

Interview with Said T. Jawad, Afghanistan's Ambassador to the US: “Where the Road Ends the Taliban Begins”

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Southwest Asia is experiencing an epoch of unprecedented change. Every day it appears history ebbs and flows. Both uncertainty and optimism are in the air. While globalization has spurred economic development and social reform, instability continues to present security challenges. With upcoming presidential elections in Afghanistan looming there is much at stake. Many are questioning the future of this dynamic region: How current changes underway will affect regional security, economic development and relations vis-à-vis the West?



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One thing is for sure, Afghanistan will play an important role in determining the future of Southwest Asia. Afghanistan is a country made up of a diverse mosaic of cultures at the crossroads of Asia, trade, culture and civilization. The destiny of Afghanistan has long been interconnected to important regional events from the conquest of Alexander the Great to the collapse of the Soviet Union to today’s frontline on the US-led war on terrorism.

Said T. Jawad, Afghanistan's Ambassador to the United States, offered his first hand perspective to al Nakhlah on how Islam, democracy, economic development and security challenges will shape the future of Afghanistan. Prior to his appointment as Ambassador, he served as the President’s Press Secretary, Chief of Staff as well as the Director of the Office of International Relations at the Presidential Palace. Ambassador Jawad has worked closely with President Karzai in implementing policies, building national institutions and prioritizing reforms in Afghanistan. He also worked with the U.S. and Afghan military experts to help reform the Ministry of Defense and rebuild the Afghan National Army. Among his many accomplishments, he was instrumental in drafting



Afghanistan's foreign investment laws and drafting Afghanistan's new constitution.

ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY

What role will Islam play in the future of Afghanistan?

Afghans are moderate Muslims and religion has historically played an important role in Afghanistan. The role of Islam has become more prominent in Afghan society after the invasion of Soviet Union and resistance against the communist which had strong religious component to it. Today terrorists are trying to use Islam and religion as a pretext to attack freedom, Afghans, and the international community. We as the government of Afghanistan are working to capitalize on the views of religion and Islam based on peace and reconciliation in order to build prosperous and prolific society in our country.

Some Islamists believe Muslim countries should develop a society that is inspired by early Islamic history, symbolism and ideals. What challenges does Afghanistan face in incorporating this increasingly popular dynamic of Islamic revivalism as it progresses as a modern state?

The challenge we are facing is to build a modern state based on pluralism and respect for human rights with limited human capital and a lack of experts in Afghanistan. Another challenge we face is that the terrorist and extremists are trying to claim they are the bearer of the flag of Islam. And it's up to us to show that many values, including freedom, pluralism and prosperity are things the Afghan people demand, deserve and have shown are compatible with their religious and Islamic values. Afghans have proven that they are able to live with live with religious values while working hard to build prosperity and pluralism in Afghanistan.

Some Islamists argue that the secular state is a continuation of Western imperialism. This is partly driven by the assumption that the state has surrendered to international capital in the form of aid. What role should the West play in its relationship with Afghanistan to counter these notions?

After the Soviets were defeated in Afghanistan, the Afghan people demanded very clearly the engagement and assistance of the western countries to stay and help build the country; but this did not take place. It wasn't until later, when the terrorist that occupied Afghanistan reached places like New York and Washington that the international community came to help the Afghan people get rid of a tyranny imposed by the terrorists and Taliban. Certainly the presence of the international community is not part of a colonial design. The West has enabled the Afghan people to build religious institutions and stand on their own feet.

How does Afghanistan incorporate *shari'a* law into its government and rule of law and grow as a modern democratic state?

The constitution is very clear on that issue. Afghanistan has one of the most liberal constitutions in the region. Afghanistan has a codified system that means we have penal, commercial and civil code. The constitution and secondary laws in Afghanistan do comply with the requirement of Islamic jurisprudence, but in the current law in Afghanistan the civil law has been adopted. *Shari'a* has been a supported source of law, but the task has always been really how to combine the two sources of jurisprudence both civil and constitution code and Islamic laws in a way to build a plural society and respect human rights. It's a hard struggle and a difficult path to be taken. Afghanistan is just one of the countries that is working hard to achieve this. A similar struggle has historically taken place in

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Europe and other countries, and we have our own challenges to overcome these issues. We have made a lot of progress and the current constitution of Afghanistan is an example of combining traditional religious values with a forward looking constitution based on pluralism and human rights.

When tensions arise between Islam and democracy visa via the constitution of Afghanistan? Does Islam or constitutional law take precedent?

