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Guest Editorial

The European Union in Afghanistan: Lessons Learned

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In December 2001, the European Union appointed a Special Representative in Afghanistan to encourage and assist the political and economic reconstruction process. At this time, the EU was certainly not aware of the enormous challenges facing the international community in putting this war-ravaged country back on its feet after more than 25 years of military strife, foreign occupation and ethnic struggles.

The US-led military intervention in the autumn of 2001 had successfully brought down the Taliban regime and decisively weakened the Al-Qaeda network. The international conference on the future of Afghanistan, held in Bonn in November 2001 under the chairmanship of the Algerian diplomat and Afghanistan expert Lakhdar Brahimi with the participation of representatives of major Afghan ethnic and factional groups, had elaborated an agreement which defined concrete steps for the establishment of a representative multi-ethnic democracy within a three-year time frame including the rebuilding of a national army and police. Just two months later, at a donors' conference on 21–22 January in Tokyo, the international community pledged USD billions to support this effort and provide means for humanitarian relief, the return of refugees, the reconstruction of the infrastructure and the rebuilding of the economy of the country. The European Union (Commission and Member States) alone pledged USD2.3 billion for the first four years.

When trying today to draw lessons for the EU from her engagement, I will base my assessment primarily on my own experiences in Kabul between December 2001 and July 2002, but will also take into account the developments in the subsequent four years.

The first positive lesson the European Union should draw from her engagement in Afghanistan is the realization that the Bonn Agreement and the subsequent pledging conference in Tokyo provided an excellent basis for the cooperation between the emerging Afghan administration and the international community. Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN special representative and mastermind behind the Bonn agreement, became the key figure in Kabul to

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help the Afghan administration in the implementation of the agreement. The agreement itself turned out to be a benchmark for future efforts in peace-building. The Afghan leadership could continuously be reminded to adhere to the timetable of the agreement. The international community had to honour its financial pledges for the reconstruction of the country just as much as Karzai's administration honoured the obligations under the Bonn agreement. When the political process was not moving forward according to plan, the donors could refrain from spending the pledged money.

In the first months of the interim administration, it became obvious that state-building and reconstruction not only depend on a well elaborated agreement and its implementation but also on a satisfactory level of security. However, in this respect the arrangements of the international community were insufficient.

In December 2001, the UN Security Council had authorized the deployment of an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), but limited its scope of action solely to the Afghan capital, Kabul. The ISAF forces were welcomed by the Afghan population and a satisfactory level of security was soon achieved in Kabul. At the same time, a separate US-led military force under a separate command (Operation Enduring Freedom) continued to try to wipe out remaining Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters, mainly in the region bordering Pakistan.

The result was that major regions of Afghanistan, which comprise a total area of 652 000 sq km, were left without any protection with the effect that the emerging central administration only exercised control over a small part of the country. In addition, due to a heavily destroyed infrastructure, travel within the country remained extremely difficult for a long time; and international assistance arrived very slowly due to fear of incidents.

Very early in 2002, the UN special representative and myself, publicly demanded an extension of ISAF beyond Kabul. At that time, a limited number of troops deployed in all regional centers would in my view have provided the much-needed security and contributed decisively to the strengthening of the central administration. It took two years to extend the UN mandate for ISAF with the command taken over by NATO. But as we can see today, a much higher number of troops is required to achieve the objective of providing security throughout the whole of Afghanistan. By now the warlords have regained much of their influence in their respective regions and control again small personal armies. Every so often in the past they even received financial support from the USA in order to help the Americans identify and eliminate the hideouts of remaining Taliban fighters. In my opinion, however, not a single Taliban was captured due to information provided by the warlords. But even the long-time American ambassador in Kabul, Afghanborn Zalmay Khalilzad, who should have known better, supported this policy.

Another unfortunate decision was the dual military command structure, namely one for ISAF and another separate one for Enduring Freedom. This was due to the agreed division of labor between the USA – who would continue to fight the Taliban and the remainder of the Al-Qaeda network – and the Europeans and others who would provide the security force needed for the stabilization of the country. The effect was that the ISAF command was never fully informed about the activities of the USA, which led to misunderstandings and sometimes confusion. Every military commander can tell you that a unified command saves resources and achieves the best results. However, not until 2006, a total of four years later, was a unified command established.

