

Report: Roundtable on Afghanistan and Syria with Dr. Kamal Alam, Fellow Middle East Regional Defence and Security Issues at the Institute for Statecraft, UK, on May 13, 2014.

Taliban are not likely to overrun Kabul post-2014

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ISLAMABAD: “The Taliban are not likely to overrun Kabul after 2014, they may be able to control certain pockets of territory in the south and east though,” said Dr. Kamal Alam, Fellow Middle East Regional Defence and Security Issues at the London-based Institute for Statecraft UK. He was speaking at a roundtable on Afghanistan and Syria organized by the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS) here on Tuesday. He was of the view that the international community would make sure that the Taliban remain a peripheral force post-2014. Dr. Alam was hopeful that the Bilateral Security Agreement will be signed between Afghanistan and the U.S. soon after the new Afghan president would be sworn in. He added, however, that the post-2014 scenario in Afghanistan would largely depend on how the Afghan government manages to provide personal and social security to its people rather than serving only the elite. Dr. Alam was of the view that the Taliban were not popular in Afghanistan. He said that even the ones who claimed to be supporting the Taliban were doing that out of fear or the hope of some financial gain. He refuted the perception of a general ideological support for the religious cause of the Taliban in parts of Afghanistan.

Dr. Alam, who comes with on-ground experience with coalition forces operating in southern Afghanistan, was of the view that counter-insurgency effort in Helmand province is fraught with lack of coordination. With the presence of British and Canadian troops alongside the U.S. Army and Marine Corps there it was not easy to coordinate all the activities of all the different command structures, according to Dr. Alam. This, he argued, gave some local strongmen the opportunity to use NATO firepower to settle personal scores with rivals at times. He shared that the Afghan National Army operating in Helmand is composed mainly of Tajiks and the Pashtuns who were settled in the north by King Amanullah about a century ago. Dr. Alam termed the Afghan Special Forces—with a strength of between 3,000 to 5,000 soldiers—a success story though. He added that there is very little visible on-ground development work in Helmand province.

Dr. Alam shared that the public perception in Afghanistan is quite anti-Pakistan. He added that the Afghans tend to blame most of their security problems on Pakistan. Dr. Alam was of the view that the print and electronic media in Afghanistan was a major factor in anti-Pakistan sentiments among the masses.

Dr. Alam emphasized that Pakistan had no other option but to remain involved with Afghanistan. He said that Pakistan could neither isolate itself from Afghanistan because of its contiguity and porous nature of the border with Afghanistan nor could it wish away the involvement of other neighboring countries in Afghanistan. Dr. Alam shared that India is strongly involved in Afghanistan in various fields including trainings for the Afghan National Army. He shared that the Afghans praise Indian role in Afghanistan while conveniently forgetting that during the Afghan Jihad India had sided with the Soviets against Afghanistan. Similarly, he said, many Afghans have a lot of complains about Pakistan now

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overlooking the fact that Pakistan was a great help to the country when it was invaded by the Soviet Union.

Dr. Alam was of the view that Pakistan needed to improve its public image in Afghanistan. He shared that Pakistan had undertaken some major goodwill gestures towards Afghanistan, such as: the establishment of a university in Mazar Sharif, the training and coaching of the Afghan national cricket team, and the construction of the Torkham-Jalalabad Highway, but that those efforts were not backed by concerted public diplomacy initiatives.

Dr. Alam stated that relations between Pakistan and Syria had deteriorated recently because of allegations of a possible Pak-Saudi collusion in supporting the Syrian rebels. He added that Pakistan and Syria had enjoyed very close and cordial relations since the Arab Israeli War of 1973, wherein Pakistan supported Syria against Israel. He said that the best school in Damascus still is the Pakistan International School, and that there are roads named after Pakistani pilots in the city. Dr. Kamal shared that the common population of Syria finds it hard to believe that Pakistan could be involved in undermining the central authority of its government. Dr. Alam dismissed the impression that the Syrian government is an Alawite government. He shared that many top positions in the Syrian government were held by the Sunnis, and added that intermarriages between the Shias and the Sunnis were quite common in Damascus. He termed the conflict in Syria as a conflict between the liberal and secular Syrians represented by the central government, and the al-Qaeda represented by the rebels.