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## Reports

# The United States' Feasibility of Remaining in Afghanistan

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Recent events in Afghanistan have fuelled speculations over the internationals' ability to last out their stay in the country even until 2014. In January, 4 American Marines in Helmand were shown urinating on corpses in a video. In February, in a case that appears to have been no more than exceedingly poor judgement, some copies of the Qur'an were burnt, damaged and treated in a disrespectful manner. In March, a US army staff sergeant in Panjwayi district of Kandahar province is believed to have killed 17 individuals (many of whom were women and children) in a single night.

These events are extreme outliers that capture the imagination of Afghans and foreigners alike, and seem to many a continuation of the past decade of war. In the perception of many Afghans the difference between these extreme events and the ongoing more frequent violence of night raids, large military operations and so on, seems marginal.

A number of prominent international voices have called on America (and the other 49 countries serving in the ISAF coalition) to start leaving Afghanistan immediately. The argument they present is that foreign forces are unable to play a positive role inside Afghanistan, that they will be unable to start doing so, and that large numbers of lives and amounts of money are being spent to no avail.

Aside from this international discourse, inside Afghanistan there have been calls for the international forces to leave, most loudly by the various groups that make up the insurgency. This is echoed to some extent by public opinion, although it is difficult to get an accurate read on the country's attitudes in the current environment.

The general themes of Afghan public opinion — as gathered from discussions with Afghans as well as from following civil society debate and media discourse — as displayed towards the foreign presence is above all a deep scepticism towards anyone's promises. Outside major cities, there is a severe lack of trust in the international forces or any overall positive vision of Afghanistan's future. It seems that few are hopeful that Afghanistan will be better off five years from now.

A key metric that illustrates this is the number of people leaving the country. Afghans are leaving Afghanistan to neighbouring countries, and are travelling further afield. This group has very high numbers of children and adolescents. In fact, 2011 saw the highest numbers of such departures since the latest round of international engagement began in 2001, more 30,000 all in.

In this paper, we will assess the current staying power of the international presence in Afghanistan from a military as well as broader strategic perspective. To what extent are they able to continue to carry out their mission? What are the likely key milestones between now and 2014? And to what extent do the on-going discussions between the United States and the Taliban offer a way to make this transition period easier?

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On paper, the transition or enteqal process has a number of benchmarks, some of which have already been reached. This year, Afghanistan will most likely sign the highly contested Status of Forces agreement with the United States, one that will provide a legal and practical framework for the US presence in Afghanistan after 2014. The central sticking point in the ongoing bilateral discussions has been the extent to which the United States will be allowed to continue to operate out of bases inside Afghanistan. Chicago will host a NATO conference between May 15-22, and this will be followed by a conference held in Kabul. These are expected to affirm the 'transition' process and rubber-stamp its continued implementation. The United States will hold a presidential election on November 6th; in the past these have provoked intense speculation, hedging and a political stasis within Afghanistan in the months leading up to Election Day as all parties to the conflict may see their fortunes rise or fall depending on who wins. Afghanistan itself is scheduled to have its own presidential elections in 2014, although the precise dates and mechanics of that election remain unclear.

While 'Transition' is labelled a multilevel process, it appears primarily premised on a transfer of military control over to Afghans. International military forces will be reduced, and control of those areas will fall to Afghan security forces (of whatever shape or form). This includes the conventional military (the National Army) as well as police forces. This year the many private security companies that exist to protect local and international programmes, offices and staff around the country are due to be transitioned into the Afghanistan Public Protection Force (APPF). This has already been delayed several times, however, and some entities will be exempt from the process. The militia forces that ISAF has been installing around the country — in Kunduz, for example, or in Kandahar and Helmand — will play a key part of this transition process, mimicking the Soviet withdrawal to a large degree.

A political transfer of power will also come to the forefront in 2014, when President Karzai will (presumably) hand over power to a new figure following elections. The United States will need to find a way to involve itself in this process in a useful way.

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The various elements of this transition process have, however, all been called into question over the past year. Each element is the subject of heated debate, as was seen during General Allen's recent testimony given on March 20th. The factual basis for claims of progress is debated as well as the nature of the process itself.

The ANSF and their abilities to perform as the transition plan requires has repeatedly been challenged over the past year. The Afghan National Army is still only able to field one kandak capable of operating independently. Training of the military units has been emphasised at the expense of the logistical backend of the Afghan security forces, too. The use of militia forces — under a plethora of different names and designations — has also not been problem-free. Groups have been involved in the same human rights violations, corruption and uses of force/violence that they were set up in part to forestall. The Afghan government have yet to seriously tackle the issue of internal corruption, and attempts to block investigations have come from as high up as President Karzai himself. Also, in terms of their forward-planning, there are few indications that the United States has started to anticipate the various possible scenarios surrounding the 2014 presidential elections, a milestone that they need to start to engage with soon.

This catalogue of doubt as to the efficacy of the international mission in Afghanistan is undeniable, but does it call into question the staying power of those same forces? After all, previous years have also seen problems diagnosed and mistakes made, but the internationals remained, even expanded their presence.

The Taliban and affiliated groups continue to remain an issue, in part because their continued attacks make it difficult for NATO/ISAF to claim the upper hand. After all, the realities of the levels of violence only count for so much if the population do not believe that these trend shifts are not going to be permanent or meaningful for their own lives and that of their children. The Taliban will likely attempt to demonstrate their continued ability to operate throughout the country, albeit through a continued emphasis of asymmetric tactics — IEDs, assassinations and 'spectacular' operations.

