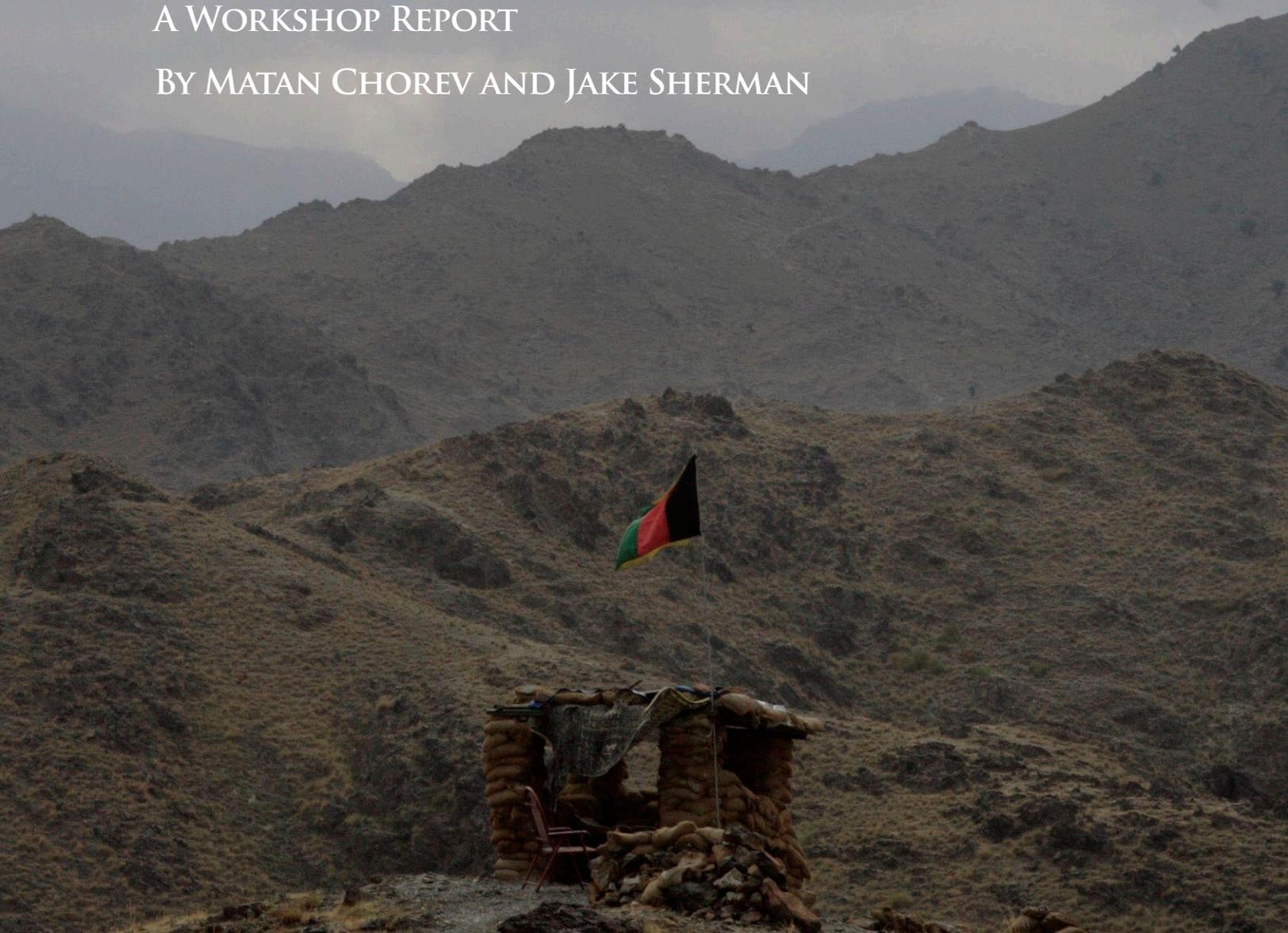


THE PROSPECTS FOR SECURITY AND POLITICAL RECONCILIATION IN AFGHANISTAN: LOCAL, NATIONAL, AND REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES

