

NIGHT RAIDS, DRONES AND RAYMOND DAVIS STILL IN AF-PAK NEWS

A vitally important loya jirga, or grand gathering, is underway in Afghanistan with leaders from all over the country converging to share their views on the future of the Afghanistan-US relationship. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has announced that a prerequisite for any deal with the US is an end to night raids. Perhaps because of the importance of the meetings in Afghanistan, today saw a particularly large drone attack just across the border in Pakistan, with at least 15 killed in the attack. Raymond Davis also makes a surprise re-appearance in today's news, with former Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi providing more details on his resignation when he was under pressure for refusing to grant diplomatic immunity to Raymond Davis.

The loya jirga starts today and the Taliban has vowed to attack it:

About 2,000 Afghan community and political leaders will gather on Wednesday in Kabul under tight security for four days of deliberations on the country's most pressing issues, including ties with main ally the United States.

The meeting, known as a loya jirga, or grand assembly, cannot make laws, and whatever it decides has to be approved by parliament, but the subjects up for debate are among the most sensitive: the scope of a U.S. military presence after a 2014 deadline for foreign combat troops to leave and the idea of peace talks with the Taliban.

The Taliban, who have long fought to oust foreign forces, have dismissed the meeting as a ruse to cement what they

see as foreign interference and have already tried to disrupt it. They have vowed to target participants and said they had a copy of the jirga security plan.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai is using the occasion to say that no agreement with the US is possible without an end to night raids:

President Hamid Karzai set the conditions for his country's strategic partnership with the United States, saying on Wednesday that Afghanistan would allow long-term American bases here as long as American troops stopped conducting operations at night, searching homes or detaining Afghans.

Karzai's comments came at the opening of a large assembly, known as a loya jirga, which convened more than 2,000 delegates from around the country to discuss Afghanistan's future relationship with the United States, as well as the prospect of negotiating with the Taliban.

"We want to have a strong partnership with the U.S. and NATO, but with conditions," Karzai said. "We want our national sovereignty, and an end to night raids and to the detention of our countrymen."

Karzai flew by helicopter from his palace to the jirga venue across town, a sign of the level of concern about possible Taliban attacks during the conference, which is scheduled to run for at least four days. Afghan security forces blocked several roads in Kabul and searched cars and pedestrians for explosives; government offices and many shops were closed.

Night raids have long been a sore spot. As I noted back in September, targeting for the raids appears to have “improved” to the point where it is now claimed “only” 20% of raids target innocents rather than civilians. Given the long-term association of night raids with mistreatment and torture of Afghan civilians when they are detained in night raids, it comes as no surprise that Karzai would couple the call for an end to night raids with a call to end US detention of Afghan civilians. (Of course there also is the problem of torture of Afghans in Afghan prisons as well, but we won’t go there for now.)

The insistence on ending night raids will force the US to face a difficult decision. Night raids are a favorite tool and were dramatically increased by David Petraeus after the Obama administration took over. Despite the increase in the number of night raids and the US insistence that the raids are a vitally important tool, Reuters notes that violence in Afghanistan is at its worst level since the US invasion over ten years ago. Will the US give up its favorite tool, which it continues to cling to long after it has been conclusively demonstrated to be an abject failure?

As noted above, the Taliban have indicated that they intend to attack the loya jirga. Perhaps because of this important gathering of influential figures, one of the largest drone attacks in recent months took place today in South Waziristan:

A salvo of missiles fired by US drones destroyed a Pakistani Taliban base on Wednesday, killing at least 15 suspected militants in Pakistan’s tribal badlands on the Afghan border, officials said.

Up to 10 missiles slammed into the sprawling compound in the Baber Ghar area of South Waziristan, killing between 15 and 18 militants, most of whom were reported to be local Taliban fighters, the Pakistani security

officials said.

Five US drones carried out the attack, one of the officials told AFP.

“The target was a base of Pakistan Taliban. We have reports that 16 to 18 militants were killed in the attack,” the official told AFP in the northwestern city of Peshawar.

The story also quotes Pakistani officials that “foreign”, meaning al Qaeda or Uzbek Islamist militants, may be among the dead.

Meanwhile, former Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi provides more details on the end of his time as Foreign Minister. His loss of the position had been noted and attributed to his reluctance to grant immunity to Raymond Davis in a quote from the New York Times in this post of mine around the time it was announced, but now we learn more:

Former Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) MNA Shah Mehmood Qureshi said on Tuesday that he resigned as foreign minister after refusing to bow down to pressure over giving diplomatic immunity to Raymond Davis.

Talking to reporters at the Multan airport on Tuesday, Qureshi said that the Raymond Davis incident had taken place on January 27 and he had resigned on January 30.

He further said he did not step down because he wasn't given the foreign ministry, adding that he refused to give immunity to the CIA contractor because 'he was not an ambassador'.

“[The Davis incident] is in front of the whole nation. I was being greatly pressurised to give him immunity and I refused to do it,” said the former PPP stalwart.

From other recent reports I saw on Qureshi, it appears that he is leaving the PPP party and looking to form a new political party. Given the way in which the Raymond Davis incident brought huge crowds of Pakistanis into the streets, Qureshi may well have found in the Raymond Davis episode a useful rallying point for his efforts to start a new party.