

Testimony of Jarrett Blanc
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Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs
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Chairman Kaine, Ranking Member Risch, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the future of Afghanistan beyond 2014 along with my colleagues Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Fatema Sumar and USAID Deputy Assistant Administrator Kathleen Campbell.

Allow me to begin by thanking the members of the Subcommittee for your continued support for our mission. The American people have been generous, steadfast, and brave in supporting Afghanistan. We continue to make great sacrifices, and I would particularly like to honor the memories of the three American citizens killed last week at Cure International Hospital in Kabul along with the dedication of thousands of American men and women who have served in our armed forces, our diplomatic outposts, and our assistance programs in Afghanistan.

The investments we have made in Afghanistan have paid important and underreported dividends. We began this mission in late 2001 to prevent Afghanistan from again being used to launch attacks against us. As part of an international coalition of more than 50 nations, we have helped make the world more secure since 2001, and as the major funders of an international civilian assistance effort, we have enabled the Afghans to rebuild their own capacity to provide security, educations, and jobs to their own people and become a reliable partner in efforts to prevent extremists from using their land to launch violence against our people and our allies.

Our mission now is to make these gains sustainable by handing over to and supporting increasingly capable Afghan institutions. As we approach the end of the ISAF mission and the beginnings of the political transition to a new Afghan government, I would like to describe evidence that Afghan institutions are precisely that – increasingly capable and sustainable – and to outline the challenges that those institutions now face and the ways in which we and our partners can help them to overcome those challenges.

Afghan confidence – and ours – begins with the performance of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), the most highly regarded institution in Afghanistan. As the international community and the Afghan government together envisioned at the 2010 NATO conference in Lisbon, the ANSF has progressed from supporting ISAF operations to conducting them jointly to leading complex operations with ISAF support to taking over the lead for security throughout the country, which formally took place nearly a year ago in June 2013. Since then they have held their own against the insurgents, secured major events like last fall's Loya Jirga, and successfully planned and carried out a highly complex effort to protect polls and voters on Election Day, thwarting Taliban attempts to disrupt the first round of the elections.

The electoral process to date is further reason for measured confidence in Afghanistan's future. For the first time in their history on April 5, Afghans led every component of the electoral process. Afghan forces provided the security. Afghan electoral bodies planned and administered it, meeting nearly every deadline from candidate registration through release of the preliminary vote tallies. Afghan media provided platforms for reasoned debates about policy and generally avoided inflammatory rhetoric. Afghan civil society organizations and candidate agents monitored the polling centers. Afghan political elites formed multi-ethnic tickets and campaigned all across the country. Afghan institutions were not flawless but they were responsive, demonstrating significantly increased capacity from the 2004 and 2009 elections. For example, on Election Day, as some polling centers reported running low on ballots, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) tapped pre-positioned supplies of contingency ballots and kept the public informed with regular press conferences throughout the day. Most importantly, enthusiasm for the democratic process and hope for their future brought millions of Afghans out to vote despite bad weather and Taliban threats.

Similarly, Afghan electoral bodies have responded appropriately to allegations of fraud. In accordance with electoral laws passed last year, the IEC has quarantined the ballots from centers where it believes further investigation is warranted, the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) is adjudicating complaints of fraud, and candidates continue to refer allegations of irregularities to the appropriate authorities. If, as now seems highly likely, a second round is necessary, the competence, transparency and impartiality of these bodies will be critical in ensuring that the Afghan people broadly accept President Karzai's successor as legitimate and credible.

Afghan youth, civil society groups and women all played critical roles in the elections. Youth were active in all the major presidential campaigns, reportedly turned out in large numbers to vote, and ran as candidates for many provincial council seats against older incumbents. Afghan civil society groups took responsibility for monitoring the elections, sending 12,000 trained observers to polling centers throughout the country, making sure procedures were followed and filing complaints and alerting news media when they were not. Afghan women also ran for provincial council seats (nationwide, 11% of the candidates were women), served as female searchers at polling stations, and also voted in large numbers, especially in urban areas. Nearly 2.5 million Afghan women cast votes, 36% of the total. The Afghan Women's Network issued a statement thanking the national security forces for "providing full support to all women during the election and facilitating a secure environment for people to go vote."

