

The hostage handover in Pakistan: an initial assessment

By Anand Arni¹

The Background

On October 12, 2017, a press statement was issued by the US Department of State to the effect that 'The United States Government, working in conjunction with the Government of Pakistan, has secured the release of the Boyle-Coleman family from captivity in Pakistan.'²

Other reports mentioned that Joshua Boyle, 33, and his wife Caitlan Coleman, 31, were captured by the Haqqani Network while backpacking in Afghanistan in 2012. Caitlan was pregnant at that time³. They remained in captivity for five years during which period Caitlan had three more children.

Publicly, the version is that the Haqqani Network convoy carrying the family was being tracked by the US which alerted Pakistani intelligence once the convoy crossed over into Pakistan through Khurram Agency on October 11.

It is further claimed that Pakistani forces intercepted the convoy near Nawa Kili area of Kohat, 60 kms within Pakistan, shot out the tyres and rescued Joshua, Caitlan and their three children. Early reports indicated that one of the hostage-takers was injured and captured⁴. This was later refuted by the DG ISPR who said the driver and an accomplice fled into a nearby refugee camp and that the soldiers did not open fire for fear of injuring the hostages⁵.

After being helicoptered to Islamabad, Boyle refused to board a US military aircraft headed for Bagram Airbase or even to travel to the US. Arriving in Toronto after a flight by commercial aircraft, Boyle made a statement that there had been a fourth child who the Haqqani Network had killed. They had also raped his wife in an act perpetrated by 'one guard, assisted by the captain of the guard and supervised by the commandant' as 'retaliation for his repeated refusal' to accept an offer made to him by the network⁶.

Boyle claimed that he was in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan as a pilgrim, to help villagers in areas where 'no NGO, no aid worker or no government has been successfully able to bring the necessary help.' He praised the 'incredibly professional' Pakistan army and expressed disagreement with US foreign policy.

The Assessment

The actual mechanics are, however, unclear with the Americans calling it a 'transfer of custody' suggesting that the Pakistani intelligence had prevailed on the Haqqani Network to release the Boyle—Coleman family. Locals of the area were aware that something was afoot as drones had been sighted in the skies for over ten days.

That an operation was likely would have been known to virtually everyone given the tell-tale signs of drones hovering around the area for ten days. This could also be a reason why the handover was near a refugee camp so as to pre-empt any drone attacks. The Haqqani Network's links with the ISI are well known and the Americans, themselves, have referred to the Haqqani Network (HN) as a 'veritable arm of the ISI'.

Boyle's background is murky; he was briefly married to Zaynab Khadr, a Canadian-Egyptian who he met after the events of 9/11 when he developed an interest in national security matters. He moved close to the family by offering assistance when they were agitating for the release of her brother, Abdullah, who was being held in Canada pending review of a US extradition request⁷.

The Khadr family had moved from Canada to Pakistan/Afghanistan. Her father had connections with the Al Qaeda and was closely linked to Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. He was killed in a crackdown on Al Qaeda and two other

brothers, Omar and Abdulrahman were subsequently detained in Guantanamo Bay. Zaynab, now married a fourth time, is in Sudan.

Boyle, described as smart and a crusader, had flirted with converting to Islam. He had the credentials to be acceptable to the Taliban and conversely was of interest to those interested in ascertaining what the Taliban was upto. The brutality shown by his captors could mean he was subjected to hard interrogation techniques as they may have had similar concerns. His attempt to distance himself from the Americans is perplexing.

A confession, or some sort of statement, has probably been extracted under duress while in HN custody. It remains to be seen when and how this will be used and whether this had anything to do with his refusal to go to the US.

President Trump hailed the release suggesting that it was the consequence of his tough stand on Pakistan and that 'Pakistan's co-operation is a sign that it is honouring America's wish that it do more to provide security in the region'. In Pakistan, some analysts have seen this as signs of a new dawn but others are not so sanguine. **Overall, the impression is that this is an offering presented before the Mattis/Tillerson visit to Pakistan.**

Implications for India

In India there was euphoria when Trump announced his new strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia⁸ which envisaged a harder line on Pakistan and — to add to Pakistan's chagrin — an Indian role in nation building in Afghanistan. **An early assessment would be that, by securing the release of the Boyle—Coleman family, Pakistan has attempted to claw back some lost ground.**

A clearer indication whether it's back to business as usual in US—Pakistan relations will emerge after the Tillerson/Mattis visit as there is some divergence within US on interpreting the message behind this hostage handover. There is also a disconnect between what Trump says and does, and this will be of equal concern to the Pakistanis as well.

However, for both its domestic and overseas stakeholders, Pakistan needs the US to prevail on India to revive the bilateral dialogue. For this, one needs to examine the cards in Pakistan's hands. **It is unlikely to resile on the ace in the pack – an end to the overall violence in Afghanistan. Some other cards that it holds are - assistance to secure the release of three or more hostages presently with the Haqqani Network, action against the Haqqani Network itself, addressing Western concerns about outfits like the Lashkar-e-Taiba and enhanced intelligence cooperation with the West.**

Its principal concerns at this moment are India, the economy, and countering Indian influence in Afghanistan.

With Tillerson and Mattis, Pakistan is likely to argue that it is more sinned against, rather than a sinner itself. **It will draw a redline around an enhanced role for India in Afghanistan. It will also argue that it needs the US to address its concerns to build domestic ground before it takes the next step. It is within the realm of the possible that they will argue that the first step would be a resumption of the Indo-Pakistan dialogue and that this will be matched by some steps on their part.**

References

- ¹ Anand Arni is a Distinguished Fellow of the Geostrategy Programme at the Takshashila Institution. He heads Takshashila's Intelligence Reform project.
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