A WORKSHOP REPORT

BY MATAN CHOREV AND JAKE SHERMAN



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Cover Image: The Afghan flag flies at Forward Operating Base Sakarni, Kunar Province, Aug. 14, 2006. (Photo: Gary Knight/VII)

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I. Executive Summary

This workshop report, based on two days of intense discussions hosted by the Institute for Global Leadership at Tufts University and held under the Chatham House rule, summarizes the predominant views of a select group of Afghan politicians and former military officials, Pakistani journalists and scholars, current and former United Nations officials, diplomats, humanitarian workers, and representatives from the U.S. military on the opportunities for, and obstacles to, security and political reconciliation in Afghanistan.

The workshop highlighted six inherent tensions to the conflict and the U.S.-led coalition's chosen strategy: (1) the disjuncture within the Afghan body politic and President Hamid Karzai's crisis of legitimacy; (2) the fragmented nature of the insurgency in Afghanistan; (3) conflict between the near-term political horizon of the United States and its coalition partners and the requirements for long-term stability of Afghanistan; (4) the balance between national and local authority in the country; (5) the classic clash between the imperatives of justice and durable peace building; and (6) the impact of regional tensions and U.S. policies on the prospects for (a) brokering a stabilization plan endorsed by major regional and external powers, and (b) "re-neutralization" of Afghanistan and preventing its reversion to the pre-U.S. invasion status quo ante.

The near-term prospects for security and political reconciliation in Afghanistan are bleak. Nonetheless, the United States, its coalition partners, and neighboring states can still assist in shaping sustainable, Afghan-led stabilization, in accordance with their overlapping national interests. In the short term this effort will require (1) recognition of inherent tensions in the current U.S. strategy as well as within the regional geopolitical environment; (2) clarity about the overwhelming effect of U.S.-led coalition military operations and the mendicant aid economy on key stakeholders' incentives; and (3) a focus on using eight years of painful lessons learned to guide future policy.

In addition, policymakers should consider the following recommendations:

- Draw on the Taliban narrative of "a moral force fighting corruption and anarchy," to create opportunities for members of the Taliban and their supporters to join the peaceful political process. Ensure that any narrative of reconciliation also appeals to non-Taliban peaceful opposition groups.
- Move beyond material incentives when designing reintegration and reconciliation (R&R) programs, to give primary focus to the political drivers of the conflict at both the local and national levels.
- Err on the side of political inclusiveness when resolving and clarifying the status of individuals currently detained by the coalition or by the Afghan government or subject to international sanctions. This effort also requires a reexamination of those targeted for capture or elimination to ensure that coalition troops are not used to settle scores among local rivals.
- Incorporate lessons learned from the earlier Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration and Disarmament of Illegal Armed Groups programs, to overcome the legacy of mistrust left by these failed efforts. Ensure that the mistakes of these programs are not repeated in future reintegration and reconciliation efforts.

- Guard against the moral hazard risks in the R&R effort, particularly those that signal that the “politics of disruption” pay, with the consequence of providing unintended incentives to individuals to participate in violent opposition activities.
- Defend communities not only from insurgents but also from predation by Kabul, provincial capitals, local power holders, and associated local security organizations.
- Monitor and adjust the incentives created intentionally or unintentionally by international aid and military operations, to ensure they do not exacerbate the conflict.
- Shift the focus on the opium economy from the relationship between narcotics and the insurgency to one that also addresses the substantial role of key government officials in the drug economy.
- Overcome suspicions by Kabul and the insurgency about the United Nations’ mediation role. If these suspicions are entrenched, an alternative interlocutor suitable to all parties must be identified, legitimated and put into action.

II. Preface

Barack Obama's administration revealed its new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan on December 1, 2009. Reiterating the administration's "narrowly defined goal" to "disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda," President Obama announced a surge of 30,000 troops (in addition to the 21,000 troops announced as part of the March 2009 strategy review), in order to address a status quo he judged to be "not sustainable."

