

## **Security, Reconstruction and Political Normalization in Afghanistan – Falling Short**

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This week, Afghanistan's constitutional *loya jirga* (national assembly) agreed to a new draft constitution, following three weeks of extremely contentious deliberations. President Bush welcomed the news, saying that this "lays the foundation for democratic institutions" and will "help ensure that terror finds no further refuge in that proud land." The assessment of the special representative of the United Nations Secretary General was more guarded. Lakhdar Brahimi feared that the elections to be held this year under the new constitution would be pointless without more security throughout Afghanistan.

Two years after the U.S. military intervention, the situation in Afghanistan is by all accounts unpromising. The efforts of U.S. armed forces, the Afghan government and the international community to secure Afghanistan from the Taliban and al Qaeda are producing mixed results. Afghan civilians continue to be victimized by local warlords, nominally affiliated with the Kabul government but not controlled by it. Reconstruction, in terms of physical infrastructure, human welfare and political institutions, appears to have slowed considerably.<sup>1</sup> In just one sign of the failure on the security and reconstruction fronts, half of the country's thirty two provinces are now no-go areas for aid workers.<sup>2</sup>

The recent comments of senior figures associated with international effort in Afghanistan are telling. The U.N. Security Council mission to Afghanistan, led by Ambassador Gunter Plueger of Germany, concluded, "The conditions necessary for a credible national process are not yet in place – national reconciliation requires greater focus: political parties need time to develop; national institutions must undergo reforms; and the power of factional leaders must be diminished."<sup>3</sup> The U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, also offered a bleak assessment of U.S. accomplishments warning that the Afghan transitional government needs to provide "more services and more presence" in areas along the Pakistan border, and noted the upsurge in drug trafficking and other crimes, and the resurgent threat from Taliban and al Qaeda fighters based in Pakistan. He also took aim at the limited cooperation by Pakistan, whose government has been hailed by the White House as an ally in the fight against terrorism.<sup>4</sup> At present, deficits in security, reconstruction, and political normalization continue to beset Afghanistan's return to a normal national life.

### **Security**

In May 2003, Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld announced that "The bulk of Afghanistan is permissive and secure."<sup>5</sup> The more recent and authoritative military assessment by General John Abizaid, Commander in Chief of Central Command, was more sobering. He described combat operations in Afghanistan as "every bit as much and every bit as difficult as those that go on in Iraq."<sup>6</sup>

A random sample of incidents in just the early part of December 2003 conveys the scale of the overall problem. A bomb planted in downtown Kandahar wounded 20, two Indian workers on the Kabul-Kandahar highway project were kidnapped in Zabol (following the earlier kidnapping of a Turkish engineer on the same project), a crew of census takers was ambushed in Farah – one was killed,<sup>7</sup> and four Afghan irrigation project workers were murdered in September.<sup>8</sup> In November, a French citizen on the staff of the U.N. High Commissioner for refugees (UNHCR) was killed in Ghazni in the line of duty and a U.N. office car was bombed in Kandahar.<sup>9</sup> In the first week of 2004, the UNHCR office in Kandahar suffered a grenade and firearms attack, while an Afghan aid worker was kidnapped in Zabol.<sup>10</sup>

Two particularly challenging dimensions of the security situation are the civilian and political impacts of U.S. military operations, and the continued presence of independent armed forces throughout the country. These challenges have remained unmet by U.S. and international provisions for security in the form of an Afghan Army, the International Security Assistance Force, and Provincial Reconstruction Teams.

#### *Civilian and Political Impact of U.S. Military Operations*

At this moment, U.S. armed forces are engaged in major military operations in southern and eastern Afghanistan, where Taliban forces and sympathizers operating out of Pakistan have long held sway, and where the alienation of the Pashtun majority from the Kabul government has consistently been the most acute. While the objective of these operations has been to put down the insurgency and extend the authority of the interim government, they have eroded the credibility of the U.S. presence and of the government for its perceived close association with U.S. purposes.

