

Testimony of Ronald E. Neumann
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Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

Chairman Tierney, Representative Flake, thank you for inviting me to address your hearing on the situation in the aftermath of recent Afghan elections. After a few general comments I would like to focus specifically on the issues of reinforcing Afghan governmental legitimacy and efficiency and in particular on the subject of corruption and what to do about it.

The election was a mess. There is no hiding this fact and it is well understood. The issues now are how this impacts the legitimacy of President Karzai and how we go forward. Fundamental to considering these questions is the need to consider how Afghans see the matter. While they do resent fraud, my impression from Afghan contacts and knowledgeable foreigners in Afghanistan with whom I remain in contact is that the mass of public opinion was not eager for a second round, feared the risks associated with it, frequently considered it a waste of money that could be better spent improving their lives and just wants to move on. This is a simplification. There are certainly highly politicized elements that have strong opinions all across the spectrum of views. However, my general point is only that legitimacy will be far more a question of what happens now than of what has gone before.

While Afghans want development the most fundamental demands they make of government are for security to pursue their daily lives, basic fairness in resolving disputes, and a sense that the country is moving forward to a better future. The Afghan government's inability to deliver security from crime, oppression and insurgency is seen as a fundamental weakness. Hence, while reform and anti-corruption are very important in this mix they cannot be divorced from the need for security. The subjects are inter-related and what we decide to do about the provision of troops and the building of enlarged and effective Afghan security forces will be key elements in how Afghans view their government and the potential for progress. The military decisions are not my subject today but it is important to understand how closely linked progress in the security situation is to the other subjects I intend to discuss.

Corruption in Afghanistan has evolved over the years of war. Senior leaders taking a cut of projects may not be liked but the practice is long standing and has not traditionally sparked enormous discontent. But the years of warfare have produced a much more wide spread corruption in the society. When there is a pervasive sense of insecurity, when officials are not sure their government will continue, wonder whether they may have to flee to exile and lack any reason to believe they will ever enjoy a pension or even a living wage there is every incentive to profit from any position to safeguard themselves, their families and their friends.

Without confidence in the future there is no basis for a sense of civic duty. This is the situation we face today. If every corrupt official were fired tomorrow I have no

reason to doubt that the problem would shortly reemerge with the new cadre. This is not a counsel of despair. Other societies have emerged from prolonged period of instability. But it is a reminder that change will be slow and difficult and there are no silver bullets on single policy choices that will provide rapid change. In doing so we will have to pay attention also to the frequent assertions that our and other donors aid is fueling corruption through the actions of contractors and their interaction with Afghan subsidiaries.

It is also important to remember that in worrying about corruption and governance our larger purpose is to help the Afghans build a government that can generate enough popular support to stand on its own. Thus we need to be careful that pressures and foreign actions do not reinforce the now all too prevalent view that President Karzai is an American puppet. Such impressions both undermine Afghan legitimacy and make us responsible for everything that goes wrong; and much will go wrong.

In this regard the strident and repeated public criticism of President Karzai, whatever its justification, is extremely counterproductive. It has created the impression that we seek to undermine and replace him. This weakens his ability to muster domestic support and paradoxically pushes him to look for support from many of the same war lords and corrupt figures we wish to see removed. Public shouting is not an effective technique for getting one's way. It arouses anger and defensiveness instead of cooperation. The point is not whether it is justified but

whether it is effective. It is not. I do not say that pressure cannot be an element in our discourse but it needs to be far more private and part of an ongoing dialogue than I fear has recently become the case.

Instead of shouting and making demands we need to rebuild a common understanding that we are in Afghanistan together and that we will succeed or fail together.

I worked closely with President Karzai for nearly two years. We had our differences but we respected each other. I believe President Karzai is a fundamentally decent man who wants progress for his country. We will need to push but we will also need to understand that a complex, rather tribal society without established institutions will only change slowly. Some rapid changes hold great danger of creating a dangerous backlash. President Karzai may well be too hesitant in making changes but we are too often ignorant of the difficulty and dangers that may come with what we propose. Hence, progress will be a process and not a single decision. It will be a matter of extensive discussions, of trial and error, of finding the balance point between too little change and too much. We have a competent Ambassador and we need to give him the space and support to work on these issues over time.

Within these difficult circumstances what can be done? First, of course, is security as I said. A government that cannot keep its citizens alive will be neither respected

nor engender support. Second, we need to work with the Afghan government to reduce the petty corruption that is the bane of existence of so many Afghans. In this regard we need to focus particularly on the Afghan police. Their illegal tolls on the highways and bribes on the cities' streets need attention. The larger problem is within the Ministry of Interior. In Minister Haneef Atmar we have a competent administrator who has performed strongly in two important previous ministerial posts. We need to reinforce and support him. We need to supply the same density of advisors, mentors, and trainers that we have provided for some time to the Afghan army and Ministry of Defense. I understand that we are making some progress in this regard but we are years behind. When I left Afghanistan in 2007 we had roughly ten times as many advisors and trainers devoted to the military as we had for the police. More international support is possible but this must not wait.

Crime is a major issue for Afghans and a constant reminder of the governments weakness. Well guarded foreigners are frequently unaware of how kidnapping, robbery and shakedowns of Afghan merchants retards investment, business, and creates resentments that are fuel for the insurgents. There has been some progress in dealing with these problems in Kabul but there needs to be much more. We can do better in providing the training and tools to deal with this problem. We cannot create the political will to deal with the problem of senior figures who may be involved in crime but we can press for arrests. And with more police mentors and trainers we can achieve a far higher degree of knowledge of whether progress is being made or not.

