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Testimony of

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before the

US House of Representatives
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs

"The Afghan Elections: What Happened and Where Do We Go From Here?"
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*The views expressed here are my own and not those of the United States Institute of Peace.

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee,

I am Alex Thier, Director for Afghanistan and Pakistan at the U.S. Institute of Peace. Thank you for the opportunity to present my personal views on the way forward for the United States and Afghanistan.

The United States face a fundamental dilemma in Afghanistan today: do we continue and increase our support to the deeply compromised Afghan government in the hopes we can improve it, or do we reduce support, and risk the collapse of that government, the success of the Taliban insurgency, and wider regional instability?

I have just returned from travel to Afghanistan and Pakistan and the situation is alarming. Pakistan is undergoing a spasm of violence so widespread and unpredictable that the whole country feels under a state of siege. To its credit, the Pakistani military is undertaking a serious military campaign in South Waziristan, but is simultaneously making deals with other militants and displacing hundreds of thousands of its own citizens. Meanwhile, political infighting threatens the tenure of the current civilian government. The future of Pakistan and its uneasy relationship with India seems more precarious than ever.

In Afghanistan, the political equilibrium remains unbalanced following the elections fiasco. President Hamid Karzai’s main challenger, Dr. Abdullah, told me personally that he wants to focus on the future, not the past, and that he would become the “loyal opposition” to the Karzai government. But he also continues to maintain that Karzai’s assumption of a second term is illegal based on the failed elections. Tensions between President Karzai and the international community are high – as they publicly trade allegations over corruption, external interference, and who is protecting or paying-off which warlord. And the top two U.S. officials in Kabul, Ambassador Eikenberry and COMISAF McCrystal, have become unintentionally embroiled in a public disagreement over the wisdom of sending more U.S. forces to the theater. Meanwhile, violence continues to rise, the United Nations is reducing its presence in response to the recent terror attack on its staff

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in Kabul, and on Monday, Transparency International ranked Afghanistan as the second most corrupt country on earth, after Somalia.

Altogether, these events have spurred a crisis of confidence in the region and here at home that threatens to further imperil our mutual objectives to limit the spread of extremism and ensure stability. The collective approach over the last eight years is clearly not working. Even as we have steadily invested more troops and more money, security has declined, and violence and corruption have increased.

Even if you believe, as I do, that our interests in the stability Afghanistan and the wider region demand that we continue our robust engagement, it is imperative to ask at this juncture if we can turn the current situation around, and if can we do it in partnership with the Karzai government?

The Elections

Creating a reasonably democratic government in Afghanistan that can provide security, govern justly, and deliver basic services has been the U.S. goal since 2001. Yet eight years later, the government in which we have invested billions of dollars is badly faltering.

Thus far, the Afghan government and its international partners have failed to deliver on many of these key issues. Most importantly, many Afghans do not feel secure. The Taliban use brutal tactics and intimidation to demonstrate to the population that the government and its international backers are unable to protect them. At the same time, private militias, drug mafias, and criminal gangs act with impunity throughout the country. At best, the government seems powerless or unwilling to stop them. At worst, many of these bad actors are government officials or closely associated with the government. On the positive side, the lives of many Afghans have appreciably improved: access to education and health care, as well as incomes, have risen significantly. But many of these advances are undone by the government’s failings of security and governance.

Progress on developing the framework to support a reasonably democratic government has been unaccountably weak. Elections do not a democracy make.

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Indeed, elections that are not embedded in a democratic framework can be downright undemocratic. Afghanistan’s August 2009 elections were a case in point. Managed by an “Independent” Election Commission that was clearly biased in favor of the President, the elections became an exercise in pre-, mid-, and post-election fraud. At all stages greed, lust for power, and the lack of any effective system of accountability transformed what should have been a critical step in Afghanistan’s gradual transformation towards stability into a farce.

The work of the mixed Afghan and international Elections Complaint Commission (ECC) was the only institutional bulwark against the bold-faced attempt by the President’s supporters to steal the election. The permanent institutions required to hold a fair and accountable process – political parties, the IEC, an independent and apolitical judiciary and prosecutorial service – were all dormant at best or complicit at worst.

In many respects, the United States and the international community bear equal responsibility with the Afghans for the failure of the elections and the political process. Many in Karzai’s camp associated with the worst abuses of power were – or remain – protected by international patrons. President Karzai’s brother, long-rumored to be a drug kingpin in southern Afghanistan, is reportedly also on the CIA payroll. Rashid Dostum, the infamously brutal warlord from northern Afghanistan has been consistently protected by NATO allies with interests in the North. At the operational level, the date for these elections has been known since early 2004, but little was done to support the development of elections institutions until it was too late.

Ultimately, this botched election process has shaken the legitimacy of the Afghan government at a crucial moment. It is not principally that the Afghan people (or indeed the international community) see elections as the path to legitimacy, but rather that this election crisis has reinforced all the worst perceptions of the Karzai government as a corrupt and unreliable partner. Therefore, while the elections process can no longer be redeemed, it may still be possible, through concerted and intensive effort, to rehabilitate the reputation and performance of the Afghan government itself.

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What Next?

No government that is unable to provide security to its population, and which is seen as corrupt and unjust, will be legitimate in the eyes of the population. It is this illegitimacy that has driven Afghans away from the government, and emboldened the insurgency.

Therefore, while we may require additional forces to train the Afghans and secure the population, the focus of international efforts to stabilize Afghanistan should not be exclusively, or even primarily, military. Instead, the real key to success in Afghanistan will be to reinvigorate critical efforts to promote Afghan leadership and capacity at all levels of society while combating the culture of impunity that is undermining the entire effort.

