

10 years after 9/11:

Understanding the 'other' – Cultural dialogue in Afghanistan

By Katrin Mader

On Sept. 5, 2011, a group of military, academic, policy and cultural experts on Western involvement in Afghanistan met at Chatham House to discuss how differing cultural values and ideas about security and stability are influencing the Western effort to bolster the Afghan government and military in order to withdraw most U.S. and European forces in coming years. It was also discussed how dialogue on a grassroots level with civil society initiated by cultural actors could help to create a peaceful and long term oriented path towards nation building. The conference, and a review of the history of Western involvement in Afghanistan, revealed that cultural conflicts and misunderstanding have had deep effects on the Afghan war.

Intro

NATO involvement in Afghanistan was prompted by the Sept. 11, 2001 attack on the United States by al-Qaida, an organisation with its roots in the U.S.—and the Saudi Arabia-backed fight by Afghan, Arab and other Muslim fighters against Soviet troops which occupied Afghanistan from 1979–1989. But how did Bin Laden and his affiliates, whose aims were once aligned with America's, change his primary goal to attacking the U.S.? According to journalists' interviews with those who knew bin Laden, his hatred of America was fuelled by unwanted U.S. involvement in defending Saudi Arabia, his homeland and the site of Islam's two holiest shrines, against the threat posed by Saddam Hussein after the Iraqi leader's invasion of neighbouring Kuwait in 1990. Because of the deep religious importance of Saudi Arabia as the home of Islam's most important events and sites, the idea of non-Muslim Americans stationed there was infuriating to many conservative Muslims. In Bin Laden's case, it helped inspire violence¹.

With certain lack of cultural and faith related consideration that largely defines behaviour and action of deeply religious Muslims, many Americans, including those responsible for national security, could not have been envisioned that helping defend Saudi Arabia and Kuwait against external threats would create anger among the citizens of those countries.

Winning hearts and minds?

A lack of cultural sensitivity and awareness of the 'other' culture has also affected the ground-level tactics of NATO troops in Afghanistan. In the first years of the war, Western soldiers frequently raided Afghan homes, often at night, in order to find suspected Taliban and al-Qaida fighters. This was a source of deep anger for many Afghans, for whom the privacy of the home, and the sheltering of female family members from male strangers is a fundamental

¹ Coll: 2008

source of honour. Another cultural misunderstanding led to many civilian deaths and stirred anger of locals Afghans even further. Large weddings are an important ritual in Afghan life, and often feature shooting into the air in celebration. There were a number of incidents in which Western airstrikes hit wedding parties that they mistakenly suspected to be gatherings of insurgents. These deaths and raids helped to fuel the Afghan perception that Western forces are in Afghanistan in order to control the land and its people, much like the Soviet invaders before them.

With West-Afghan relations are now entering a new uncertain period, military-led quick fix solutions have proved unsustainable and the security and governance situation in the country remains fragile and unpredictable. Military and security experts are trying to address the problems of cultural and conflict sensitive operations and 'winning hearts and minds' of the local populations by adopting a 'comprehensive approach' to counter- insurgency and stabilisation. The comprehensive approach is a means of combining efforts to "improve on the current level of cooperation between security forces, other government activities, and the rest of the actors involved- bringing together all the elements of effort—political, economic, cultural, military"², and by engaging not only in military intervention but also including humanitarian mission.

However contrary to the desired effort and goals of security forces there is another deep gulf between people in the West and in Afghanistan. The 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks has become one of the most important events of this year in the West, with millions of people in the U.S. and other nations remembering the victims through a wide variety of events. A recent Wall Street Journal article reveals however that a large number of Afghans outside the largest cities do not know about the attacks. In Helmand and Kandahar, the largely rural, Pashtun provinces that are the heartland of the Taliban, 92 percent of respondents to a poll of 1,000 men between the ages of 15 and 30 "said they didn't know about 'this event which the foreigners call 9/11' after being read a three-paragraph description of the attacks," the newspaper reported. The paper pointed out that this could be largely attributed to the lack of literacy in the region, where electricity, television and radios are also unknown in many villages. The International Council on Security and Development, the think tank that conducted the poll, also implicated a lack of cultural outreach by Western powers. "Nobody explained to them the 9/11 story—and it's hard to win the hearts and minds of the fighting-age males in Helmand if they don't even know why the foreigners are here," said Norine MacDonald, president of the think tank³. With many Afghans still being unaware of the reason behind Western occupation, the mission of security forces for creating a dialogue based on local engagement and rebuilding civil society infrastructure appears still largely ineffective.

