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**Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations  
Of the  
House Armed Services Committee**

**Thursday, August 2, 2012  
2118 Rayburn HOB  
3:00 p.m.**

**“Afghan National Security Forces: Afghan Corruption and  
the Development of an Effective Fighting Force”**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am honored to have this opportunity to address the Subcommittee on the critical issues of the development of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and corruption in Afghanistan. The widespread corruption in Afghanistan and its vast detrimental effects on governance, the legitimacy of the political system in Afghanistan, and hence also the counterinsurgency effort are the subject of my forthcoming book, *Afghan Aspirations, American Ambivalence: Strategies and Realities of Counterinsurgency and Statebuilding* (forthcoming winter 2012). I have conducted fieldwork on these issues in Afghanistan numerous times, traveling across Afghanistan and interviewing both ordinary Afghans as well as ISAF and Afghan government officials, most recently in April 2012.

### **A Quick Review of the Battlefield as of August 2012**

*The lynchpin of the transition strategy in Afghanistan and its most developed element is the gradual transfer of responsibility for Afghanistan's security and for fighting the still-entrenched Taliban from NATO's International Security Assistance Force to Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).* However, in handing over the responsibility to the Afghans, the United States and ISAF are handing over a stalemated war.

The McChrystal plan endorsed by the White House in December 2009, albeit with fewer forces than General McChrystal requested, assumed that by the time of the transfer ISAF would have secured large parts of Afghanistan. Four years later, some real progress had been achieved – such as in central Helmand and Kandahar, both of which used to be either intense battle-zones or strongly under the Taliban's sway. *But the territory cleared by August 2012 that is being handed over to the Afghans is much smaller than had been projected.* Progress in central parts of the south is real, but how robust remains to be seen. Other parts of the south, as well as parts of the west remain under the control of the Taliban. The east continues to be intensely contested, and ISAF and ANSF are essentially in a stalemate there with the insurgents. In the north, the increase of ISAF and ANSF forces did improve security in a narrow corridor along the major roads in Kunduz and Baghlan, but ethnic tensions are simmering and poor governance permits the continuation of the conflict and tensions. Other parts of the north, as well as large parts of Afghanistan's west, are among the most stable and peaceful in Afghanistan. But there, such as in Herat, attacks, while still highly sporadic, appear to be intensifying.

### **The Poor Governance in Afghanistan**

Despite the substantial improvements of Afghan security forces, *few Afghans believe that a better future is on the horizon after 2014.* Although NATO and U.S. officials remain optimistic about the success of the counterinsurgency and stabilization campaign, many fear there will be a renewed outbreak of civil war after 2014 when the NATO presence is much reduced. This prospect of civil war and ethnic infighting after 2014 was foremost on the minds of most Afghans with whom I spoke on my last trip - in April 2012. The success of ANSF's response to the April attacks notwithstanding, most were deeply skeptical that the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) would be able to fill the security void created by the drawing down of ISAF forces and their far smaller and circumscribed presence after 2014.

*Worse yet, Afghans have become disconnected and alienated from the national government and the country's other power arrangements.* They are profoundly dissatisfied with Kabul's inability and unwillingness to provide basic public services and with the widespread

corruption of the power elites. Afghan citizens intensely resent the abuse of power, impunity, and lack of justice that have become entrenched over the past decade. During that period of the initial post-Taliban hope and promise, ***governance in Afghanistan became defined by weakly functioning state institutions unable and unwilling to uniformly enforce laws and policies.*** Official and unofficial powerbrokers have issued exceptions from law enforcement to their networks of clients, who have thus been able to reap high economic benefits, and can get away even with major crimes. ***Murder, extortion, and land theft have gone unpunished, often perpetrated by those in the government. At the same time, access to jobs, promotions, and economic rents has depended on being on good terms with the local strongman, instead of merit and hard work.***

***Yet as the decade comes to a close, the political patronage networks too have been shrinking and becoming more exclusionary.*** Local government officials have had only a limited capacity and motivation to redress the broader governance deficiencies. The level of inter-elite infighting, much of it along ethnic and regional lines, is at a peak. ***The result is pervasive hedging on the part of key powerbrokers, including their resurrection of semi-clandestine or officially-sanctioned militias.*** Hedging against a precariously uncertain future is equally pervasive on the part of ordinary Afghans. Especially in the Pashtun areas that constitute the Taliban heartland, they will often send one son to join the ANA, and another to join the Taliban, and possibly a third son to join the local strongman's militia, to maximize the chances of being on the winning side, whoever will control the area where they live after 2014.