The involvement of Afghan women in the elections is visible sign of a shift in attitudes towards women nationwide. A recent Democracy International poll found that 92% of Afghans believe that women have the right to participate in elections; similarly, the Asia Foundation found that 83% of their respondents in Afghanistan said that women should have the same educational opportunities as men. It would be naïve to underestimate the considerable social, economic, and legal challenges that still confront Afghan girls and women. These changes have not yet halted violence against women or opened enough schools to girls in every province and it will take many years for them to do so. Still, the elections and the shift in perceptions provide a basis for hope. As Secretary Kerry said in his speech at Georgetown last year: "If I had to walk blind into a district in Afghanistan and I could only ask one question to determine how secure it was and how much progress it was making, I would ask, 'What proportion of the girls here are able to go to school?'" There's no question in my mind that investing in Afghan women is the surest way to guarantee that Afghanistan will sustain the gains of the last decade and never again become a safe haven for international terrorists."

Sustaining progress in Afghanistan after 2014 through the Transformation Decade depends on the continued growth of Afghanistan's governance and security institutions and continued support by the international community for a sovereign, stable, unified and democratic Afghanistan. This partnership must be based on the principles of mutual respect and mutual accountability and should recognize the increasing responsibility of the sovereign Afghan state and a calibrated reduction of financial and other assistance from the international community. Stability requires Afghan progress on security and political goals which must be matched by effective governance, the advancement of rule of law,

human rights, and economic reform. Our assistance programs through this period of transition will remain focused on building the capacity of Afghan institutions to sustain the gains of the last decade, including continued support for Afghan women.

Let me single out three factors in particular that can contribute to sustaining progress in Afghanistan in the next decade. The first is the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA). The BSA could allow a limited, post-2014 mission focused on training, advising and assisting Afghan forces and going after the remnants of core Al-Qaeda. Such a mission would further strengthen the ANSF in its fight against the Taliban and it would allow us to continue to deny terrorists opportunities to plan attacks against the U.S., our interests, and our allies. President Obama has left open the possibility of concluding the BSA later this year with Karzai's successor. Both frontrunners have said publicly that they would sign it soon upon taking office.

Second, the government of Afghanistan needs to enact policies that will empower the private sector to grow the Afghan economy to make up for decreases in international assistance, provide jobs for its large population of youth, and increase government revenues to overcome the current fiscal gap between revenues and expenditures. The economic challenge is illustrated by flat government revenues over the last two years, which reflect a number of factors, including a general slowdown in the economy and hesitation from potential investors (partly a response to uncertainty over the elections and the BSA). The Afghans have taken some steps in recent months to improve revenue collection though there is much work to be done. Corruption remains a fundamental challenge in Afghanistan to governance as well as economic growth – something Afghans themselves recognize. Indeed, both frontrunners have advanced anti-corruption agendas during the campaign and both have repeatedly spoken of the need to improve Afghanistan's infrastructure, establish the appropriate legal and security environment to attract foreign investment, and expand educational and technical training opportunities for Afghan youth.

Regional integration, the third factor, will also improve Afghanistan's economic prospects. My colleague Deputy Assistant Secretary Fatema Sumar will discuss this topic in detail later in this briefing. However, let me provide some political context for it. The region's stability is inseparable from Afghanistan's stability and prosperity. The Istanbul Process, an Afghan-led mechanism launched in November 2011, represents a step forward in terms of dialogue and cooperation

between Afghanistan and its neighbors. This emerging consensus is an important development in terms of the political and security trajectory of Afghanistan.

The United States has been in Afghanistan for 13 years, we have invested billions of dollars, and nearly 2,200 of our servicemen and women have sacrificed their lives so that the extremists who attacked us on September 11 can never again threaten American territory, our citizens, or our allies from Afghan soil. Under President Obama, U.S. strategy and that of our international partners (as established in conferences in Bonn, Chicago, and Tokyo) has aimed at strengthening Afghan institutions so that the Afghan government and people can provide for their own security, grow their own economy, and manage their own internal and external affairs. The common element in all three of these transitions – security, economic, and political – has been the gradual and responsible transfer of leadership to Afghan hands. That remains our approach and it is working.