After eight years, even a fully resourced strategy is not guaranteed to succeed. Illicit power structures, including warlords, narco-mafias and other criminal networks have become entrenched and intertwined with corrupt government officials. Political patronage, at the heart of the recent election fraud, is more powerful than those promoting reform. And our own record of delivering effective assistance programs does not always inspire confidence. A fraction of each dollar allocated actually makes it to the end user, and sometimes even then fails to have the desired impact.

To overcome these challenges, and our own limitations, we must do five things with our Afghan partners to rebalance our efforts: 1) radically prioritize what we want to accomplish; 2) address the culture of impunity and improve governance; 3) decentralize our efforts to reach the Afghan people; 4) support a serious program of reconciliation and reintegration to get insurgents off the battlefield; and 5) improve international coordination and effectiveness.

Prioritize: For too long we have been doing many things poorly instead of a few things well. In this critical year, it is essential to simultaneously scale back our objectives and intensify our resources. The U.S. and its partners should focus on security, governance and the rule of law, and delivery of basic economic development with a strong emphasis on agriculture. This focus will allow the

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international community to develop key partners, and improve Afghan leadership and accountability.

Address Impunity and Improve Governance: Without a credible and legitimate Afghan partner, we cannot succeed no matter how significant the investment. The U.S. must act aggressively with its Afghan partners in the lead to break the cycle of impunity and corruption that is dragging all sides down and providing a hospitable environment for the insurgency.

Earlier today, President Karzai was inaugurated for a second five-year term, promising to the Afghan people and the world to fight corruption and build a stronger, safer Afghanistan. A few key steps must be taken immediately to set a clear tone for the next Afghan government. First, Karzai must put forth a strong and “clean” slate of top officials in cabinet ministries and key provinces to demonstrate his commitment to reform. Second, the government must truly empower its anti-corruption and serious crimes task force, independent of the government agencies it may be investigating. For its part, the international community must devote intelligence and investigative support, as well as the manpower to support dangerous raids. Third, in the first few months, several high profile cases including the removal and/or prosecution of officials engaged in criminality, including government officials, should be pursued aggressively and highly publicized. Finally, the U.S. must put real effort into strengthening Afghan institutions that will be responsible for these matters over the long haul, giving them the capacity and tools they need to lead. The U.S. should approach this mission with the same vigor as other key elements of the counter-insurgency campaign.

Decentralize: A top-down, Kabul-centric strategy to address governance and economic development is mismatched for Afghanistan, one of the most highly decentralized societies in the world. The international community and the Afghan government must engage the capacity of the broader Afghan society, making them the engine of progress rather than unwilling subjects of rapid change. The new formula is one where the central government continues to ensure security and justice on the national level and uses its position to channel international assistance to promote good governance and development at the community level.

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Reconciliation and Reintegration: The Afghan government has yet to undertake a serious effort to attract the non-ideological foot-soldiers of the insurgency from the battlefield. By offering economic opportunity, improved governance, and protection – alongside a vision of a better future – the government and the international community may be able to reverse some of the insurgent territorial gains over the last few years. Such an effort will require leadership, resources, and a concerted effort to coordinate and communicate between Afghan national and local government and international and national security forces.

At the same time, the anti-Taliban political elite (government and opposition figures) must achieve consensus about possible political negotiations with Taliban leadership, and the redlines for such engagement. Public offers of negotiations with the insurgents by the government should be accompanied by strong support for the Afghan and international security forces and civilians who continue to sacrifice in the fight against extremism.

Improve Aid Effectiveness and Harmonization: The U.S. must use its aid to leverage positive change, and must closely coordinate these efforts with international allies. This should include not just information sharing, but serious operational planning with Afghan government and allied officials. To that end, it is time to consider creating a civilian lead in the international community with the power to harmonize both policy and process. A new office and approach with unified leadership that carries the commitment from at least the top five international donors would focus and leverage the vast majority of assistance to the country.

Another critical point of leverage is to channel more aid through Afghan government institutions with stringent accountability mechanisms such as “dual key” trust funds that enable Afghan initiative while retaining oversight of spending. It is also essential to move spending to the provincial and local level, to build capacity of sub-national institutions and put more control over development resources into the hands of the recipients.

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The Way Forward

Can these steps reverse the tide of insecurity and lack of confidence that has swept Afghanistan and America and provide the international community and the Afghan people a credible partner?

I believe the answer is yes. But this cannot be accomplished through half measures, mixed messages, and lack of long-term vision. A unified international presence on the civilian and military sides must simultaneously work with President Karzai and his government and around them, to boost leadership and accountability in Kabul and across the country.

The Afghan people, and those who have lived and worked among the Afghans, including our soldiers and civilians in Afghanistan, have not given up hope for a peaceful Afghanistan. In every part of the country there are Afghans risking their lives to educate and vaccinate children, to monitor elections and investigate war crimes, and to grow food for their communities. They are not helpless without us, but they rely on us for the promise of a better future – a promise we have made repeatedly over the last eight years.

I understand that remaining committed to the stabilization of Afghanistan is not easy. It will be costly, in lives and taxpayer dollars. It is a challenging mission, in every way. Yet the alternatives, when examined honestly, are unbearably bleak. Through four years on the ground in Afghanistan during the Afghan civil war in the 1990s, I witnessed the impact of war, warlordism, Talibanism, and abandonment by the West on Afghanistan and its neighbors. Afghanistan, its fabric of governance and society rent by war, became a breeding ground of Islamist extremism and global jihadists.

Afghanistan has come quite far since those dark days. We are not as far along as we should have been by now, but our accomplishments are not minor. Our efforts since 2001 have demonstrated, if quixotically, that with determination and leadership, positive change is possible.