

# Perspectives on Reconciliation Options in Afghanistan

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## The Afghan Campaign in Context

The first thing to realize about Afghanistan, in the context of counterinsurgency, is that it isn't one. To be sure, an insurgency is one component of our problem in Afghanistan today, and therefore a counterinsurgency response is one necessary component of our effort there. But the effort is much broader than counterinsurgency.

In my opinion it is best understood as a stability operation: the insurgents matter primarily because they de-stabilize Afghanistan, and they are only one of several things that de-stabilize the country. Bad behavior by government officials, corruption and abuse by officials and by local power-brokers as well as within the international aid effort, deliberate de-stabilization by Afghanistan's neighbors, and a thriving illicit drug trade are also critically important de-stabilizing factors. If the Taliban were to disappear tomorrow, and these other issues were not addressed, then a new Taliban would emerge within months to take the place of the old, as the underlying drivers of conflict – corruption, abuse and foreign de-stabilization – would not have been addressed. This, in fact, has actually happened twice already in Afghanistan. The international community defeated the Taliban in 2001 and again in 2003-2004 only to see the movement re-invigorate and spread once again. In my judgment, what is driving the conflict is a cycle of instability, which we could summarize as follows: Afghanistan is experiencing a cycle of increasing instability and violence, with four key drivers:

- Corruption and criminality in the government, societal elites and the international assistance effort, which enables and encourages

- bad behavior by government officials and power-brokers, which in turn creates
- popular rage and disillusionment, which empowers the insurgency.
- The war against the insurgents creates opportunities and incentives for corruption and criminality, driving the cycle onward.

Because this is a cycle, each element in the problem must be addressed concurrently, not in sequence. This implies that extremely strenuous efforts at government reform, countering corruption and improving accountability are, or should be, key components of the campaign, alongside efforts to counter the insurgency. The problem is not the insurgents alone, it is the instability they create, along with the other drivers of instability. We need to address that instability directly, if we ever hope to make the country stable enough so that we can leave without thereby destabilizing the broader region.

## **State of the Campaign**

We are currently experiencing four major problems in Afghanistan, most of which are well-known and of long standing. At the political level, our most critical problem is the credibility, viability and legitimacy of the Afghan government. In this form of warfare you are only as good as the government you are supporting, and this is a government which lacks credibility in the eyes of many Afghans, lacks legitimacy in the eyes of many in the international community, and therefore needs extremely substantial reform if it is to be a viable partner.

At the strategic level, the critical problem is the timeline – the anticipated July 2011 deadline to begin handing over control for security to the Afghan government. This deadline makes every other problem a crisis, it prompts the Afghan population to sit on the fence because they believe we are leaving and they fear being targeted by the Taliban once we leave, it undermines confidence on the part of the Karzai government and so encourages disunity and the seeking of peace terms with the Taliban, it creates a fear of abandonment on the part of the Northern Alliance commanders which may encourage thoughts of civil war or secession, it encourages us to continue seeking short-term, quick-fix solutions, and it is deeply damaging to economic confidence.

At the operational level, the key problem is the continuing active safe haven in Pakistan for the Afghan Taliban. Unless this safe haven begins to be seriously addressed, the Taliban can survive tactical defeat in Afghanistan, retreat to their safe haven and await a favorable opportunity to return to the fight once we leave.

At the tactical level, the key problem remains lack of resources: the lack of sufficient troop numbers (especially Afghan troop numbers) to provide permanent security presence to the bulk of the population, the lack of good-quality police, the lack of local civilian officials who are both competent and locally legitimate, lack of certain key military enablers and civilian specialists.

All these problems must be addressed as a matter of extreme urgency if we wish to turn the campaign around. All these problems, with the exception of the timeline, are long-standing issues in the campaign. And all these problems will require congressional leadership of a very high order.

## **Relevant New Developments**

I would like to conclude by drawing the committee's attention to certain new developments that may influence your deliberations. Firstly, at last week's Kabul conference, there was significant discussion of a 2014 timeline for the Afghan government to assume complete security responsibility. I believe this is a positive development as it extends the timeline into somewhat more realistic territory – but the damage to Afghan public confidence created by last year's announcement of the July 2011 deadline will remain unless specifically addressed. Second, the District Stabilization Framework now being pursued by USAID and the US Military represents a significant development – focusing on stability in its own right, at the local level, and applying a concerted effort to target sources of instability.

Third, the committee should note that the Afghan parliamentary elections are currently scheduled for 18th September 2010, with approximately 2,500 candidates running (roughly 405 of them women). Candidates are already experiencing intimidation and targeted killing from the Taliban, and from corrupt power brokers – this is an important inflection point in the campaign, especially in the light of last year's disputed Presidential elections, and thus getting it right is extremely important. This will require resources and strong pressure for accountability and security.

Fourth, although civilian casualties remain a very troubling aspect of any counterinsurgency campaign, the committee should note that significant progress was made in some aspects of this problem under General McChrystal's leadership. In the twelve months to June 2010, 94 Afghan civilians were killed in coalition airstrikes, compared to 226 in the preceding 12 months. Several thousand innocent civilians were killed by the Taliban in the same period.

Finally, the committee may wish to consider the issue of negotiations with certain key leadership elements of the insurgency. There is nothing necessarily wrong with talking to the enemy as such – most successful counterinsurgencies end in a negotiated solution, after all – but it is critically important that we talk from a position of strength, and I do not believe we are in such a position of strength, given the problems in the campaign that I already outlined. A focus on reconciliation/reintegration at the local level, as distinct from a “grand bargain” with Taliban leadership, is more appropriate at this stage.

Source: [http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/Kilcullen\\_SenateTestimony.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/Kilcullen_SenateTestimony.pdf)