

AFGHAN NATIONAL SECURITY FORCES: A GLASS 55% FULL

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Thank you Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and other members of the committee for the honor to testify today. As the Afghan National Security Forces (the ANSF) near their desired size and structure, and take lead responsibility (at least nominally) for up to 75 percent of the country later this year, it is an excellent time for this committee to consider the crucial question of how well they are doing. Crucial decisions about the Afghanistan mission loom—not only about how fast to reduce U.S. forces once the current drawdown schedule is completed later this year, but also about how to plan and fund and support long-term Afghan forces.

My overall assessment is that the Afghan security forces are probably going to be good enough to fend off any attempted Taliban takeover of the country come 2014 and beyond—at least in terms of holding onto major cities and major transportation arteries. That assessment is contingent, however, on several factors: a patient NATO troop drawdown that gives us more time for training and mentoring over the next 30 months; adequate U.S. and NATO troop presence even thereafter to provide mentors and trainers and some special capabilities; adequate financial support for the ANSF from the international community; and an Afghan political system that survives the 2014 election without fracturing along ethnic lines. In addition, I would offer a caveat: as former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and I wrote last year, one needs to accept something like a "Colombia standard" of success for Afghanistan (harkening back to Colombia of several years ago in particular). That is, the insurgency will continue even after 2014 in all probability, and may even control substantial swaths of territory, but will not be in a position to regain control of the country and will over time be gradually whittled away. That is the optimistic vision; if things go wrong, the outcome could of course be much worse.

PROGRESS WITH THE ANSF

As official witnesses have testified recently before this Committee, and as COMISAF General John Allen testified before the Congress in March, there are some encouraging signs in regard to Afghanistan's various security forces:

- Afghan security forces have almost reached their envisioned full size of 352,000 counting army and police.
- Although there are still too few southern Pashtuns joining the ANSF, and too high a proportionate representation of Tajiks in certain leadership roles, the overall ethnic

balance and cohesion of the nation's security forces are reasonably good. My sense is that ethnic conflict will not be generated from within the ANSF.

- Afghan soldiers and police are fighting, too. They are now collectively taking at least twice the casualties of NATO forces, participating in at least 90 percent of all operations, and leading some 40 percent of operations themselves (albeit usually the simpler ones at this point). And they repulsed the April 15 Haqqani network attack on Kabul and other cities largely on their own. New accords have them take the lead on night raids, too.
- While the security forces still suffer from political patronage appointments and corruption, the problems are being partially addressed. Some 50 Afghan army leaders in the east of the country alone have been replaced over the last year; 70 police officers were just fired recently in the country's west for poor performance. The Ministry of Defense has opened a full criminal investigation into the problems that produced corruption and theft at Afghanistan's main military hospital last year. To be sure, such efforts could be too little too late. And some of the firings and hirings raise concerns of ethnic bias. But on balance the progress is picking up.
- Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior leadership are generally well regarded, and the Ministry of Defense inspector general is respected and competent, too.
- NATO is belatedly also cleaning up its own act—no longer unwittingly funding nearly as many corrupt actors or insurgent groups as it did before. Task Force 2010, the ISAF organization designed to increase transparency and accountability in how NATO awards contracts for logistics services and related activities in Afghanistan, is finally gaining steam. More than 100 companies or individuals have now been debarred from ISAF contracting. Transparency requirements make it easier to check on who is involved in these companies. It often takes a couple months to develop good intelligence on new companies, so when they reorganize or rename themselves, they can sometimes evade notice for a short time. But overall this set of problems is getting serious attention, thanks in large part to the earlier oversight and investigative work of the U.S. Congress.
- More than 10 percent cost savings have been achieved to date, normalized for the relevant workload, by the reforms in contracting. More important than simply saving us money, this is a promising indicator of fewer funds being diverted to malevolent actors who don't actually do the work we hire them to carry out, but pocket the money instead.
- The Afghan Local Police, a form of armed community watch overseen by NATO troops, is generally proving its mettle. These lightly armed and locally organized forces, who now number some 12,000 in all, are holding their ground in some 80 percent of all firefights, even when sometimes outgunned by the Taliban, taking the highest rate of casualties of any part of the Afghan security forces in the process.

There have been a handful of cases of abuse within this program, and a number of illegal militias are falsely adopting the name Afghan Local Police to disguise their true nature (which is sometimes to attack their neighboring tribes or communities). But U.S. special

forces have monitored and worked with the actual ALP forces effectively, and stepped in to address problems when needed. They only allow the formation of ALP units after several months of getting to know an area and working with local elders to try to ensure tribal balance. The admittedly daunting challenge in coming months and years will be to keep growing the program while also handing oversight to Afghan special forces.

