

WRITTEN TESTIMONY TO HOUSE ARMED SERVICES SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS

US Strategy in Afghanistan and its relation to Iraq
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Introduction: The Iraq War undermined US efforts in Afghanistan.

I want to begin by thanking Chairman Vic Snyder and other members of the committee for inviting me to testify to this august body once again. It is always an honor to participate in the deliberations that shape our national policies.

I believe that US strategy in Afghanistan was fatally undermined by the decision of the previous administration to wage an unnecessary and bigger war in Iraq even before our goals and objectives were realized in Afghanistan. The war in Iraq has exhausted our resources – it has cost seven hundred billion dollars in direct costs – lead to 4355 American military fatalities, nearly 250 civilian fatalities, 31,000 wounded, caused a global pandemic of Anti-Americanism and undermined the legal and moral underpinnings of the global order that the United States had constructed and nourished since 1945. For many Iraqis it has proven to be devastating; causing hundreds of thousands of deaths and refugees.

It also diverted resources and focus away from Afghanistan. Most importantly, the unnecessary war in Iraq has sapped the American resolve to wage long wars that involve insurgencies and nation building. The War in Iraq has made it very difficult for our President to go to the American people and say what he must: “We need to stay in Afghanistan for a long time. We need to spend billions of dollars and perhaps lose many more American lives in order to finish in Afghanistan what we started eight years ago.”

The US at the moment is spending about 8 billion dollars a month in Iraq and we are maintaining about 120,000 troops in Iraq. We will sustain this level of American military presence until the elections in January next year. President Obama’s promise to reduce our presence there significantly will depend on the outcome of the elections and the resolution to the political crisis that is still unresolved in Iraq. Needless to say the commitment to Iraq impacts our ability to increase spending and our military footprint in Afghanistan.

Surely a poor country like ours that needs to debate and agonize for months over whether we can afford to pay for the health care of our poor and underprivileged brethren cannot afford to fight two wars of indefinite duration and unlimited costs.

Assessing the Status of the War in Afghanistan

I have bad news for this committee. I believe that the US at the moment does not have the political will nor the public understanding and commitment to do what is necessary in Afghanistan. At the moment the public support for the war in Afghanistan stands at 40%. With the current spike in casualties, the growing political crisis that started with the malpractices in the Presidential elections, I suspect public support will decline further. It will become difficult for both the White House and the Congress to do what is necessary.

To win it all in Afghanistan, the US will need to (1) control the Afpak border and completely eliminate the ability of the Taliban to cross borders when things get tough on either side, (2) undermine their recruitment and fund raising (3) win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people to such an extent that they are motivated to stand up to the Taliban and take risks to realize the dream of a democratic Afghanistan (4) and create significant positive changes on the ground that progress can seduce the Afghans away from war and hate. But to realize these objectives with minimal civilian casualties the US will need more troops, more civilians, and far more commitment to Afghanistan. We must convey the intent and resolve that the US is there to do the right thing and to do it right. Half measures will cause more damage and make it impossible for the US to achieve even its minimal goals.

The stated goal of the Bush administration for invading Afghanistan was to capture or kill, Osama Bin Laden, destroy al Qaeda and make sure that Afghanistan was no more a safe haven for terrorists. In a sense these goals have been achieved partially. Al Qaeda is no more in Afghanistan. It has significantly diminished in its capacity and it is difficult to expect it to pull off another major attack on the US soil. But on the other hand Al Qaeda has relocated to Pakistan and has operational bases in Iraq, Yemen and Somalia from where it can launch attacks albeit with limited range but nevertheless it continues to reconstitute itself in different forms, in different locales and also using different *modus operandi*. Bin Laden is still not in our custody. Anti-Americanism in the Muslim world and overall discontent with political realities will have to decrease in great measure before demands for groups such as al Qaeda and its affiliates completely ceases in the Muslim World.

The goal to destroy the Taliban and make Afghanistan safe for us and safe for democracy has really failed. Afghan democracy is a joke and the Taliban in a hydra like fashion have reproduced themselves in Pakistan and rejuvenated themselves in Afghanistan. We now have two Talibans.

