

Assessing the Role of the United Front

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Brief Analysis

The current situation in the region creates an opportunity for Afghanistan and the United Front. The United Front is the only force present in Afghanistan and ready to move against Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. If there is cooperation between the forces of the United States and the United Front, the job of eliminating Al Qaeda's infrastructure and removing the Taliban from power will be easier than if the two act separately. Yet, the leadership of the United Front is aware of the misconception in Washington that there are certain factions of the Taliban that could be dealt with and convinced to join forces against bin Laden. Any involvement by the United States should be done in a way to bring further unity, cohesion, and support to an already existing coalition of forces opposing the Taliban under the banner of the United Front.

Accusations about human rights abuses by the United Front have been made in the West. While there may have been regrettable isolated incidents, many of the abuses cited were in fact committed by groups opposed to the Taliban which were not part of the United Front at the time. The United Front was not responsible for all of the problems that marred the period from 1992 to 1996, and it was not able to provide security for all of the people under its control then.

Good and strong relations would most probably characterize the relations of a post-Taliban government with its neighbors. Such a government would certainly place priority on eliminating the problem of the "Afghan Arabs" and terrorists operating from Afghan soil; after all, those forces have been among the most implacable foes of the United Front.

With the exception of Pakistan, the United Front has not had a significant problem with its neighbors. All of these countries except Pakistan recognize the United Front government, known as the Islamic State of Afghanistan, while the United States recognizes no faction -- neither the United Front nor the Taliban -- as the representative of Afghanistan. In the case of Pakistan, the United Front is embittered by Pakistan's deep support for the Taliban and their long direct and indirect involvement in Afghanistan. Pakistan has long been a spoiler of Afghan governments. The Inter-Services Intelligence, which was central in the Taliban's coming to power, is not accountable to any authority within Pakistan; it is still using its impressive capabilities to fund the Taliban and funnel weapons to them from abroad. Pakistan's role in any post-Taliban government needs to be carefully considered by all of the parties involved, including the United States; Pakistan should not necessarily be allowed to have a major say, in light of its past record.

In the past, Iran has attempted to influence domestic developments in Afghanistan as well. Yet, that does not apply nowadays, when Iran has a very pragmatic view about the situation in Afghanistan. Iran also has to be credited for providing support at the neediest of times to the forces and factions opposing the Taliban. Iran has legitimate worries about the Pakistani influence in the Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan. For the future, Iran's priority would be to see a peaceful Afghanistan.

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There have been a lot of misconceptions about the formation of the United Front and the area it controls in Afghanistan, which certainly undermine the viability and importance of that group. Most media reports characterize the United Front as just a coalition of religious and ethnic minorities in Afghanistan controlling a tiny sliver of the country. In fact, the Pushtun tribes -- who have traditionally dominated past governments in Afghanistan and certainly are essential to any post-Taliban government -- have a quite significant representation within the United Front; two of the five parties that make up the Front are Pushtun-dominated. As for territory, the United Front largely controls around 20 to 25 percent of Afghanistan.

Furthermore, the United Front is a more viable potential government than most media reports paint it out to be, and it is much more of a factor in formulating any post-Taliban government. Their ability to govern in the areas they have controlled after their retreat from Kabul shows that they can play an important role in forming a future broad-based government for all of Afghanistan. Furthermore, since they have been the only resistance force providing a viable alternative to the Taliban rule, they will have to be a major element in any future government.

The United Front has undertaken several initiatives to reach out and create a broader-based coalition against the Taliban in Afghanistan, working especially to include the former king, Zahir Shah, and other Pushtun groups in southern Afghanistan. In most cases, these initiatives were motivated more by opportunism than by shared ideology; that is, the different factions know that they disagree on many issues, but all want to displace the Taliban.

Yet, in dealing with the United Front, the United States has to be aware of the many media reports of human rights abuses and violations that might have been committed by factions within that group from 1992 to 1996. During this period, factions of the United Front and specific commanders committed serious atrocities, including mass executions, mass rape, and indiscriminate shelling of Kabul. However, those episodes were five or more years ago; there have been many fewer reports of abuses recently. In any case, these abuses pale in comparison to the Taliban's record.

Iran's involvement in Afghanistan has always been in reaction to other regional players' interference, primarily, if not solely, to Pakistan's actions. Iran is well aware that the United States is working with Pakistan, and for this reason, Tehran is likely to act cautiously, especially as it shares the U.S. interest in preventing Pakistan from slipping toward extremism or undergoing destabilization. Rather than allowing Afghanistan to become a source of tension between them, this is a good opportunity for the United States and Iran to improve their relations, as they share many interests about Afghanistan, including regional stability and combating drug trafficking.

As for the likely course of the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan, the United States could face a long, drawn-out process without the availability of good, specific intelligence on the whereabouts of bin Laden. In this scenario, the Taliban and bin Laden would gradually lose territories. The process could occur much more quickly, though, especially with the antipathy among average Afghans for the Taliban and especially the foreigners around bin Laden. Were local strongmen to abandon the Taliban, the collapse of the Taliban government could come quite soon. A key factor determining which scenario unfolds will be whether the United States is able to conduct a precise campaign of targeted actions avoiding as many civilian casualties as possible. The ordinary Afghan's perception of American involvement has to remain a priority for the United States.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ashraf Zeitoon.

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