Lakhdar Brahimi has noted that civilian casualties from recent U.S. attacks, including fifteen children, add “to a sense of insecurity and fear in the country.”<sup>11</sup> On one hand, the aggressive conduct of military operations against the Taliban and their allies risks alienating civilians. On the other hand, without security aid agencies and the government cannot improve conditions and give communities a stake in the new Afghanistan. Given the availability of bases of operation in Pashtun areas of Pakistan (sympathetic villages, staging posts, and tactical alliances with Pakistani armed militia groups), this sense of marginalization is highly dangerous. The effect of this on the political future of Afghanistan is felt most acutely when census takers and voting officials are unable to do their work, increasing the possibility that populations from conflict areas will be disenfranchised. The Security Council Mission recognized as much when it noted that “such insecurity also poses a direct challenge to the full implementation of the Bonn Agreement, as it constricts the political space necessary for national political processes and blocks access to many areas, threatening to disenfranchise parts of the population, notably in majority Pashtun areas.”

The reality is that, except in Kabul (and even there to a large extent), political power reflects local capacity for armed violence. If political processes redistribute this power toward civilian power centers, the armed *status quo* will resist. The fundamental problem

arises from the bifurcation of security and political planning. Military decisions have been made with insufficient regard for political consequences. Meanwhile, political authorities have suffered from a lack of security capacity necessary for a government to assert its authority in all respects. For example, U.S. air-strikes in pursuit of individual resistance leaders may be justifiable in strictly military terms if the leader is of military significance. However, their collateral effects pose the obvious question of whether an Afghan-led political-military initiative, including civic engagement and intelligence, would not be more effective overall. That, however, remains unrealistic in the absence of a real military capacity in the Afghan government.

In recognition of the failure of the approach adopted hitherto, the United States has recently outlined a modified strategy.<sup>12</sup> The incoming military commander, Lt. Gen David Barno, has outlined an approach which will have two distinguishing elements. First, “non-criminal” Taliban will be wooed back into the mainstream. Second, long-term civilian assistance programs will be established in conflict zones. However, the more aggressive civil-military posture of U.S. troops, on their own account rather than in support of Afghan-led initiatives, risks alienating rather than winning the clients and beneficiaries of reconstruction.

### *Armed Groups*

Hitherto, the United States and the international community have relied for security outside Kabul in large part on a multiplicity of local armed groups, the so-called “warlords.” Many of these warlords function as nominal local and regional representatives of the Afghan government in Kabul, and many cooperate tactically with U.S. forces.<sup>13</sup> They enjoy little legitimacy among ordinary Afghans, other than by virtue of brute power. Most of these groups are responsible for extortion, human rights abuses and other misbehavior. It was, in fact, their misgovernment and human rights abuses, as well as their internecine conflict, which paved the way for the Taliban’s rise to power with popular support after the fall of the Soviet backed regime. As the Security Council Mission noted, “In too many areas, individuals and communities suffer from abuses of their basic rights by local commanders and factional leaders.”<sup>14</sup>

More than 2000 people have died in factional fighting between these groups since the fall of the Taliban. This fighting among groups nominally within the Kabul government’s authority has undercut the credibility and authority of Kabul among ordinary Afghans. It has also added to the challenges of reconstruction by causing internal displacement of populations, and undermining efforts to repatriate Afghan refugees.<sup>15</sup> This vicious cycle between insecurity and impediments to reconstruction and political normalization is most intractable in the Pashtun heartland, which straddles the border with Pakistan.

Local warlords have also contributed to the resurgence of the drug trade in Afghanistan, where drug production and trafficking had almost ceased at the time of the U.S. invasion. They demand a share of profits and provide protection for traffickers.<sup>16</sup> The U.N. reports that poppies are now being cultivated in 28 of Afghanistan’s 32 provinces, and will produce \$2.3 billion – approximately half of Afghanistan’s GDP. Production has reached

the record levels of the 1990s.<sup>17</sup> Lakhdar Brahimi warns that “the magnitude of the problem could lead to Afghanistan becoming a ‘narco-state.’”<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, the Karzai government’s comprehensive anti-narcotics law is ineffectual because the government has little control outside of Kabul. And the temptation for ordinary Afghans to return to poppy cultivation is fueled by the lack of sustainable livelihood alternatives, which in turn reflects the development failures resulting from pervasive insecurity.

