



**THE W. P. CAREY FORUM
Central Asia Caucasus Institute**

AFGHANISTAN AFTER THE LOYA JIRGA

11:30 AM Lunch

12:05 PM Opening Remarks, S. Frederick Starr, Chairman, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute

12:10 PM Session I: The Loya Jirga: The New Afghanistan in Six Months

Omar Zakhilwal, Institute for Afghan Studies, Delegate to the Loya Jirga

Martin Strmecki, Vice-President, The Smith Richardson Foundation

Ali Jalali, Chief of the Farsi Service, Voice of America

1:45 PM Coffee break

2:00 PM Session II: Next Steps for the U.S.

Zalmai Khalilzad, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Senior Director for the Near East and South Asia, National Security Council staff, and the President's Special Envoy for Afghanistan

S. Frederick Starr, Chairman, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute

3:00 PM Adjournment

Omar Zakhilwal's Speech

I would like to begin by expressing my sincere thanks and appreciation to Professor Fredrick Starr for providing me with an opportunity to be a part of this very timely and important discussion. The future of Afghanistan, as is the subject of this panel, has always been one of the most difficult things to predict. Even economists such as myself who predict everything else quite accurately rarely hit the right prediction when it comes to Afghanistan! Prediction is, therefore, not something I would like to get into today. Instead, I would focus on discussing expectations – or, some wild swings in the expectations of ordinary Afghans I observed during my last two trips to Afghanistan, first right after the Bonn agreement and then last month to the Loya Jirga.

In December and January, right after the Bonn agreement, I took part in a survey for a human rights report by the New York based Center for Economic and Social Rights of a number of villages and cities inside Afghanistan and some refugee camps in Pakistan. We found that: The majority of the Afghan population was supportive of the US drive against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. They expressed great relief and happiness at their ousting. The Afghans, nevertheless, were overwhelmingly disappointed at the fact that the interim government that resulted from the UN/US-brokered Bonn agreement was dominated and controlled by the “once failed warlords”, yet they supported it as a necessary first step toward peace. Overall, we observed a sense of optimism for the prospects of peace in Afghanistan. Moreover, the support for Mr. Karzai was overwhelming. He was viewed as a strong national leader but temporarily tied and restricted by the Bonn agreement – “till the Loya Jirga”.

Four months later I was back in Afghanistan for the LJ and had a chance to talk to delegates from all parts of Afghanistan during the LJ, and to ordinary people in cities, rural areas and also in some refugee camps after the Loya Jirga. It was astonishing to find how expectations had changed over the past four months: Support for the US military operations in Afghanistan was virtually non-existent. Expectations from the US to help Afghanistan with peace and stability had also diminished significantly. Optimism for future was severely damaged. The support for Mr. Karzai could not have been as trimmed. He now was viewed as a nice guy taken hostage by warlords, particularly the Shora-I-Nazar; and therefore left with little ability to be effective in the restoration of peace and stability in the country. This shift of support was also demonstrated in the LJ where in the first couple of days about two-third of the delegates from all over the country signed for the 90-year old former King as their candidate for the head of the government.

There could be a number of reasons for these sharp declines in expectations, but I can mention a few. First, Ever since 9/11 the well-publicized promises of the international community have made Afghans develop high hopes for international assistance in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. They have been impatiently waiting to actually see it. The expectation for economic help from outside was a significant factor in the public support for the US fight against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Almost a year has passed since 9/11 and many months since the Bonn agreement, and the Afghans are yet to see a single significant reconstruction project on the ground. Afghans are slowly but surely giving in to the belief that the promises made by the international community, perhaps, were not as serious after all.

I must add that the importance of quick action with respect to reconstruction cannot be overstated for creating jobs and income, demobilizing armed groups, and providing a concrete indication of the seriousness of international commitments to Afghanistan. The speed and effectiveness of turning of donors’ pledges into cash and cash into projects that benefit ordinary Afghans is one of the keys to peace and stability in the country.

Second, the government that came out of the Bonn agreement was no doubt anything but representative, fair and balanced. Worse, it was a government dominated and controlled by the very warlords who were the main reason not only for all the destruction, killing, looting and raping and all sorts of other war crimes in Afghanistan over their tenure between 92-96 but for the Taliban and Alqaida as well.

The interim government, nevertheless, was supported by ordinary people, as I already mentioned believing that it was temporary. There were measures and provisions within the Bonn agreement that if adhered to (with the help and pressure from the US/UN) would no doubt have trimmed gradually the power of warlords and corrected the flawed government imposed in the Bonn agreement. The first significant litmus test of these correcting measures was expected to be the Loya Jirga, which unfortunately turned out to be little more than a tool to rubber stamp decisions imposed by warlords and to legitimize their illegitimate power and rule. The failure of the Loya Jirga to correct the mistakes made in Bonn was a significant blow to the optimism Afghans had for the future.

Third, wrongly or rightly many Afghans believed that once the Taliban and Alqeda were dealt with, the international community led by the US would help break the power of the warlords. As I observed back in January this belief was also shared by many of the warlords as well, which had resulted in their mellowing down and sounding reformed and civil. The continuous US direct military and financial support to regional warlords has now changed that belief. This has resulted in the silencing of democratic forces that were could have emerged and publicly challenge the right and competence of warlords to rule and reversing the warlords to their favorite base of warlordism and intimidation. This also explains the inability of the central government to extend its rule beyond the parameters of the Kabul city. Almost all governors in Afghanistan remain self-appointed and autonomous with little or no obedience to the central government. Last but not least, I must mention that the inability or perhaps unwillingness of the US fighters in Afghanistan to differentiate between civilian and non-civilian targets and their systematic mistakes of dropping 15000 pound bombs on civilians hasn't helped the situation either.

My conclusion from these realities is that: if massive serious reconstruction work that can create alternative meaningful and constructive professions and raise the opportunity cost of carrying guns does not begin in Afghanistan urgently; if current policy of strengthening warlords is not reversed; if the repeated mistakes by the US fighters in targeting civilians is not checked and corrected;

Then I do see the possibility of a return to a situation in which not only the restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan may become a lost cause but the realized victory against the Taliban and Alqaida may also fall in jeopardy.

Thank you;