

OBAMA'S AFGHANISTAN POLICY Q&A TRANSCRIPT

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What is the Obama administration's Afghanistan policy?

The process of policymaking has been, in a way, difficult to understand since a few months. First, for obvious political reasons, Obama felt obliged to be tough about Afghanistan. So, the idea was to send reinforcements. And he announced that officially in January, that 17,000 men and women were sent to Afghanistan. But where? It's complicated. It's at the same time, there was no new strategy. So there was the decision to send reinforcements without really having finished the strategic review. And we are here right now; we are waiting for this redefinition of strategy in Afghanistan.

Is a "surge" of troops the answer?

People tend to speak about this reinforcement as the first one—"surge," a surge like in Iraq. But actually, it's not true. In 2001 and 2002, there were less than 20,000 international coalition troops in Afghanistan. Now, with the reinforcements, at the end of the year we could be near 100,000. So, actually, it's not the first surge. It's the fifth or sixth surge in Afghanistan, and it has always been a disaster. Why? Because there was no new strategy—and we are not out of this process. We still have this idea that with more resources, more men, more money, we can do the job. And we cannot, actually. We need a new strategy. And there is nothing clearly indicating that we are at that point right now.

The framing in the newspaper, the media generally speaking, tends to propose two solutions: more reinforcements or no reinforcements. I don't think that is exactly the right point. The right point is where you are sending the reinforcement. And right now, it's very clear we are sending reinforcements in the South—Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul—the places where the Taliban are the strongest. And that's really a problem. Why? Because with that sort of reinforcement—less than 30,000 or 40,000—you cannot change the balance of power, you cannot beat the Taliban. Why? First, they still have a sanctuary in Pakistan. So, it's out of the question—I mean we cannot seal the border—that's a basic point. The second point is that, if we want to do counterinsurgency—real counterinsurgency—we have to secure the population in the villages. With that sort of troop, we cannot do it. We don't have enough men to do it.

So, what's going to happen? We are going to do the same thing we are already doing. Operations in villages at night, bombing places where we think that there are some Taliban—and sometimes we are mistaken, so civilians are killed. So, we are not going to change the rules of the game. What's going to happen is that we will have more casualties, more civilians will be killed, and at the end of the day, the Taliban will be stronger.

Can the international community negotiate with a moderate Taliban?

A lot of people are speaking about moderate Taliban, the need to speak with moderate Taliban. And I think here we have two major problems. First, there is no name. When you ask people "who are the moderate Taliban?" they don't give you a name. They just don't know, and I think that's a major problem. You don't know with whom you are going to negotiate. Why? Because all of this idea is based on wrong data and a wrong understanding of what the Taliban are. The Taliban are not some kind of loose groups working more or less together. It's a real organization. They have a real strategy. They are surrounding Kabul now. They are going north. They are expanding the insurgency. And how do you want to split this kind of organization? Precisely at the moment they are thinking they are winning the war? So why should they negotiate with the Americans or with Karzai in Kabul? There is

no real need. And Mullah Omar was very clear about that—he doesn't want to negotiate right now. Or maybe the only thing he wants to negotiate is the American withdrawal. So, we are going nowhere with that kind of idea, you know? And I think it's misleading. It's dangerous, because it's weakening the regime in Kabul. It's weakening our own position in Afghanistan. And at the end of the day, that could be a real disaster.

Is Afghanistan's current leadership regime viable in the long-term?

Karzai is, right now, in a very weak position. But the thing is that we are weakening Karzai—criticizing him—and not only Karzai, but the Afghan regime itself. It's not really about Karzai. It's about our ability to deal with somebody in Kabul who is representative enough, who is strong enough to build an Afghan state. And weakening Karzai—we don't have another candidate, actually—that's the point. Who is going to be better than Karzai? It's not very clear. Actually, my feeling is that Karzai is trying to be more independent from the United States. He's dealing with the Iranians, he's dealing with Pakistan right now not so badly, with Russians too, and my feeling is that he's doing probably better than what we think right now.

What would success in Afghanistan look like?

The problem we've never been able to resolve is that the Taliban are connected to al-Qaeda, they gave sanctuary to al-Qaeda. But our real enemy is al-Qaeda. And when we are striking against al-Qaeda, it's with drones, it's not from Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda is not in Afghanistan. So we are sending more and more resources in Afghanistan. The international coalition has lost more than 1,000 men since 2001. It's extremely costly. It's going to be worse in 2009. And all that to fight a movement that could potentially give sanctuary to al-Qaeda. So, we have to re-define our objective in Afghanistan with a very simple principle. First, the fact that we are fighting in Afghanistan is not helping us to fight al-Qaeda. Actually, it's just the contrary. The more we are fighting in Afghanistan, the more that the spirit of Jihad—of holy war—is there. Not only in Afghanistan, but also in Pakistan. So, we have to withdraw slowly, we have to have a state in Kabul that is strong enough to survive a withdrawal, and we have to concentrate to focus on al-Qaeda and no more on the Taliban. We have to fight the real threat.

What strikes me is that al-Qaeda is no more in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, we are fighting a local movement. So I think we should re-direct our forces to fight against al-Qaeda and not the Taliban. The Taliban are taking too much resources from us, the fight is not conclusive, so we have to refocus on the real threat. And the real threat is in Pakistan, not in Afghanistan right now.

So, to re-direct the fight against al-Qaeda, we need to have less involvement in Afghanistan, but more with the Pakistani government. We have to work with the Pakistani government, and it will be easier if we are not fighting in Afghanistan, actually. So what I suggest, actually, is to help the central state in Pakistan. As you know, there are a lot of political troubles right now. The central state is weak, relatively. The military is weak. They have a problem taking control of the periphery of the country. So, we have to help the Pakistani state, and it will be easier if we are not fighting in Afghanistan.

What kind of success is possible given the resources available?

If you want to beat the insurgency in Afghanistan, if you want to be sure that the Taliban are really out of the picture, you have to send probably 100,000 or 200,000 men into Afghanistan, because you need to seal the border. And honestly, nobody is going to do that in the next two or three years. So, I think

that the idea that there is a military solution is just the wrong idea, because we don't want to give the resources. So, if we don't have enough resources to beat the Taliban, what can we do, actually? I think probably one place where we can make a difference is Kabul and around Kabul.

Right now the situation is extremely difficult around Kabul; 60-70 kilometers around Kabul you are in Taliban land. That's unacceptable if you want to build some kind of relatively stable Afghan state. So, to send reinforcements to the south is certainly not a good idea because it's not going to make a difference. But to send reinforcements around Kabul to be sure that this area is stable, that we can rebuild some kind of Afghan state there—it makes sense. And in the long run, we can give these places—Kabul and around Kabul—to the Afghan national army, and move to other places or withdraw. I think this difference in where you want to put your resources, it's a fundamental point. You're sending troops south? You're watering the desert. You're doing nothing. You're sending your troops to Kabul? Probably you can help to build some Afghan state, and the Afghan state is the key to our own withdrawal from Afghanistan.