



ATLANTIC MEMO #22

Supporting Better Governance in Afghanistan

Atlantic-community.org members generally agreed that the goals of the international mission in Afghanistan must be the development of good local governance: the aim must be a less corrupt Afghan state with full domestic engagement and a definition of success that is culturally appropriate in the Afghan context – and does not merely mean an emulation of western-style democracy (Sontz, Swierczynski). Our members developed the following key suggestions towards improving the ISAF mission:

1. The appeal of the Taliban must be reduced and the rule of law improved.

Limiting the Taliban's support base is crucial (Lawson). There is some debate as to whether negotiating with the Taliban is a viable policy option now (Daiyar, Singh), though in the long run, some political agreements will have to come about (Sajjad). In the medium term, offering positive incentives such as secure salaries or lower-level positions in government institutions to non-ideological combatants is necessary. By encouraging these groups to become invested in the political development of Afghanistan, the mission will affect lasting military and political stability, as well as improve the government's legitimacy (Kuovo).

While this is a way to reduce the pool the Taliban draws its combatants from, preventing the higher echelons, namely militia leaders and those with proven records of human rights violations, from prominent roles in governments – local and national – is essential towards the development and improvement of the rule of law (Kuovo)

2. The functioning of the state must be improved by decentralizing power.

There is general agreement that much room exists to improve the functioning of the state. The governing structure or "polity" needs to be reorganized, devolving power away from the center into a loose federation of provinces (Burki), giving formal, institutionalized primacy to local levels of governance (Marton). In doing so, the international community must focus its efforts on building local institutions and structures that focus on improving the legal and justice systems, addressing rising poverty, and increasing relative regional autonomy (Hanifi, Degeratu). Implementing small scale, civic projects that engage local organizations are necessary to achieve this end (Scheller). These should have a primary focus on public works projects – sanitation, paving Kabul, local hydro-electric projects, training Afghans in construction, etc. (Gouttierre).

Extending the reach of the central government, which has characterized international policy, is a major motivating factor of the insurgency (Mason). Thus, the emerging focus on training good provincial and district-level public servants must be further developed, as it is paving the way for less power concentrated in Kabul and will ultimately contribute to better governance (Marton).

3. Corruption must be understood within cultural contexts before it can be reduced.

A major cause of corruption in Afghanistan is the excessive amount of external capital plus the absence of local structures to effectively absorb it (Liebl), thus strengthening local institutions must precede external 'development' capital (Hanifi).

Furthermore, corruption must be understood in a cultural context, where certain services require a 'fee' that Afghans consider to be merely a transaction cost (Scheller). However, on a local and national level, 'development' capital as well as international projects must focus on transferring legitimate control of security and resource management to official institutions, by improving the Afghan National Army and Police training and as well as the salaries of government employees. This will have the effect of countering the influence of the local strong-men who have taken over the security sector (Degeratu, Hanifi).

Atlantic Memos showcase the best ideas and arguments from debates in the Open Think Tank on atlantic-community.org. All policy recommendations in this document were made registered members of the Atlantic Community.

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