

Afghan diplomat: Taliban is not missed in his country

by Copley News Service

Said Tayeb Jawad has been Afghanistan's ambassador to the United States since 2003. After being educated in Afghanistan and Germany, Jawad settled in the United States in 1986, earning a master's degree in business administration from Golden Gate University in San Francisco. He returned to Afghanistan four months after Sept. 11, 2001, to assist in the rebuilding of that nation following the U.S. invasion that toppled the Taliban dictatorship. He worked in a variety of capacities to help reform the government and rebuild the Afghan National Army. He also served as President Hamid Karzai's press secretary, chief of staff and director of the Office of International Relations. He was appointed ambassador to the United States by Karzai on Dec. 4, 2003. Jawad also serves as Afghanistan's nonresident ambassador to Mexico, Brazil, Colombia and Argentina. He was interviewed recently by the San Diego Union-Tribune's editorial board.

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Q: The general understanding we have is that things have deteriorated in Afghanistan. The Taliban have mounted some fairly significant battles against the NATO troops, violence seems to be a problem, there's relatively little economic development. You have a democratic government, but enormous challenges - sectarian-type challenges - among different tribal groups in the country, and the Taliban has exploited all of that to stay alive and to exert a lot of influence around the country. It doesn't look like a very promising situation.

A: You are right to a large degree. Especially in the past four months, we are facing serious security challenges in Afghanistan, especially the south. But at the same time, I just want to put on the record that a lot's been also accomplished in Afghanistan. We hear the sensational news about bombings going on or an explosion, a mosque being burned down, or clergy being killed. But at the same time, a lot of important work in Afghanistan is taking place as far as building infrastructure, making it possible for children to go back to school, and many other accomplishments. Just to give you some numbers, when the Taliban were removed from power in Afghanistan, 8 percent of Afghans had access to some type of health care. That percentage is now close to 80. Today in Afghanistan, 5.4 million children are going back to school. Still, the number of the girls are not as high as we want it to be, but this is six times more than what it was during the Taliban.

Q: The girls stop going to school after a sort of elementary education of a few years?

A: Yes. The main reason is that despite the fact that 5.4 million children are going back to school in Afghanistan, only 30 percent of schools have a roof. Most of the schools are in a tent or under a tree. And especially in the countryside, the schools are not close to where the families are living. Afghanistan is the size of the state of Texas. It has a population of 22 million. And if you consider security challenges, land mines, and the distance, just the physical distance, lack of roads, it's difficult, it's more risky for a young girl to go to school. That's why some of the impediments that the girls are facing are logistical, basically; some are cultural.

Q: How much influence does the Taliban still exert around the country? The reports on this suggest that the Taliban is running much of the countryside.

A: That's definitely not true that they are running the countryside. They are not. If you look at the Taliban even during the time that they were in power in Afghanistan, before 9/11 took place, they were not running the country. They were not running anything. The way they were governing Afghanistan was by terrorizing people to submission. They were beating a man or beating a woman on the street because of wearing the wrong color. Or they were destroying historic monuments such as Buddhas in central Afghanistan just to terrorize people.

Q: Are they not still terrorizing a lot of the countryside?

A: There's a difference between running the countryside or terrorizing the countryside to prevent girls from going to school, to prevent the good work of building a clinic or building a road. They are not providing an alternative to the government. They are not providing another option. They come to a school at night, they burn the school. Usually, even if you have the international soldiers present, there will be no NATO soldiers standing guard at a school. Or they are bombing a mosque or killing clergy. So that in a society where the majority of people are Muslim and are conservative, the fact that they are killing clergy shows that they are not out there winning the hearts and minds of the people, they are really terrorizing them to submission.

Q: What is their motive? Is it simply destabilization?

A: And to prevent this process from succeeding. They're not providing an alternative. They're doing it for a variety of reasons. First, ideological. They're still al-Qaida. They are basically the foot soldiers of al-Qaida. The strategic guidance is provided by al-Qaida.

Q: Where did the Taliban's religious fanaticism come from?

A: Very good question, really going to the core of the issues. The madrassas (extremist Muslim schools) in Pakistan. That's why we are not going to be able to deal with the issues of terrorism in Afghanistan unless we really do something about these madrassas that are preaching basically hatred against humanity.

Q: Are many of them not receiving support from the Saudi government?

A: Unfortunately.

Q: And what do you see as the future of the NATO force in Afghanistan? Will it have to be there 10 years from now?

A: No. I don't think they will need to be there for 10 years. But they need to have a long-term commitment, that's for sure. It depends how fast the international community is in building the capacity of the Afghanistan security forces. Our target is to build a 70,000-strong army. So far we have trained only 35,000. And the army needs better equipment. They don't have enough firepower. They completely rely on NATO for moving around.

Q: To end the violence, doesn't it take more than the military? A country the size of Afghanistan, 70,000 troops are not a lot.

A: It takes more, certainly, than military action. And that's why we have the peace and reconciliation process that's headed by the former president of Afghanistan. And so far a significant number of the Taliban have joined the government process. In our parliament right now there are people who used to be Taliban members. But now they've quit the violence and they have joined the political process. They're a member of the parliament. We have even governors that were former Taliban members. But they have quit violence and they've joined the political process, and they're welcome. So this is the answer. The military answer is really to go to the sources of the terrorism. By the sources of terrorism we mean places where the terrorists are trained, where they are indoctrinated, camped and sent to Afghanistan. And then the other point is really to win the hearts and minds of people by showing to them that the presence of the international community in Afghanistan means a betterment of the life of people.

