



Policy Forum Report **Afghanistan**

November 12, 2013

Introduction

On November 12, 2013 the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) and American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) convened a Policy Forum for key Congressional and Executive Branch staff and selected representatives of the American Muslim community to discuss the current situation in Afghanistan and the strategy of the United States. The following is a summary of the views expressed and the insights that emerged from the discussion.

Elections to be Pivotal

The 2014 elections in Afghanistan, which will take place before the completion of the US troop withdrawal, have been greeted with great enthusiasm by the Afghan people. Despite the fact that many Afghans at the village level may be more concerned with day-to-day survival than politics, there is an overall excitement in the country about the upcoming electoral process. It is also cause for cautious optimism that some former warlords and *mujahideen* fighters are now joining political tickets instead of continuing to propagate violence. At the same time, Afghans are concerned about whether the elections will be conducted freely and fairly. A further challenge is whether or not the electoral process, which could conceivably result in an unstable coalition and a significant power struggle, can lead to genuine power-sharing. If it cannot, or if the process is plagued by fraud and corruption, the consequences for Afghanistan's future stability will be dire at best.

Security and Taliban Negotiations

Security remains a key concern for Afghans, especially as the Taliban is increasingly seen to be a threatening influence. While a number of warlords are beginning to integrate into society as businesspeople and politicians and can now be seen dueling in televised debates rather than with weapons on the battlefield, this is not the case for many Taliban. The more moderate Taliban are typically marginalized, and the hardliners don't see any need to negotiate when they don't believe they are losing militarily.

The United States has attempted to mediate between the Afghan government and the Taliban, while still remaining a party to the negotiations – a posture that creates distrust and diminishes America's effectiveness as a mediator. By the same token, negotiating while preparing to withdraw reduces one's negotiating leverage. Finally, such negotiations can also prove counterproductive when they are not coordinated with the government we are allegedly attempting to empower. Another issue that will clearly impact the security situation is the bilateral security agreement being negotiated between Afghanistan and the United States, which currently remains stalemated, owing to last minute maneuvering by Hamid Karzai.

Development and Society: Domestic-International Perception Gap

Although developmental challenges continue, significant progress has been made. The economy and the middle- and business-classes are growing, and access to education and technology has increased. Most Afghans today have an optimistic view of their country. Unlike previous generations, today's Afghan youth have spent a greater portion of their lives living with progress and freedom than they have spent living under the Taliban, with some of them barely remembering Taliban rule. While they may be dissatisfied with their current government, they now believe they have the power to change it nonviolently, and look forward to the elections and a brighter future. The local media has played a positive role in this regard—helping Afghans to witness progress beyond their own villages.

In contrast, international news coverage has not adequately reflected the country's progress or the optimism of the Afghan people. This negative coverage prevents Americans from seeing the fruits of their investment and reinforces skepticism among US lawmakers and the public about the wisdom of continuing such investments when America is experiencing economic challenges of its own.

Religion and Progress

Many religious leaders have felt marginalized and less valued under the current government than was the case under Taliban rule. However, when these leaders have voiced their opposition to the violence, it has effectively damaged the Taliban narrative, which leans heavily on religious justification. Moreover, the thoughtful engagement of religious leaders has had a positive impact in a number of other areas as well. For example, electoral commissions have begun engaging religious leaders to encourage people to vote. Also, when the derogatory film *Innocence of Muslims* gained international notoriety last year, Afghanistan did not experience major riots as many other Muslim countries did, in part because the US and Afghan governments reached out to Afghan citizens through their religious leaders, explaining what the film did and did not represent.

Recommendations to United States

Forum participants suggested the following recommendations for the United States:

Elections:

- Support a short-term increase in air power during the elections so that people feel secure enough to vote, especially in Pashtun areas.
- Push for other international—not just American—electoral observers to be present.

Security:

- Push for Pakistan to move its troops closer to the border to prevent infiltration by militants.
- Ensure that former Taliban who lay down their weapons and want to integrate into society have the support and means to do so—especially those who are now in hiding under threat from the hardliners.

Economic and Social Development:

- Engage the Afghan diaspora in promoting entrepreneurship and business investment. Smaller businesses can make an important contribution where bigger businesses are reluctant to invest for security reasons.
- Invest in education, especially higher education and technical education. Create opportunities and scholarships: (1) for Afghans to study abroad (including at regional American universities) in order to develop technical, entrepreneurial, business, and other skills; and (2) for madrasa students, who are training to become future religious leaders, to receive modern, progressive Islamic education in other Muslim countries like Turkey and Malaysia.

Citizen Engagement and Outreach:

- Engage Afghans widely at the village level—not merely the urban, politically-minded English-speaking elites.
- Promote civil society dialogues and cooperation among American, Afghan, and Pakistani groups. As a neighboring stakeholder in Afghanistan, Pakistan can play a significant stabilizing or destabilizing role and must therefore be engaged.
- Engage Afghan religious leaders, who have major influence in their communities.
- Publicize more effectively the good things the United States is doing, such as providing assistance to Afghan electoral bodies.
- Promote more positive international news coverage to change the public narrative about Afghanistan in America. This will enable Americans to see the fruits of their investment and why further investment and time will be needed for that investment to fully pay off.
- Honor American commitments to Afghans who have served as US interpreters by easing the significant delays holding up their visas to immigrate to the United States.

The International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) is a Washington-based NGO that prevents and resolves identity-based conflicts that exceed the grasp of traditional diplomacy by incorporating religion as part of the solution. American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) is an informal group of Muslim community leaders and scholars that seeks to foster a constructive partnership between the American Muslim community and the US Government for the purpose of advancing the national interest. The views expressed in this brief may not necessarily represent the views of ICRD or AMCE.