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“Perspectives on Reconciliation Options in Afghanistan”

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

Dirksen Senate Office Building, Room 419

July 27, 2010, 9:30 A.M. – 11:30 A.M.

The U.S. Senate **Committee on Foreign Relations** held a hearing to discuss reconciliation and reintegration in Afghanistan. Touching on issues of governance and civil institution building, the hearing was twelve in a series the Committee has held on Afghanistan in the past 18 months. The Committee—chaired by **Sen. John F. Kerry** (D-MA), with ranking Committee member **Sen. Richard G. Lugar** (R-IN) in attendance—requested the testimony of three individuals: the Honorable **Ryan C. Crocker**, former U.S. Ambassador to Iraq and Pakistan; **Zainab Salbi**, founder and CEO of Women for Women International; and **Dr. David Kilcullen** of the Center for a New American Security.

Sen. Lugar opened the conversation, characterizing reconciliation as "intrinsic" to success in Afghanistan. Expressing a concern that reconciliation remains undefined and “appears to be left to the Afghan president,” whose approach has been criticized as “too narrow,” Lugar suggested that reintegration must be comprehensive to avoid further instability. Referring to the recent international conference in Kabul, Lugar stated that little headway was made in confronting these issues or in battling the “endemic corruption” in the Afghan government. He **welcomed President Hamid Karzai’s statement that he will refocus international assistance on a limited number of programs to increase results and accountability, and called “fair conduct” in the September parliamentary elections “vital”** to government efforts to gain the trust of partners and potential reconcilability.

Sen. Kerry referred to the classified documents recently leaked on Afghanistan and Pakistan, cautioning against any tendency to “over-hype” the contents of those materials. Moving on to reconciliation, Kerry posed several “critical” questions: Which insurgent groups can be part of the reconciliation process?; Is the timing correct?; Who will direct the negotiations?; What is the role of Pakistan?; and How should reconciliation be conducted? Kerry called the recent Kabul conference a “good step forward” on these issues, noting that **President Karzai affirmed that any reconciliation will be contingent on insurgents’ willingness to accept the Afghan constitution and renounce Al-Qaeda, while U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reiterated that any peace deal cannot come at the expense of women and civil society.** Kerry argued that reconciliation must be “genuinely national” to succeed and must include various ethnic groups such as Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Pashtuns.

Ryan Crocker was the first witness to speak, and argued that reconciliation must be considered in the larger context of security. Crocker proposed that a successful counterinsurgency must create a secure operation environment to pave the way for reintegration, which he said only becomes possible on the large scale when insurgents doubt their ability to prevail. Crocker pointed to the **need to speak to any and all factions interested in talks, and to work productively with both Karzai and Pakistan as**

long-term strategic partners. He also cautioned against pulling out of Afghanistan too soon, **stating that premature American withdrawal would mean “grim consequences for Afghans, especially women and minorities,” for which the U.S. would ultimately be “held responsible.”**

Zainab Salbi urged the American government to reconsider Pakistan's current role as the key regional U.S. ally on Afghanistan, **arguing that the U.S. should build a coalition of moderate Muslim countries-- most prominently Turkey --to moderate discussion between Afghanistan and Pakistan.** Noting that the insurgency does not consist of a united Taliban force, but of various factions and militias, Salbi said that the U.S. should engage with moderate groups but not with more extremist elements, such as the Haqqani network. She suggested that **the treatment of women and minorities and their inclusion in the political process should be viewed as a "bellwether" for the overall direction of the country, and stated that the U.S. "cannot abandon" these groups without losing its international credibility.** Proposing that too much emphasis has been placed on security in Afghanistan at the expense of considering civilian solutions, Salbi stated, "The legacy is not a military one, it's a civilian one."

David Kilcullen argued that governments usually win in counterinsurgency campaigns when two factors are present: the government is fighting in its own country, and it is willing to negotiate with insurgents on underlying political issues. Kilcullen concluded that the U.S. therefore needs both a viable local partner in the Afghan government, and successful reconciliation efforts. Nevertheless, he cautioned that the government “must be negotiating from a position of strength.” This **"strength," he said, is based not only on military power, but also on the legitimacy of the Afghan government, including its stance on human rights, corruption, and the behavior of local officials.** Kilcullen also highlighted the importance of regional actors in addressing issues in Afghanistan, suggesting that U.S. involve Iran even though such a prospect may be “uncomfortable,” and noting that China has an important role to play. Finally, Kilcullen observed that Afghan culture accommodates the idea of engaging in talks while continuing combat operations.

Kerry asked for the witnesses' comments on CIA Director Leon Panetta's comments questioning whether any elements of the Taliban had a real interest in negotiations. He also asked how the U.S. could show strength without committing to a lengthy military presence in Afghanistan. **Crocker** responded that **“changing the calculus on the battlefield” is essential and that engaging international and regional actors such as the UN, Pakistan, and Iran could prove helpful in that respect.** Kilcullen pointed to the need to clearly communicate to the Afghan public and to insurgents that the July 2011 date for the start of a U.S. troop withdrawal is not an absolute deadline, arguing that the U.S. should shift its focus to a 2014 end date instead.

Lugar asked how reconciliation would practically work and whether the U.S. or President Karzai would take the lead. **Crocker** suggested that **an Afghan reconciliation committee could be formed to lead the initiative and coordinate with the U.S., and would include minorities, women, members of the Northern Alliance,** and other groups. **Salbi** pointed to the need for more diplomatic discussions on the local level and also argued that a Muslim coalition should call for the negotiations, not the U.S.

