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April 9, 2012

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Myths and Misconceptions in the Afghan Transition

Summary

- The coming period of transition to Afghan control of national security will require greater cooperation and understanding between all parties.
- Cooperation between the international community, the Afghan government and local communities is currently being undermined by a series of myths and assumptions which stem from the unstable conditions, a perceived lack of shared interests and a handful of highly publicized incidents.
- The international community often underestimates local capacity for governance in Afghanistan and ignores the success that Afghanistan did have with self-rule for much of the 20th century.
- Local Afghan communities are skeptical of the aims of both counterinsurgency and state-building measures, as projects, such as internationally sponsored elections, have failed to yield anticipated results despite the continued presence of international troops.
- There is an urgent need to rethink some of the assumptions on both sides of the table which threaten to undermine the long-term prospects for peace in Afghanistan.

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Some Myths and Misconceptions

As responsibility for security and other aspects of governance and rule of law rapidly transition to Afghan control in the coming years, serious logistical and structural challenges remain to be addressed. Less discussed but equally important, though, is the fact that there is currently a gulf in communication and understanding between members of the international community, the Afghan government and local communities. This divide is both evidenced by and further perpetuated by a series of myths and misconceptions on all sides of this relationship.

Afghan Myths

On the one side, among both educated and uneducated Afghans, there is the persistent belief that counterterrorism is an open-ended excuse used by the international community, particularly the United States, to assert control over Afghanistan in order to extract resources, particularly mineral wealth, and to prevent the expansion of Chinese and Pakistani influence in the region. A common refrain amongst many Afghans is that United States is actually aiding the Taliban in an effort to promote instability and justify its continued military presence in the country.¹ They question how

a group perceived as weak and unorganized could continue to stand against the technologically superior U.S. and NATO forces.

While some may chuckle at these ideas as absurd, failure to recognize their legitimacy in the minds of many Afghans leads to one of the fundamental disconnects between the avowed partners for Afghan stabilization. It bears focusing on what is perpetuating some of these myths. Since 2001 the international military forces have relied on local warlords and powerbrokers with sordid histories and reputations to bring local stability. These figures often have a perverse incentive to encourage instability in order to benefit from the weakness and corruption of government structures, through industries and practices such as land grabbing and the opium trade. For almost a decade, the international military has repeatedly attempted to stabilize Afghanistan, in part, by partnering with those strong figures who are benefitting most from its instability. Many Afghan citizens see what the military views as a necessary means of expediting stability as a Faustian pact with some of the most violent figures, particularly in provinces like Helmand, Kandahar and Uruzgan.²

It is also important to consider the way that Afghans *perceive* the massive distribution of aid and other funds from the international community. Many in the international community blame rampant corruption within Karzai's government for the failure to have a tangible impact on the Afghan populous to match the levels of actual donated dollars. While some Afghans agree with this assessment, many also feel that those in the international community who control the funds are responsible for the ineffectiveness of how they have been applied. On several occasions and with increasing frequency, the president has effectively countered corruption charges by accusing the international community of its own means of corruption, particularly amongst private security contractors.³ While seemingly unrelated, these issues are often symbolically linked in the minds of many Afghans with other concerns about the international presence, such as the increasing number of barriers and roadblocks by embassies and other international organizations which has slowed traffic in Kabul to a crawl. These trends, coupled with several recent events, including the burning of Korans at Bagram Airfield and the killing of 16 civilians in Kandahar by an American soldier, have increased hostility to the international presence.

Such issues damage Afghan perceptions of the international presence and the distribution of international funds more generally. Large donors, such as USAID, ask for complex proposals that many Afghan businesses and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are ill-equipped to write. As a result, the vast majority of contracts go to American firms, which often then get subcontracted to a few Afghan firms. While this may be considered transparent by internationals involved, it is important to stress that for many Afghans, there is the sense that the process is actually not transparent. Many of the actual implementing Afghan firms are dominated by a small segment of the ruling elite who many Afghans see as corrupt and monopolizing external funding.

International Myths

Myths and misperceptions, however, are not confined to the Afghan side of the conversation. Among many in the international community, there is the common misconception that Afghanistan has never had a functioning government, that corruption is an inevitable aspect of Afghan culture and that since Afghans are not truly interested in democracy it is justifiable to make deals with warlords and other strongmen, even if they are known criminals.

During the 1960s and 1970s Afghanistan did have an effective local governance system that relied on creating relationships between central government officials and local leaders. While it was not without its problems, this system was considered equitable by the majority of the population.