### *The Afghan Army*

The litany recited by the international community has been that police training and rebuilding a new Afghan army will in time mitigate the problem. Building up Afghan security forces is a long term project, however, which will come to fruition long after the principal events that determine the country’s political future, such as the elections slated for this summer, have passed.

The Afghan army remains small and ineffective, with an anticipated training period of several more years before it can assume responsibility for any significant share of Afghanistan’s security. Its target number is 70,000 by 2008. The Interior Minister calls the task of providing sufficient security for upcoming political events “a race against time.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, to the extent that effective and capable units are available to the interim government in Kabul, they suffer from a suspicion on the part of the Pashtun majority that they represent the interests of the northern ethnic minorities who control them, rather than the nation as a whole.

### *International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)*

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has played an important role in protecting important events such as the *loya jirgas* that led to today’s government. For two years, however, the objections of the United States and others prevented expansion of ISAF’s mission beyond Kabul.<sup>20</sup> Recently, the international community, most notably, Secretary Rumsfeld, has shown a willingness to expand the size and scope of ISAF, whose command was assumed by NATO on August 11. However, despite a formal endorsement by U.N. Security Council Resolution 1510<sup>21</sup> and by NATO,<sup>22</sup> the practical import of this new willingness remains uncertain.<sup>23</sup>

NATO’s commitment to an expansion of ISAF remains hedged about with escape clauses. A letter from the NATO Secretary to the UN Secretary General makes expansion subject to “identification and provision of appropriate assets”. It also provides for expansion taking into account the political context and the availability of additional resources.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the funding formula for ISAF will act as a disincentive to its appropriate expansion. Under UNSC Resolution 1510, expenses are to be borne by participant governments, and at the most by a trust fund of uncertain value. In the absence of assessments billable to the international community on an equitable basis,

financial considerations will, as they always have everywhere, trump objective security calculations.

In reality, ISAF has difficulty maintaining the complement (5,500) required to properly patrol Kabul under its previous mandate. Other than Canada, which has contributed the largest component (in excess of 1000), 30 troop contributing countries have provided a mere 4,000 men. Germany has committed 450 troops for Kunduz, one of the least problematic areas of the north, and no commitment has come forward for the more troubled areas of Mazar-e-Sharif or Herat. The dilemma is that an expansion without additional troops will render the “expansion” in reality a dilution of the current level of coverage, and that the lack of a robust enforcement mandate will vitiate ISAF’s capacity to grapple with the central security-development conundrum.

### *Provincial Reconstruction Teams*

A parallel initiative to ISAF has been that of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT). PRTs were designed originally as integrated U.S. teams of military civil affairs units, political officers from the U.S. Embassy, and USAID-funded assistance teams, which were spread around the countryside. They were developed in consultation with the U.N. Assistance Mission, and have had some limited utility in providing military protection of development efforts.

Five U.S. teams have been supplemented by British, New Zealand and German teams. However, these are not combat units, and thus fail to address the type of intense and pervasive violence and insecurity which have bedeviled Afghan civil society’s attempts to return to normalcy. For illustration, the British PRT operating in the highly conflict-ridden area around Mazar-e-Sharif is 85 strong. While it has had great success relative to its size in tasks such as monitoring local cease-fires or preventing illegal land seizures, it cannot prevent fighting among warlords.<sup>25</sup> And all PRTs, including the U.S. PRTs in central and southern areas of the country, have failed to prevent the type of endemic violence reflected in the killing of international aid workers, or numerous deaths of Afghan staff of aid organizations which go unreported in the western news media.<sup>26</sup>