Sen. Benjamin Cardin (D-MD) questioned whether the U.S. has a reliable partner in the Afghan government, which he said is "known for its corruption" and has inspired a "lack of confidence" in negotiations. **Affirming the importance of good governance to achieving progress on security**

issues, he asked how the U.S. could be more effective in empowering the Afghan people and guaranteeing their rights.

Crocker responded that President Karzai faces “overwhelming” challenges and that his performance has in many respects been “disappointing,” but argued that the U.S. must continue to work with him as a strategic partner while ensuring “more accountability,” as it did with Prime Minister Al-Maliki in Iraq. He also **proposed that a U.S. “priority” should be to include a focus on “local leadership initiatives” in the provinces, as well as on strengthening the central government.**

Sabri said that the U.S. has “over-promised and underperformed” in Afghanistan, suggesting that people have not seen a major improvement in their lives so far. She argued that the Afghan government has no incentives to reject corruption given that the U.S. provides it a “blank check,” and noted that **in recent surveys, Afghan women identified government corruption as the second greatest challenge facing them, after security and before the Taliban.**

Sen. Bob Corker (R-TN) quoted statements by Crocker that Afghanistan needs “good enough governance,” asking exactly what that would involve. **Crocker** responded that the “most fundamental issue” in the counterinsurgency right now is security, which will ultimately allow Afghans to address governance issues. He emphasized the need for **governance that can provide services such as education and gives the Afghan people “the sense that life is going to be better, maybe not for them, but at least for their children.”**

Kilcullen characterized the overall military campaign in Afghanistan as a **“stability operation,” requiring not only counterinsurgency against the Taliban, but “just as important,” a solution to the problems of bad governance, corruption, and human rights abuses.** He argued that the ISAF mission should be revised to include a focus on reforming the corrupt Afghan government, and advocated for undertaking “bottom-up, civil-society based” initiatives to give the civilian population a voice. Kilcullen added that local Afghans typically express concern over **three key issues related to governance: human rights violations on the local level, access to a free, transparent, effective justice system; and community participation in local issues.**

Sen. Russell Feingold (D-WI) voiced his **support for a representative political solution that would protect “hard-won rights and freedoms,” address negative perceptions of the Afghan government, and tackle broader ethnic and regional tensions,** asking how the U.S. could best engage on these issues. Feingold also questioned whether the Karzai government would carry out a truly inclusive process, or simply engage in backroom deal making with local warlords.

Salbi argued that the U.S. and the Afghan government **must include women and ethnic minorities in the process not just in symbolic ways, but in “real ways,” while engaging in “infrastructure building”** as part of good governance to provide people with shelter, economic opportunities, and education. **Kilcullen** proposed that significant pressure from the international community is necessary to ensure that the government negotiates in good faith. He added that **the U.S. should distribute development assistance more widely across the provinces, noting that USAID programs currently function in only the least safe areas, where accountability is weakest.** Kilcullen also said that it is significant that one in seven candidates for the upcoming parliamentary elections are women.

Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA) noted four major challenges: government credibility and legitimacy; the time line for U.S. withdrawal; the presence of a safe haven for terrorist elements in Pakistan; and a lack of

resources. He **asked whether the term "sustainable stability"-- used by Crocker to define U.S. goals in Iraq --would be applicable in Afghanistan.**

Crocker responded that **sustainable stability would have to include not only military security, but also addressing a range of destabilizing forces, including the absence of governance, corruption, and the lack of services.** Stating that "non-kinetic" elements such as the Afghan government may determine the success of the conflict, he stressed the need to work "bottom up" on these issues. **Kilcullen** reiterated that "there isn't a military solution; it has to be political."

Sen. Ted Kaufman (D-DE) affirmed that "we all agree" that governance is the key in Afghanistan, but went on to express concern over how a reintegration government containing Taliban elements would affect women's rights. He also argued that the U.S. must send a signal to the Afghan government that while "patience is finite," if it engages in necessary reform, the U.S. is willing to make a long-term commitment of support.

Salbi suggested that it would be possible within a democratic framework to highlight moderate Islamic views and to debate the role of women in government, pointing to Pakistan and Turkey as role models. **Kilcullen** observed a "silver lining" in the U.S. draw down deadline, arguing that it has pushed some Afghan officials to address corruption, and affirming that the U.S. must condition any continued presence in Afghanistan on reform when dealing with government representatives.

Kerry expressed concern over Salbi's previous comments regarding institution building, suggesting that the U.S. should not engage in "nation building" in Afghanistan. **Salbi** countered that the U.S. is losing ground to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, who are addressing immediate needs of the people, such as food.

Lugar asked how the U.S. could effect change in the government, questioning whether reconciliation efforts can succeed while Afghans continue to have grave concerns about their government. **Kilcullen** argued that **the U.S. and the international community must put their foot down on corruption** and make it clear to Afghan leaders that their government stands or falls on the basis of international assistance.

Kaufman harshly criticized **specific cases where the Afghan government pardoned officials allegedly engaging in corruption, arguing that unless progress occurs on this issue by July 2011, the U.S. should not consider extending its presence** in Afghanistan. **Kilcullen** suggested using leverage to force a change in Afghan leadership, while **Salbi** cautioned against attempting to "wash our hands" of the conflict without first creating viable alternatives to the Taliban.

Corker asserted that **the need for a legitimate Afghan partner on the counterinsurgency is "the issue of the day,"** and asked how the U.S. could effectively leverage the Karzai government given its awareness that the U.S. views it as essential to the conflict. **Crocker** stated that a "sense of partnership" with Karzai is necessary, with both sides working toward a "stable enough" Afghanistan with "good enough governance" to prevail on its own. **Kilcullen** offered a less optimistic look, **arguing that the U.S. might be able to reform the Afghan government some day, but not by 2011.**

Lugar concluded that the hearing represented the most important session of the Committee to date on Afghanistan.