

KARZAI SEEKS LEGITIMACY AT JIRGA

President Hamid Karzai convened a meeting last week of over 2,000 Afghans to participate in a four-day traditional jirga in Kabul. The dual purpose of this large-scale traditional gathering of elders and leaders was to discuss the possibility of a strategic partnership with the United States and whether the Afghan government should continue to pursue peace talks with insurgents.¹ Although this traditional jirga was only consultative, some Afghan officials fear its endorsement of Karzai's political agenda would allow him to claim legitimacy and call similar events in the future to stifle opposing voices in government.²

The jirga issued a 76-point resolution on Sunday that closely mirrored Karzai's view of the need for a strategic partnership agreement with the United States. However, the endorsement is dependent on a series of conditions, including the cessation of coalition night raids, the closure of U.S. and internationally-operated prisons, and a stipulation that U.S. personnel who commit crimes in Afghanistan be tried in Afghan courts.³ If enacted, the agreement would permit U.S. forces to remain in Afghanistan for up to ten years, and the Afghan government could ask for an extension at that point.⁴

Although most of Karzai's political opponents, including previous presidential competitor Abdullah Abdullah, boycotted the jirga and considered it unconstitutional, many publicly agreed that a U.S. partnership was vital to the country's future interests as long as "democracy is ensured and fundamental reforms in the structure of the government as well as reforms in the electoral system are guaranteed."⁵ Members of the Meshrano Jirga (Upper House of Parliament), many of whom are appointed by Karzai, expressed support for the findings of the jirga and recommended Karzai send the 76-point document to the Wolesi Jirga (Lower House of Parliament).⁶

Support for a continued U.S. presence was not consistent across the country, though, as up to 1,000 students blocked the Kabul-Jalalabad highway in Surkh Rod district of Nangarhar province on Sunday to protest the possibility of a strategic agreement.⁷ Protestors reportedly burned an effigy of U.S. President Barack Obama and shouted anti-American slogans.⁸ Although Afghan National Police officers were present, the Surkh

Rod district governor said the demonstrators dispersed peacefully after three hours.^{9,10} The Taliban, who previously condemned the jirga, unsurprisingly rejected its recommendations and the idea of a U.S.-Afghan strategic partnership.¹¹

Karzai had publicly endorsed a continued strategic partnership with the United States following the planned handover of lead security responsibilities to the Afghan government in December 2014.¹² The U.S. and Afghan governments have discussed various scenarios for strategic cooperation before, but negotiations have occurred in private. Karzai previously emphasized Afghan-run governance and security, including the cessation of controversial night raids by coalition forces, but the timeline for withdrawal for the 130,000 U.S. military personnel currently in Afghanistan has remained a contentious issue.¹³ U.S. officials have insisted permanent bases are not a factor in the post-2014 partnership with Kabul, but perceptions to the contrary have long caused unease among regional neighbors and have incited street protests in Kabul.¹⁴ Afghan condemnation of night raids was countered by the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee and the commander of the ISAF Joint Command in Kabul, who defended the raids as a "very important part" of the campaign that would soon "be run by Afghans to reach their own objectives."¹⁵

Karzai also consulted the convened jirga on the best way to resume peace talks with insurgent groups, the very idea of which has remained controversial since the assassination of the government's chief negotiator Burhanuddin Rabbani in September.¹⁶ Past peace talks

were criticized for being highly secretive and opaque, and non-Pashtun minorities remain highly suspicious of deals that could be negotiated with Pashtun insurgents.¹⁷

The Taliban, however, condemned the jirga and threatened to attack the site and its participants, decrying any strategic partnership as a Western attempt to occupy Afghanistan.¹⁸ The organization also claimed that a government informant had leaked the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) security plan for the event, giving the Taliban access to the plan.¹⁹ Although the Afghan government denied these allegations, some media sources reported the ANSF “hastily rewriting” their security plans.²⁰ On Monday, a suicide attacker was also shot and killed by ANSF near the jirga venue and two suspected accomplices were arrested.²¹

On Thursday morning, insurgents fired two rockets at the jirga compound. The first rocket landed near the Intercontinental Hotel, approximately 500 meters from jirga site, while the other struck an intersection near a police checkpoint. ANSF apprehended two suspects.²² Officials from the National Directorate of Security (NDS), Afghanistan’s intelligence agency, also claimed multiple foreign intelligence agencies in the region had unsuccessfully attempted to disrupt the Loya Jirga.²³ The NDS reported finding long-range rockets in four sites aimed at the jirga venue. It also claimed to have disrupted more than a dozen plots and arrested as many suspects with “explosives, suicide vests, and other equipment and ammunition.”²⁴

Karzai convened a peace jirga last year that was similarly met with cynicism, as opposition figures claimed the jirga was not representative of the population but rather composed of a select group of Karzai-aligned powerbrokers and appointees.²⁵ Although the jirga’s findings are not constitutionally binding, many Afghan representatives have criticized the entire undertaking as having been constructed to permit Karzai to go to the Bonn II Conference in December with an exaggerated show of national support to discuss future international involvement in Afghanistan.²⁶ Although members of parliament were invited, many boycotted the session, arguing that issues of national importance deserved to be debated in parliament rather than at an ad hoc forum.²⁷ A protracted controversy between the executive and legislative branches already undermines the efficacy of the Afghan government, and the jirga’s recommendations

to parliament will likely be contested by the polarized political factions.²⁸ Karzai’s emphasis on the importance of this hand-selected jirga threatens to further alienate sections of the population and has the potential to further undermine democratic progress in Afghanistan.

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NOTES

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