

**Statement before
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia**

**“U.S. Strategy for Afghanistan: Achieving Peace &
Stability in the Graveyard of Empires”**

A Statement by

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Chairman Ackerman, Ranking Member Burton, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify on U.S. strategy for Afghanistan. It is a subject of great importance, and I am honored to have the opportunity to share my views with you at this juncture, just one day before President Obama presents his new comprehensive strategy at the NATO Summit in Strasbourg and Kehl. At the Summit, he will aim to secure greater commitments from our allies and promote deeper partnerships.

Partnerships are indeed critical, and today I would like to focus my remarks on reinvigorating our most important partnership: with the Afghan people and their government. While improved coherence with our allies and regional powers will be fundamental to overall success, my statement will instead concentrate on how to ensure that Afghans are in the lead. I would be happy to discuss other issues during the question and answer period.¹

Afghans First. While only 40% of Afghans feel that their country is heading in the right direction, and 60% believe that corruption is a serious problem among government officials,² polls also tell us that 60% still accept the presence of foreign troops, 80% prefer their current government over one led by the Taliban (or others), and 80% view the Taliban as a serious threat.³ These polls reveal that the Taliban have *not* been winning hearts and minds, even though they do adjudicate disputes in some instances. Thus, there is still political space in Afghanistan for the Afghan government, along with international partners, to turn things around.

At the same time, given the deep insecurity in many parts of the country and the serious retribution many ordinary Afghans face if found working with the international coalition, there are increasing numbers of “fence sitters” in the country. These Afghans view the United States as not having delivered security, rooted out corruption, or built capable institutions, despite the billions spent in the country. Many Afghans also believe that America abandoned them in the past and will do so again, and hence they prefer to wait and see. The Taliban, on the other hand, deliver a rough sort of justice through parallel systems (which is better than what many

¹ For further information on these and other related issues, see Karin von Hippel and Frederick Barton, “Getting it Right in Pakistan and Afghanistan,” *CSIS Commentary*, January 28, 2009; Karin von Hippel, “Confronting Two Key Challenges: A PCR Project Research Visit,” *PCR Project Special Briefing*, October 17, 2008 (http://www.csis.org/component/option,com_csis_pubs/task/view/id,5093/); and the two PCR Project Measures of Progress in Afghanistan: *Breaking Point: Measuring Progress in Afghanistan* (2007), and *In the Balance: Measuring Progress in Afghanistan* (2005).

² Metrics Brief, February 2009, Strategic Advisory Group, ISAF HQ, released on 9 March 2009.

³ “Afghanistan: Where things stand,” ABC News/BBC/ARD Poll, February 9, 2009. See also “Afghanistan Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-9/11 Afghanistan” compiled by Jason H. Campbell and Jeremy Shapiro, March 3, 2009.

Afghans are getting from their government), and claim they are there to stay - hence the oft-repeated Taliban refrain: *You foreigners have all the watches, but we have all the time.*⁴

If President Obama's "new, comprehensive strategy" is to succeed, all Afghans - the "fence sitters" as well as those that support the government and international forces - need to become equal partners and share the responsibility of implementing this new approach. (It is already too late for them to have fully participated in conceiving the strategy, though Afghan government officials were brought in towards the end of the process). Afghans need to believe that the risks that accompany association with the international coalition are worth taking. To do this, they need a far greater stake in their future than they currently have. Too many decisions are currently being made on their behalf, without their involvement.

New partnerships need to be developed, with Afghans fully in the lead: in establishing security, building the economy, developing and sustaining governing institutions, rooting out corruption, and in generating outrage and revulsion in their communities when insurgents wound and kill Afghans. How do we change the current paradigm, and ensure that the people and government of Afghanistan are directing efforts, and the international community is playing more of a facilitating and supporting role?

One way is through more *direct and accountable aid*, which goes straight to the people, rather than the current method of being channeled through many layers of contractors and implementing partners, which each take a slice of the pie along the way. According to one study, international contractors have received three-quarters of U.S. development assistance in Afghanistan.⁵ One wonders what percentage of every U.S. dollar gets to the Afghan people today, particularly given the enormous security and other costs associated with international personnel in Afghanistan? Our office did an assessment of this same question for aid in Iraq in 2004 and found that only \$ 0.27 from every dollar was reaching the Iraqis.

Even if the rhetoric espoused by international civilians and soldiers is all about *Afghanization* and building local capacity, the reality is that many donors bypass or supplant government programs entirely, duplicate other efforts, or focus on areas that may be a lower priority for Afghans. Often, decisions are made on Afghans' behalf with no consultation. Some donors say they "inform" the Afghan government before they launch new projects; hardly the appropriate term if they really believe in partnerships and capacity building.

