

RELEASE IN FULL

Notes on Tom Malinowski/Rachel Reid meeting with Hamid Karzai
July 14, 2010

Karzai: Opening pitch: Where is the war on terror? Even the Americans say it is in Pakistan. That's where al Qaeda is. In Afghanistan, it is our insurgency, something between ourselves that we have to resolve. We have been at war for 30 years; nothing is more important than ending this.

I know the Taliban better than anyone else. They killed my father, they've killed thousands. We chased them out after just 1.5 months nine years ago. Yet today, people are still being killed.

I could say that I was happier with human rights in Afghanistan today than under the Soviets, or during the civil war, or under the Taliban, but it would be a political statement; it would not be from my heart. How can I claim that human rights are in a better situation here when there are thousands of people being killed?

More on toll of war – he shows us his daily casualty reports for the previous Wednesday, reads off the totals for Afghan civilians, ISAF troops, Afghan troops, and “enemy” troops (and then hastens to add that he disagrees with the term “enemy.”)

What would you do if you see happy occasion in one corner of the room and a tragedy in the other? Do you go to the happy corner? No of course you go to the tragedy, and that is my focus/priority.

Malinowski – I respect your argument. Most leaders would tell us to focus on the positive. I've Never argued with a head of state that human rights situation in his country was actually better than he thinks. But have to disagree with you – as horrific as the problems still are, there has been progress in the last ten years in part because of steps your government has taken– for example, having 37% of girls in school is not good enough, but it's far better than nightmare that preceded it. (Karzai – yes, and there is a free press, elections, other progress). So yes, to deal with the massive suffering you need to pursue peace. But how do pursue peace without jeopardizing the gains made, including in women's rights?

Karzai – Peace will never jeopardize progress, war will.

Malinowski – Imagine there is a Taliban shadow governor who is responsible for the destruction of girls' schools and issuing death threats through night letters. Can you conceive of a deal in which that man is made the real governor of his district or province, if he simply agrees to respect the Afghan Constitution going forward?

Karzai – Not necessarily. But if he agrees to leave aside his arms, abide by the law, settle down to a life under the constitution.

One option is peace, one is a deal. The other is war. If it is a deal then you'll be the district governor but leave behind the violence. If that brings peace then what would you do? Knowing he has a bad character, and becomes the district governor, or that he continues the conflict?

Q to Tom -- what would you do if it was in Nashville, TN and this was the only way to stop a war claiming so many lives?

Malinowski - I wouldn't make him mayor of Nashville.

Karzai - We have that now in our government. We have people with terrible pasts in the government.

We had vetting but it went wrong. Look at what happened in parliamentary vetting. The weaker people who had committed fewer violations were removed; the bigger ones who committed worse acts were allowed.

Malinowski - we have more than just the two choices you suggested. There is a middle ground between trying to kill Taliban leaders and making them the leaders of one's community.

Karzai - OK, what does it look like?

Malinowski - peace and reconciliation, an agreement to stop fighting and killing each other, perhaps exile for some people, perhaps giving them the chance to run for political office on a level playing field with everyone else (including vetting). But not necessarily giving them jobs in which they will have authority over peoples' lives.

There are obviously more complicated issues having to do with transitional justice. As you know, we opposed the amnesty law (Karzai turns to his aides and says: "That was the thing the Parliament did, right?"). But even if one supports amnesties, that's different from allowing Taliban leaders positions of authority.

Karzai - If you have a choice between saving a girl's life and preserving her chance to go to school, which would you do first? Obviously, saving lives must come first. Ending this war must come first.

Malinowski - There is undeniable logic to that argument, but in practice we've found that you have to pursue peace and human rights together. Look at what happened to the Pakistanis in Swat. They made a hasty deal with the Pakistani Taliban, allowed them to come in and take power. Women were kept from school and work; there were awful cases of public whippings and abuse that shocked the Pakistani public. And before long, war broke out again and the Pakistani army had to retake what they gave away. They tried to trade rights for peace and got neither.

Karzai - Don't worry about the Taliban being part of government (suggests long way off, only talk). And if we get there, Afghan people will have a chance to decide these questions. Not up to me.

Malinowski - Good that women have been increasingly included in these discussions, including in the Peace Jirga. Will they be included in any negotiations with the Taliban?

Karzai - Yes. They will be present in the negotiations.

The overall question is the rights of the Afghan people. We are starving for human rights in Afghanistan. Most of all, the right to life.

Malinowski - When you say that Taliban members must abide by the Constitution and Afghan laws to reconcile, can you add a subordinate clause, specifically mentioning that they must accept the right of women to go to school, work, participate in politics? Those are all part of Afghan law; stressing them explicitly would reassure us and send the right signal to the Taliban.

Karzai: Turns to his aides: Don't we already say that? They answer "yes." We do, we have; it's in the declaration of the peace jirga [note: it is not].

MILITIAS

Karzai: Afghans don't want militias; it's a disaster for this country; we've made this very clear. They are security firms, transportation companies, they are everywhere.

Community guard police are what we need, recruited through police procedures and not paid by commanders; paid as individuals.