

Executive Memorandum

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Assisting Afghanistan After the Elections

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Afghanistan's September 18 parliamentary elections were an important milestone for building stability and democracy in a country that is critical to the war against al-Qaeda and Islamic radicalism. The surviving leaders of the ousted Taliban regime opposed the elections and killed six of the almost 6,000 candidates running for seats in the lower house of parliament and 34 provincial councils. The votes are still being counted, but the fact that (by regional standards) the elections proceeded with relatively little political violence is itself an important achievement.

Nevertheless, the United States and its allies cannot afford complacency in the uphill struggle to resolve Afghanistan's enormous problems. To stabilize Afghanistan and preclude a return to power by the Taliban and its terrorist allies, the U.S.-led coalition must help the nascent Afghan government to provide its long-suffering people with greater security, economic development, and enforcement of the rule of law.

A Difficult Agenda. The parliamentary elections are expected to strengthen the popular legitimacy of President Hamid Karzai's government, but the real test will come after the elections. Popular support for the government, which has little ability to enforce its authority outside Kabul and other major cities, will expand to the degree that it helps to develop the economy, reduces widespread unemployment, rebuilds shattered infrastructure, resettles the more than 1 million refugees, and solves the housing shortage and lack of health care.

Fulfilling this long and difficult agenda will be impossible unless the Karzai government can first provide security and enforce the rule of law. The Taliban rose to power in southern Afghanistan in part because war-weary Afghans welcomed an end to lawless anarchy. Local criminal gangs, drug traffickers, and regional warlords remain a threat to the rule of law.

The Taliban and its allies, including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezbi Islami (Party of Islam) and the al-Qaeda movement, have steadily escalated their attacks. More than 1,200 Afghans, including roughly 600 insurgents, have been killed this year—the worst year of violence since the Taliban was overthrown in 2001. It is largely a cross-border insurgency. Operating from bases in Pakistan, the Taliban has dispatched small groups of insurgents to attack government forces, assassinate local officials, and intimidate civilians. Pakistan has about 80,000 troops deployed along the border but has often turned a blind eye to Taliban activity among its restive Pushtun minority, which remains more

• Although the Afghan elections went relatively smoothly, the U.S. and its allies cannot afford complacency in the uphill struggle to improve security, rebuild the economy, and enforce the rule of law.

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anti-Western and pro-Taliban than the Pushtuns who have historically dominated Afghanistan.

Despite the increasing violence, the Pentagon reportedly plans to reduce the number of U.S. troops (currently about 19,000) by up to 20 percent next year if the post-election situation improves. This is a dangerous gamble. Afghan guerrillas suspend most activities during Afghanistan's grueling winters and return home or to camps in Pakistan to rest and regroup. In the spring, they remobilize and resume their attacks. While the U.S. military presence could be safely reduced during the winter months, prudence dictates that it should be increased again in the spring when the fighting season resumes.

Assisting Afghanistan. The U.S. should help the Afghan government to:

- **Improve the security situation.** In addition to maintaining its military presence, the United States should expand the mandate and, if possible, the size of the 11,000 NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) peacekeepers. ISAF troops, drawn from 35 countries, are deployed in Kabul and northern and western Afghanistan. They should extend their protection to cover strategic roads and towns farther south, where Taliban insurgents are more active. Washington should also press the Pakistani government to disrupt cross-border Taliban operations and arrest Taliban leaders who have found sanctuary in Pakistan.
- **Rebuild shattered infrastructure and develop a free economy.** Afghanistan needs foreign assistance to help rebuild, but long-term economic development depends on sound economic policies, good governance, and improved rule of law. The Afghan government should help Afghans to help themselves by encouraging local entrepreneurs, welcoming private-sector and foreign investment, and reducing interference from regional warlords and Kabul-based bureaucrats. Many Afghans are increasingly disenchanted with foreign contractors and officials from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) who are paid exorbitant salaries by Afghan standards. The United States should reform its aid program to work through the Afghan government and local NGOs wher-

ever possible and reduce dependence on foreign contractors. It should place a higher priority on building the Afghan government's capacity to help its own people by improving public administration and training government officials and Afghan NGOs to train other Afghans. Greater effort should be made to employ jobless Afghans on labor-intensive projects such as rebuilding crumbling roads and agricultural irrigation systems.

- **Establish the rule of law.** The U.S. and its allies urgently need to assist the Afghan government in building an effective and independent judicial system, supported by better trained and better equipped police, to enforce the rule of law and help build a cooperative civil society. The Afghans also need extensive help in eradicating the booming opium trade without undercutting support for the government. This means helping poor farmers find alternative means of supporting their families while cracking down on the drug lords who buy their poppy crops, process them into opium and heroin, and smuggle the illegal drugs to markets outside Afghanistan. Washington must also help Kabul root out drug-related government corruption. The recent resignation of Interior Minister Ali Jalali, reportedly due to his dissatisfaction over the involvement of some government officials in the drug trade, is a warning sign that narco-corruption is a growing threat.

Conclusion. President Hamid Karzai has played a courageous and indispensable role in leading Afghanistan to embrace democracy and reject Islamic radicalism, but he needs greater international support to rebuild his country, prevent the Taliban from making a comeback, fight drug mafias, and tame unruly warlords. The United States must vigilantly remain engaged to prevent Afghanistan from sliding backward and becoming a sanctuary for Islamic radicals, terrorists, and drug smugglers.

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