The constitution is the fundamental legal document that sets forth the principals of the legal system and political vision for the future of the country. But that constitution is being drafted with close cooperation with both secular experts and religious figures. But like any country, the constitution is the guiding document for both legal and political direction of the country.

How will Afghanistan handle the next presidential elections?

The next presidential election is scheduled in about 18 months. The Afghan constitution allows direct vote by all Afghan citizens. The preparation is underway, but holding an election is a costly exercise for Afghanistan. We are working with our partners in the UN and donor community to raise the funds needed for provincial election which runs close to 400 million dollars. There are discussions in Afghanistan to combine provincial and parliamentary election into one process to save money. This is fully technical and financial and the government and the parliament of Afghanistan will decide if this is the right course.

SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT

Afghan-Pakistani relations have fluctuated over a number of issues, such as: the Durand Line, the war on terror, and Afghanistan's close relationship with India. Proponents of establishing better relations note that Pakistan has given considerable aid and relief to Afghan

refugees and established an important trade network through Afghanistan to Central Asia. Opponents, however, complain that a larger number of Pakistan's intelligence and security branch have established close ties to the Taliban regime and continue to destabilize the Government of Afghanistan. What can be done to foster peace and stability between both countries and in the region?

The Afghan and Pakistani people see extremism and terrorism as the real enemy of our people and governments. We have been asking our friends in Pakistan for a more sincere cooperation to fight extremism and terrorism both in Afghanistan and Pakistan. We claim that any kind of tolerance or support for extremist groups for the sake of political gains is dangerous for both our countries and the region and world will pay a heavy price for that. However, we are very

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much encouraged by the recent elections in Pakistan. We are really looking forward to working with a new prime minister and government of Pakistan to fight extremism in both countries in a resolute and sincere manner.

How will relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan benefit by creating an environment of security and stability?

We think that a stable and prosperous Afghanistan will be the best friend of Pakistan because our stability and prosperity is interconnected. This will provide Pakistan with an opportunity to export products into central Asia and benefit from energy that is available in Central Asia. A stable Pakistan will insure Afghanistan secure and easy access to the Indian Ocean. We are really seeking the best possible relations with Pakistan for the sake of our national interest. We will not be able to rebuild Afghanistan unless we have good sincere political and economic relations with Pakistan.

What are some of the challenges in doing that?

There are some historic complications in relations with the government and the extremist elements in Pakistan. Sometimes this is exploited for tactical political gain, which has caused strategic losses and prevented the fight against extremism. The continued operations of the Taliban and terrorists have made it difficult for the two countries to overcome these challenges.

Afghanistan has engaged in cordial relations with both Iran and the United States, even as relations between the two countries continue to deteriorate over American objections to Iran's nuclear program and support for extremists. What role can Afghanistan play in bringing these two countries together and creating security and stability in the region?

While relations between U.S. and Iran have historic complications, we don't think that we will be in a position to play an important role in bringing the two countries together. We are asking for both Washington and Tehran to leave their differences out of Afghanistan. We are asking our friends in Tehran and Washington both to work to allow the Afghan people to rebuild their institutions and to work together in the reconstruction process of Afghanistan.

What lessons were learned in the last six years of state building?

Mistakes were made on both sides because of a shortage in human capital and qualified people. We didn't really know the magnitude of destruction that Afghanistan has undergone. The

international community underestimated the amount of investment and amount of security forces that were needed to face those challenges. And like many other post conflict countries there has been waste in the way that the money was spent and difficulties by the Afghan government to clearly indicate the priorities of Afghanistan and formalize them in a national development strategy. And, the lack of these proper unified strategies led to waste in the way the money was spent.

What can be done to make aid and development efforts in Afghanistan more effective?

Aid assistance should be used to build the capacity of the Afghan government to deliver services. This will show the people of Afghanistan the rewards of participating in the political process of

electing officials. It's also a reminder that the people have a voice in the way that the money is being spent and knowledge about where the projects are being built.

Can you touch on the recent report by Oxfam criticizing aid efforts in Afghanistan? The report suggests that more than half of all aid is conditional on the procurement of resources from donor countries and that projects appear to be launched without consulting the local people and lack transparency.²

The NGO's in Afghanistan have to face the reality on the ground. There is no doubt there is a need for more transparency. There is a need for getting more value out of each dollar that is being used in Afghanistan. But we also should not forget that the working environment both for government and NGO's is a difficult one. There is a shortage of human capital and security is challenging. But considering all of these factors

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there have been a number of projects that have implemented in a very successful and cost effective way both by the NGO's and government, such as the National Solidarity Program.