Q: But it seems that economic development in Afghanistan is extremely difficult. It's an isolated country. It doesn't have much infrastructure. It doesn't have roads and airports and railways.

A: Not really, no. We have to build the roads. This is needed not only for stability in Afghanistan but also for regional integration, and for any other purposes in the region, not only for security but for connectivity, if you want a stable region in this part of the world. We have India, we have Central Asia, we have Pakistan. We have to connect to them. We have to provide better incentive for people to do trade. And this is under way.

Q: The per capita income in Afghanistan is comparable to the poorest countries of sub-Saharan Africa. And only 10 percent of the population has electricity.

A: That's true. The per capita income in Afghanistan is \$358. And that's up from \$198. So in the past five years it's more than doubled. From a very low base, but still there's progress. And electricity is a major issue. Less than 10 percent even in the rural area of Afghanistan has access to electricity.

Q: Is poppy growing still the No. 1 form of economic development?

A: No, no. It is the No. 1 form of economic destruction, not development. The poppy is as destructive as the terrorists. There's no doubt on that part.

Q: When you've got a country that is so short of infrastructure, so short of the basic conditions required for economic development, poppy development - poppy production and eventually turning it into heroin, of course - can become the most lucrative way for anybody to survive, to generate income, to feed a family. The U.S. military commander was quoted recently as saying we're losing the war against poppy production.

A: Because we are not - you are not - doing enough to fight it effectively. It's not only in Afghanistan. You're losing the war in many other places. You're losing the war in the Bronx, you're losing the war in Colombia.

Q: What help are you looking for from the United States and the rest of the international community?

A: Well, we have had a decrease in poppy cultivation in certain provinces in Afghanistan. Last year we had 95 percent reduction east of Afghanistan, in Jalalabad province. And we have to look at, why did it work? What did they do that could serve as a model? The way to fight it effectively is to provide for an alternative livelihood for the farmers to build institutions, to build a police force. In order to fight narcotics effectively, you have to do education to a certain degree. But that should not be the only means of doing it, otherwise you alienate people. You have to give them another option. If you eradicate the poppy fields, there has to be another alternative livelihood. There cannot be an alternative crop, frankly. There's nothing that will substitute poppy. But it could be an alternative livelihood. Once you give an incentive for someone to be in the legal economy, just as a human being, no one wants to be a criminal.

Q: Let's go back to the development of your military. You said you want 70,000. You now have about 35,000. Are they considered competent and loyal?

A: The 35,000 that are part of the Afghan National Army, they are very competent, they are loyal. According to NATO forces, the Afghans are received very well all over the country as truly good fighters. They lack equipment. But at the same time, we don't have this level of competence in the police force because the amount of the training that is available for the police is much shorter. The amount of the resources is less. They are paid a lot less. So that's why a lot of good people are not enlisting in the police force. And just to

give you a practical example, we are paying something like \$70 a month to a police officer. And if you offered the job to me at \$70 a month I'm not going to take it because even as an unskilled person I can drive a car for a nongovernmental organization or for the U.N. and make \$300 a month. So why would I take that difficult job of fighting terrorism, al-Qaida and then Taliban? So if you want to have a disciplined, qualified police force, you have to have some recruitment criteria. You can only have recruitment criteria if you pay them well; otherwise, if you don't pay well, you have to enlist whoever shows up.

Q: Isn't there a temptation among Afghans to blame the U.S. anytime something comes along where there's economic difficulty or some sort of difficulties, to sort of look back to pre-9/11 days more fondly than perhaps they were?

A: No, no. In Afghanistan, the difference is that no one actually misses the day of Taliban. The frustration has come because there's an expectation from you. They don't want you to leave. We are not asking you to leave the country, but they would like to see an improvement in the daily life. Electricity is a good example. Ten percent of Afghanistan has electricity. Seventy percent of schools do not have a roof. The police are paid only \$70 a month. These things create a frustration.

Q: Why is that we have not been able to capture Osama Bin Laden and some of his top lieutenants who just seem to disappear into the mountains of eastern Afghanistan or western Pakistan?

A: Initially because we didn't really - you didn't - have enough troops on the ground is one reason. The other reason was that the back door (from Tora Bora) was truly open.

Q: And how is it that he can operate and hide out for five years now without being captured? After all, Pakistan is not that big. The conventional thinking is that's where it is, right?

A: That's where he is. And again, it's not the conventional thinking. We should look where we find his friends. Most of the major al-Qaida operatives are in Pakistan. And most of them have been found not in tribal areas necessarily, in a cave, in a mountain. They've been found in Karachi and Islamabad and major cities because these criminals, they need connectivity. They are like a CEO of a corporation. They're not really - they need to be through the Internet to be connected to a large web of criminal activities all over the world. So the reason that you couldn't find him is not so much the military in Afghanistan. The reason is political because in Pakistan you cannot actually do hot pursuit. You can trace them sometimes. You know where he is. But by the time he reacts or goes to different channels, it's too late. And also the search should be expanded to major cities in Pakistan.

Q: The U.S. Congress sometimes stood in the way of new programs in Afghanistan in terms of funding. Do you think things will be much different now?

A: I have good relations with a number of Democrats who believe that we should have done more in Afghanistan, frankly. Their stand is we should have stayed more engaged, we should have done more, and it would have taken a lot less resources. And it's a matter of investment. You do more upfront, then you will be disengaged sooner. You build a national army, then you don't need the soldiers of the international community to be there. There's a difference between political rhetoric and then the reality. So we will see what's going to happen after the changes. In many cases, people think that Afghanistan is a smaller Iraq. It's not. Security-wise, the challenges are much different.

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