The new strategy consists of three mutually reinforcing parts. The first is a focused counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan aimed at turning the tide against the Taliban so that it no longer poses an existential threat to the Kabul government. To stem domestic political opposition and focus the minds of the U.S. bureaucracy, coalition partners, and the political elite in Afghanistan, President Obama eschewed an open-ended "nation-building commitment," and set July 2011 as the goal for beginning the transition of U.S. combat forces out of Afghanistan.

The second, political part complements the military campaign by seeking to build the capacity and legitimacy of the Afghan government as a viable alternative to the Taliban. With the turning of the tide, the strategy will prioritize Afghan-led efforts to reintegrate former insurgents and reconcile with government opponents.

The third, regional part largely focuses on building an "effective partnership with Pakistan... built on a foundation of mutual interests, mutual respect, and mutual trust." Announcing that the United States "cannot tolerate a safe haven for terrorists whose location is known and whose intentions are clear," President Obama escalated the drone campaign in the border area which has eliminated key al Qaeda and Pakistani Taliban leaders. He also escalated joint operations that have arrested more than half of the members of the Quetta Shura in the three months following the announcement of the strategy. Recognizing that "success" in Afghanistan is "inextricably linked" to U.S.-Pakistani relations, President Obama has made it a priority to defuse the "trust deficit" between the two countries. Since coming into office and even more so since December 2009, the Obama administration has sought to translate its rhetoric into action. A secret directive written by National Security Adviser Gen. Jim Jones called for intensifying efforts to normalize relations between India and Pakistan. This call was regarded as an essential step in addressing Pakistan's perception of insecurity and encouraging the political and military leadership to reorient its strategic calculus away from its western border to its northern one. In March 2010, Washington launched a Strategic Dialogue with Islamabad, ramping up military coordination and intelligence sharing and increasing non military aid to supplement the five-year, \$7 billion Kerry-Lugar bill passed earlier in the year. Although these are positive steps, the controversy inside Pakistan over the Kerry-Lugar bill and other dimensions of the rapprochement between Islamabad and Washington suggests that progress will be both painstaking and slow.

The high-level prioritization of political settlement and R&R in Afghanistan is a striking change for a war that has been stuck in strategic drift for half a decade. The R&R process has enjoyed significant momentum since the January 2010 London Conference, where plans were announced for a Grand Peace Jirga in Kabul—now postponed—and funds pledged for the Peace and Reintegration Trust Fund. In March, Britain's foreign secretary, David Miliband, declared that "now is the time for the Afghans to pursue a political settlement with as much vigor and energy as we are pursuing the military and civilian effort."

While the Afghan government and some members of the coalition are keen to accelerate the reconciliation track, the U.S. leadership believes that more time is needed to reverse the Taliban's momentum and secure a more favorable environment for negotiations. In early March, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates argued that senior members of the Taliban are not yet at the point where they perceive that the "likelihood of their being successful has been cast into serious doubt." Key allies, partners, and neighbors also hold significant reservation about the R&R policy. It remains to be seen whether Pakistan's recent arrests of senior Afghan Taliban leaders demonstrates a strategic recalibration or merely an effort to defend its interests in shaping any dialogue between President Karzai and the Taliban. India, which has traditionally opposed the Taliban returning to power, has moderated its position. India's external affairs minister, Shri SM Krishna, has said that the Taliban "should be given a second chance," and that if they accept the conditions of the international community, New Delhi "could do business" with them. Russia has also softened its stance and signaled its support for R&R by removing its objections to the delisting of some former members of the Taliban regime from the UN's sanctions list.

Amid meetings between Hezb-i-Islami and the Karzai government, as well as with UN officials, palace intrigue and rumors of back-channel negotiations dominate the headlines. As the international community supports the R&R process moving forward, it must learn from past failed efforts, recognize the tensions that imperil a quest for political settlement—of which negotiations make up one part—and implement policies that are likely to increase the chances of success.

