

[Email This](#)[Print This](#)

## Afghanistan: The International Community's Role in Defeating the Insurgency, Nick Grono

*Speech by Nick Grono, Deputy President of the International Crisis Group to the NATO Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council Security Forum "Security Through Partnership", in Astana, Kazakhstan on 25 June 2009.*

Thank you, Chairman. At events like this it appears that NGOs are expected to be provocative, at least in contrast to the more constrained presentations of government and NATO speakers. So, as the lone NGO voice in a sea of ministers, ambassadors and officials, I'll do my best not to disappoint.

I want to focus my comments on the role of the international community in helping the Afghan government defeat the insurgency.

The first thing that needs to be understood is that this insurgency cannot be crushed by brute force. Even if such force could produce victory – and it wouldn't – the measures required would be utterly unacceptable to the international community and the Afghan population.

So, the only way this insurgency will be defeated is by changing the conditions that fuel and perpetuate it.

And what fuels the insurgency in Afghanistan? There are three key drivers, two of them internal and one external. The internal ones are the widespread insecurity of the Afghan people, and the lack of legitimacy of the central government – and these two are obviously closely related. The external driver is the ability of the insurgents to use Pakistan as a sanctuary.

Addressing these will be a huge challenge. However, there is some room for a small degree of optimism on the security and sanctuary issues, at least when compared with the situation 24 or even 12 months ago. It is the lack of government legitimacy that remains the most intractable problem, and which threatens to undermine all other efforts in Afghanistan. I'll explain why shortly, but let me first run through the security and sanctuary issues.

### 1. Security

Security here means human security – ie, protecting Afghan citizens and communities from political violence, whatever the source – be it insurgent, government or international. Winning hearts and minds should take priority over killing insurgents who can be easily replaced from a seemingly endless recruitment pool.

For too long, the priorities have been reversed – with the focus being not on protecting the population but fighting the Taliban.

With too few troops on the ground, and a resulting over-reliance on airpower, efforts to kill insurgents have too often resulted in the killing of civilians, causing the population to turn against the government and international forces. This has been exacerbated by intrusive night raids, and arbitrary detentions.

But there is some room for optimism on this front. We are seeing a surge of resources into building the Afghan security forces, together with additional American troops committed by President Obama. These may – if the political will and strategic direction is there – enable the Afghan government and international community to deliver much better security to the Afghan people. With the right strategy, they could also provide the space to establish effective local administrations and services, helping bolster government legitimacy.

And importantly, the U.S. military has acknowledged a fundamental change of approach is needed. Lt. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the newly appointed military commander in Afghanistan, has said that

"the measure of effectiveness will not be the number of enemy killed. It will be the number of Afghans shielded from violence".

Now, such sentiments have been expressed before, and we have been told by previous military commanders of their determination to reduce civilian casualties. And while that was certainly their intention, it sometimes fell victim to competing military imperatives, the heat of battle and pressure for quick results. But if General McChrystal manages to operationalise what he is saying – and we note that new guidelines have been announced to this effect – then this could represent a fundamental shift in the nature of international engagement in the country. It won't be easy – the Taliban has no compunction in using the local population as human shields, and I expect it will be working to actively encourage NATO to mistakenly target civilians – but it will help change the perception of the local population towards the international community's presence in Afghanistan.

## **2. Pakistan**

The difficulty of defeating an insurgency is magnified many times over if the insurgents have safe havens and a ready source of recruits across the border. This has been a key challenge facing the Afghan government and international forces ever since the Taliban leadership fled to Pakistan and regrouped there following its ousting from Afghanistan. Insurgents have been able to travel relatively freely between the two countries ever since.

The problem was exacerbated by the reluctance of the U.S. to pressure the Musharraf regime. Washington and its western allies were seemingly convinced that turning a blind eye to the Pakistan military's support of jihadi groups, and their recruiting and training centres on Pakistani soil, was the price it had to pay to obtain Islamabad's cooperation against al-Qaeda.

In Kabul U.S. support was rightly perceived as being half-hearted as long as Washington did not pressure Islamabad to rein in the militants. Indeed the failure to do so was the subject of considerable confusion – and conspiracy theories – amongst the population who could not understand the unwillingness to speak up even in the face of mounting Western casualties. It also gave the Karzai administration an excuse on which it could blame its governance failures.

There are now a couple of reasons for some optimism on this front. First, in late 2007, the U.S. finally began acknowledging the consequences of its failure to confront the Musharraf regime on its support for jihadi groups. And second, Pakistan now has a civilian government, albeit a fragile one. Civilian governments in Pakistan are far more conscious than the military that a secure Afghanistan would help stabilise Pakistan's troubled borderlands.

Hence, strengthening civilian rule in Pakistan is vital to achieving regional stability and success in Afghanistan, as a weak civilian government will be too willing to compromise with its militants. The US is pursuing a sensible strategy of support for the government, and has put Pakistan right of the heart of its Af-Pak policy. While there is still a very long way to go, at least we have started heading in the right direction.

## **3. Governance**

That gets us to governance. The government's legitimacy, or the lack of it, is largely a product of the way in which it governs. Most analysts are rightly scathing of Kabul's performance, particularly when it comes to corruption and patronage, even if they are divided over the causes.

Some will say it results from a siege mentality, given Pakistan's efforts over the years to undermine the Afghan state. Others will say it's because abusive powerholders were re-empowered after the fall of the Taliban in a short-sighted focus on the war on terror. Others will say that the drug trade undercuts any attempt at institution building. Of course, these are all factors.