### **The Military Transition and Its Challenges**

Putting aside for the moment the question of the Afghan Local Police (ALP) to which I shall return, ***the standing up of the ANSF has been one of the brightest spots of the transition process of improving Afghan capabilities to provide for their own security and governance. But it is also a big unknown.*** The size of the ANSF has been expanding rapidly, and the quality of military skills of the Afghan forces has also been growing. The current target strength to which the ANSF is scheduled to be expanded by October 2012 is 352,000. However, at the price tag of several billion dollars per year, such a force is unaffordable for the Afghan government for years to come. Thus, in addition to agreeing to continue footing the ANSF bill, participants at the May NATO Chicago Summit agreed to maintain the 352,000-strong ANSF until 2017, but undertake a “gradual managed force reduction ...to a sustainable level,” with a working target of 228,500.<sup>1</sup>

The force reduction has implications beyond both ANSF's military capabilities against the insurgent networks. The ANSF is one of the largest sources of employment in Afghanistan. Even if the 130,000 ANSF force reduction is gradual and even if the already-high attrition rate considerably reduces the number of those dismissed, the downsizing will still leave a lot of young men, recently trained and issued weapons, without a job. Afghanistan's unemployment is already running high, and it is precisely the salary that induced many to sign up for the ANSF. The more military men are laid off without being able to find alternative unemployment, the greater the chances for political disquiet, criminality, and outright conflict. Yet peacefully integrating those young men into Afghanistan's society will be no smaller a challenge than effectively integrating demobilized Taliban fighters.

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<sup>1</sup> Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan issued by the Heads of State and the Government of Afghanistan and Nations contributing to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), May 21, 2012, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_87595.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_87595.htm).

At the same time if the Afghan government seeks to compensate by reducing the quality of equipment, training, and benefits in order to keep more men on the roster with fewer financial resources, that too could have negative implications for the fighting capacity of the force. Afghan soldiers need not live in air-conditioned barracks; but it would be a serious problem if they were issued faulty arms and lacked ammunition (as has periodically happened with the various auxiliary paramilitary forces). When it comes to the impact on Afghan security, much will depend on to what extent reductions in the ANSF are driven merely by affordability and to what extent they are determined by the strength of the insurgents.

***For many years yet, certainly well beyond 2014, the ANSF will continue be challenged in some critical domains. These include command, control, and intelligence; air support, and medical evacuation and other specialty enablers.*** There are still two years to grow these ANSF capacities, and the expectation is that the international community will continue providing such critical assets after 2014. However, that will depend on how the role of U.S. and partner forces after 2014 is defined: if the definition of U.S. mission then is only very narrow counterterrorism for its own contingents and on-base counterinsurgency training for the ANSF, the United States may be severely constrained in providing crucial and necessary resources to the ANSF.

The Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) are being increasingly battle-tested, but much is yet unknown about their capacity to stand primarily on their own. The NATO Lisbon Summit in November 2010 established that ANSF would be gradually placed in charge of security in Afghanistan place by place, in a series of five segments covering Afghanistan's territory, referred to as "tranches." In a tranche handed over to ANSF, ANSF is to be the dominant security provider and ISAF is to be only in the background, deployed only when called upon by ANSF. So far, out of the five-tranche transition, two tranches have been completed, and a third began in May 2012. It includes 122 districts as well as all remaining provincial capitals.

How the ANSF handles especially the third tranche will be an important test of its capacities because the previous two tranches consisted mainly of stable or secured areas. There have been some tough places among them, such as the capital of Lashkar Gah, Marja, Nawa, and Nad-e-Ali districts of the Helmand province, which although cleared by ISAF before and registering major security improvements nonetheless are the heartland of the Taliban insurgency and historically difficult security environments. But it was only in the third tranche that the ANSF was to take over areas still violently contested and with poor governance. How ANSF performs during the third tranche will be the most telling indicator so far of its likely performance after 2014.

