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Subject: Do They Have Our Attention Yet?

With reference to my recent communications on Afghanistan and the Taliban, the recent Taliban actions with the Bamiyan and other Buddhist statues re-state some of the points I made.

1. The Taliban are not trained or experienced diplomats, bureaucrats or technocrats. They are primarily Kandahari, fundamentalist mullahs with little respect or understanding of modern western, i.e., U.N. values. Except for “the people of the Book”, i.e., Muslims, Christians and Jews, the Taliban have little understanding and no respect for other religions, and especially those that involve idols or statues that have long been an anathema in traditional Islam. In Taliban eyes, the destruction of the Bamiyan statues is justified if not demanded given their fundamental orientations. The surprise is that they did not take this action earlier. Clearly, they are making a point.
2. The Taliban are frustrated at not being recognized by the world and the U.N. as the government of Afghanistan. Taliban at the lowest levels in Helmand expressed this frustration to me two years ago. They control and govern virtually all of that country. As Taliban Minister of Information and Culture Maulawi Quadratullah Jamal said, “We tell the United Nations to go and ask Rabbani for the statues’ preservation, because they recognize him.”
3. The Taliban are frustrated at the lack of international recognition of the fact that they abolished opium poppy as a crop in Afghanistan. We all know that they did and have known since the end of the fall planting season in November. An unidentified Afghan intellectual close to the Taliban in the media put it this way, “At the insistence of the international community, the Taliban eradicated poppy growing....For their pains, they received sanctions and a cut in international assistance....In response, the United States placed us once again on the list of countries judged to be non-cooperative in the fight against drugs.” No other government in the world has been able to take an equivalent action against narcotics. It would be as if President Bush banned the selling of heroine on the streets of our major cities and it happened. As previously noted, the Taliban banned the primary cash crop in the country, the basis of the economy. And this

action affected primarily the farmers of Helmand province that were the main producers and one of the centers from which the Taliban receive much of their political support. We can be sure that Mullah Omer is under a great deal of pressure to allow the return of poppy as a crop. From what I hear, since the ban, the price of raw opium has more than doubled in Afghanistan. This is great for the merchants who are holding the past produce but does little for the average farmer who is in continual debt with this crop. As a credit system, many farmers receive advance payment from the buyers at time of planting for the planned crop. And as I noted in my previous communications - no organization, no country is taking any action in support of the opium poppy ban. We are giving the justification for Mullah Omer to lift the poppy ban. The western world, the primary consumer of the narcotics, is doing nothing to help the farmers with the transition from opium to other cash crops. We will have another reason to condemn a Taliban action even though we ignored the opportunity to help.

What appears in the West as an illogical action and some level of crime against mankind and cultural history, the destruction of the two ancient Buddhas of Bamiyan is very likely a political act on the part of the Taliban, and justified in their eyes in several ways.

International isolation as a political sanction in hope of resulting in a change does not work, certainly not with the Afghans. It is seen as a provocation, in the eyes of the Taliban, to be reacted to. If we are interested in change, we must engage the Taliban in a positive and continuous dialogue on the subjects of our mutual interest and stop pushing them into dumb reactions. As I noted before, the Afghans do not respond well to provocation, threats and negative sanctions. They tend to be somewhat hardheaded and have proven to be willing to take their values into self-destruction as can be seen over the past 20 years of Afghan history.

Can we try to help these people who have been our friends, fought one of our wars, not to destroy themselves? In my opinion, it would not be that difficult. Some economic support is needed and a lot of positive, productive dialogue, not continuous condemnation. Recognition and support of the opium poppy ban could be a very important first step.

Do they have our attention yet? Are we listening? I think not.

cc: Jeff Lunstead/South Asia  
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