But to fully understand the challenge of governance in Afghanistan we need to understand the context. Some thirty years of conflict has severely weakened, or destroyed, most of the country's institutions. The resulting paradigm is that of abusive power-holders preying on the local populations. The power-holders change – Afghan communists, Soviet military, mujahidin, Taliban, and now re-empowered warlords – but the problem remains the same. The problem is that of highly personalised rule, a culture of impunity, and abuse of large segments of the population based on tribal, sectarian or ethnic affiliation.

And, unfortunately, in its effort to build peace on the cheap, the international community reinforced these destructive dynamics. Instead of moving rapidly to establish a credible security presence throughout the country – which would have helped secure neutral space for new institutions to take root and civilian voices to be heard – it subcontracted responsibility to those abusive warlords and commanders as part of its minimalist approach. These discredited power-holders then reverted to their old practices of preying on the local population and favouring their

networks to the exclusion of others. This happens right under the noses of the international community, even as it provides most of the government's funding.

Not surprisingly this approach has resulted in festering grievances amongst ordinary Afghans. They see ministers and provincial governors appointed on factional grounds, not merit. They see officials who hoard power and lavish rewards on their own networks, at the expense of others. These actions increasingly alienate the population from those believed responsible for the abuses – be they warlords turned governors, the palace in Kabul, or the international forces who support them. And all the while, the Taliban has been extremely astute at manipulating such grievances, often at a very local level, to recruit its foot soldiers.

All of this contributes to undermining stability. The increasing disaffection of the Afghan population makes it ever more difficult to defeat the insurgency and build an effective state.

So, where does that leave us? Crisis Group has long argued that addressing governance, and particularly the rule of law, is key to building the legitimacy of government. These are daunting challenges. And instead of focusing on them the international community and the Afghan government have favoured quick fixes, such as arming local militias, empowering discredited warlords, making deals, and giving impunity to abusive power-holders. Afghans understand the hypocrisy of such policies, and know that they will continue to be the victims of these power-holders.

Some will say that yes, mistakes were made, but the urgent need now is to demonstrate progress. Then they argue that, given the weakness of the government, it is necessary to bypass it. But the past seven years are littered with examples of quick fixes intended to produce rapid results – but in fact achieving the opposite. And the current weakness of government is in no small part due to past attempts to work around it.

Indeed the international community would do well to more explicitly recognise its own responsibility for the current state of affairs. We backed the creation of highly centralised state structures for what is in reality a diverse multi-ethnic, multilingual, multi-sectarian, country. We backed President Karzai's desire to create a winner-takes-all presidential system with an ineffectual legislature. We largely supported his efforts to ensure political parties – essential to a robust and sustainable democracy based on issues rather than individuals – had no role in the system. Important elements of a representative and decentralised government, such as provincial and district councils, lack any power, or were never created at all.

We shouldn't give up on our strategy of institution building – the fact is that it's not so much that it has failed, but the rhetoric has not been matched with resolve. What we need to do is ensure that the Afghan government and the international community meet commitments they have already signed up to.

Our priorities should be to:

1. **Back representative government:** Afghans want more accountability, not less. Any successful and sustainable effort to stabilise Afghanistan rests on the presence of robust, representative and accountable governing institutions. Such an approach is far preferable to relying on the good intentions or promises of chosen individual clients. This means getting elections right – in particular in ensuring that they are credible and widely accepted – and not simply lowering the bar to ensure we can tick them on our lists of things to be done. It also means holding elections at the level closest to the people, the district level, which have yet to be held despite being required under the constitution, and empowering the elected councils. It means building local government that can deliver basic services, such as health and education.

2. **Emphasise the rule of law:** There should be an intense new focus on building the institutions to enforce the law, as well as a genuine effort to hold officials accountable for any abuse of power, incompetence or illegal actions. Law and order – here meaning police, courts and prisons – are basic building blocks to ensure state legitimacy and integral to any successful counter-terrorism measures. On the other hand, creating unaccountable local militias will only worsen ethnic tensions and violence.

3. **Oppose the appeasement of insurgents:** Doing deals with the Taliban is inconsistent with building credible and accountable institutions. Numerous peace agreements with jihadi groups and networks, in Pakistan and in Afghanistan, have broken down within months. In each case they have enhanced the power and activities of violent insurgents while doing nothing to build sustainable institutions. Attempts at appeasement at any level would give vulnerable Afghan populations little incentive to stand up to the insurgents, especially if they believe that the insurgents have the upper hand. Any compromise with religious extremists will also send a message not just within Afghanistan but also across the border to violent extremists in Pakistan

that terror pays dividends. And negotiating with the Taliban from a position of perceived weakness will make long-term political solutions all the more elusive.

This doesn't mean there should never be talks. To the extent it is possible to identify Afghan insurgent groups prepared to abandon their jihadi ambitions, lay down arms, and accept the constitution and rule of law, the possibility of negotiations with them should not be excluded, but any such dialogue should be approached with great caution.

## Conclusion

Let me conclude by saying that building a stable and secure Afghanistan is a big challenge indeed. Until recently the international community has been unwilling to frankly acknowledge just how big the challenge is, and the scale of the resources that will be needed to achieve it. And member states have been largely unwilling to subsume their own priorities and preferences to a common, coordinated strategy.

But with a new US administration now making Afghanistan one of its national security priorities there is a real opportunity for the international community to come together to work with the Afghan government to address the drivers of insurgency in Afghanistan.

Success is by no means a given, but as failure will – in the words of President Obama – result in an Afghanistan that will once again be a base for terrorists who want to kill as many people in the West as they can – we all have a critical incentive to get it right.

Thank you.

---

→  [comments](#)