

# DID KARZAI REALLY ACCUSE THE UNITED STATES OF COLLUSION WITH THE TALIBAN?

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Despite extraordinary progress in the media's ability to cover a wide range of international issues with remarkable speed and analysis, cultural and linguistic differences can at times result in poor-quality reporting. Media is not simply a source of information about local and global events. It shapes public opinion and influences government policies. Therefore, quality reporting is essential to avoid misperceptions and misunderstandings that could lead to ill-informed policies. It is important for the media to not only recognize the possibilities of misunderstandings that could arise as a result of cultural and linguistic differences, but also to react quickly and make corrections when mistakes and misunderstandings do occur. A case in point is the recent reporting of a statement made by Afghanistan's President, Hamid Karzai, widely characterized as an accusation of collusion between the United States and the Taliban.

Since the 2009 Afghan elections, diplomatic relations between President Karzai and the US government have not been always purely positive. Although Karzai is known for having taken some contradictory positions and making occasionally vague statements, he has always been very clear and direct in criticizing US policies. During the 2009 elections, Karzai accused the United States of manipulating the elections.<sup>1</sup> He also blamed the international community for election frauds.<sup>2</sup> In 2010, he even threatened to join the Taliban if foreign pressure for domestic reforms continued.<sup>3</sup>

On March 9, 2013, the Taliban perpetrated two suicide attacks, one in Kabul and the other one in Khost – killing as many as 17 innocent people and wounding scores. President Karzai's comments the following day about the attacks attracted worldwide media attention and further strained the already tense relationship between Afghanistan and the United States.

Karzai was speaking in a local language and made some vague statements about the bombings, with many implicit meanings, but within a specific context. While a native Dari speaking audience could easily understand and interpret his comments, without an understanding of this specific context in which he was speaking, his words could be easily misunderstood and misinterpreted. This is exactly what happened when foreign media translated his statements literally and drew their own conclusions and interpretations of his comments outside the local context.

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1. "Karzai Says United States Wants to Manipulate Him" Reuters, 7 September 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/09/07/idUSL7677562>.

2. Elise Labott and Jill Dougherty. "Afghan's Karzai Calls Clinton to Discuss Fraud Comments," 2 April 2010, [http://www.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/04/02/white.house.karzai/index.html?\\_s=PM:POLITICS](http://www.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/04/02/white.house.karzai/index.html?_s=PM:POLITICS).

3. "Karzai Reportedly Threatens to Join Taliban," 5 April 2010, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/05/karzai-reportedly-threate\\_n\\_525414.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/05/karzai-reportedly-threate_n_525414.html).

While attending a commemoration of International Women's Day in Kabul, President Karzai said:

“Yesterday's bombings, carried out under the Taliban label, were in reality at the service of America.

Many news agencies interpreted these comments as an accusation of a collusion between the United States and the Taliban. However, President Karzai did not make any reference to the term “collusion” which was widely used by local and international media in their reporting of this story. President Karzai made no specific accusations against the US government. Rather, all his comments and critiques were in direct reference to the Taliban attacks and within the context of the Taliban's repeated demands for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan. In his speech, Karzai was appealing to the Taliban's interests and implicitly saying that, if the Taliban wanted the foreign forces to leave Afghanistan, they will have to stop conducting such attacks which only give the United States reason to stay in the country beyond 2014.

Karzai, used the phrase “at the service of America” as a way of telling the Taliban that they are not serving, but rather indeed contradicting their own interests by carrying out such attacks. Karzai was not concerned about protecting the Taliban's interests, he was trying to remind them that their actions will encourage the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan beyond 2014. He was indeed appealing to the Taliban's interests and strategy in order to convince them to stop conducting further such attacks and killing and maiming innocent people.

The *New York Times* misinterpreted President Karzai's comments writing, “President Hamid Karzai levelled particularly harsh accusations against the United States on Sunday, suggesting that the Americans and the Taliban had a common goal in destabilizing his country.”<sup>4</sup> Karzai, however, never mentioned any common goal between the Taliban and the United States. Similarly, *The Guardian* interpreted his comments as a shared Taliban-US effort for extending the US presence in Afghanistan: “On Sunday, Karzai said that recent suicide bomb attacks in Kabul and Khost province, in which 17 people died, were a sign of shared Taliban and US efforts to justify a long-term foreign troop presence.”<sup>5</sup>

It is important to note that President Karzai also said that, “On the one hand, the Taliban are negotiating with America, but on the other hand they carry out bombings in Kabul.” His comments on the Taliban negotiations with the United States referred to the ongoing efforts of the peace process and the intent of the United States to negotiate with the Taliban by allowing the opening of a Taliban office in Doha. The Afghan government strongly supports these negotiations. President Karzai was thus in no way blaming the United States but rather accusing the Taliban of dualism – namely perpetrating suicide attacks that kill and injure Afghan civilians while Taliban leaders are negotiating with the United States and Europe in Doha.