The lesson learned is obvious. A political peace-making process has to be accompanied by the dispatch of a strong international military presence covering the whole country. As the security situation improves, it can and should be reduced and ultimately withdrawn altogether. A dual-command structure is never a good idea.

One of the key political objectives of the Bonn agreement was to have all major ethnic communities participate in the establishment of a multi-ethnic democracy. One of the early difficulties encountered by the interim administration in Kabul was the issue of how to deal with the various warlords who enjoyed influence and support in the regions but at the same time were known for their criminal records, for leading private militias and for frequently refusing to cooperate with the central government.

President Karzai followed a policy of inclusion and was supported in this endeavour by the USA, as well as by the special representative of the UN. This resulted over time in their participation in the central government and parliament.

While it might be a difficult task to achieve, I am nevertheless of the opinion that the new Afghanistan would have been served better by bringing those individuals with a criminal record to justice and excluding them from acquiring political offices. This would have been a better new beginning and provided the government with convincing legitimacy

Another delicate issue is the activity of Non-Governmental Organizations(NGOs) in Afghanistan. As soon as the security situation improved early in 2002 and donor funds became available, the influx of NGOs into the country happened with a breath-taking speed. Proud of being independent from any government control, each NGO had its separate idea for providing assistance to the country. While many did engage in valid and productive work, some of them spent half of their budget on setting up their own offices before doing any fieldwork. Some shrewd Afghans set up their own NGOs in order to receive foreign funds. The central administration tried to monitor and supervise these activities but without much success. If any at all, there was very little coordination between the various actors, which led to much duplication of activities.

It is recommended that in the future the EU finds ways and means to streamline and coordinate the activities of the NGOs of its member countries without interfering with their laudable political objectives.

A further aspect of the Afghan experience was the misguided conviction of donor nations, as well as NGOs, that they knew perfectly well what the Afghans really wanted and needed to rebuild their country. The Afghans were quite often overwhelmed by the numerous recommendations and suggestions which did not necessarily meet the real wishes of a people who are still so deeply rooted in their own ethnic and religious traditions.

I came away from Afghanistan with the impression that, apart from security, humanitarian assistance and limited infrastructure work, the international community should concentrate its assistance primarily on education, education and more education. We should offer a broad educational basis for everyone from an early age. Only education will provide the necessary skills for being able to establish a business later in life, to become an accountant, to cope with a globalized economy, to repair a motorcar or to decide on a government suitable for the Afghan people. The problem in this respect seems to be that donor countries are keen to achieve quick, positive results for their respective electorates. Unfortunately, quick results cannot be achieved in educational projects over a short period of time. Unlike national governments, the EU Commission does not have this problem. She can concentrate on medium- and long-term projects. My recommendation would be that the EU Commission concentrates its assistance to developing nations almost exclusively on the promotion of educational objectives. Building schools, assisting in curriculum development, and providing and training teachers will have far-reaching positive effects for the future of any country more than any other short- or medium-term assistance.

There is one last point I would like to emphasize, namely the visibility of the European Union in Afghanistan. The EU and its Member States provide for more than one third of all financial assistance and aid programs to Afghanistan. EU countries contribute the bulk of forces to ISAF. EU Member States have taken the lead in building up some of the key functions of the new Afghanistan: police (Germany); judiciary (Italy); and anti-narcotics (United Kingdom). The humanitarian assistance, as well as educational and social programs, provided by the EU Commission and individual Member States are also noteworthy. Despite these facts, the work and contribution of the EU for the reconstruction of Afghanistan is hardly ever mentioned in books and articles written about Afghanistan. In the last few years, the UN and a number of individual nation states have figured prominently in assessments by experts, whereas the EU has been noticeably absent from these reports. This is more than regrettable given its major contributions.

When I left Kabul in July 2002, I was confident that the Special Representative of the EU, by speaking with one voice jointly with the representative of the

EU Commission, would make a difference when pointing to the facts in public as well as in the media. As far as I have been able to observe until now, this objective has not yet been achieved.

Considering the lack of acknowledgment of her major political and financial contributions, the EU should perhaps commission an independent group of experts to make recommendations regarding the improvement of her visibility worldwide.