I disagree with those who want to disband the ALP because I believe critics tend to understate the degree of care taken in overseeing it. I disagree also with those who exaggerate its significance in Afghanistan and see it as a major game changer, because they tend to forget how small it is and must be in order for that oversight to remain vigilant. But as a tool of the broader effort, it has its place and should in fact be gradually expanded as now planned.

- A spirit of hopefulness, more than fear, characterized most of those I spoke with in Kabul. The recent signing of the U.S.-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement to guide cooperation after 2014 reassures many Afghans that they will not be left to their own darker angels—or the mercy of their neighbors—when ISAF’s transition is complete. Although implementing protocols and a status of forces agreement for the SPA may prove difficult to negotiate, the accord has definitely given a boost to the strides of many Afghan reformers who continue to work hard for their nation’s future.

REMAINING CHALLENGES AND THREATS TO THE MISSION

Yet each of the above areas of progress with the Afghan security forces underscores the fragility of the situation:

- While Afghan forces are much bigger and better than before, they are nowhere near good enough, so professionalism and discipline must not only be maintained, but improved in the future. As noted, even though Afghan forces are now leading more than 40 percent of all operations, I was told on a recent trip to Afghanistan that these are generally the simpler operations.
- While a large number of incompetent or corrupt leaders within the security forces’ ranks have been replaced, many remain, and under the present government, uniformed leaders and ministers of interior and defense only have so much power to replace poor leaders on their own given the political interests still at play in many appointments. For example, cabinet ministers can replace officers down to the rank of perhaps colonel, and top uniformed leaders can only replace officers down to the rank of perhaps captain.
- The Afghan Local Police can only be effective in the future if Afghanistan’s own special forces are increasingly able to play the oversight role that NATO has provided to date. This clearly assumes a level of competence and integrity within the Afghan special forces that will not survive poor national leadership, should the wrong person wind up in charge after President Karzai.

- The wrong president or even the wrong type of presidential campaign in 2014 could also generate ethnic tensions that weaken and divide an overall security force that, to date at least, has not shown any major proclivity itself towards civil warfare. In other words, even if the ANSF do not generate a civil war, they may not be invulnerable to one that begins outside their ranks.
- The Border Police (within the Ministry of Interior) and the Air Force (within the Ministry of Defense) still suffer from the influence of strong criminal patronage networks within their institutions.
- Western impatience with the mission and pursuit of the false of a smaller, cheaper ANSF after 2015 could leave a force unable to handle the challenges that are likely to face it then. In particular, the idea of reducing the ANSF from 352,000 down to 228,500 shortly after 2015 is probably premature at best, as former Ambassador Ron Neumann and I wrote last month in the *Washington Post* after our trip to Afghanistan in May. The idea came from some American military officers in the training command in Kabul, not formally from NATO or the Afghan government, and it was but one of several concepts for future Afghan force sizing that built on the premise of a much safer threat environment. Absent such a safer security situation, moving to such a smaller force quickly just to save perhaps \$2 billion a year in U.S. financial support would jeopardize the investment of some \$700 billion—and more than 2,000 American lives—we will have made by that point. Indeed, it will risk requiring us to keep more U.S. forces in Afghanistan after 2014, at an incremental cost of more than \$1 billion annually per thousand American GIs, than we would have to do otherwise. It would be a false economy. An Afghan force of such a size should be viewed as a floor on requirements, not a most likely case.

CONCLUSION

Beyond specific issues in working with the ANSF, American policy in Afghanistan needs one new big idea: we need to convey to Afghans clearly that our willingness to support them financially, developmentally, and militarily after 2014 will be a function of the quality of their governance and the character of their leaders.

I do not believe it likely that this Congress or a future Congress will sustain up to 20,000 GIs in Afghanistan at a cost of perhaps \$25 billion a year, and add another \$3 billion to \$5 billion annually in direct security and economic support to the Afghan government and people, if the next Afghan government is badly corrupt. In such an event, while our own strategic interests might not lead us to pull the plug on the effort entirely, I would predict that our commitment would be scaled back dramatically. Of course that would be your decision here, but my speculation is that levels of American assistance might wind up perhaps one third to one fifth the amounts sketched out above, or even less. That would be regrettable. But given American politics, and budget constraints, it would be likely.

We should not try to pick a winner in the next Afghan election. But for the good of the country's security forces and everything else crucial to the mission, we may need to identify and seek to veto informally a few losers. Congress can and must play a key role here. Thank you for the chance to testify.