soldiers of the Afghan army, security services and police, but also civilians.

To date, the Afghan police alone has lost 4,634 officers. For comparison, last year’s total number of deaths among Afghans at the hands of extremists was estimated at about 3,000 people. No one knows the exact number of deaths, especially among civilians. It is possible that it is much bigger than reported by the ISAF’s official representatives and the Kabul government.

After the signing of the security agreement between Afghanistan and the United States the number of terrorist attacks against the Afghan military, law enforcement and government officials has increased dramatically. Their goal is to intimidate those who might resist the Taliban’s return to power.

Judging by increasing reports of the Afghan military and police refusing to return home after graduating from Western universities, we can say that the Taliban has had some success in this regard. For instance, at the end of September three Afghan army officers (a major and two captains) who had been in the United States under a professional training program asked for asylum there. Then there were two more Afghan policemen who also stayed in the US. In October there were reports of four Afghan servicemen who decided to stay in Europe after the end of their studies in Italy. A request to the British authorities for political asylum from another high-ranking officer of the Afghan army who was there as a member of his country’s delegation to the NATO summit in Wales was also made known to the public.

Tribal elders, including the Pashtuns, who are resisting the establishment of the Taliban rule, are also being subjected to cruelest repression. Teachers and students are also being attacked. There have been reports from Kabul of schools suspending classes in several districts of the northern provinces of Afghanistan because of threats of physical violence.

The intensified activities of the anti-government forces and their atrocities against the local population have provoked the desire among them to buy weapons and create local self-defense units that are mainly made up of Afghan Turkmens. There have been numerous reports in 2014 of their battles with Taliban groups in the provinces of Jowzjan, Sar-e Pol and Faryab, that were caused by looting and massacres of civilians by extremists who are trying not only to penetrate the Turkmen tribal territories, but also to impose their own rule there.

Starting from September, there have been reports of the exacerbation of the situation in another northern province of Badghis. Until recently it was believed that a relatively high level of security was maintained there. The most difficult situation is unfolding in Kabul and the Kabul province and in nearly all of the Pashtun areas (Helmand, Kandahar, Zabul, Paktika, Paktia, Uruzgan, Baghlan, Ghazni, and Nargarhar).

In some provinces the Taliban took control over entire districts. For instance, according to the reports of the end of
October, the Taliban controlled approximately 30 localities in two districts of Chahar Dara and Dasht-e-Archi of Kunduz province. In Wardak province, the Taliban has established its authority in the district of Saidabad which is located in a mountainous area near Kabul. Sangin district of Helmand province which is considered a regional drug trade hub also fell under their control. Almost every place where the Taliban has firmly entrenched itself, they create a shadow government, Sharia courts, collect taxes from local farmers and entrepreneurs, and both local authorities and the leadership of the Afghan police have to accept it.

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Afghanistan, the Taliban’s members include many Pakistanis and Arabs, representatives of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The latter were reported to have been seen in late October in northern provinces of Kunduz and Badakhshan neighboring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Unlike the Taliban, the IMU are unlikely to stop after a victory in Afghanistan while Islam Karimov runs Tashkent and Emomali Rakhmon remains in power in Dushanbe. Even if anyone from the IMU wants to resign, there will be forces that will make them act against the regimes in Central Asian countries if those try to act as independently in foreign policy as is currently demonstrated by Russia.

Some Western experts praise the organizational abilities of the Taliban, the level of combat training of their units, the ammunition, including modern weapons and equipment, and the use of such high-tech tools as Google Earth in fighting against the Afghan army and ISAF forces.

On the contrary, most experts have pessimistic views on the ability of the Afghan army and police to confront the Taliban and other anti-government groups. Much of the Afghan military and police, especially enlisted personnel, have low morale, are poorly motivated, poorly trained and armed. There is still a quite high level of desertion from the Afghan army and police. The local militia (Malishes) is seen in the same vein.

For example, in Kandahar province the already formed units are not provided with arms and food. They are not paid the promised salaries. The police is constantly receiving complaints from local residents about the extortion of food and money by Malishes. There are also numerous cases of desertion and defection of Malishes to the Taliban.

Most experts specializing in Afghanistan believe that the Taliban intend, before the final departure of Western troops, to show everyone, both in the country and abroad, who actually runs Afghanistan. Hence the expansion of their zones of influence, the boldness of their attacks in conjunction with active information and propaganda through foreign media.

After withdrawal of ISAF troops, there is a possibility that Afghanistan will follow the same scenario as Iraq. The Western Alliance is leaving the country not having solved any of the problems as had been declared before the start of the operation. The central government in Kabul is unable to govern territories, the national army is ineffective, the economy is destroyed, and there is mass unemployment (especially among youth) which is forcing young people, driven by despair, to join the anti-government forces.

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