⁴ See the PCR publication, [Breaking Point: Measuring Progress in Afghanistan](#) (2007), which warned of the deterioration in security if things could not be turned around in mid-2007.

⁵ That study also noted that 60 per cent of all development assistance goes through only five contractors. Afghanistan Compact Procurement Monitoring Project, Peace Dividend Trust, 1 April 2007, p.11.

Donors often argue that they are forced to manage programs in this manner due to concerns about corruption, and often to demonstrate a presence back home, where their nation's involvement may not be so popular. According to the Afghan Ministry of Finance, more than 70% of donor assistance is provided outside the Afghan national budget, and the government is not able to track all those funds to ensure that they cohere with existing frameworks and strategies.⁶ In addition, far more aid is pledged than spent, adding to the confusion. Some estimate that 40% of pledged funds are not spent, often because of the so-called lack of capacity, though this could be partly attributed to the international community not identifying and understanding local capacity as well as it should, and not taking the necessary risks.

The reality is that there is little clarity as to what donors are doing, how much aid is spent, how decisions are made regarding programs, and whether or not successes and failures in some parts of the country are informing experience elsewhere. President Obama's team does recognize many of these problems, and the appointment of high profile envoys and ambassadors by the United States and many key allies should help refocus international efforts, as should the appointment of a senior official at UNAMA late last year to improve donor coordination.

Yet, it will not be enough to make incremental improvements. The people in Afghanistan have been losing confidence for more than two years,⁷ and it is necessary to make major changes in order to gain their full participation and ownership of the new approach. As much of the funding as possible should be channeled through successful government programs (such as the National Solidarity Program), national non-governmental and civil society organizations, and the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, co-managed by the World Bank and the Afghan government.

Corruption is a problem – not just within the Afghan government, but also among international donors. Here, perceived corruption due to lack of transparency over donor spending can be just as harmful as real corruption (which also exists). Afghans hear about billions being spent but see little evidence that the money is reaching the people. Corruption can be countered in a number of ways: one approach could emphasize greater transparency over all monies pledged and spent – call it “two-way accountability” - so that the Afghan people as well as taxpayers in all coalition countries can see where their Afghans, Dollars, Euros, Pounds, Riyals and Yen are going. Currently this is not the case.

⁶ Figure from a senior UN development official in Afghanistan.

⁷ Op cit, “Afghanistan Index,” March 3, 2009.

President Obama's plans to appoint new Inspector Generals for the State Department and USAID, as well as to bolster the office of the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, should help monitor U.S. funds. But all these offices should be expanded so they can play a preventive role through instituting safeguards and other mechanisms, and not just an investigative role after the fact. Other donors should also be encouraged to do the same, potentially by the United Nations, which is assuming greater responsibility over international coordination. The UN has been mandated to be lead coordinator, but so far has been unable to realize this goal. A more robust UN, supported by the United States, needs to be seen as a fundamental part of America's exit strategy. Thus, when the UN advocates new ways to coordinate international assistance – which will inevitably include changes to be made by donors – the donors, including the United States, will need to listen.

The President could also consider appointing a high-level American deputy to Ambassador Holbrooke, stationed in both Kabul and Islamabad, to be the new development and accountability czar for all U.S. development funds spent by civilians and the military. Similar concerns over corruption and direct aid will apply if the Senate passes the five-year, \$7.5 billion Kerry-Lugar legislation for civilian aid to Pakistan.

The current opaque, non-transparent setup only feeds conspiracy theories and provides fodder for Taliban propaganda efforts. If donors and the Afghan government publish what they spend, and Afghans (and citizens in donor countries) monitor this spending through the media, websites, regular public reporting and other means, there will be greater ownership and less corruption. The ultimate goal is to empower national and local governments to strengthen governance, and fight extremism and corruption on their own terms.

Success can be achieved with clear direction and goals, the assumption of responsibility by all parties, and regular and open information flow to the people in Afghanistan and in allied nations. The overriding need is for a common purpose that is understood and agreed to by all parties, including the Afghan leadership and public, its neighbors, and international actors.

Finally, Afghans need to hear that the United States is fully committed to their welfare and security. Official U.S. statements and policy should ensure equal airtime to the plight of Afghans, along with the focus on the threat posed by al-Qaeda and affiliated insurgent/militia groups to the United States, Canada, and Europe. Only when Afghans view the struggle as a common one – that they are not just fighting America's war – will they become full partners in this endeavor.

Thank you for your time and for the privilege of appearing before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.