

Report on Afghanistan Trip August 2011

sponsored by Wilmington College, coordinated by the Friends Committee on National Legislation



In August 2011 FCNL's Matt Southworth led a delegation of eight people to Afghanistan. Over five days this group of academics, activists, journalists, and congressional staff met with more than 20 different groups and Afghan officials. They met with international aid agencies, former Taliban representatives, Afghan women and other local groups, and the Mayor of Kabul.

Friends' emphasis on speaking from our own experience is a powerful part of our practice. Strengthening not only our public advocacy but our communal identity, this practice allows us to draw out truth from our own lives and be influenced by the truths of others. For FCNL, learning as much as possible from the people both implementing and being affected by U.S. policy in Afghanistan will help shape legislative efforts from now through next year. With this trip, we were also able to help colleagues who are in positions to influence policy gain this critical firsthand experience. What follows is a brief summary from Matt.

How and Why Did We Go?

As the trip took shape in the weeks leading up to August 13, one central question emerged as an organizing principle:

How will the U.S. military leave Afghanistan without leaving civil war in the wake of withdrawal?

To answer this question, it seemed essential to visit Afghanistan while not under the auspices of the U.S. military, State Department or others who have immense incentive to protect or defend the current policy. The delegation felt that the best way to learn what Afghans think—in civil society, in the Karzai government, in the insurgency—is to speak to them directly. The delegation maintained a low profile by traveling in unmarked civilian vehicles and staying when possible in a trusted guest house (rather than a public hotel).

Key Objectives

The delegation had several specific objectives in mind as we planned the trip:

- 1) Gain an unfiltered perspective of the situation on the ground in Afghanistan by interviewing a range of individuals, groups and organizations in the country.
- 2) Determine concrete policy recommendations which can translate into stand-alone bills or amendments on upcoming Afghanistan-related legislation.
- 3) Upon return, communicate experiences and new vision to FCNL constituents, FCNL donors, key stakeholders and decision makers, key congressional staff and the media.

What did we learn?

Our delegation returned with a true sense of urgency conveyed by those we spoke with regarding the need for a change in U.S. policy in Afghanistan. Without swift, decisive action by the Obama administration and Congress, it's hard to imagine a peaceful transition in Afghanistan at anytime, be it 2014 or 2024. The overwhelming consensus of people we talked with was that President Obama's "surge"—which started in summer of 2009—has failed to deliver stability or security to Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a more dangerous place today than it was even two years ago. The decreasing security is fueled by the uncertainty of U.S. intentions. Nearly every Afghan and international group our delegation spoke with expressed concern that the U.S. will abandon Afghanistan, much as it did in 1989 when the Soviet occupation ended. Afghan concern resonates as one travels around Kabul, where the scars of the civil war of the 1990's are abundantly evident; the deep lines in the faces of the people who survived that horrific time in Afghan history also tell the story. At the end of the day, it is in no one's interest—not Afghans, the U.S. Congress or President Obama—to see Afghanistan slide into civil war.

This doesn't mean the U.S. military should stay in Afghanistan. The majority of people we talked to believe the U.S. military should leave the country, but that U.S. aid and assistance should not. A responsible withdrawal requires ensuring that both security and political transitions are underway as U.S. military forces leave. This means the U.S. must sort out its long-term non-military policy in Afghanistan and commit to robust political and economic engagement after the war. Unfortunately, what is unclear to many Afghans we spoke with is what the U.S. really plans to do in Afghanistan. U.S. policy in Afghanistan seems to be charging headlong in the exact opposite direction of stability.

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After a decade of empowering, funding and arming Afghanistan's anti-Taliban warlords and drug lords, the U.S. has inadvertently fueled ethnic tensions to a flashpoint. On top of conflicts brewing between Afghans, there are also layers of conflict with several proxy wars taking place. From the Karzai government to Iran to the Pakistani Inter Service Intelligence (ISI), everyone is hedging their bets on what the U.S. will do next. In refusing to talk to the Iranian government and allowing U.S. relations with Pakistan to deteriorate, the U.S. is not only fueling civil strife in Afghanistan, but also exacerbating the proxy wars happening at the top layer of the conflict.

The ambiguity of U.S. intentions—plans to (mostly) leave by 2014, but an insistence that Afghanistan won't be abandoned, for example—could be diminished if a transition strategy reaching beyond security were developed. As the former Afghan Deputy Minister of the Interior Shahmahmood Miakhel, now country director for the United States Institute of Peace, put it, foreign governments need a political transition strategy. The absence of such a strategy only sets the stage for an improbable, if not impossible transition to a fragile Afghan government, which is consistently undermined by western media and ongoing U.S. support of warlords.

The picture is bleak, but the cause is not lost. The U.S. must move away from the current failed war policy now, as there is literally no time to lose. When the U.S. clearly articulates its long-term non-military strategy for robust political and economic engagement in Afghanistan, it will undoubtedly ease some of these overwhelming tensions. This is, of course, only the first of many steps the U.S. must take. The U.S. must also work to strengthen the Afghan government, open all diplomatic channels, build a viable Afghan economy, and strengthen civil society. Without taking these steps, Afghanistan's future will remain treacherous and uncertain. The time to take bold steps is now, and our delegation returned with new focus and commitment to ending the war and supporting the people of Afghanistan.

As a result of this trip

We see several key opportunities in the next several months to shift the debate in Washington away from purely military solutions toward a greater focus on the need for a robust regional peace process and sustained support for rebuilding Afghanistan's economy. This, as we heard in August, is what Afghans want to see most. FCNL legislative efforts, among others, will focus on Senate funding for the Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group (funded by the House in July); lobbying "supercommittee" members to include—in their debt reduction measures—ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, both of which contribute enormously to our national debt; lobbying for legislation (H.R. 2859) to repeal the Authorization of the Use of Military Force; and lobbying for the McGovern-Jones exit strategy bill (H.R.1735).



*Trip delegation viewing road projects in Kabul with Mayor Muhammad Y. Nawandish
Pictured from left to right: Steve Clemons, The Atlantic Magazine; Ken Takeda, congressional staff; Matt Southworth, FCNL;
Rachel Lipsey, congressional staff; Mayor Muhammad Y. Nawandish; Bill Goodfellow, Center for International Policy;
Antonia Juhasz, Author; Ria Dellawar, Cultural Advisor; Michael Snarr, Wilmington College*

