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Afghanistan: why US changed its mind about Karzai's 'jirga'

US officials initially had concerns about Karzai's peace *jirga*, which is taking place in Kabul, Afghanistan. But with no Taliban representation at the event, the US shifted its stance.



Afghan President Hamid Karzai asks attendees of the peace *jirga* to take their seats after hearing sounds of an explosion, during his opening address in Kabul, Afghanistan, on Wednesday.

(Musadeq Sadeq/AP)

By Howard LaFranchi, Staff writer

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Washington —

Afghan President Hamid Karzai's *jirga*, or national-consensus dialogue, is taking place with American blessings as much because of what it isn't as for what it is.

Billed by Mr. Karzai as a national assembly of peace and reconciliation, the three-day event in Kabul is bereft of any political opposition, let alone Taliban representation. So there is no danger of concessions to the Taliban leadership — a concern that led US officials to press for the postponement of the *jirga* for several months.

The *jirga* now appears to be little more than an exercise in bolstering the political support of a tainted leader whom the United States has decided it has no choice but to work with. As a result, the US has shifted to accepting the *jirga*, Afghanistan analysts say, with relative certainty that it no longer presents drawbacks for American goals in the war with the Afghan Taliban.

"Basically, we're giving Karzai a pass on this, and after some earlier concerns, we're saying, 'Go in good health,' and we'll see what comes of it," says Marvin Weinbaum, a former State Department intelligence specialist now at the Middle East Institute in Washington.

The Obama administration used Karzai's visit to Washington last month to spell out to the Afghan leader what the *jirga* should and shouldn't do.

At a public appearance with Karzai during his visit, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton alluded to a national-reconciliation dialogue that would begin with this week's *jirga*. While suggesting US support for a process aimed at reintegrating low- and mid-level Taliban fighters into Afghan society, she also laid down a set of conditions that any reformed insurgents would have to meet.

What Karzai described as "countryside boys" in the fight simply for the pay would have to renounce violence, Secretary Clinton said. Also, they and mid-level leaders would have to cut any ties to Al Qaeda and adhere to the laws and rights set forth in Afghanistan's Constitution – including women's rights.

Karzai's May visit to Washington did not resolve all the differences between the two governments on the Taliban issue, in particular the question of a dialogue with senior Taliban leaders. But this week's *jirga* won't address that issue anyway, some Afghanistan analysts note.

"Karzai's government really does want to engage the Taliban senior leadership, but Obama and [US Gen. Stanley] McChrystal say they want to weaken the Taliban on the ground first in order to bring them to the table," says Malou Innocent, an Afghanistan-Pakistan specialist at the Cato Institute in Washington.

US officials are reluctant about instituting the kind of cash-for-loyalty program that helped turn the tide in Iraq because they fear Afghanistan may not be ready for it.

"Winning over the low-level Taliban fighters is part of our COIN [counterinsurgency] policy, but we also know that before people can make the jump, they have to feel secure about it. And the reality is we're not there yet," Mr. Weinbaum says. "If you start handing out money now, it's just money down the drain, or could even backfire," he adds, if the money simply ended up in Taliban hands.

In Iraq, the Sons of Iraq – Sunni Iraqis in the insurgent stronghold of Anbar who were wooed with cash to support the government – were a crucial component in weakening the insurgency. But, Weinbaum notes, the Iraqi movement started with powerful sheikhs who were able to deliver large numbers of Iraqis.

"That scenario just doesn't exist in Afghanistan right now," he says.

The Afghan government, says Ms. Innocent of the Cato Institute, has already shown that it is unable to secure and hold areas of the country that coalition forces have cleared – something average Afghans and Taliban fighters alike would be looking for.

That means the *jirga* in the end may have little to do with boosting Afghanistan's reconciliation process. "A better barometer" of Afghanistan's future path may be this fall's planned parliamentary elections, Innocent says. Successful elections demonstrating popular support for the government would be very likely to have a stronger impact on Taliban calculations.

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