Especially in eastern Afghanistan, which did not receive the same level of ISAF "surge" reinforcements as Afghanistan's south and was still mostly left for Tranche 4 and 5, the fighting can get very tough. And even the significant security improvements in the south are fragile. The Taliban will have every incentive to bloody the nose of the ANSF there to show that the transition strategy is not working and that ANSF cannot stand up to them once the internationals' presence is reduced. If the ANSF can respond robustly to an intense Taliban military campaign there, that will be an important sign that it can hold its own after 2014. At the same time, an absence of Taliban attacks in the south would not necessarily mean that the Taliban has been greatly weakened. It may be just waiting it out until after 2014 before expanding significant efforts and resources to resurrect control and intimidate government structures and the population into submission.

***One of the major deficiencies of the military part of the transition strategy is its one-way direction.*** The NATO Lisbon Summit set the transition process as conditions-based – and to an extent it is. ISAF’s recommendations of which districts are selected for handover to Afghan responsibility are based on a rather comprehensive assessment of the security situation, quality of governance, and strategic significance of the areas. But ultimately, the transfer decisions lie with President Hamid Karzai and his principal advisor for transition, Ashraf Ghani. Complex political considerations, including of ethnic balancing and satisfying local powerbrokers, at times will influence the transfer decisions, despite ISAF’s advice.

More worrisome, there is very little scope in the handover strategy for NATO forces to go robustly back into an area that was handed over to the Afghans, if the original assessment of handover readiness proves incorrect and if ANSF performs poorly. Under an ideal scenario, the shift from “unit partnering” to an ISAF advisory role on the ground would be a gradual process, rather than an on-and-off switch, with ISAF having the ability to “let Afghan units fail” to some extent but to retain a sufficiently robust capacity to come back with combat forces to recover any losses. However, squeezed by the timelines set by the international community, such as the U.S. military drawdown schedule, the transition process has become essentially a one-way street: Once handed over to the Afghans, the territory belongs to the Afghans and there is little stepping back. Neither the foreign capitals nor the Afghan government have appetites for anything but scaling back the international military presence. Thus the May 2012 NATO Chicago Summit added a new milestone -- namely, that all parts of Afghanistan would begin the transition process and that the Afghans would be in the lead everywhere by mid-2013. Still, what “lead” means is not yet fully defined. U.S. senior military officials, however, have stressed that at least until 2014, U.S. forces would remain “combat-capable.”

Nor is the level and type of U.S. and ISAF military support for the ANSF after 2014 exactly determined as yet either. Decisions still have to be made as to the number of U.S. and other international troops and the character of their mission. At the signing of the U.S.-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement, President Barack Obama spoke of “steady military reductions” in U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan after the end of 2012. That phrasing seems to suggest that the United States will not maintain the 68,000 troops in Afghanistan in 2013 that the U.S. military leadership appears to prefer. ***Yet too fast a reduction in U.S. military presence will critically undermine the military transition in Afghanistan, inhibit the growth and much-needed improvement of the ANSF, and risk undermining whatever military successes have been achieved since the surge of U.S. troops in 2009.*** The President also stated that the U.S. military forces remaining in Afghanistan after 2014, pending the signing of a U.S.-Afghan Bilateral Security Agreement, would focus on only “two narrow security missions” – counterterrorism and training of ANSF.<sup>2</sup>

Ideally, ISAF will embed advisors within Afghan units, which is necessary both for mentoring the units and for integrating U.S.-provided air support. The 2009 McChrystal review indeed stressed “unit partnering” between U.S. and Afghan military units, and much of the pre-2014 transition is about the gradual shift in ISAF’s mission from “combat to support.” Such support, including with intelligence, command and control, air support, medical evacuation, and specialty advisors, will be necessary beyond 2014. But if the post-2014 mission of international (including U.S.) troops is defined very narrowly as only counterterrorism anti-al-Qaeda/ anti-global-jihad operations, the mentoring capacity will be severely undermined. Nor will the

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<sup>2</sup> President Obama, “Address to the Nation from Afghanistan,” May 1, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/01/remarks-president-address-nation-afghanistan>.