The workshop convened a select group of Afghan politicians and former military officials, Pakistani journalists and scholars, current and former UN officials, diplomats, humanitarian workers, and representatives from the U.S. military to discuss the opportunities for, and obstacles to, security and political reconciliation (see the annex for a list of participants). The panels explored the meaning of "political settlement" in Afghanistan, the role of military operations in achieving such an outcome, the impact of local security arrangements and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration, the political economy of insurgency, counterinsurgency and state building, and regional dimensions and implications.

This workshop report, based on two days of intense discussions held under Chatham House rule at Tufts University's Institute for Global Leadership, outlines the predominant views of participants. It does not reflect in any way a consensus view or capture the considerable variation in analysis of the current situation or desirability and feasibility of the current strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The authors are solely responsible for the content, as well as any error or omission.

III. Guiding Tensions

The conflict and the coalition's chosen strategy is comprised of at least six inherent tensions:

Disjuncture within the Afghan body politic. The Kabul government is weak and fragmented. Political fault lines in Afghanistan have deepened since 2001, and new ones have emerged over time. Ethnic tensions, perhaps the most visible fault line, were exacerbated after the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance early on gained control of critical security ministries; this issue has been somewhat mitigated, but broader questions of reform have been left unaddressed. Afghanistan's

winner-take-all electoral framework has marginalized ethnic and political interests across the spectrum, resulting in strong support for powerful regional leaders among their coethnics during the 2005 and 2006 national elections. Fraudulent electoral results in the summer of 2009, combined with controversial cross-factional deal-making, further deepened schisms and brought into serious question President Karzai's legitimacy and governance capacity. The inclusion of many former warlords in the current government—with the full support of the coalition—has underscored their continued political influence, particularly at the provincial and district levels, where the authority of the central government remains shaky and reliant on informal means of influence. A recent development in Afghanistan's politics is the parliament's newfound assertiveness and unity in checking President Karzai, as evidenced by its overwhelming opposition to his efforts to limit the autonomy of the Independent Electoral Commission, a body charged with the "authority and responsibility to administer and supervise" elections.

A lack of international forces in the early years and an U.S. emphasis on co-opting rather than challenging potential spoilers has required President Karzai to adopt a governance strategy based on delicately balancing the interests of powerful former commanders, the clergy, and the tribal elders. While there is now frustration in the West that Karzai is unwilling to seriously address corruption and other issues essential to "winning the hearts and minds" of Afghans, many of these difficulties are rooted in the coalition policy decisions in the early stages of the intervention. The seeming policy shift over time has unnerved President Karzai, who believes that the coalition is both hypocritical and unrealistic in its demands.

Intra-Taliban rivalries. Gen. Stanley McChrystal's leaked August 2009 Commander's Initial Assessment highlighted two main threats to coalition efforts in Afghanistan: the "crisis of popular confidence" in the Kabul government and "the existence of organized and determined insurgent groups." The insurgency is composed of a complex mix of actors, and discerning the degree to which their agendas are strategically versus tactically aligned—and thus whether and where there may be opportunities for splitting groups off from one another—is extremely difficult. The principal insurgent groups are organized around the leadership of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Jalalludin and Sirajuddin Haqqani, and Mullah Omar, who draw political, if not material, support and protection from marginalized Pashtun tribes. At the same time, economic opportunities created by insecurity (e.g. such as taxation and protection fees for illegal narcotics and supply convoys) are transforming the motivation of some lower-level fighters from opposing international forces and fighting political disenfranchisement to self-enrichment.