² Stavridis: 2011

³ Trovimof: 2011

Dialogue through Culture

Cultural actors as well as European cultural institutions on the other hand are engaging with a differing approach to dialogue that intends to diminish the gulf between Western forces and Afghan civil society working on grassroots level. Cultural programs, engaging young, future leaders of the country, aim to create space for dialogue and artistic expression in order to build confidence and capacities of local cultural practitioners, rebuild a cultural infrastructure and support integration in multiethnic societies. For example, the Goethe Institut has been holding puppet theatre workshops which resulted in the 2009 founding of Parwaz, the first puppet theatre ensemble in Afghanistan. Based on fables and fairy tales and every day circumstance, the content of the plays include a plea for tolerance and mutual respect⁴.

Nonetheless the question imposes, of how one can possibly know if watching a play at a puppet theatre in Afghanistan promoting tolerance and mutual acceptance will influence a child to not become an insurgent? As PD Dr. Jochen Hippler, a German peace practitioner recently said at a conference of zivik, a civil conflict prevention funding programme of the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (ifa): “when security and development cooperation fail to enforce peace, we should be realistic enough to see that artists can’t necessarily do that either”⁵

Cultural engagement of local people affected by violence can not solve conflict, but it can make a peace and conflict process more tangible and human. This requires long term engagement and realistic perspective of what can be achieved with cultural work and action. Culture and the arts are at the very heart of a society making the layers and patterns of how a society works more visible and understandable of which also Western military and security forces could benefit from. For example the twelve 30 minutes long theatre plays “The Great Game: Afghanistan” visualised Afghan culture and history “taking the audience on a journey from the first Anglo-Afghan wars to Independence; from the Russian invasion to the CIA arming of the Mujahideen; from the coming of the Taliban to Operation Enduring Freedom, the reconstruction, aid-workers and the present situation in Helmand.”⁶ Sir David Richards, then Head of the British Army, said after watching the plays: “I can tell you that the Ministry of Defence as a whole, and certainly the armed forces desperately want to understand the country well, and this series of plays—if I had seen it before I had deployed [to Afghanistan] myself in 2005 for the first time—would have made me a much better Commander of the ISAF Forces.”

Conclusion

What is the meaning of cultural dialogue in such long, complex and complicated conflict region as Afghanistan? During the roundtable event of the Chatham House on “The roles of values in counter-insurgency and stabilisation” it soon became clear that the definition and purpose of implementing a cultural dialogue largely depends on to who you are talking to—

⁴ Please refer to: <http://www.goethe.de/ges/prj/kue/kon/bqu/pik/enindex.htm>

⁵ Zivik Forum 2010

⁶ Tricycle: 2011

Military, Diplomats, or Cultural activists. Clear is, that either form of dialogue faces its own potential but also challenges and limitation. However, what is always required is a deep understanding of the conflict and cultural pattern that is operated in. Projects and operations of whatever nature have to be carefully planned and aligned with the cultural and religious environment of a society. A comprehensive approach to counter- insurgency has to truly consider all layers of the social interaction and environment- without understanding the 'other' culture, winning 'hearts and minds' of Afghans will be a difficult task to be accomplished before Western forces withdraw from the country. Uncertain still is what they will leave behind.

Information on Chatham House Project: "Cultural Dialogue in international Security and Defence"

The conference "The Role of Values in Counter-Insurgency and Stabilisation: Mil-Mil, Civ-Mil and 'Civ-Civ'-Dialogue from the Balkans to South Asia" (London, 5 September 2011) was part of Chatham House's "Cultural Dialogue in International Security and Defence" programme. This is a two year project to convene a series of workshops and conferences bringing together scholars and policymakers with the goal of creating greater understanding about how developed, Western nations have different conceptions of national security than nations in the developing world such as Afghanistan and rising powers such as China, Russia, India, and Brazil.

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