

Statement to Implementation Group

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Mr. President, Mr. Chairman, Ambassador Brahimi, ministers of the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, members of the Implementation Group, ladies and gentlemen:

This is my fourth visit to Afghanistan since the establishment of the Interim Administration. I have visited not only Kabul, but also the Shamali plain, Jalalabad, Qandahar, and Bamiyan. In Shamali, during the Nawruz celebration, I saw people starting to rebuild their homes after the devastation left by a total war carried out by the Taliban and al-Qaida. In Jalalabad I observed the second stage of elections to the Emergency Loya Jirga, and I heard first-hand from the electors how much the people of Afghanistan want a representative government that will preside over an effective state able to provide security, education, and employment. In Bamiyan and Qandahar, where I discussed future elections with local people, I saw that, though some Afghans were dissatisfied with the Loya Jirga, they looked forward to the work of the constitutional commission and the elections promised in the Bonn Agreement. All expressed hope for a legitimate, competent national government, though they had different views about how that government should be structured. Many insisted that the state should be staffed by competent people chosen for their skills, not on the basis of politics or patronage. None said they preferred to be ruled by military commanders, by tribal or ethnic leaders, or by their respected religious and spiritual figures.

The collapse of even the weak state that Afghanistan once had is the source of most of the catastrophes that have befallen the Afghan people. Without a state that could participate in the international community, Afghanistan became an outlaw zone, where international terrorists could victimize first Afghans and then others, including my own home in New York. Helping Afghans build a state that exercises a lawful monopoly of violence and that can develop their society through policy that is formulated and implemented coherently is the surest way to guarantee both our security and theirs.

The fundamental need in Afghanistan is not nation building, as is so often said. The delegates to the Loya Jirga showed, if anyone doubted it, that Afghanistan is a nation, though disputes over how to govern and share power in that nation are acute. What Afghanistan needs above all is assistance in building a state.

One of the most important ways to help Afghans build a state is to seek to fund programs of reconstruction through the government budget, which becomes more feasible as the government itself uses the budget more effectively to make policy. Sometimes, however, in discussing the need to fund more of reconstruction through the government, I encounter some misleading impressions. Some say that Afghanistan is not a nation, but just a collection of tribes, that it never really had a state, and that regional commanders are traditional tribal leaders who enjoy more support than government. Others say that Afghanistan always had a decentralized system, and that foreign donors should not support a top-heavy central government.

These statements contain elements of truth, but Afghanistan, like every other country, has changed over time. The Afghan state formed within its current borders in the late nineteenth century after the turmoil of the second Anglo-Afghan war had left a variety of regional and tribal leaders in control of different regions of the

country. The situation to a certain extent resembled that after the withdrawal of the USSR and again after the defeat of the Taliban and al-Qaida. Unlike the mujahidin government that took power in 1992, Amir Abdul Rahman Khan received enough money and guns from the British Empire to conquer his rivals and establish a highly centralized administration, though one with limited reach into the society. But his strategy, of imposing a state on the society through violence, the same method used by the Taliban, is not what the Afghan government seeks to do today.

The next episode of revolt and instability ended in 1929 when Muhammad Nadir Shah, father of His Majesty Muhammad Zahir, captured the capital. Rather than confront local leaders directly, he and his successor worked to promote commercial agricultural exports that the government could tax to finance a modest expansion of the capacities of the state. The cotton industry in northern Afghanistan and the Bank-i Milli, a national private development bank, was the major legacy of this period. This example, of trying to fund a national government by encouraging the growth of a private economy engaged in international trade, is reflected in the model proposed by the National Development Framework.

Afghanistan later moved toward statism, when the Cold War once again provided the Afghan government with the opportunity to obtain foreign assistance. Starting in the mid-1950s, this aid financed the expansion of the army and administration, and the construction of schools, roads, and dams. It created most of the infrastructure we are now trying to rebuild.

Now once again foreign donors, cooperating more than competing, are seeking to help Afghanistan build security forces, the infrastructure of economic growth, and representative institutions.

In undertaking these tasks, the National Development Framework seeks to avoid the pitfalls of the past. The aid dependence of the 1960s and 1970s created an overly centralized administration, increased the gap between the capital and the rest of the country, and left the country vulnerable to crisis when aid shrank. The government too often suffocated the private sector with bureaucratic requirements. The NDF therefore calls for reliance on the private sector with a smaller but more effective administration.

