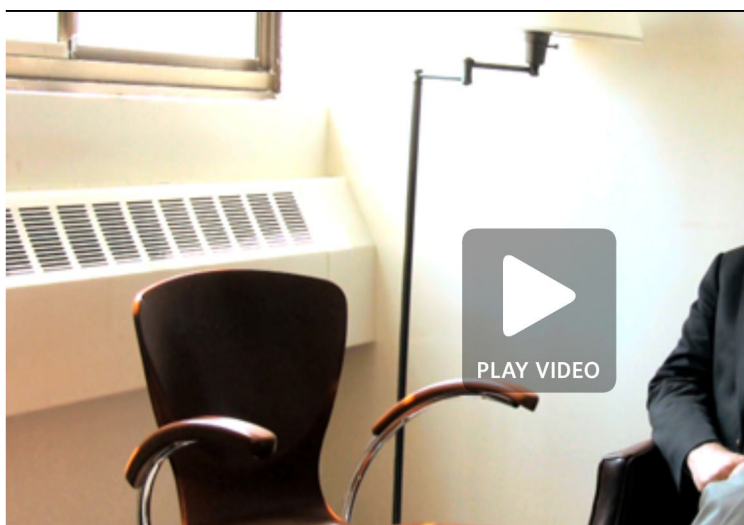


To achieve stability, Kabul has to first fly the nest

Giving the government greater funding and more control will help strengthen country's sovereignty, a growing number of experts say

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A new word has surfaced with increasing frequency in speeches by Afghan leaders and international officials in recent months as the Taliban insurgency gains momentum and demands grow for a change in direction that will stabilize the country.

The term is "Afghanization," meaning greater funding and responsibility for the Kabul government, and it is supported by some experts as a way of reviving the Afghan mission.

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One of the most respected backers of the concept is Barnett Rubin, a leading academic on Afghanistan, who explained the idea in a wide-ranging interview at his office in New York recently.

"The only way that governments become more effective is if they're made responsible for something, make mistakes and pay for the consequences," Dr. Rubin said. "Simply, it's learning by doing."

He added, "The international community has done that to some extent, but we need to do it a lot more."

Dr. Rubin's opinions about Afghanistan have already shaped the country's history. He assisted with drafting the constitution, and has remained a key adviser to international officials while continuing with his duties as a senior fellow in the Center on International Cooperation at New York University.

Like many others deeply involved in the project of rebuilding Afghanistan, he expresses sadness at the recent violence but emphasizes that the international community cannot walk away from its effort without provoking bloodshed on a vastly greater scale.

At the same time, Dr. Rubin said, Western governments need to recognize that the current approach is not working. The core motivation for foreign involvement in Afghanistan is security, he said, but the result has been insecurity.

"We have not been successful in addressing the basic reason for which we are there," he said.

Some observers have blamed the weakness and corruption of President Hamid Karzai's government, but Dr. Rubin emphasized the external factors that undermine Mr. Karzai, such as regional powers trying to exert influence in the country and a lack of coherence in the international strategy.

"The President of Afghanistan right now is in an almost impossible position, because he's supposed to serve and represent the people of Afghanistan, but almost all the money and resources he has to do that comes from other donors," he said.

The donors often interfere in the smallest details of the Afghan administration, Dr. Rubin said.

"You have a lot of international actors micromanaging things."

Mr. Karzai pushed his international supporters for greater funding - and control over how the money is spent - at a meeting of major donors in Paris last month. United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon endorsed the Afghanization concept in his remarks to the assembled leaders, but gave the term a broader meaning than that usually understood by Afghan officials.

"The strategy identifies its core policy as one of 'Afghanization,'" Mr. Ban said. "We fully endorse this policy and we understand it in its widest possible terms: Afghanization is not only a process of channelling more international assistance into Afghan institutions; it is a practice of all Afghans participating in the rebuilding of their country."

A more limited definition of Afghanization has grown popular in Kabul's local media this year, as Afghan journalists debate the merits of their country assuming full responsibility for the security of the capital city and surrounding areas, after years of protection by NATO troops.

Dr. Rubin said the handover of control should also extend to the technical assistance, valued at roughly \$1-billion a year, provided by foreign advisers to the Afghan government.

"We have to confront the reality that if we want to succeed in strengthening Afghanistan's sovereignty, we may have to delegate some of our own," he said.

Even while advocating Afghanization, however, Dr. Rubin said he knows the same idea has failed in the past.

The white-bearded academic said he remembers the Soviet campaign for Afghanization in the 1980s, as Soviet leaders foisted new responsibilities on their client government in Kabul. The regime collapsed a few years later.

He also spoke recently with U.S. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke after he returned from a trip to Afghanistan. Mr. Holbrooke served in the Vietnam War and remembers the campaign for Vietnamization in that country, Dr. Rubin said.

"He went to Afghanistan and came back, and he said: 'The only thing they've changed from Vietnam is the names of the programs,'" Dr. Rubin said.

"But what's the same is that they still don't work."

He chuckled ruefully.

"President Bush gave a speech in which he said the lesson of Vietnam was that we should have kept fighting until we succeeded," he said.

"What somebody said was, he forgot that we did succeed. We reached all our goals, met all our benchmarks, created a Vietnamese army, pulled out our troops and then a couple of years later, the government collapsed."

What might set this effort apart from the previous failures is the current efforts at opening negotiations with the Taliban and regional players to find a political settlement, Dr. Rubin said. But those talks won't be easy, he added, because violence will always remain tempting.

"Unfortunately, due to the poverty of Afghanistan and the weakness of its government, it's relatively easy and cheap to destabilize it."

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