Alignment of near-term political horizon with requirements for long-term stability. Over the next twelve months, the coalition will have to balance its actions aimed at near-term progress on security with their potential long-term impact on the sustainability of the Afghan state. President Obama's transition time line and commitment to narrowing and focusing the objectives in Afghanistan seeks to reverse years of strategic drift and a ruinous practice of overpromising and under delivering to the Afghan people. As Secretary of Defense Gates testified in December 2009, "It is neither necessary nor feasible to create a modern, centralized, Western-style Afghan nation-state—the likes of which has never been seen in that country." The ambitious state building envisaged by the Afghan Compact or the Afghan National Development Strategy has been set aside by the coalition and the international donor community. Nevertheless, a sustainable peace will require not only a political pact between the government and the insurgency but also a minimally

resilient state capable of enforcing an agreement and contending with occasional challenges to the new political order. The short-term power and profit maximization hedge is not limited to Afghan stakeholders but applies equally to the country's neighbors.

National versus local authority. The 2004 Afghan constitution created the legal basis for a strong, centralized Afghan government. Although intended to counter regional fragmentation under local powerholders, the legal framework disempowered tribal authorities. As the insurgency has grown, the decentralization of authority to sub national institutions has increasingly been viewed by policymakers as a solution to the corruption of central government institutions and the inadequacy of national security forces. This emerging approach was highlighted in dramatic fashion by the direct deal between the U.S. military and Shinwari tribal leadership in January 2010, but similar changes have occurred in different parts of the country. The coalition's effort to correct for over centralization in state-building efforts is driven in part by hard-earned lessons, the necessity of reversing the deterioration of security conditions as quickly as possible, and the weakness of the Kabul government. This recognition and the potential benefits of local deals should be balanced by the risk that devolution of authority might undermine the Kabul government to the point where it is no longer capable of leading the R&R process. Specifically, decisions at the local level about governance of security forces should resonate with national imperatives (such as a balance among the country's ethnic groups and a clear strategic communications campaign; arming "pro-Karzai" Pashtuns in the South while disarming non-Pashtun militias in the North sends a mixed message) in support of R&R. In the effort to devolve authority, the Afghan government and the coalition must guard against the risk of creating more potential spoilers.

Justice and peace. Some form of redress for victims of Afghanistan's conflict will likely be necessary for a minimally sustainable political settlement. Public anger over the lack of accountability for past and ongoing crimes by former factional military leaders has been a recurring theme of Afghan politics since 2001. Most Afghans were dismayed by what they viewed as political accommodation of powerful mujahideen in the government in the name of "stability," a view reinforced by Karzai's 2010 electoral deal-making with former factional leaders such as Abdul Rashid Dostum and Mohammed Fahim. The 2010 implementation of a controversial amnesty law passed by parliament and signed by President Karzai in 2007, which also applies to former Taliban fighters, has brought into focus the tension between the quest for peace and justice.

Regional tensions. Afghanistan's six neighbors as well as key relevant regional actors have disparate and often clashing interests in Afghanistan's future. Each country's interests are at stake in the outcome of the R&R process and in the ultimate outcome of the nearly decade-long American intervention. The post-9/11 U.S. tendency to 'own' Afghanistan, seemingly in perpetuity, has blinded Washington from the prospects of seeking a regional settlement in which contracting parties seek to prevent a reversion to status quo ante.

These regional actors' preferences and bottom-line priorities, including their views about negotiating with the Taliban, must be both managed and addressed so as to enable a sustainable political settlement. President Karzai's row with the Obama Administration this spring reflected in part his fears about Washington's Strategic Dialogue with Islamabad and its impact on Afghanistan's national interests.

IV. Guideposts for Reconciliation and Reintegration

Recognition of narratives. Reconciliation and reintegration cannot be seen to create losers. The Afghan government and the coalition should vindicate both the broader Taliban narrative as “a moral force fighting corruption and anarchy” and the narrative of non-Taliban peaceful opposition groups that fear the consequences of a second Taliban rule. The atrocities committed by the insurgency against the local population give good reason for resisting any seeming legitimization of the Taliban. Afghanistan’s nascent civil society, minority groups, and Pashtuns opposing the Taliban will rightly insist that they, too, will be able to claim a “moral victory” at the local level. If President Karzai’s increasingly vocal criticism of the international community’s policies in Afghanistan is a reliable indicator, as in Iraq, the United States may have to accept that any resultant political entity might unite around an anti-American worldview and resistance to foreign military presence and influence.