Afghans face the constant irritation of paying bribes for daily services; for drivers licenses, passports, and document registration. We are not going to clean up the whole Afghan government but by focusing on the Interior Ministry that is responsible for so many of these services we and the Afghan government together can begin to make a dent in the problem.

The Afghan Army is now one of, perhaps, the strongest institutions in Afghanistan. This is a tribute to brave and dedicated Afghans and to the enormous work done by us and by advisors and trainers from many nations. As we move toward supporting a larger army we must be attentive to maintaining competence in the expanding officer corps. There will be pressures for political appointments especially to senior ranks. We should not control appointments, that must remain an Afghan decision if the force is to be a national and not a foreign institution. But we need to insist that the incompetent or the cowardly are not rewarded with promotion for political reasons. I believe we have and are working on this but with expansion will come temptation and we will have to be firm in this aspect of our oversight.

In Afghanistan there is a blending of corruption with incompetence. The latter is particularly a function of the years of war and the destruction of the educational system. There is an enormous lack of trained administrators and technicians in every field. This affects the competence as well as the work ethic of many officials from top to bottom. Although there are some very bright, hardworking and

courageous men and women in the Afghan government they are too few and they have to do too many things themselves in the absence of competent subordinates.

We have thrown considerable resources at this problem in the last few years, although we started beefing up such programs only in 2007. But because of resource limitations too many of our resources had to go to short term training; band aid fixes for much deeper wounds in the Afghan social and educational fabric. We need to keep up the short term work because there are so many immediate problems. But we need to find the resources now for a massive expansion of longer term, higher education particularly in American universities.

This is expensive and it is long term. But if we had started eight years ago we could now have had four graduating classes from American and foreign universities numbering in the hundreds instead of the handful that exist. We should not wait longer to begin.

Mr. Chairman, Afghanistan is a country that needs everything. Because we cannot do everything at once setting priorities is extremely important. Therefore when it comes to appointments of Afghan officials we need to be careful in how we focus. We cannot oversee every ministry and provincial office. We lack both the manpower and the wisdom to do so and if we try to impose our views too often we will make ourselves the rulers. And very poor rulers we would likely be since our international record on picking foreign leaders and throwing out others, from the

overthrow of Diem in Vietnam to supporting Ahmed Chalabi in Iraq, is most often one of bad choices. Yet there are some things we and our international partners can do.

There exists a commission for recommending senior government appointments agreed to in the 2006 London Compact. It is an Afghan mechanism but with room for independence. It took a long time to get organized. It has had to fend off efforts to weaken and politically manipulate it. But it exists. The work to strengthen this commission and make it more efficient needs to be continued with strong support from us, as well as the UN and the major international donors.

Some speak of decentralization as though it holds near magical properties that could lead quickly to improved governance and efficiency. This is an illusion. Competent personnel do not exist in sufficient numbers to staff the provinces. The holders of power in many locations are the same corrupt and oppressive figures who undermine through the power of the gun the very qualities of governance we wish to strengthen. Tribes are fractured and tribal leaders seriously weakened. An unreflective or too rapid decentralization would only strengthen the very forces that make establishing a competent government such a challenge.

Instead of a few policy decisions we need to proceed with a multiplicity of programs, training, pressing, and supporting the competent. This will be a function not of policy but of hundreds if not thousands of implementing decisions that need

to be made in Afghanistan. We have a larger, stronger team with more resources than I had in my period in Afghanistan but the work is not easier or faster.

As we go about it, in addition to supporting our team in Afghanistan, we need to be selective in picking priorities. This is strangely hard for us. We are good at putting together lists of priorities but too often we cannot restrain ourselves from trying to make progress on too many fronts. And if we urge ten items on a minister or President Karzai and push hard we will get movement on the items easiest for him to deliver, not necessarily those that are the most important. Therefore, selectivity is important.

I would defer to Ambassador Eikenberry and his team in making such priorities but may suggest two areas of focus. One is personality dependent. Where we have strong Afghan leaders, whether ministers or governors, we need to give them strong support. Afghanistan is still a nation of individuals far more than of institutions. Where the leadership exists institution building can make progress. Where leadership is lacking all the training we can muster will achieve little.

Secondly, we need to focus on those places most essential; the army, the police, the ministries of finance, defense and interior. In those institutions we need to take strong stands on appointments. But we also need to leave President Karzai some space elsewhere to deal with Afghan politics. Appointing supporters to high offices, including ambassadorships, is not unknown in our own system. It is

unrealistic to expect that politics can be removed from appointments in the aftermath of a presidential election and in the run up to parliamentary elections next year. That is all the more reason to be judicious in where we expend our prestige and our resources.

Mr. Chairman, reform in Afghanistan will be hard, probably harder than even my statement can convey. But progress has been made—in the army, education, finance, health and some other areas. More is possible. We need to press for change but we need also to be realistic in our expectations lest we create the conditions of our own disappointment. With sensitivity to how Afghans see their world, with focus, resources, patience, and support for our team on the ground progress can be made.

Thank you for your attention and for giving me this opportunity to present my views.

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