Afghans be reassured overall or continue to welcome such a foreign presence if it does little to satisfy their need of much more broadly-defined security and improved state-building while exposing them to the risk of terrorist retaliation.

***Moreover, when ISAF forces are thinning out they will become more and more dependent on ANSF for ground-level intelligence, particularly for developing and maintaining a good understanding of the broader dynamics in Afghanistan, such as the nature and quality of governance in particular locales, and possibly even for narrow counterterrorism missions.*** Already, U.S. and ISAF forces are beginning to feel challenged in this intelligence requirement. ISAF's access to and participation in the processes of interrogating and locally-reintegrating insurgents seeking to come out of the cold must at times be negotiated with the local ANP and ANP commander, and is not always forthcoming. Such trends are likely to intensify from now on: some Afghan interlocutors, for example, could try to manipulate intelligence in order to eliminate rivals by labeling them the Haqqanis, and the delicate intricacies of the interaction between poor governance in a district and Taliban mobilization grow. Similarly, if the government of Afghanistan decides to relegate the international military forces to their bases and rarely calls upon them for assistance, such as for night raids, the less effective any continuing international military training can be. The faster ISAF forces depart before 2014 and the more limited in size and scope their missions are after 2014, the more any improvements in Afghan military and police capacities will be jeopardized and chances for stability in the country undermined.

***A disturbing big unknown is whether the ANA will be able to withstand the ethnic and patronage factionalization that is already to some extent fracturing the institution.*** ISAF has done a great job in reducing the Tajik domination of command posts in the ANA, a fact widely resented by Pashtuns. In 2008, approximately 70% of Afghan *kandak* (battalion) commanders likely were Tajiks. As of summer 2012, that number has been reduced to 40%. For several years, the ANA has been nominally ethnically balanced, but it managed to recruit disproportionately low numbers of southern Pashtuns. Most of the Pashtuns recruited for the ANA had come from central and northern Afghanistan. The recruitment of Pashtuns from the south, although still low, has also been increasing.

However, at this point, the problem goes deeper, with ethnic fissures and patronage networks running through the military. Unless such tendencies are rolled back, such as by rewarding commanders who operate even-handedly across the ethnic groups within the ANA and do not seek to cultivate a circle of ethnic friends, the ANA may ethnically fracture after 2014, only intensifying the likelihood of civil war.

***The ANA appears to be increasingly weakened by corruption.*** This development is not new, but it may be intensifying. In some of the best *kandaks*, excellent soldiers are not being promoted because they do not have influential friends. Conversely, many extra positions, at the level of colonel, for example, are being created so that commanders can give payoffs to their loyal supporters. Soldiers from marginalized groups, without powerful patrons, or simply those who cannot afford to pay a bribe, are being repeatedly posted to tough environments whereas their better-positioned compatriots get cushier postings. Clamping down on such corruption is as important as increasing the ANA numbers.

***The ANP has of course been notorious both for such intense ethnic factionalization, as well as for corruption.*** It is important that the international community continue to demand credible progress against both vices and carefully assesses whether personnel shifts are indeed

motivated by efforts to reduce corruption or mask further ethnic rifts and the firing of one's ethnic rivals.

The ANP's anti-terrorism capacity, such as its ability to detect bombs and respond to spectacular Taliban and Haqqani attacks, has increased dramatically. Its performance in responding to the April 2012 attack on the Afghan Parliament and June 2012 attack on the Spozhmai Hotel near Kabul were considerably better than its response to the attack on the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul in June 2011. In later cases, the ANP and other ANSF forces were able to handle the situation largely on their own, both in terms of the tactical operations and command and control, with essentially a limited ISAF backup. In the earlier case, the terrorists could not be defeated until the ISAF joined in. Indeed, when the ANSF, including the ANP perform well, their legitimacy with Afghans grows. Thus the successful response of the Afghan commandos to the April 15 Kabul attack stimulated a spontaneous support-your-troops campaign throughout Afghanistan. Public appreciation in turn motivates the troops risk their lives and not themselves engage in abusive behavior toward the citizenry.

