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# Governance in Afghanistan

Looking Ahead to What We Leave Behind

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# Introduction and summary

The United States' top strategic objective in Afghanistan over the past nine years has been defeating the Al Qaeda network. Strengthening and sustaining the Afghan government was a second-tier priority at best that was ranked far behind military operations, and when the United States took any efforts to strengthen government they were done only as a means of “dismantling, disrupting, and defeating” the Al Qaeda terror network.

But building legitimate, responsive, and self-sustaining Afghan government institutions is essential if the United States and its NATO International Security Assistance Force allies are to withdraw their military forces from Afghanistan and keep them out over the long term without the country descending into civil war and regional proxy fighting. To accomplish this, Congress, the Obama administration, and the American public need a clearer understanding of the full dimensions of Afghan governance and the many international actors and programs whose activities affect the issue. This paper's purpose is to aid that understanding.

Building even a minimally functioning state in Afghanistan will be incredibly difficult. The task isn't helped by 30 years of war, eight years of Bush administration neglect and mismanagement, and an Afghan government plagued by a lack of capacity and political will. While it is understandable that the Obama administration wants to show quick results to the American people—who are growing increasingly frustrated over the human and financial costs of almost nine years of war—administration officials are paying too little attention to the sustainability of the programs and Afghan state we are creating. They need greater clarity of purpose in defining their end-state goals to achieve coherence in American policy toward Afghanistan.

The Obama administration began to focus on the state-building effort in 2009 to a much greater extent than the Bush administration, and it placed a stronger rhetorical emphasis on strengthening governance at all levels in Afghanistan as part of its overall strategy. It asserted that state institutions are essential to weaken the insurgency and extremism more broadly. Under U.S. General Stanley McChrystal's command NATO's International Security Assistance Force identified the need to “separate insurgent influence from the populace and support Afghan Government sub-national structures to establish rule of law and deliver basic services” as one of the three principal efforts in its current campaign plan.<sup>1</sup>

President Barack Obama's announcement of a July 2011 departure date for some American military forces has added greater urgency to U.S. policy and has led to a renewed

focus on training Afghan national security forces in addition to continued support for local militias and partnerships with local powerbrokers. These actions are meant to create short-term military stability across as much of the country as possible. But military operations alone will not create long-term stability in the country.

We believe the current Afghan formal government is in need of serious political and economic reforms to survive over the medium to long term. The Afghan population currently has few means of expressing dissent regarding policies carried out by the international community and the Karzai government, which operates on a highly centralized patronage model in which power and resources are channeled through Hamid Karzai's personal and political allies. The system lacks the connection, rules, and checks and balances necessary to make leaders truly accountable to the domestic population, which invites corruption, rent-seeking, and a hemorrhaging of domestic legitimacy. Local governmental bodies are the appropriate places for representing Afghans and responding to their needs, but these currently suffer from a lack of capacity, confusion over their roles and authorities, and little legitimacy.

The system's continued survival is also dependent on large flows of international support, and the international community has struggled to change the Afghan government's increasing dependence, governmental weakness, and rampant corruption. In fact, in many cases it has fostered these negative dynamics.

These problems are further complicated by the Taliban, who today is engaged in aggressive political maneuvering. In the Taliban's initial rise to power in the mid-1990s and in its current incarnation it has been adept in exploiting the competitive local landscape of Afghan politics to overcome its rivals and mobilize support. This is carried out through a combination of violence and intimidation, a political-ideological message casting the internationally supported Karzai government as illegitimate and the Taliban as a purifying movement, and the establishment of parallel government structures to displace the influence of both the central government and local rivals for power.<sup>2</sup>

The Taliban movement, like many insurgencies before it, appears much more dependent on domestic support—or at least acquiescence—for its continued operations than the Karzai government. And it has correspondingly appointed parallel “shadow governors,” roving courts for dispute resolution, and public complaints commissions to convey a message of responsiveness to the Afghan people. The Taliban's experience with popular mobilization makes it a formidable enemy for the Afghan government and the international effort to bring its leadership to justice, and may allow it to once again overcome the patchwork of local power brokers as it did in the mid-1990s.