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4. E. Graham-Harrison, “Afghan President Accuses US Forces of Colluding with Taliban,” *The Guardian*, 10 March 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/mar/10/afghan-president-us-forces-taliban>.

5. Alissa Rubin and Thom Shanker, “Afghan Leader Says U.S. Abets Taliban's Goal” *New York Times*, 10 March 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/11/world/asia/karzai-accuses-us-and-taliban-of-colluding-in-afghanistan.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/11/world/asia/karzai-accuses-us-and-taliban-of-colluding-in-afghanistan.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

On March 26, two weeks after the comments, President Karzai clarified his remarks during a joint press conference with US Secretary of State, John Kerry:

“[T]he Taliban said that they carried out the explosion, killed people, in order to show their force to the US Secretary of Defence. I said, how do you show your power to the US Secretary of Defence by killing Afghans, killing widowed women and children. This is no show of force to the US defence secretary but actually this helps the psychological environment of telling the Afghan people that if the US is not here, we (the Taliban) are a threat to you. I never used the word collusion. Those were the words picked up by [the] media.”

Despite the fact that President Karzai publically denied having accused the US government of any collusion with Taliban, the media continues to reference Karzai’s comments as an allegation of a collusion between the United States and the Taliban. Nearly three weeks after President Karzai’s response to the accusations, William Dalrymple, writing for the *New York Times*, referenced Karzai’s comments saying, “President Karzai, shocked Western leaders by declaring that recent attacks proved that the Taliban ‘are at the service of America.’ The implication was clear: terrorists were colluding with the United States to sow chaos before America’s planned withdrawal in 2014.”<sup>6</sup> He did not make any reference to the fact that these accusations were publically denied by Karzai during his press conference with Secretary Kerry.

Media shapes public opinion and can affect bilateral diplomatic relations. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel was in Kabul and planning to attend a joint press conference with President Karzai latter on the same day that he made his initial statement. However, hours after Karzai’s speech, Hagel canceled. The news was widely covered and commented on by senior government officials. According to *CNN.com*, “Karzai’s reported remarks caused outrage in Washington with some in Congress questioning why the United States should continue the war effort.”<sup>7</sup> The United States has spent billions of dollars fighting against Al-Qaida and the Taliban and has lost many lives in an effort to rebuild Afghanistan. Clearly, such an accusation would outrage not only the US government and diplomats but also the American people who are financing the war through their taxes. The consequences are not any less when the news reaches some Afghans with conflicting views on the US presence and mission in Afghanistan.

In today’s globalized real-time world, media plays an absolutely crucial role in shaping and influencing public opinion. Therefore, better understanding of local languages and dialects and cultural-political contexts are critical for better quality reporting and analysis. It is important to anticipate major misunderstandings and their potential to shape policy decisions. Leaders of the countries and communities in question ought to keep in mind the possibilities of such misunderstandings that can negatively affect their political relations. The United States and Afghanistan have long-term objectives and strong political relations that will continue to help them clear and overcome such misunderstandings, but the energy spent on mitigating such simply wrong translations is a waste and represents a costly distraction from much more important issues. Most unfortunate however are the negative longer-term effects

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6. William Dalrymple, “The Ghosts of Afghanistan” *New York Times*, 13 April 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/14/opinion/sunday/why-karzai-bites-the-hand-that-feeds-him.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/14/opinion/sunday/why-karzai-bites-the-hand-that-feeds-him.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

7. Tom Cohen and Jason Hanna, “Karzai Says Media Misinterpreted Comments on U.S. and Taliban” 26 March 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/03/25/world/asia/afghanistan-kerry-karzai/index.html?iref=allsearch>.

of such (media) mistakes on public opinion, and the difficulties of counteracting false images and perceptions these mistakes create.