### **Reconstruction and Political Normalization**

The relationship between security and reconstruction in Afghanistan has several closely related dimensions. The lack of security for civilians from armed activity of various types impedes reconstruction and political normalization. Conversely, the failure to make progress toward a better life for ordinary Afghans undercuts the authority of the central government. It also forces Afghans into the embrace of armed factions that can offer some degree of practical security, whatever their legitimacy or ideological character. In many districts, particularly in the south and east, there are almost no government offices and services outside the *ad hoc* justice and largesse of semi-autonomous “officials” and warlords.<sup>27</sup> Equally troubling is the loss of confidence (and consequently of willingness to participate in civic life) in areas of the south and east where attacks have occurred, and where foreign aid groups have curtailed their operations.<sup>28</sup>

It is well worth remembering that the United States and the international community are in Afghanistan because the Taliban's rule there allowed the country to become a host of the terrorism reflected in September 11, 2001. It was rampant violence and lawlessness, extreme poverty, and poor governance that enabled the emergence of the Taliban and lent it an astonishing political viability for such an extreme movement. Consequently, the security interests of the United States and the international community in Afghanistan lie in the inter-related considerations of military security, stable governance, and the hopes of Afghans for relief from horrifying poverty.

The extent of the obstacles to normalization in Afghanistan is conveyed by the picture of the opening of the constitutional *loya jirga*. Very real divisions along ethnic, political, and religious/ideological lines had marked the political preparation for this meeting.<sup>29</sup> Human Rights Watch, in a report issued December 12, found that armed groups had used threats and bribery to influence the proceedings of the *loya jirga*.<sup>30</sup> It would therefore have been prudent to keep its proceedings transparent. Yet, for practical reasons, the first meeting opened under unprecedented security because of repeated threats to delegates from Taliban and related opponents of the interim government. Afghan troops blocked all roads leading to the meeting, and snipers were positioned on rooftops. Though understandable, the heavy security underlines the difficulties of creating the kinds of participatory process of political, economic and social development necessary for a political order perceived as legitimate by a wide range of Afghans. Compounding this concern was the fact that the Afghan troops blocking access to the meeting act under the command of a Defense Ministry perceived as being partial to northern ethnic minorities to the detriment of the Pashtun majority.

The constitution just approved by the *loya jirga* provides for a central authority with a strong presidency. This formulation would be unobjectionable if conditions in Afghanistan were typical. They are not. The lack of sufficient military capacity in civil government authority, and the reliance of the civil authorities on relatively autonomous armed power centers, suggests a somewhat different dynamic. A strong presidency, rather than a government where authority is distributed between the president, a prime minister and a legislature, will provide fewer or no institutional mechanisms for power-sharing among disparate and discordant interests. Given the ideological and ethnic divisions that characterize Afghanistan, this will encourage independent armed groups to pursue their interests by military instead of political means. It is clearly such an understanding that was reflected in the remarks of Lakhdar Brahimi when he observed in a report to the transitional government that in the absence of a more representative and balanced government, the *loya jirga* is "unlikely to produce a stable, legitimate political order" and warned of a "fractured, unstable" one instead.

On December 16, the Afghan President opened the long awaited and violence prone Kabul to Kandahar highway. The road is of the highest strategic importance because it is key to reconstruction, political stability and government authority, and security. Attack helicopters, snipers, a defensive trench next to the tent where the reception was held, and a halt to traffic for several miles in each direction, highlighted the continuing challenges to the restoration of normal life in Afghanistan, even at the site of the flagship project of

national reconstruction. The future seems highly uncertain in the absence of this extraordinary degree of security (which of course cannot be maintained). Also troubling for the future is the fact that, in order to finish in time for the opening ceremony, sections of the road had to be left with a single layer of asphalt.<sup>31</sup>

Reconstruction efforts have produced some notable successes. Schools have been built or repaired and millions of books distributed. Significant resources have been expended to create a new Afghan army and to train more than half of the numerous but largely incompetent police force.<sup>32</sup> Also of note is the recent increase in the pace of disarmament and demobilization of the various militias, and most notably, the turnover of heavy armaments (rockets, launchers, tanks) from Tajik units in the Panjshir Valley.<sup>33</sup>

