

COMMENT 218 - From Taliban 2.0 to EU DisInfolab – The outreach of Global Jihadism

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There are no moderate Taliban – Dr Massouda Jalal so entitled her anticipatory 2011 [Wall Street Journal](#) article. Jalal, the first woman running for the Office of President, who also served as a minister for woman affairs in Afghanistan, highlighted that ‘[s]eeking to negotiate with an implacable enemy could be seen either as foolish or foresighted.’ She thus explicitly warned the international community, especially decision makers in both Washington and Brussels, that the ‘[...] willingness to compromise with the Taliban is shortsighted’ and ‘[t]here is no such thing as a moderate Taliban [...]’: ‘If Western political leaders had lived through the savagery themselves, and experienced the fear and the hopelessness of the Taliban’s rule, I imagine they would be somewhat less naïve’. Unfortunately, it appeared that some kind of “guided naivety and selective cognition” was (and most-likely still is) quite convenient for governments in formulating, propagating, and executing their Afghan exit strategy.

But as the former minister stated on the eve of the second International Conference on Afghanistan in Bonn (December 5th, 2011) ‘[t]he people of Afghanistan understand that accommodating the Taliban will result in fear and chaos.’ The forecast became reality – most dramatically expressed in the events of the [Taliban takeover of Kabul](#) and the plight of the hundreds of thousands Afghans seeking to flee the country through any means. The Taliban did not waste time [to carry out raids](#) so as to search for and execute any Afghan propagating and practicing democratic values as well as human - and particularly women – rights. This, of course, confirmed Jalal’s rationale.

Clearly, any hope of actual negotiation with the Taliban is based on false assumptions (foremost the existence of “moderate” Taliban elements and the effectiveness of a diplomatic-political engagement promoting a transition within their movement). Such quagmires ignore the real nature of the movement: Jihadism. For Jalal it became clear over a decade ago that the West whitewashes the fact that the Taliban is an anti-systemic, anti-democratic, and theocratic military organisation. The West also seems unable to understand that the Taliban see political negotiations only as a (temporary) [strategic feint](#)¹ – never as an actual alternative to the use of coercive force. Coercive force alone is held dear by the Taliban to achieve their goal, the re-establishment of a fanatic Islamist regime.

Dr Jalal’s view, shared by this author, has been for many years that trying to reach a sustainable agreement with the Taliban means ‘[negotiating the non-negotiable](#)’. In an interview with Germany’s international broadcaster Deutsche Welle, I said that ‘[t]here are no moderate or good Taliban since [the movement] is an anti-systemic and anti-democratic force which is trapped in its own fundamentalist ideology’. In another comment of the [present](#) series, I stress that to keep the movement going, the Taliban have to reject democracy including consensus-based negotiated power-sharing and political decision making. Thinking and acting based on extremist ideologies leaves no room for dissent.² Dissent is incompatible with the fundamentalist Taliban mindset.³ This was also Ambassador Hussein Haqqani’s (Hudson Institute, US) conviction as he stated to The New York Times (‘[Don’t Talk With the Taliban](#)’, 2013): ‘Unlike most states or political groups, the Taliban aren’t amenable to a pragmatic deal. They are a movement with an extreme ideology and will not compromise easily on their deeply held beliefs’. Thus ‘[t]here is no reason to believe and no evidence that the Taliban are now ready for political accommodation’. On August 18th, 2021, Haqqani [confirmed](#) in an interview with the BBC his conviction that the Taliban did not change their ‘core beliefs’.

¹ Actually, the Taliban identified the (Doha) peace talks as a [political feint](#), as a strategy the prepare the “war from within the system” - as a broadening of the “armed struggle”.

² Liberal democracy and tolerant-inclusive societies are seen as a threat that weakens the ideology and identity that holds the Taliban together.

³ It is no coincidence that Michael Semple [describes](#) the Taliban as ‘armed mullahs – fighting priests’.

The Taliban cannot therefore share power with ‘infidels’ (that is those who do not adhere to their narrow reading of the Koran) without undermining their own collective identity. As such, we must expect that the Taliban will continue to erase all structures and agents of democracy and religious pluralism in Afghanistan and beyond. The idea that the Taliban will ever accept an inclusive government in Kabul remains wishful thinking.

The Doha negotiations (Khalilzad⁴ diplomacy) leading to the February 2020 “peace agreement” between the US (under then US President Donald Trump) and the Taliban, and the following abandoning of the notion of the condition-based withdrawal (under current US President Joe Biden) must be seen as a continuation of a process which started over a decade ago. However, when considering the causalities of the worsening Afghan imbroglio, one cannot focus on the obvious miscalculations by US administrations alone. Indeed, one needs to see the wider picture, reaching far beyond the usual Afghanistan-Taliban-international terror nexus. Perhaps a most crucial question concerns how far decisions to make deals with the Taliban derived solely from military-strategic considerations, or whether we are witnessing plain cost-benefit calculations.

Actually, one must also wonder whether naivety alone guided western politicians’ decision to give in so “easily” into (more or less) all demands of the Taliban and completely side-line the elected Afghan government in the 2020 Doha deal. It is insightful to point out how diplomats – flanked by the bulk of the media – changed their depiction of the Taliban from a damnable Jihadist force, first into an insurgency group, and then into a “political movement” which needs to be considered in order to bring peace to Afghanistan. The changing public rhetoric producing the [image of a new version](#) of the Taliban ([Taliban 2.0](#)) needs to be seen in the context of the then emerging debate regarding the unlikelihood of an “armed peripety” of the Afghan imbroglio. However, that a military solution for the conflict with the Taliban was described as impossible does not mean that a political settlement is the logical consequence, in the sense of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

⁴ Zalmay Khalilzad, then US special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation, is known to be the architect of the “US-Taliban 2020 deal” and the subsequent troop withdrawal of US combat forces.

The US was convinced to be applying a pragmatic approach when it started talking to the Taliban. However, the US was utterly fooled, and this for three reasons. Firstly, the Taliban seem to have been successful in portraying themselves as a reformed, legitimate political actor both willing and able to collaborate with the international community - a view which the US administration die-hard wanted to hold since it allowed for the illusion of a “smooth exit”. Secondly, the international media much contributed to creating an image of the Taliban as a moderate and pragmatic force capable to bring peace to Afghanistan. Thirdly, during the last decade(s), the rapidly growing Jihadist forces in Western states were increasingly met with either ignorance or even tacit acceptance - reaching the level of complicity - among governments, the media, academia, and think tank circles. Most remarkable in this context is an organisation named [EU DisinfoLab](#). According to an [in-depth analysis](#) of this entity, SADF showed that EU DisinfoLab is responsible for one of the major if not the greatest disinformation operation in Europe in recent years. It ‘seems obsessed with the need to silence [...] every negative reference attached to Jihadism’. SADF also stressed that the founder of EU DisinfoLab consistently [targeted](#) government efforts to combat Jihadism, for instance those by Belgium and France, before the organisation developed a smear attack on our own major work against [terrorism](#). Such behaviour by a European-based organisation not only encourages Jihadism in the West but also creates an enabling environment for the flourishing of false notions – such as that holding the Taliban as a pragmatic and moderate actor – thus most likely influencing political decision-making processes in both Washington and Brussels.

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