***But the ANP critically continues to lack an anti-crime capacity, and the anti-crime training it receives is minimal.*** Instead, the ANP is being configured as a light counterinsurgency and SWAT-like counterterrorism force. Yet, crime -- murders, robberies, and extortion -- are the bane of many Afghans' daily existence. The inability of the Afghan government to respond to such crimes allows the Taliban to impose its own brutal forms of order and justice and to develop a foothold in Afghan communities. ***Worse yet, the ANP remains notorious for being the perpetrator of many crimes.***

***Among the most controversial aspects of the transition strategy in Afghanistan are various efforts to stand up self-defense forces around the country.*** These Afghan "militias" are supposed to increase security in areas where ANA, ANP, and ISAF presence are highly limited. With ISAF denying that the various programs amount to a militia effort (calling the units everything but militias and insisting that they are based on Afghan traditions, such as *arbakai*), ***the most visible version of these efforts right now is the Afghan Local Police (ALP).*** By May 2012, the ALP numbered somewhere between 6,000 and 13,000 members<sup>3</sup> and was slated to grow to at least 30,000 by the end of 2014.

When compared with the other self-defense programs, the ALP has by far the strongest oversight mechanisms, and the U.S. military officials are quick to note that the ALP program is far more sophisticated and far better than the Soviet militia program. Even so, the oversight mechanisms and controls are hardly sufficient.

The ALP is supervised and trained by U.S. Special Operations Forces (SoFs) who are to embed with the ALP in the village or area where the ALP operates. Embedding may imply a variety of things -- from living in the village for six weeks to visiting the village once a week. Training mostly consists of teaching the recruits how to handle small firearms (which they either have and already know how to handle, or are issued), medical training, and communicating with the SoFs.

Those recruited are to be vouched for by three *maliks* and/or a village *shura*. The *maliks* or *shura* are relied on to determine that the ALP recruits will not secretly work for the Taliban or other anti-government elements, turn on their U.S. advisors, or abuse the local community. This

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<sup>3</sup> My interviews with ISAF officials in Kabul and in western and northern Afghanistan produced this wide range in the estimated number of units in existence at the time. The range may be indicative of ISAF's difficulties in tracking the growth and membership of the ALP units.

control mechanism is believed to be adequate since the *maliks* are assumed to know the men they are recommending. The problem with this *malik*-based control mechanism is that not infrequently a powerbroker controls the village elders, dictating his preferences in a way that may escape outsiders' scrutiny. A second control mechanism of the ALP program is that the district police chief is to supervise the ALP units. The problem with this mechanism is that the post of district police chief has often been associated with some of the greatest and most consistent corruption in Afghanistan. The greatest weakness in the ALP effort, and its many predecessors and concurrent programs, is that there are no established mechanisms for disarming an ALP unit that has gone rogue and prelates on its own or rival communities.

***The local context in Afghanistan varies greatly and the decision to stand up ALP and other militia forces may well be highly problematic. The structure, composition, history, and insider-outsider relations of a community all significantly influence how well-behaved a local self-defense unit will be.***

***If a community is homogenous, and particularly if it is also isolated, but subject to outside Taliban extortion and abuse, it may well enthusiastically welcome the creation of the ALP and even volunteer it.*** Or it may on its own, even without the umbrella of the ALP or another official self-defense program, rise up against the Taliban, and later be simply anointed as ALP. Under such circumstances, the ALP may significantly improve security and the life of the community. Although communities abused by Taliban outsiders could generate a force on their own to fight the Taliban, the benefit of the ALP structure is that it can relieve some of the logistical problems that an independently operating self-defense group may have.

ALP presence in a community can also have a political impact. If the community has been systematically disfranchised from power in an area -- for example, Ghilzai Pashtuns in Uruzgan do not have representation in a local district government and in the local police forces -- establishing ALP units in such a community does empower it. This empowerment, however, can be vis-à-vis the district Afghan government as much as against the Taliban.