Another hurdle to building effective governance in the country is the United States' and international community's circumvention of the Afghan government at all levels. While the United States supports the government it also bypasses it in favor of key local powerbrokers, favored actors, and local militias who provide it with intelligence, security assis-

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tance, and aid project implementation. This circumvention weakens the government and fragments the political system without establishing any coherent, sustainable alternative.

The international community has refrained from seriously confronting how the systems of formal and ad hoc power and governance it has established will affect Afghanistan after the eventual withdrawal of active large-scale foreign intervention. We also have not sufficiently analyzed how our short-term stabilization efforts—such as supporting local militias and partnering with local powerbrokers—may undermine our long-term security goals. It is time to deal with these issues head on.

This paper will examine Afghan governance structures, highlight their weaknesses mobilizing domestic support and revenue, and describe the international community's conflicted approach to them. We begin with a basic explanation of Afghan governance that outlines the major leadership positions, institutions, and authorities of the government at the national, provincial, and district level to examine how well the government has extended its authority over different parts of the country. We then analyze the government's dependence on international support and the ways that international assistance supports or bypasses Afghan government institutions. This is followed by an assessment of how security-focused delivery programs have affected governance.

The regional and global security implications of Afghanistan's return to civil war and the political and humanitarian pledges made by the international community over the past decade demand a serious commitment to develop Afghanistan into a state capable of living at peace with itself and its neighbors. But the American people as well as other contributing countries will not tolerate an indefinite military occupation in Afghanistan that continues to strain our armed forces and financial coffers in the midst of our own economic crisis. The Obama administration recognizes this fact. But it has not yet outlined a clear plan for transferring control to the Afghan state or sufficiently prioritized the reforms needed to ensure that it can one day stand on its own.

Thus, based on our analysis of current Afghan governance, we believe U.S. policy—as well as the international community—must prioritize the following areas to be able to transfer control:

- **Provide clarity of purpose:** The Obama administration remains vague about what progress looks like in Afghanistan and what our objectives are over the next two to five years. The administration should coordinate with the Afghan government and NATO-ISAF to create a clear end-state goal with a precise set of qualitative and quantitative metrics that attempt to measure our progress toward a sustainable Afghan state.
- **Increase sustainability and reduce dependence:** An ongoing assessment of how current approaches will play out in the “build” and “transfer” stages of the engagement is required to ensure that stabilization efforts do not undermine the wider goals of rep-

representative sustainable governance. The international community should create a path to greater financial independence for the Afghan government from the international community by increasing domestic revenues and condition additional aid on meaningful corruption and governance reforms that show would-be Afghan taxpayers that their contributions will not be lost.

- **Put Afghans in the lead:** Afghans continue to act as bystanders as their state is rebuilt. They must be consulted to a greater extent, given greater budgetary authority, and put in the lead. More international assistance should be channeled through the Afghan government in the form of trust funds monitored by the international community. The Afghan people must have more ways to access and influence the way their country is being run and how their money is being distributed.
- **Push for an institutionalized rather than personalized decentralization of power with greater Afghan participation:** All roads currently lead back to President Karzai, who directly appoints more than 1,000 government officials throughout the country and many more positions indirectly. Decentralizing power by supporting local governing bodies is an important step for increased representation, but it must be linked to a simultaneous process of establishing checks and balances between the branches of government and civil society. It will require negotiating with a Karzai government that is likely to resist changes that reduce its power.
- **Demilitarize development assistance:** The military is receiving and implementing far too much development and governance assistance as part of a short-term stabilization agenda. Afghan civilians with international civilian support should be driving state-building and development assistance. The international community should be aware of the perverse incentives they may be creating by providing assistance to the most insecure areas of Afghanistan rather than the secure areas.

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