The Taliban in Afghanistan have in the last one year nearly quadrupled their numbers, going from 7000 to over 25000, according to US intelligence. The Taliban fighters have also become more aggressive and effective in their ability to engage western forces. They are using IEDS more effectively and are getting better at making and hiding them. While their numbers have increased four times, their military activities have increased hundred times. British sources reveal that now British forces have to fight the Taliban seven times a day!

To make matters worse, they are proving to be very resolute, cunning, resourceful and brazen. In the past few weeks, they have attacked the Pakistani army's national head quarters, they have blown up the Indian mission in Kabul, attacked an Italian Patrol, attacked a NATO patrol in Kabul, and attacked a US military base in Kamdesh causing heavy casualties and eventual closure of the base. They have killed hundreds of soldiers and civilians on both sides of the borders. The year 2009 has become the deadliest for US and for Pakistani soldiers and citizens.

The only good news is that the election of President Obama has softened Muslim attitude towards the US in general – which may not last long if he completely succumbs to Israeli pressures and fails to make sure that Israel also lives up to its obligations under the peace process and international law. In Pakistan the public opinion has turned against the Taliban and Al Qaeda, which has emboldened the army to take tougher measures against them, but anti-Americanism remains high in Pakistan and the incessant violence has made this nuclear power very unstable.

What Options does the US have in Afghanistan?

There are broadly three options that are being discussed in academic and policy circles.

The first option is to accept the recommendations of General Stanley McChrystal and send a second surge of 40,000-100,000 troops and civilians to Afghanistan and escalate both war and nation building activities simultaneously. This means more expenditure, more American and Afghan casualties and without a guarantee of victory.

The second option is to scale down US strategy from counter insurgency and counter terrorism to counterterrorism only. Meaning forget Afghanistan and the Taliban and focus on Al Qaeda, wherever they are.

The Third Option is to partially answer General Chrystal request.

In my humble opinion the third option is not worthy of consideration and the first one is a one-way street to a long-term quagmire that serves neither US, nor Afghan interests. General McChrystal's strategy does not have a global perspective to it. Anti-Americanism in Afghanistan is not contingent on what the US does in Afghanistan alone. It is affected by what the US does in Palestine, in Iraq, in Pakistan and other parts of the Muslim World. The US could invest a lot of blood and treasure in Afghanistan but still lose if it fails elsewhere.

Additionally the US military presence is a provocation in itself. Many Afghans will support and fight with the Taliban as long as foreign troops occupy their land. A major surge will inevitably cause many civilian deaths, which incite hatred against the US, garner support for the extremists and generate more recruits for them.

I like the second option with additional caveats. The US must fight only those who directly threaten US interests and security. Global wars have serious costs and

consequences that even a super power cannot afford. As long as Al Qaeda threatens the US we must fight it, wherever it is. We do not even have to destroy it. All we need to do is maintain enough pressure on it so that it cannot attack our homeland and our interests.

Al Qaeda has brought devastation and violence to the very societies that have hosted it. For the past two years Pakistan has been the biggest victim of terrorism by Al Qaeda and the Taliban. If some Pakistanis due to misguided and unwise anti-Americanism choose to support them then they should be left to deal with the consequences. We can pray for them.

We should not embark on imperial adventures without strong commitment by those who we seek to rescue. If the Afghans want our help to fight the Taliban, they must prove their resolve by first standing up to them. If the Pakistanis want our help to fight their extremists then they too should show the necessary commitment and stop running with the hare and hunting with the hound at the same time.

In the age of unmanned drones, long distance relationships are not a bad idea. If the US can make its war against its enemies invisible it will have a better chance of winning. Simultaneously we must continue to maintain a wide-ranging dialogue with the Muslim world and seriously seek to resolve key issues that undermine US Muslim relations. Any and every diplomatic blow against anti-Americanism is worth many military surges that inevitably kill civilians and undermine the main goal – to improve US security through better US-Muslim relations.

Thank you for considering my thoughts.