How can Afghanistan overcome the recent increase in security challenges?

When the Afghan forces, NATO and the international coalition carry out military operations they are usually successful: the Taliban are defeated quickly and generally pushed aside. The problem is that if you don't deliver services, and don't back up military operations with development then the terrorists will come back and all the efforts of military operation are wasted. It is very important that every military operation is followed by development activity. In Afghanistan where the road ends the Taliban Begins.

What kind of development projects are the most beneficial?

Development activity should include setting out operational courts system to deliver justice, schools, clinics, supporting the government, and making sure police have a strong presence in the region. After a military operation is over the people living there should feel there is a positive difference between the terrorist and the presence of the international community in terms of development and delivery of services. That is the only way we can get their support and that's why its very important to conduct properly military operations with development activities.

The poppy trade in Afghanistan has been growing rapidly despite over \$1.6 billion in counter narcotics spending by the U.S. government and over \$500 million by the United Kingdom. Over 90% of the world's illicit opium originates in Afghanistan, and poppy accounts for 52% of the nation's economy. How can you counter narcotics in Afghanistan when the economy is so reliant on poppy growth?

The best strategy is to prevent cultivation instead of focusing on eradication. The best way to accomplish this is to provide an alternative livelihood and take some people out of agribusiness. Give them a chance to have another job-like building roads and dams that generate electricity. And for those that continue to remain active in agriculture make sure that whatever they grow that their legitimate crop has a market and a buyer. An alternative crop project will only succeed if we have roads, transport, and market to sell. And this will only succeed if we

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continue building rule of law, interdiction efforts and going after big traffickers. The real drug money is not at the hand of the farmer, but at the hand of the processor and traffickers.

A recent project between local cotton growers and Chemonics, an international development consulting firm, planned to create thousands of jobs in Afghanistan, but due to a congressional ban on competitive agriculture projects it was denied funding. Does this suggest that some U.S. policies prevent Afghanistan from realizing their economic and security efforts?

A number of congressional amendments prevent support for certain agriculture products in Afghanistan. A lot of these funding issues are legacies connected to the Cold War and other domestic policies and priorities of U.S. congress and government. There is a need after 9-11 to look into issues of foreign assistance and remove some of the old impediments that prevent some very good projects from being implemented in post conflict countries like Afghanistan.

A number of security experts have suggested that al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden is hiding in the North West Frontier Province bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan. Can you address this concern

and touch on your thoughts on the challenges of securing this region?

We are looking for Osama Bin Laden and al Qaeda in Afghanistan and so is the U.S. military and intelligence and NATO. I think if he were in Afghanistan he would have been found by now. Finding him is a big priority for the Afghani community, intelligence and military. Bin Laden is most likely hiding in major metropolitan centers in Pakistan where we found some of his colleagues and associates in the past. And if you look where we found his friends and associates its not been mainly in Afghanistan, but. It has not even been in tribal areas. So considering the fact that the head of al Qaeda needs to be connected to his followers and the world, it would be really hard to hide in a remote cave in Afghanistan.

You have previously said that Afghanistan and the region as a whole would be better off if the Taliban would return, denounce violence and embrace pluralism. This appears to be a unique method of using conflict resolution as an important tool in the war on terror. Can you talk more about the reconciliation process with the Taliban?

The reconciliation process is a success in Afghanistan. So far over 5,000 Taliban have joined. We are ready to talk and reconcile members of the Taliban that respect the Afghan constitution. The reconciliation process is challenging because they have an effective source of indoctrination that is hard to eliminate. The Taliban and al Qaeda use a very sophisticated media propaganda operation called As-Sahab that

produces DVD's, tapes and internet movies that support their operations and affiliates. This propaganda campaign is used to recruit members, using an ideology that capitalizes on poverty and ignorance.

Despite these continuing challenges do you have an optimistic vision for Afghanistan in 30 years? What are the short and long term goals? What is the road map for the future?

Afghanistan is located in a strategic part of the world. The Afghan people are moderate and they are pragmatic which is why they have a strong willingness to partner with the international community.

Afghanistan provides a good location for our friends and partners and they can count on the people and government of Afghanistan to be a long term partner. Prospects of peace depend on the continuing engagement of the international community particularly the United

States in helping to build institutions. If the United States and international community make large investments in building Afghan institutions the pressure will be relieved for them to keep long term military presence in Afghanistan. The Afghan people are looking to take charge of their destiny and will prove to be a reliable partner to the U.S. and the rest of the world during these challenging times in a difficult part of Asia.

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