



Accommodating the Taliban An Ill Conceived and Unprincipled Policy

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In his interview on Sixty Minutes this past Sunday, President Obama said that he was spending time in the evening reading about the problems in Afghanistan. It appears that he's been reading Fared Zakaria (Newsweek), as his views were echoed in the President's suggestion that he would consider accepting some kind of accommodation with the more "moderate" elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan that, in his view, could effectively split the movement. The President should expand his reading list, which should include some of the well-respected, moderate Arab writers.

Take for example, *Mushari Al-Zayidi*. Writing this past week¹ in *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, *Al-Zayidi* questioned Zakaria's assertion that the world can accept and accommodate radical Islam. In essence, *Al-Zayidi* observes that Obama's strategy for Afghanistan seems to be based on Zakaria's theory that the United States should draw on its experience in Iraq where some of the Sunni groups were recruited, separated from *Al-Qaeda* and their lethal power against American forces nullified. *Al-Zayidi* finds Zakaria's theory, which relies for support on statements made by David Kilcullen, advisor to General David Petraeus in Iraq, an ill conceived, fundamentally flawed experiment. While it is true that the Taliban are Sunni, as were the groups in Iraq, *Al-Zayidi* explains that the similarities end there. The Sunni tribal groups in Iraq were never religious extremists; most came from the socialist Baath party in which religion played little if any role. The Sunnis turned anti-American because the United States disbanded the Iraqi army, leaving the Sunnis fearful of the *Shi'a*, bitter, short on cash and ready to join *Al-Qaeda* or any other movement. They were basically mercenaries, so once the United States started paying them they readily switched allegiance.



The situation in Afghanistan is quite different. The Taliban are religious fanatics, not frustrated mercenaries. They are strong supporters of a strict – and some believe distorted – interpretation of the Islamic *shari'a*, including a total ban on the education of women. The Taliban is also well funded by its opium trade and therefore doesn't need to sell its allegiance for a handful of cash; it can afford to buy allegiance. It is also important to remember how the Taliban came to power. Infighting among Afghanistan's corrupt and brutal warlords had thrown the country into chaos. The Taliban, with their strict religious order, gave the

¹ March 10th, 2009 <http://www.aawsat.com/print.asp?did=510419&issueno=11060> – Title: "It is a weak proposal, Fared"

population a sense of security, albeit at a significant cost. Success in Afghanistan depends upon unseating the Taliban, not accommodating them. It will only be possible to do so if we can provide the population with an environment in which they can live free from the oppressive Taliban regime, but retained the sense of security for which they have paid dearly.

Al-Zaydi views the idea of “coexistence” advocated by Zakaria, and apparently embraced by President Obama, as impractical, opportunistic and surely will be seen in the Arab world as a sign of weakness. It is therefore bound to fail. *Al-Zaydi* is well aware of “the complexity of confronting the extremists”. He points out, however, that the history in many Arab countries has shown that when Muslim radicals were left unchecked the results were disastrous. “We began to see their fanaticism in all aspects of our lives, as they fought against the arts, the sciences and any opening to the outside world. They stubbornly rejected civility and progress.” The Saudi’s experience with cozying up to the Islamists is undoubtedly one of the most convincing illustrations of the failure of such a strategy. Thus, the Saudi King, who is trying hard to reverse this trend [see [PI 566 – The King’s Quiet Revolution](#)], must be very alarmed to see the apparent willingness of the U.S. administration to consider accommodating the extremist Taliban in Afghanistan.

Al-Zaydi argues that attempts to accommodate radicals are always unsuccessful and short lived. Moreover, he explains, fanaticism cannot be confined within geographical boundaries. “It will spill over into other Muslim countries as these movements export their ideology.” Thus, if the United States “accommodates” the fanaticism of the Taliban under any pretext, it will embolden Islamists in Yemen, Libya, Morocco and Algeria, as well as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Wahabi in Saudi Arabia. (Widely read Islamic columnist *Fahmi Huwaydi*, writing in Al-Jazeera yesterday,² is already touting President Obama’s new label -- “moderate Taliban” -- as an accepted term in world politics.) It would therefore be a grave mistake if the United States fails to appreciate that Afghanistan is not Iraq, or ignores the facts for the sake of political expediency.

Principles, no matter how inconvenient, matter. Establishing a dialogue with other countries we disagree with like Iran is wise. Such dialogue should not however be confused with a policy of accommodating radical groups like the Taliban. Such a policy is difficult to rationalize logically or justify morally. Keep reading Mr. President. Then look your wife and daughters in the eye and ask yourself whether you would sacrifice women’s right to life, liberty and education on the altar of political accommodation.

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² <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/03FF9B38-7666-47E8-B8BC-B93C531FCD41.htm>