Yet, the negatives are also chilling: 30 girls' schools burned, bombed or attacked; rapes, sex trafficking and forced marriages of women; illegal detentions and threats against women's rights activists; and seizure of homes and property. The World Bank has reported that only 23 percent of Afghans have access to safe water, 12 percent have sanitation, 6 percent have electricity, and 7 million people remain vulnerable to hunger.<sup>34</sup> Life expectancy is 43 years.<sup>35</sup> The problems of security, and the consequent slow pace of reconstruction, will almost guarantee that there will be few opportunities for reintegrating recently disarmed militiamen into the civilian economy. The prospect of a return to arms, given the availability of weapons in Afghanistan, is very real and very troubling. Moreover, less than half of the \$5.2 billion pledged at the 2002 Tokyo donors' conference has been paid, and the Afghan Finance Minister, a former World Bank official, estimates the need as high as \$30 billion.<sup>36</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This precarious position leading into the first free elections in a generation represents a serious failure in light of the commitments undertaken by the United States and the international community under the Bonn Agreement. Overall, the failure reflects a lack of foresight – as a matter of both planning and policy - about how security and reconstruction would be handled once the Taliban was ousted, or indeed while conflict against the Taliban was still underway. As a result, the request made by the parties to the Bonn Agreement for “necessary measures to guarantee the national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and unity of Afghanistan as well as non-interference by foreign countries in Afghanistan's internal affairs” remains substantially unanswered.<sup>37</sup>

To a far greater extent than in Iraq, the U.N., through its specialized humanitarian agencies, was present in Afghanistan for many years until the U.S. invasion. This provided credibility as well as infrastructure for the post invasion reconstruction process. Yet, once there was a sizeable U.S. military presence engaged in combat and explicitly eschewing a role in civil-military humanitarian coordination, problems arose from lack of coordination between planning for military and humanitarian operations. What had been an easy working relationship before the war between U.N. agencies and NGOs, declined in the absence of an integrated mechanism for coordinating U.S. military objectives and Afghan or international civil objectives.

This continuing bifurcation between the U.S.-led effort to destroy remnants of the Taliban and al Qaeda and the Afghan/international enterprise of “putting Humpty-Dumpty together again,” has posed a significant impediment to normalization. Although disbursements remain short of pledges, the combined efforts of the transitional Afghan government, the U.N. Assistance Mission and the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, as reflected in the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund and the Transitional Assistance Plan for Afghanistan, attest to the possibilities of an international mobilization of financial and technical resources. Unfortunately, the lack of security has all but subverted this latent potential.

Because of the serious threat posed by the operations of the Taliban and its allies in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border areas, securing the Pakistani government’s full and unambiguous cooperation is of critical importance.<sup>38</sup> Joining the ongoing comments of U.S. officials to this effect, Pakistani commentators and journalists have called attention to the ambiguous anti-terrorist commitment of the Pakistan government.<sup>39</sup> As long as this continues, Afghan and international efforts to restore stability will be hampered by continuing conflict and instability in the Pashtun heartland. Conversely, to the extent that the political stability of Afghanistan remains uncertain (particularly along the Pakistani border), to that extent is there a greater temptation for Pakistani policy to hedge its bets and retain the Taliban option which it created as an instrument of strategic depth.<sup>40</sup>

The intricate connections between considerations of security against outside threats, internal security, aid and reconstruction, and political normalization demand the most careful planning and clear strategic vision in the efforts of the U.S., the international community and the Afghan government. *Ad hoc* responses reflected in both the U.N. resolutions and the responses of the U.S. administration will simply not be equal to the task.

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<sup>1</sup> Steven R. Weisman, “Resurgent Taliban Threatens Afghan Stability,” New York Times 11/19/03.