Under the best of circumstances, the ALP can increase security against anti-government forces, such as the Taliban, in communities previously left to suffer, open up roads to villages previously-deemed too dangerous to travel and hence boost economic activity in the area, and even reduce local crime, extortion, and land theft. The ALP units in the Arghandab district of Kandahar, operating under tight supervision of the U.S. SOFs, are purported to have achieved such excellent results.

Difficulties and complexities in many forms, however, tend to arise quickly when a community or an area is not homogenous and when the Taliban or Hezb-i-Islami or other anti-government elements are not simply thuggish outsiders in the area. ***In highly contested communities plagued by ethnic and tribal rifts, there is substantial risk that ALP and other self-defense forces will begin preying on host or neighboring communities, serious abuses of human rights will take place, and the basic security of such communities will be undermined.*** In very heterogeneous, polarized, and fractured communities, the establishment of ALP units often critically augments the security dilemma among the communities and triggers an armament spiral.

Even when security improves as a result of the creation of a local ALP outfit, the robustness of that improvement may be far less than meets the eye. Sometimes security in an area improves simply because a community typically hedges its bets and pays part of its income, including what it gets through the ALP salary payments, to the Taliban.

While the effects of establishing ALP units are highly contingent on local contexts, cumulatively the ALP phenomenon transcends the local context and can, through contagion, as it were, generate a widespread and complex security predicament for the whole country. Even though the ALP are physically not to travel and operate outside of their villages (of course, they violate the rule), their reputation regardless travels among widespread communities. Instead, rival communities, observing that their antagonists are being armed, seek to do the same.

To many of these serious challenges of the ANSF, there are no easy solutions. But one thing is clear: *The faster the international community leaves Afghanistan and the more it reduces its presence, particularly its military presence, the more the negative dynamics in the still very-problematical Afghan security environment will be intensified and the fewer means and lesser leverage the internationals will have to combat them.* What the Afghanistan battlefield looks like in 2015 still remains very much open. The disposition of forces throughout the country at the time is likely to be highly dependent on the political and governance situation in Kabul and the public support is stimulated or deters in the Western capitals. Clearly, Western presence will be much reduced in size and much more greatly circumscribed in the scope of the mission of U.S. and Western soldiers will be tasked with – but how exactly remains yet to be determined. The military situation may also have been affected by any serious negotiations with the Taliban that get underway between now and then. But of course these political variables are themselves part of the feedback process wherein what has happened on the battlefield is highly determinative of who wins the political power-plays and who sits and prevails at the negotiating tables. Indeed, it is the iron grip of these feedback loops on events that makes the analysis here of the prospects for transition from mostly U.S.-control to Afghan control also central to the overall assessment of U.S. policy.

### **The Need to Prioritize Efforts to Fight Corruption**

Without major improvements in governance, it is difficult to see how lasting stability after 2014 could be achieved, whatever the balance of remaining military forces on the ground.

President Hamid Karzai has recently indicated a new willingness to focus on combating corruption, issuing, for example, an order to government officials not to interfere with anti-corruption efforts. It yet remains to be seen how strong President Karzai's new desire and determination to improve governance in Afghanistan is and to what extent their announcement is predominantly focused on the Western audience.

*The political and governance system in Afghanistan is, in fact, so pervasively corrupt and so deeply and intricately linked to key structures of power and networks of influence, that some prioritization of anti-corruption focus is required.* After 2014, the international community is likely to continue to lack the capacity to fully break with all problematic powerbrokers. Nonetheless, Washington and the internationals can try to urgently mitigate at least the most egregious power abuses and the types of corruption that are most detrimental to long-term stability in Afghanistan.

*Anti-corruption efforts should focus on limiting tribal or ethnic discrimination in access to jobs, especially in the ANA and ANP, and on expanding access to markets and contracts.* A corollary to limiting ethnic discrimination within the security services is to make sure that particular ethnic groups or people from particular regions who do not have access to influential powerbrokers in the higher-level commands are not selectively posted to very violent areas for too long without being rotated out; also that command levels are not dominated by a

particular ethnic group, such as the Tajiks; and salaries and leaves are equally distributed by superiors.