Yet, despite these flaws, when this generation of turmoil began, Afghanistan had a state. The national government collected only a meager share of the national income as taxes and was overly dependent on foreign aid and exports of natural gas, but governors and military commanders did not retain customs revenues for themselves, nor did they control autonomous armed forces. There was no controversy as to whether to call them “warlords.” The broad esteem for the former king of Afghanistan, so evident among the delegates to the Emergency Loya Jirga, testifies to the continued commitment of Afghans to the kind of public order and representative government they last enjoyed under his rule.

This state was relatively weak, but centralized, like all Afghan administrations for the past century. Decentralization of some functions, particularly the implementation of development projects, as in the World Bank Funded National Solidarity program, might be beneficial to the Afghan people. But funding development projects primarily through non-governmental organizations or international agencies in areas dominated by unaccountable armed commanders can constitute not the decentralization of government but the undermining of government.

Many seem to confuse the government with the “central” government, and in today’s situation it is understandable. But the bureaucracy in the capital should

preside over a national government, including provinces, districts, and localities.

Under today's law, all the officials of these bodies should legally be appointed from the center, and perhaps this should be changed, but in the current situation regional power-holders appoint these officials on their own.

The National Development Budget provides donors with an excellent opportunity to strengthen the state by investing in a truly national government, though not necessarily an excessively centralized one. Most development projects will be implemented in the provinces. Financing these projects through the national budget will provide the state with resources to compete for the loyalties of the provincial and district officials. It will build their capacities through practice with international partners. It will legitimate the efforts of the government to gain control of the customs revenue, by showing that taxes will not disappear into a black hole of Kabul bureaucracy but will help finance investments and services that people need.

Of course implementation through a state apparatus in the condition of today's Afghan government can be frustrating. But, despite losses to inefficiency and corruption, it will be much cheaper than international agencies. When he was governor of Nangarhar, the late Hajji Abdul Qadir told me he had cleaned the Jalalabad canal for less than \$30,000 after seeing a proposal from an international donor to carry out the same work for over \$ 3 mn.

While no aid program alone will guarantee security, strengthening the coherence and capacity of the state is necessary if security is to be sustainable. Aid supplied through the national development budget will also provide both the government and international actors, represented by the SRSG, with an important tool for security and peacebuilding. UN Security Council resolution 1401 of March 28, 2002 states (para. 4) "that although humanitarian assistance should be provided

wherever there is a need, recovery or reconstruction assistance ought to be provided, through the Afghan Interim Administration and its successors, and implemented effectively where local authorities contribute to the maintenance of a secure environment and demonstrate respect for human rights.” Though this paragraph cannot substitute for direct measures to protect security, aid through the development budget can provide an important tool for reinforcing security measures through such “peace conditionality.”

Finally, while Afghanistan needs a state, it also needs international cooperation, and in particular regional cooperation. The experience of the past two decades has left many Afghans suspicious of one or all of the neighboring countries, and they regard the involvement of the broader international community as a kind of guarantee against the resumption of cross-border interference. But most of its products will have to go overland and transit neighboring countries. Its water, energy sources, and populations are all shared with these same countries, as are millennia of history and culture. Poverty, drought, trafficking of arms and drugs, armed groups, refugees, smuggling, deforestation are all problems that are shared with its immediate neighbors and that cannot be solved without regional cooperation. International actors from outside the region should use their current presence to invest in cross-border cooperative projects and to strengthen those efforts at cooperation that have already begun. Only such regional cooperation will make reconstruction sustainable, especially if global actors become more concerned with conflicts in neighboring regions.

People often ask me if I am optimistic or pessimistic about the future of Afghanistan. My answer is: “No.” I hope I am realistic about the obstacles Afghanistan faces, though many times in the past twenty years it has been difficult to

confront these tormenting and seemingly insoluble problems. After what has happened here, the dimensions of which, I think, are still not generally understood outside the country, no one should expect that the return to security or the development of effective government would take a short time or occur through a linear process of improvement. But I still remember how we could imagine the future of Afghanistan in the summer of 2001, when I had a particularly gloomy discussion with Dr. Abdullah in New York, and how we can imagine it now. I spoke earlier of the high hopes and expectations of the Afghan people. Addressing a meeting such as this, hosted by an internationally recognized and supported government of Afghanistan, in the city of Kabul, it is impossible not to share those hopes, at least a little.