<sup>2</sup> Leading Article: “Afghanistan: Unfinished Business,” The Guardian 10/07/03

<sup>3</sup> UN Document S/2003/1074

<sup>4</sup> Mike Allen, “Afghan Security Worries Envoy,” Washington Post 11/19/03

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed Rashid and Barnett R. Rubin, “SOS from Afghanistan,” The Nation 5/31/04

<sup>6</sup> Walter Pincus, “Attacks in Afghanistan are on the Rise,” Washington Post 11/15/03

<sup>7</sup> Pamela Constable, “Bout of Violence Rattles Afghans,” Washington Post 12/08/03

<sup>8</sup> Pamela Constable, “Security Still Elusive In Afghanistan; Resurgent Taliban, Warlords Threaten Political Stability,” Washington Post 11/16/03

<sup>9</sup> *ibid* Washington Post 11/16/03 and “Afghans Defend Suspect Targeted in US Attack,” Washington Post 12/12/03

<sup>10</sup> World In Brief, Washington Post 1/6/04

<sup>11</sup> Pamela Constable, “Bout of Violence Rattles Afghans,” Washington Post 12/08/03



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- <sup>12</sup> Pamela Constable, "New Strategy Calls for Wooing Some in Taliban," Washington Post 12/21/03
- <sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch (HRW) World Report 2003 Pp. 187-201
- <sup>14</sup> UN Docs. S/2003/1074
- <sup>15</sup> In July 2002, UNHCR suspended returns of many internally displaced persons because of escalating violence and deteriorating human rights situations. Throughout the later part of 2002, aid agencies and UNHCR drew attention to the need for expanded international military protection. In some cases, they suspended their relief or reconstruction operations.
- <sup>16</sup> Pamela Constable, "Afghan Poppies Sprout Again," Washington Post 11/10/03
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>18</sup> UN Doc S/2003/1074
- <sup>19</sup> UN Docs. S/2003/1074
- <sup>20</sup> HRW World Report 2003 *ibid*
- <sup>21</sup> S/RES/1510 (2003)
- <sup>22</sup> UN Docs S/2003/970 Enclosure to Annex I
- <sup>23</sup> UN Docs S/2003/970 Annex II
- <sup>24</sup> UN Docs S/2003/970 Annex II
- <sup>25</sup> Such as that between General Dostum and Atta Mohamed in October.
- <sup>26</sup> Jonathan Steele, "Our friends, the warlords," The Guardian 10/30/03; and Pamela Constable, "Security Still Elusive in Afghanistan," Washington Post 11/16/03
- <sup>27</sup> Washington Post 11/16/03 *ibid*
- <sup>28</sup> Pamela Constable, "Violence Shadows Kandahar's Revival," Washington Post 11/23/03
- <sup>29</sup> Pamela Constable, "Karzai Calls for Strong Presidential System," Washington Post 12/15/03
- <sup>30</sup> Paul Watson, "Fears of Vote Buying Muddy Path to Loya Jirga," Los Angeles Times 12/11/03
- <sup>31</sup> Pamela Constable, "A Road to Afghanistan's future," Washington Post 12/17/03
- <sup>32</sup> \$500 million over two years for the army and \$250 million for the police force.
- <sup>33</sup> In recent months, approximately 4000 soldiers in Kunduz, Paktia and Kabul have surrendered their arms, in exchange for small cash stipends and the promise of job training. Pamela Constable, Militias Transfer Heavy Arms, Bolstering Kabul's Authority Washington Post 12/11/03
- <sup>34</sup> *Afghanistan Update* [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)
- <sup>35</sup> (No by-line) Reconstruction The Guardian 11/14/03
- <sup>36</sup> Leading Article: "Afghanistan: Unfinished Business," The Guardian 10/07/03 The Guardian 10/07/03, and (No by-line) "Reconstruction," The Guardian 11/14/03
- <sup>37</sup> UN Docs S/2001/1154 Annex III
- <sup>38</sup> Eliza Griswold, "Where the Taliban Roam, Dodging the Jihad in Pakistan's Tribal Lands," Harpers September 2003.
- <sup>39</sup> Husain Haqqani, "Pakistan Frees Terrorist Leaders," *Asian Wall Street Journal*, 1/7/03; and Husain Haqqani, "Skepticism Over Crackdown," *The Nation* (Pakistan) 11/19/03
- <sup>40</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban*, Yale University Press. 2001