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The Transatlantic Afghanistan Initiative: Afghanistan after the Election: What Next?

Report by Luca Marini, stagier

Speakers:

- *Gilles Dorronsoro*, a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment, is an expert on Afghanistan and Turkey. His research focuses on security and political development in Afghanistan, particularly the role of the International Security Assistance Force, the necessary steps for a viable government in Kabul, and the conditions necessary for withdrawal scenarios. Previously, Dorronsoro was a professor of political science at the Sorbonne, Paris and the Institute of Political Studies of Rennes. He also served as the scientific coordinator at the French Institute of Anatolian Studies in Istanbul, Turkey.



- *Fabrice Pothier*, director of Carnegie Europe. He travelled regularly to Afghanistan and developed extensive expertise on the illegal drug trade and conducted special reports and advocacy programs on the intersections between counter-narcotics, poverty, and violence.

Resume:

The recent presidential and provincial council elections in Afghanistan come at a moment when coalition forces are empowering their strategy in the war against the Taliban. US President Obama has sent thousands of additional troops in recent months but the security situation continues to deteriorate in the face of Taliban advances.

On his return from a month-long trip to Afghanistan, Professor Gilles Dorronsoro has discussed the security situation on the ground and the challenges facing both Afghanistan's new political leadership and the international community as they move forward with a post-election development agenda.

The debate in Washington and European capitals has recently become more focused on how many more troops will be sent to Afghanistan in 2009 as part of a military surge. Gilles Dorronsoro, argued that such a tactical adjustment is unlikely to make much difference. The real question is how combat troops should be used. The



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West faces two choices: continue playing hard by going after the Taliban, especially in the south and the east, and spreading troops; or adopt a new strategy focused on protecting strategic sites, namely, urban centers and key roads. The insurgents control the countryside, and have a strong presence even inside cities like Kandahar and Ghazni. Outside the major cities, Afghan administration is nonexistent.

As President Obama must realize, whether Afghanistan is led by Hamid Karzai or anyone else, the problem for the International Coalition is not one of insufficient force; it is insufficient government. The main problem is the absence of security and law enforcement structures, notably police and judges. Too little money has been directed toward institution-building and the justice and police programs have been a total failure. The few police officers are poorly paid, prone to corruption, and poorly trained and armed. In most cases, people seek to resolve disputes by going to local jirga (when effective) or ulema for Sharia justice. Gilles Dorronsoro explained that the Karzai government has a fragile relationship with the United States right now because the latter is increasingly dealing with local groups and militias who are especially hostile to the U.S, even coopting some of them in the Afghan Parliament.

The Taliban are systematically destroying the local administrations at the district level, with the objective of eliminating the government's contact with the population. As they succeed, they show Afghans that the state is unable to protect them or provide services,. "This situation forces the United States to take charge of local security and governance, which in turn enables the Taliban to call attention to the foreign occupation and recruit resistance to it." Dorronsoro stressed.

The Taliban are now the dominant political force in numerous regions of Afghanistan, including Pashtun-majority provinces in the east and the south. In these provinces, the situation of the International Coalition is comparable to that of the Soviet Union in the 1980s. That means that the International Coalition is operating with astonishing low level of support of the Afghan population.

Gen McChrystal was named commander of US and Nato forces in Afghanistan in June, introducing himself as the man who "could do more with less". In September, just three months after his appointment, "Gen McChrystal is expected to ask for more troops – enough to put the total number of international forces in Afghanistan over 120,000, more than the Soviet army deployed there in the 1980s" Dorronsoro again expressed his concern about a predictable evolution. With no real hope of closing



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the border with Pakistan, the reinforcements Gen McChrystal is reportedly requesting would be insufficient to stabilise even one or two provinces in the south,. For the Obama administration, that is not definitively the best situation to confront with on the eve of its first mid-term elections in 2010. The American public opinion will not easily accept more troops in Afghanistan in the same year troops are withdrawing from Iraq.

Dorronsororo also explained that the Taliban are not a loose local group, but a well-structured and strategic organisation that succeeds in building alliances with other militant groups. He underlined that the Taliban have the potential to go north in Afghanistan and build a national movement. The idea that the Taliban will stay in the south is deeply inconsistent. For this exact reason, sending more troops to the south could be an effective short-term strategy for fighting the Taliban in some areas. But it would not work in the long run because it would not help consolidate an effective Afghan state, necessary precondition for any exit-strategy. To have a reasonable chance of accomplishing that, efforts on consolidation of cities and key roads and building up of the Afghan army is needed.

The Taliban have opened a front in the Northern provinces, having consolidated their grip on the South and East. If the International Coalition does not counter this thrust, the insurgency will spread throughout Afghanistan within two to three years and the coalition will not be able to bear the financial and human costs of fighting.

"A safer Britain requires a safer Afghanistan" UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown stated the day after (4th September) the debate with Dorronsororo, at an IISS press conference. Someone used to say the same with America and Vietnam a couple of decades ago. Then suddenly, but after impressive human and financial losses, they simply backed roll.