



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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Afghanistan: Are We Ready for 2008?

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Today the *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, along with *Princeton University's Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination* (LISD), hosted a discussion about the progress in Afghanistan. The speakers were **Ms. Fawzia Koofi**, Deputy Speaker of Afghanistan's Parliament (Wolesi Jirga), and **Ambassador Ronald Neumann**, who serves as US ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan from July 2005 to April 2007. **Mr. Wolfgang Danspeckgruber**, director of LISD, moderated the discussion.

Ms. Fawzia Koofi, spoke first, and she said that rather than give a fancy speech she wanted to talk from her own experience as an Afghan. She noted that Afghanistan is experiencing a lot of success that often gets over looked. She cited 44% of voters are women as an example that democracy is taking hold. Also, 27% of the Parliament are women. She noted that “people who used to use guns against each other ... now sit and talk” in Parliament. She said this is not just a symbolic achievement and asserted that Afghan democracy is not just a copy of the US or any other Western nation. She briefly discussed many signs of improvement including in the national army and the police, more attendance at schools, and more attention on women’s issues. She concluded by speaking about problems with corruption and controlling the drug trade. She pointed out that the drug trade is not a purely internal issue and that it will require regional and international cooperation to end it. She also noted the cyclical relationship between corruption and the drug trade so that they feed each other.

Ambassador Ronald Neumann began by saying that in a world that relies on sound bites, everyone wants you to say whether the situation in Afghanistan is good or bad, but the reality is “500 shades of maybe.” He noted that one problem is unrealistic expectations. The goal is set so high that failure is inevitable. He also said that there are three main tracks in Afghanistan—security, economic development, and political culture—but the three tracks do not move forward in sync. Regarding security, he said that there has been progress in the army and the police, though there is still a long ways to go. He noted that one problem is rushing the process—rush the training, rush to deploy, keep Afghan soldiers deployed for years—and then wonder why the army is not developing properly. He also said while the money is sufficient, there is a definite lack of mentors and trainers (1 to 100), which is hindering development. About economic development, he pointed out that policymakers do not pay sufficient attention to the lag time between policy changes and implementation. He explained that funding approved in 2006 finally builds a road in 2008 not because of mismanagement but because the project has to go through all the steps of implementation that are part of a democratic system. The important thing is that funding is maintained at a constant level to allow flexibility to respond to current needs. He concluded by warning that “the US is resourcing not to lose. We are not resourcing to win.”

As evidence, he noted that while Afghanistan is slightly larger than Iraq in size and population, Iraq has 160,000 troops but Afghanistan only has 40,000.

In concluding remarks, **Mr. Wolfgang Danspeckgruber**, pointed out that time is running out in Afghanistan. The clock that is counting down is public opinion in the US and the European countries and among the Afghans, as they start to see coalition forces as occupiers not assistants. He also noted the “we will not be able to win Afghanistan militarily.”

During the Q&A, one person asked about why the media, even the Afghan media, always reports on the violence instead of on the good things that are happening. Ms. Koofi said that, first, it shows that the Afghan media is actually independent, not being controlled and forced to report on the good things only. Second, she noted that people are interested in hearing about the violence rather than about a new bridge being built. Amb. Neumann quipped that just like in the US, “if it bleeds it leads.”

Another questioner asked Amb. Neumann about arming the tribes in Afghanistan to fight the Taliban like what the US is doing in Iraq against Al-Qaeda. He responded that it is a very bad idea because the tribes are very fractured in Afghanistan. You would only be arming commanders (like the mujahideen during the Soviet invasion) without loyalty to the state and buying a short-term quiet. Such action does not help build the state, and that is what Afghanistan really needs.