Beyond material incentives. An R&R that is solely materially based will be woefully inadequate. Afghans are not driven into the insurgency by a purely economic calculus, and they will not be turned away from it by one either. Financial and other material incentives have been central to Afghan reintegration and disarmament programs in the past, with no strategic impact on the insurgency at the local or national level. Even at the community level, R&R should be contextualized politically. To build confidence, reintegrees should have a role in local administration, judiciary, and security forces and a forum should be set up to contend with property disputes as well as other local issues (primary among these justice and accountability) that may arise from R&R. The Afghan government and the coalition should offer a security pledge simultaneously to both reintegrees and noncombatants.

Decriminalization. Successful R&R must err on the side of political inclusiveness when resolving or clarifying the status of individuals currently detained as “enemy combatants” by the coalition or the Afghan government. It also requires a reexamination of those targeted for capture and elimination, to ensure that coalition troops are not used to settle scores among local rivals. Such measures will influence public perceptions, as well as build trust in the process so long as guidelines and mechanisms are both clear and transparent. Issues that will have to be addressed include how to apply the 2007 amnesty law passed by the Afghan Parliament to insurgent fighters, the review and possible delisting of individuals from the UN’s al Qaeda and Taliban Sanctions Committee Consolidated List (Security Council Resolution 1267), and the status of insurgents detained at Bagram, Guantanamo, and elsewhere. Given that impunity has been a major driver of the insurgency, policymakers should not ignore issues of justice in pursuit of expeditious R&R.

Legacy of prior efforts. The R&R effort must incorporate lessons learned from the failure of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration and Disarmament of Illegal Armed Groups programs (including Program Tahkim e-solh or PTS, the Allegiance Program, the Afghan Social Outreach Program, and the work of the Disarmament and Reintegration Commission). For example, some Afghan communities felt that they incurred a “peace penalty” when programs judged their districts to be “in compliance” based on a series of quantitative metrics (e.g., weapons collected) despite negative community perceptions. Furthermore, earlier efforts were premised on the false assumption that the community could be incentivized to pressure local commanders to comply with the process.

Some Afghans are expert at “gaming” the international community’s programs to their benefit. PTS, the Afghan government’s successor to the U.S. military’s Allegiance Program, counted thousands of “reconciles” among its ranks, 50 percent of which were not genuine insurgents, according to a UN study. Poorly designed R&R programs risk creating new insurgents whose sole motivation is reintegration. To prevent the emergence of “professional reintegrees” or “revolving door insurgents,” any bottom-up approach must guard against the risk of working with low-level entrepreneurs whose legitimacy is impossible to assess and whose primary priority is personal benefit.

Politics of disruption. R&R must address the needs of all community-level constituencies affected by the process and not just the insurgents. The R&R process should avoid creating a moral hazard that signals that the “politics of disruption” pay, as this risks alienating communities and incentivizing association with opposition activities. The coalition must seek to balance the proliferation of “community defense” initiatives with an increased focus on DDR. Local communities will resent any double standard that allows the legitimization of potential rival militias or that sanctions predation and abuse. By rearming local security organizations without adequate oversight and accountability, the coalition risks re-creating the conditions of chaos that gave rise to the Taliban in the first place.

Defense from predation. Local communities should feel that R&R protects them not only from insurgents but also from predation by Kabul, provincial capitals, and associated local security organizations. Excessive decentralization of governance and reliance on local deal-making risks sanctioning abuse and corruption that has previously pushed the local population out of the political process and into the insurgency. Three problems must be addressed: (1) corruption and coercion by subnational, particularly district, administration and police; (2) the post-Taliban disenfranchisement of certain tribes (e.g., the Ghilzai and the Panjpai); and (3) the existence of parallel security structures (some of which are supported by the international community), that engage in intimidation of political, business, and personal opponents.

