

The World; U.S. Ambassador, 'Viceroy of Afghanistan,' Turns to Iraq

Kazem, Halima

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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A former university professor who has served in the State Department, the Pentagon and on the National Security Council, Khalilzad had long been considered a political and security expert on Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan when President Bush tapped him as special envoy to Afghanistan in early 2002, then ambassador in 2003. Flying to the capital, Kabul, was a homecoming of sorts for Khalilzad, who came to the United States in the 1970s as a student. He arrived in his homeland, he said, with a simple agenda: "to accelerate success in Afghanistan."

Critics accused Khalilzad of trying to paper over Afghanistan's deep-rooted problems with short-term solutions, in an effort to show U.S. success. They faulted the U.S. for using warlords to fight Al Qaeda and remnants of the Taliban regime. Many of those local commanders later proved disloyal to Karzai.

FULL TEXT

His boots pounded the rocky terrain as he skillfully maneuvered through the mountainous ravine, challenging his security detail and entourage of aides to keep up.

Hiking to a U.S.-funded project site in the southern province of Laghman, U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad chattered away in a stream of guttural Pashto, discussing the necessity of creating jobs for Afghans.

"If you don't provide work for these men, they will turn to the gun and fight again," Khalilzad told the provincial governor.

The governor nodded and motioned to a group of six men digging a large ditch for a river dam project. The dike was one of several U.S.-backed projects the affable Afghan-American ambassador visited before heading to Baghdad on Monday as the new U.S. ambassador to Iraq.

"I have waited to come to Laghman because I know you all have high expectations of me," Khalilzad told a large crowd gathered Sunday to inaugurate a government headquarters in the province. The crowd burst into applause. "Laghman is where my parents were born and where my grandparents are buried."

As the top U.S. official in Afghanistan for the last two years, Khalilzad has been somewhat of an enigma to many Afghans.

"He is a representative of the U.S. government, I understand that, but he is also one of our own," said Abdul Hadi Wahidy, a former militia commander in Laghman.

But it is exactly this mixed identity that helped Khalilzad wield such strong influence over Afghanistan's politics and reconstruction. Fluent in the nation's two main languages, Dari and Pashto, Khalilzad was nicknamed the "viceroy of Afghanistan," and was touted by supporters and detractors as the power behind Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

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"Because of my background, that I was born here, I speak the languages of Afghanistan and I knew the key players here, this has made my job here easier," he said. But at the same time, Khalilzad said, being an Afghan added to the pressures he faced. People expected more of him than they might have of another U.S. ambassador.

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"The United States' policies in Afghanistan ended up contradicting each other. On one end they were helping the warlords, and on the other trying to set up the Karzai government," said Abdul Fayeze, a political scientist at Kabul University. "It didn't make sense."

Daad Noorani, a political analyst and editor in chief of the Rozgaran newspaper, accused Khalilzad of pushing Karzai to accept warlords in his government after his election in 2004.

"The people of Afghanistan were very clear when they voted for Mr. Karzai. They wanted him to eliminate warlords from his government," Noorani said. "But Mr. Khalilzad ignored the promises President Karzai made to the people and talked him into including Ismail Khan and Dostum in his administration."

Khan ruled Herat province as his personal fiefdom until late 2004, and Abdul Rashid Dostum is an ethnic Uzbek leader from northern Afghanistan. Khan is now minister of energy; Dostum is the army chief of staff.

With Khalilzad leaving, Noorani and others fear Karzai will have trouble handling these powerful commanders.

"Khalilzad has appeased these warlords by bringing them into the government, but this is not a long-term solution," said Noorani. "President Karzai is going to be left to deal with them in his already struggling government."

Khalilzad dismissed such criticism, saying that "there is a lot written about my role with regard to specific things that historians will have to look at much more closely.... All the information with regard to what happened is not out there out yet."

In a recent farewell address, the ambassador called on the Afghan government to stop rotating bad leaders and appoint new and qualified officials.

With parliamentary elections scheduled for September, Khalilzad says Afghanistan still has many challenges ahead. "As we get closer [to the elections], insurgent attacks by terrorists could intensify," he said.

On Monday, Afghan officials said they had foiled a plot this weekend to kill Khalilzad. Three Pakistanis were arrested in Laghman shortly before his visit.

Khalilzad says the solution lies in strengthening the nation's police force and army, and in a long-term security alliance with the United States.

"A strategic partnership can deter big efforts, like someone invading. But in regards to covert operations ... that's much harder," he said. "For that, what is needed is to be provided by the Afghan government, intelligence and police."

He warned the country's neighbors and other forces not to meddle in Afghanistan's affairs.

"There are those who think the U.S. will get tired of Afghanistan," Khalilzad said. But Washington won't walk away, he insisted. Insurgents, he said, are "wasting their money."

Illustration

Caption: PHOTO: FAREWELL VISIT: U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, center, helps Laghman provincial Gov. Shah Mahmood Sapi inaugurate a building. The Afghan-born Khalilzad is off to Iraq.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Nikola Stojanovic For The Times

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