Generally speaking it is remembered as being free of corruption, perhaps most clearly evidenced by the practice of universal conscription, in which every man was required to serve in the national military regardless of economic standing or ethnicity. Even the sons of the king were required to serve in the national military, standing in stark contrast with the current rumors about the child of local elites purchasing grades at the national university or other privileges.

Some of the struggles of setting up good governance systems in the last decade should not be perceived as some sort of primordial rejection of democratic governance by the Afghan people. For example, the high turnout in initial elections, particularly in 2004, and the increasing disillusionment with the documented corruption of recent elections do not suggest that Afghans have some inherent distaste for democracy. Instead, many of Afghanistan's historical political structures and community decision-making mechanisms are deeply rooted in democratic values. Participation in elections has declined for a much simpler reason; Afghan elites have been effective at manipulating the six national elections held since the U.S. invasion. Powerful individuals have used elections to solidify their patronage networks and monopolize government funds.

Other international programs that target certain leaders (often referred to as Key Leader Engagement or KLE) or generate resources for one group over another potentially undermine these practices, making local politics actually less democratic. This is perhaps most apparent in the case of the Popalzai tribe to which President Hamid Karzai is a member. In the area around Kandahar, the Popalzai have come increasingly to dominate local political and economic structures. However, local governance and development councils set up across the country, typically through U.S. and British funds, often times rely on a select group of local leaders and government officials to choose members of the local council. These individual members of the community often have very different interests than the community writ large and the involvement of international programs marks them in the eyes of many community members as being distinctly unrepresentative. USIP's research suggests that Afghans in general are in support of holding elections for local councils, but that the current system that relies on hand-chosen representatives in many communities is creating resentment. Many of these current programs seem to work on the assumption in the international community and perhaps amongst the Kabul-based government that local communities are somehow unable or unwilling to choose their own leadership.

Effects of these Misunderstandings

What is most worrying is that these seemingly simple misunderstandings can produce tragic results. In the most extreme cases, Kabul has seen violent protests in response to the perception that the United States is working against Islam. In less public cases, aid programs and political strategies that favor a small group of wealthy, elite Afghans suggest that the United States and NATO partners do not have the best interests of ordinary Afghans in mind when planning programs and policies. In the most extreme cases, alliances with unsavory local commanders, some with histories of past war crimes, has led many Afghans to believe that the United States in particular is actively encouraging instability in the country, and has forced average citizens to make economic and political decisions as if this were the case.

The tendency of NGOs and international donors to work around a government that they largely perceive as corrupt and ineffective has also created some severe economic distortions. Both international NGOs and donors have not done enough to engage in public awareness campaigns. This means that money continues to be delivered in large amounts, delivered in ways that are non-transparent and unpredictable for local communities. Attempts to monitor these efforts by groups like the Congressionally-founded Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) are

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

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usually aimed at policy audiences and Afghan communities rarely hear about these efforts except in the form of sensational media sound bites.

Finally, all of these misconceptions have made both the Afghan government and the Afghan people much more distrustful and suspicious of the role of the international community in the early stages of negotiations with the Taliban, and to question the ultimate aims of such negotiations.

These myths and misconceptions have helped reinforce the idea that perhaps the United States and the Afghan government are not actually on the same side of the negotiating table. This has been thrown into harsh relief as the two scramble to assert authority over where, when and how to hold peace talks. This raises some long-term concerns as any settlement negotiated between the Taliban and the United States that the Afghan government does not believe was negotiated in good faith is unlikely to bring lasting peace to Afghanistan.

Reaching across the Table: What can be done to help understanding

- The international presence in Afghanistan needs to work on being more transparent in its distribution of funds.
- The international community needs to continue to invest in the Afghan government and in particular in local governance structures through local actors that are selected by the community, not relying on those that have come to power during the current instability.
- The international community and the Afghan government need to increase communication and cooperation in several areas, particularly regarding their approaches to local governance and reconciliation with the Taliban. Before negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban begin in earnest, more diplomatic conversations between the government and the international community need to take place to avoid multiple streams of negotiations that threaten to undermine each other.

Endnotes

1. See Vanessa Gezari, August 19, 2011, 'The Secret Alliance,' *The New Republic*.
2. See Matthieu Aikins, November 2011, 'Our Man in Kandahar,' *The Atlantic*.
3. See Laura King, October 4, 2010, 'Afghan President Begins Disbanding Private Security Firms,' *Los Angeles Times*.



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