Additionally, *it is critical to focus on the corruption that seriously undermines the emergence of the already fragile markets in Afghanistan*. Such severely detrimental corruption includes the proliferating unofficial checkpoints and the ever-escalating bribes to be paid at the checkpoints, major corruption in the banking sector, and corruption in line ministries wherein a bribe is paid and yet the service is still not delivered and the bribe has to be paid several times over.

Finally, *efforts to undermine effective local officials should not be tolerated*. The international community should use problematic powerbrokers as little as possible and only as last resort. The damage such powerbrokers can inflict on the international community's efforts may well necessitate "having them in the tent rather than trying to pull the stakes off the tent on the outside," as an ISAF official put it to me.<sup>4</sup> But if the powerbrokers bring down the tent from the inside by their rapacious behavior, the state-building effort will be equally ineffective.

There is a real cost to prioritizing the anti-corruption campaign as opposed to combating corruption of any sort in a blanket way. The prioritized approach requires an intelligence picture that the international community does not have and may struggle ever more to develop. Prioritization can further expose the international community to the risk of being seen as inconsistent, hypocritical, and meek. But with the continuing dependence on problematic interlocutors, such a prioritized focus is perhaps the maximum the internationals can currently hope to accomplish. Emphasizing all corruption equally will likely run up against the political dependencies of the current Afghan government and motivate it to do little on corruption, even as it promises much to the international community. But equally, giving up on corruption spells failure of the stabilization effort.

Paradoxically, a chance to push through such governance reforms will be augmented if the international community finds a way to work through President Karzai rather than against him. The Obama Administration's early confrontation with Karzai over corruption left him deeply suspicious of and outright antagonistic toward Washington without making him improve governance or tackle corruption. Many aspects of the transition strategy will be hampered if the relationship between Kabul and Washington deteriorates further. President Karzai has remained resistant to focusing on corruption. However, the international community needs to continue stressing to him, and to whomever his successor post 2014 is (if he in fact does not remain in power), that he is likely to lose much more political and economic power and physical security from a collapse of governing authority in Afghanistan than he will lose by transitioning his system of coopt-and-close-your-eyes toward greater accountability and lesser impunity.

### *Reigning in the Warlords*

*The United States and the international community have shown little willingness to break with problematic warlords*; instead, many have been embraced for reasons of short-term effectiveness on the battlefield. In the case of others, the international community simply could not figure out how to have them removed or neutralized. The smaller the international presence in Afghanistan, the less wherewithal and capacity there will be on the part of the internationals to finally sever dependence on the powerbrokers and effectively encourage their removal from official and unofficial positions of power.

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with a U.S. Embassy official, Kabul, Fall 2010.

But that does not mean that the international community should not be looking for such opportunities even as its presence diminishes. Whenever possible, efforts should be undertaken to neutralize the warlords. Lesser presence in some areas may permit greater pressure on Kabul to hold them accountable (even with reduced leverage to accomplish such a removal). Washington and the international community should not be beguiled by arguments that the more security in Afghanistan disintegrates, the more it will be dependent on the warlords, so they cannot be antagonized in advance. Neither the tribes, nor the warlords, nor the ALP can keep security and stability across the length and breadth of the country. At best, they may be able to keep pockets of security in particular areas. But if the situation in Afghanistan becomes more atomized after 2014, there will be opportunities to selectively resurrect relationships with some of the warlords with whom they have been dropped. For the warlords will not be loyal to the cause of the United States and international community anyway, all the more so if it is just a narrow anti-al-Qaeda mission, and they will simply cooperate with anyone who pays them more or increases their power – be it the Taliban or the international community. The Northern Alliance commanders will be far less likely to ever be coopted by the Taliban, but they will ultimately also seek to cultivate as many international friends as they can and play them off against one another.

