

Khalilzad's "Personal" Trip to Kabul: Clear Messages of a Hidden Mission

News:

In recent days, Zalmay Khalilzad, the former United States Special Representative for Afghanistan Peace, traveled to Kabul and, in a media interview, spoke about the state of relations between Afghanistan and the United States. He emphasized that he is not currently a member of the U.S. government and that his trip was "personal"; at the same time, however, he acknowledged that the visit included discussions on prisoner exchanges, bilateral relations, and ways to improve them. Khalilzad also stated explicitly that despite his formal departure from government structures, he still considers himself "engaged" in Afghan affairs and feels a sense of responsibility toward this file.

Comment:

The first point worth reflection is this: a trip described as personal, yet its content is entirely political; a conversation presented as informal, yet revolving precisely around the same axes that have defined U.S. policy in Afghanistan for years. From this interview, one can discern not only the views of an individual, but also the main contours of Washington's policy—albeit in a softer and more informal form.

Zalmay Khalilzad is not a new figure in Afghan politics. During his official tenure, he was the principal architect of U.S. talks with the Taliban and one of the key designers of the Doha Agreement—an accord that moved the Afghan crisis from the battlefield to the negotiating table and recognized the Taliban as the United States' official counterpart. Khalilzad was not an independent policymaker, but the executor of a specific American strategy: reducing costs, containing threats, and managing the crisis without long-term commitments.

In the recent interview, he states plainly that Afghanistan is no longer a priority of U.S. foreign policy; yet he immediately adds that it still matters to Washington. This "importance" stems from two very specific issues: U.S. security and the Taliban's commitments—namely, the release of American prisoners and the Taliban's obligation, under the Doha Agreement, to curb terrorism so that Afghan soil is not used against U.S. interests and those of its allies. Put more clearly, from the U.S. perspective Afghanistan is not a vital issue, but it is a potential risk that must be managed.

Khalilzad defines this management within the framework of the Doha Agreement. He recalls that the Taliban have committed not to allow Afghan territory to be used against U.S. interests and those of its allies, and his remarks suggest that, up to this point, Washington has a relative level of satisfaction in this regard. In his view, this indicates an acceptable degree of pragmatism.

One of the more meaningful parts of the interview concerns Bagram Air Base. Khalilzad rejects the term “occupation” and links the issue to U.S. security needs. He states openly that in the future the United States and Afghanistan may once again enter into cooperation, and that Bagram could be part of bilateral discussions. This indicates that, from Washington’s perspective, Bagram remains a potential instrument—not a closed file. Pressure, negotiation, and bargaining can all be redefined under the headings of security, diplomacy, or counterterrorism.

At the same time, Khalilzad also plays the role of the “good cop” and encourager. He gives the Taliban’s policies a favorable assessment and indirectly advises them to learn, like Pakistan, how to interact with the United States. His praise of Pakistan’s skill is praise of a model: a country that has learned how to derive maximum benefit from its relationship with the dominant power while respecting America’s red lines. His message is clear: if the Taliban are realistic and understand the rules of the game, they can become a more tolerable partner.

Regarding democracy and Western values as well, Khalilzad speaks of a change in method, not a change in objective. He states that the United States no longer seeks to impose democracy and its associated values through military force, but this does not mean abandoning them. The tools have changed: soft pressure, diplomacy, economics, and conditional engagement have replaced war.

The overall conclusion of this interview shows that America’s relative satisfaction with Taliban policies is operational and conditional, not value-based or principled. Yet a fundamental question arises here: if the criterion of policy success is Washington’s satisfaction and the management of threats, where does the pleasure of Almighty Allah stand? In the order of the nation-state and realist politics, this question has essentially been removed; because today politics has been reduced to the realm of interest and power. The real crisis emerges when those in power among Muslims—especially those who came to the fore with the slogan of Islamic governance—also accept this removal and view the state not as a means of manifesting religion, but as an instrument of bargaining and survival. This gap is the root of many of our present political deadlocks.

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