Aid and incentives. The incentive structures created by the opium economy, international development projects, and the coalition’s military support and logistics contracting are in many ways exacerbating the conflict. The distribution of aid for security imperatives threatens to undermine the kind of long-term political and economic development required for a sustainable state. It can also contribute to greater instability by encouraging corruption and rent-seeking behavior, as well as undermining Afghan government capacity, all of which contribute to insurgent recruitment.

Funding for development projects should be commensurate with Afghan and international capacity. The ongoing “surge” of civilian resources and personnel to Afghanistan should reverse the coalition’s tendency to underestimate Afghan capacity while overestimating its own. In some sectors, “less is more” may be an appropriate dictum for aid providers. Incentives, particularly in rewarding performance and merited political appointments, are also worthy of consideration. The R&R process must take into account local market needs. Creating redundant skill sets or failing to find sustainable employment for former fighters essentially encourages them to engage in illicit activities.

Furthermore, the Obama administration’s eighteen-month time line for the beginning of troop withdrawal risks incentivizing counterproductive behavior among elements of both the leadership and the population. Although the declaration of a specific date for the transitioning of authority

to the Afghan government was intended to “focus minds,” the leadership in Kabul might conclude that President Obama cannot afford to begin significant withdrawal of forces in such a short time frame and will therefore not pursue reforms with sufficient vigor. In contrast, the population might conclude that the United States is determined to leave and will hedge its bets appropriately.

More broadly, donors should transition away from a transactional aid approach to a demand-driven model. Aid programs should prioritize local ownership and responsibility so that Afghans reclaim ownership of their economic and political development.

The government’s role in of the opium economy. Targeting traffickers, while effectively ignoring the substantial role of key government officials’ participation in the industry and interest in maintaining the insecurity status quo, is counterproductive: it empowers the most corrupt elements of the government, weakens population support for Kabul, and thereby undercuts the political legitimacy of the R&R effort.

The right interlocutor. The Afghan government will have the lead role in negotiations with the insurgency, but international support will be crucial. The UN played a central role in the negotiations that led to the Bonn agreement and in efforts to support the political process that followed. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan is specifically mandated “to provide political outreach as well as good offices to support, if requested by the Afghan government, the implementation of Afghan-led reconciliation and reintegration programs.” The UN’s perceived impartiality makes mediation a traditional strength of the organization. Moreover, the UN is the only organization in which all of Afghanistan’s neighbors are members.

In Afghanistan, however, the UN suffers from two legitimacy challenges that may render it too politicized to serve as the lead R&R interlocutor. First, Karzai resents the UN in part because of its role in highlighting fraud in the 2009 election and in opposing his subsequent efforts to strip the Independent Electoral Commission of its autonomy. Second, the armed opposition challenges the evenhandedness of the UN, instead seeing it as an actor that explicitly supports Kabul and is aligned with the coalition. Concerted effort by all parties is needed to overcome these obstacles. If these barriers are too entrenched, an alternative interlocutor suitable to all parties must be identified and mobilized.

V. Conclusion

The prospects for security and political reconciliation in Afghanistan in the near future are bleak. Nevertheless, the international community can play a role in shaping a sustainable Afghan-led process. In the short term, this effort will require (1) recognition of inherent tensions in the current U.S. strategy as well as within the regional geopolitical environment; (2) clarity about how overwhelmingly U.S.-led coalition military operations and the mendicant aid economy influence key stakeholders’ incentives; and (3) a focus on using eight years of painful lessons learned to guide future policy.

The United States, its coalition partners, and the Afghan government all acknowledge that they cannot fight their way to victory. Skepticism about the merits of the Obama administration’s strategy and the legitimacy of the Kabul government runs deep. Nevertheless, there is a shared

view in the need for a political framework to provide the space for long-term crisis management and political reconciliation efforts. Whether and how hard-earned lessons are implemented will determine the outcome of this conflict and the future of the region.

Annex: Participant List

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- Minna Järvenpää, Afghanistan Analysts Network
- Felix Kuehn, independent author and researcher
- Sulaiman Layeq, former politician and President of the Academy of Sciences
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