Until such dire necessity truly arises in a future post-2014 meltdown, however, *the international community should seek to neutralize the influence of problematic powerbrokers as much as possible*. It needs to demand accountability and punishment for serious crimes perpetrated by the powerbrokers, such as land theft, rape, kidnapping, and murder. As much as possible, it should encourage merit-based appointments in the government. *With whatever limited leverage and choices are left to the international community, it should seek to interact with, encourage, and reward well-performing government officials*.

*Whatever redlines the United States and the international community sets for the powerbrokers, the internationals need to be prepared to uphold these redlines and take punitive actions if the powerbrokers and the Afghan government violate them*. Thus, conditionality should not be vague, and the redlines the international community sets should only be those that Washington and the international community have the will and capacity to enforce. A consistent failure to act against behavior designated as intolerable only undermines the reputation and effectiveness of the international community. This means not suggesting that military aid to the ANSF is conditional unless the internationals are truly prepared to cut it and risk an intensification of conflict and deterioration of the ANSF. This is not to say that if governance continues to disintegrate further and corruption and impunity intensify even more, the international community should not cut military aid. But it is to say that if one declares such a policy, one needs to be prepared to live up to it.

#### Reigning in the ALP

*ISAF needs to resist the siren song of the ALP shortcut. If the vetting process becomes more rushed and less reliable than it is already, serious human rights abuses, security dilemmas, ethnic tensions, and other local conflicts will only grow*. Ideally, the program would be scaled up. *At minimum, any initiation or expansion of the program in a locality needs to be based on a comprehensive and credible assessment of local conditions, with long-term governance ramifications factored in as strongly as short-term battlefield exigencies*. In highly heterogenous areas with preexisting conflicts among communities or with discriminatory governance, the ALP and other militias should not be stood up.

***Credible and robust mechanisms should be developed right away to roll back rogue ALP units already in existence.*** As the June 2012 Kunduz experience demonstrates once again, the current rollback mechanisms are not adequate. ***Stronger accountability mechanisms than the current ones need to be put in place, and accusations of crime, abuse, and ethnic and tribal discrimination need to be investigated and prosecuted far more diligently and robustly than they have been.*** ISAF needs to commit itself to and involve itself in such accountability and procedures and not simply wait for the Afghan Ministry of Interior and Justice to undertake them. Or it may have to wait forever in many cases.

***Now is also the time to start developing a serious program to disarm and demobilize the ALP at the end of 2014.*** The United States and the international community should commit themselves to carry out that disarmament and to establish a credible program with procedures for diverting the decommissioned ALP from future predation and ethnic infighting. Such a stand-down program will be credible only if other militias, whether under the aegis of the United States or belonging to Afghan warlords, are also incorporated in it. For if they are not, the various militia units, even if they do shed their uniforms, are unlikely to give up their weapons or to feel particularly constrained in their behavior.

### **The Diminishing, but Still Crucial Western Influence in Afghanistan**

***Persevering with whatever capacities and resolve can still be gathered in the West and emphasizing good governance does not guarantee success; many of the larger and deeper trends there may now be outside of the control and beyond the leverage of the international community. But going out fast, defining the post-2014 mission in very narrow counterterrorism terms, and writing off governance only spells failure.***

Despite the many negative developments and problematic trends in Afghanistan, despite the deep anxiety with which many Afghans look at the 2014 transition, a failure of the international effort to leave Afghanistan with a stable government is not preordained. Afghanistan is a complex place, where local realities are often highly diverse. There are glimmers of hope. Security has improved in parts of the country. Afghan security forces exhibit growing capabilities, even as they continued to be challenged by many deep problems. And a new generation of Afghans is rising that is motivated to take on the problematic powerbrokers, rise above ethnic cliques, and bring in a rule of law to Afghanistan.

The United States and the international community still can – and should - attempt to empower those Afghans who are determined to privilege the broader interests of the people over narrow power and profit maximization. The United States and its international partners in Afghanistan are exhausted and focused on getting out of there. But the faster United States scales back its efforts in Afghanistan and the more rapidly ISAF forces reduce their presence before 2014, the more the leverage of the international community will be diminished as well; and the more any improvements in Afghan military and police capacities will be jeopardized and increases in security undermined.