This is unlikely to be quantitatively different from attacks and threats that the international forces within Afghanistan haven't already faced (to some degree or other). Even if we assume there will be more individual incidents of the type that we saw in recent weeks or even on the level of the border incident between US and Pakistani forces in November 2011, it is unlikely that the reaction to these would be such that the internationals would have to accelerate their departure. Undoubtedly, it is the fact of their looming departure that itself plays a role in accentuating some of these disputes.

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It is in this context that the ongoing, sometimes-faltering negotiations process is being held. The promise of negotiations with the insurgency is very much part of the US 'transition' strategy.

There has been increasing talk about a political solution, one that potentially holds the promise of stopping the current downward spiral, and which could perhaps not only prepare the ground for the withdrawal of foreign troops, but perhaps even achieve a much-desired stability in Afghanistan that prevents the country from becoming a terrorist haven once again. If they are left as they are, there is considerable doubt that the current government in Kabul will remain viable and that the Afghan security forces will have the ability to control and counter the growing insurgency. Riddled with corruption and stripped of legitimacy by endemic election fraud, much of the central state seems to be riven with internal conflict and is currently held together only by foreign actors. On the other hand, a potential political process that would see a change in the balance of power within the central state as well as on the local level will be met with considerable resistance from the incumbent elite.

While there might be incentives to find a political solution, there are also factions within both the insurgency and the Afghan government that are opposed to a settlement, or a substantial inclusion of the insurgency into the current political paradigm. President Karzai has stressed that he seeks reconciliation, but there are significant voices within the current administration that are not interested in any such process. While the ongoing capture-or-kill campaign is removing credible negotiation partners among the Taliban, the current Afghan government also lacks credibility. Time, however, is of the essence.

Moreover, the perception among the Taliban at large is that they are—in a broad sense—'winning.' Numerous military and political leaders have announced that the insurgency's momentum has been reversed, but this does not reflect the perception of much of the general public—in particular in Afghanistan's south and east but increasingly in the north of the country as well.

The underlying assumption of the surge, that negotiations need to be held from a position of strength, and that the Taliban should be forced to the negotiation table by military pressure, offers a bleak prospect for peace. A key incentive in the other direction can be found in the realisation that the present conditions are a precursor for civil war. This prospect of a return to civil war—similar to that of the 1990s—offers an incentive for all participants in Afghanistan to begin working on a political settlement that could prevent this from becoming a reality.

The status of the US-Pakistani relationship is likely to play a key role in this process. While the two countries will likely remain caught in their false embrace — both needing the other, but not caring much for the other at the same time — the extent of Pakistani support for the Afghan Taliban's operations could make a large difference in terms of how active the group is between now and 2014. Pakistan retains the capacity to clamp down on the leadership, logistics and operational activities of the Afghan Taliban within Pakistan.

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It is highly likely that the international transition plan will happen more or less on schedule, with all the relevant milestones achieved. There is a considerable amount of leeway for this to happen, and even with all the problems noted above, 2014 will largely see an attempt on the part of all parties to the conflict (from the United States to the Taliban) to declare victory. Indeed, both are already doing this.

This isn't to say that the ideal solution to Afghanistan's problems is likely to be achieved by 2014; too much would have to change for that to be possible. Instead, the transition process offers a way out for the current large international presence within the country. From the group's statements over the past year, it becomes clear that the discourse of those calling for reform is focused on several key issues: unemployment,

housing, institutional reform and popular political participation, and the issue of prisoners of conscience and prisoners held without trial. This reformist discourse does not consider recent political decisions to be evidence of progress towards real political participation. Consequently, the recent decision on the participation of women was not celebrated, as the experience of women in these councils can at most be equal to that of their male predecessors, namely, the realisation of the ineffectiveness of the elected. Moreover, the decision came at a time when reform movements were campaigning to expand the powers of these councils and make them independent and fully elected.

The lack of a path and a space through which women can engage in the political process renders decisions supporting women's rights akin to a car with no road to drive upon. It can only remain still, hovering over the same space. It will remain difficult to capitalise on these decisions in the confining context in which the elites – particularly the political and religious elites – are to be held responsible.

Saudi women have not been able to create and consolidate an identity of mass struggle in Saudi Arabia because of this lack of space. The two main obstacles impeding progress on women's rights are the ones discussed above: religious thought in the state and the state's political economy.

To overcome these obstacles, the most suitable cultural and activist option available to women is primarily to seek reform. The engagement and representation of women in the Saudi reform movement, which has been increasingly visible in recent years, will establish a mutually reinforcing dynamic between the reform movement and women's efforts to demand and win their rights. The reform movement aims to bring about institutional and legal change in the kingdom. It is committed to the renewal of religious thought, seeing this as a prerequisite for social and cultural change. The constitutional monarchy option, for example, will enable the opening up of social, political and economic structures to one another, which will lead to the re-institutionalisation and reformulation of laws and regulations. It is possible to ensure that such change adopts women's rights in a clear and significant manner, in contrast to the marginalisation that characterises the current situation.

In conclusion, women will not be able to succeed and find the space to voice their demands and act to achieve them if they are not present and active in these institutions in ways that will help to push forward the renewal of religious thought, and find appropriate forms for the country's political economy that will ensure a role for the individual citizen, whether man or woman. Any success for women in bringing about change in these two areas has the potential to reverberate more broadly, affecting the entire society and the network of social relations. If and when this is achieved, the restructuring of society will be one from which all will benefit.

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#### **References**