

Hopes are dim for Afghanistan

By Ken Ballen

Thu November 21, 2013

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- *A Loya Jirga council meets in Afghanistan to decide if U.S. troops may stay past 2014*
- *Ken Ballen: In Taliban message to Loya Jirga, a bombing killed 13 near meeting site*
- *Ballen: Afghan security depends on talks with a leader of Taliban, which denounces U.S. presence*
- *Ballen: U.S. spent \$90 billion in Afghanistan, the Taliban is resurgent, our goals still unmet*

Editor's note: [Ken Ballen](#), a former federal prosecutor, is president and founder of [Terror Free Tomorrow](#), a nonprofit organization that investigates the causes of extremism. He is the author of "[Terrorists in Love: True Life Stories of Islamic Radicals](#)."

(CNN) -- A traditional grand conclave of elders, a Loya Jirga, convenes Thursday in Kabul, Afghanistan, to decide whether U.S. forces can remain in the country past 2014. But events this past weekend illustrated the continuing perils and myopia of American policy.

On Saturday, just a few hundred yards from the site of Thursday's critical meeting, expected to be attended by 2,500 people, a car bomb exploded, killing at least 13 people. The Taliban took responsibility. At the same time, at Georgetown University in Washington, former first ladies Laura Bush and Hillary Clinton took the stage together to exhort Americans not to abandon the women of Afghanistan. Former Secretary of State Clinton stated that it is essential the U.S. continue to play a role in the country to provide the security necessary for continued progress for Afghan women and girls.

American reconstruction of Afghanistan is the most expensive reconstruction of a single country in U.S. history, costing more than \$90 billion to date. The United States has given more to Afghanistan than any other single country during the Marshall Plan after World War II. Last year, Afghanistan received almost twice as much as the next four largest foreign assistance country beneficiaries combined. With about 2,300 U.S. service members killed in this effort, the loss to American families has also been incalculable.

Yet, with all this sacrifice, the United States is not meaningfully closer to the goals Laura Bush, Hillary Clinton and the Obama administration have asked us to embrace. While our political leaders laud that progress and the need for a continued U.S. military presence, the Taliban respond with more bombs and more innocent lives are lost.

Hopes now for any kind of peace in Afghanistan largely depend on Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. After the Loya Jirga, a delegation of the Afghan High Peace Council will reportedly visit Pakistan to meet Baradar in a renewed push to end the decades' long conflict.

Baradar, once the top deputy to Taliban Supreme Leader Mullah Muhammad Omar, was freed from jail in Pakistan in September at the request of the Afghan government to help facilitate the peace process. Mullah Omar has denounced the Loya Jirga and the Taliban opposes any U.S. troops remaining.

Having interviewed Mullah Baradar's assistant and other Taliban fighters and leaders, it is clear that their worldview is as far from the Americans' and the largely Western-educated elite we rely on to run Afghanistan as ever.

In the world of Mullah Omar, Mullah Baradar and many of the Taliban leaders, their path is driven by the power of religious visions and dreams. Each "true night dream" is nothing less than a prophecy of God. And each leader's authority comes from God.

The seminal event in sealing Mullah Omar's authority as unquestioned leader happened in April 1996. Then, in the dusty southern Afghan Pashtun stronghold of Kandahar, Mullah Omar donned, from a religious shrine, the holy relic of the cloak of the Prophet Muhammad.

After the initial American victory in Afghanistan at the end of 2001, Mullah Omar and Mullah Baradar retreated to Quetta, in Pakistan.

As recounted to me by someone in Omar's inner circle, the Mullah was devastated by the Taliban's defeat. Paralyzed with inaction, Mullah Omar could not decide what to do, waiting patiently for another "true night dream" from God.

As a result, Mullah Baradar helped to direct a meeting in the spring of 2002 at a madrassa in Quetta with Mullah Omar's favorite seer. It was only after the Taliban seer recounted a dream in which he saw Mullah Omar's "beard turn a blinding white -- for it was now made of the threads of the holy prophet's very cloak" that Omar decided to lead the fight again against the Americans inside Afghanistan.

This is the same Mullah Baradar upon which peace talks now substantially depend.

While our Afghan allies hold the Loya Jirga to decide the fate of a continued U.S. military presence in the country, their Taliban enemies deliver their response with more bombs. And while the U.S. continues to invest unprecedented resources into a largely corrupt and feckless Afghan government, the Taliban leaders wait for dreams.