



## On-The-Record Briefing on U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership

**Under Secretary for Political Affairs R. Nicholas Burns, Afghanistan Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah**  
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03/21/06 -- [Joint Statement: United States-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership](#)

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It's a great pleasure to welcome all of you to the State Department. I want to thank Minister Abdullah for having come to the United States for this inaugural session of our Strategic Dialogue between Afghanistan and the United States.

As you may know, it was President Bush and President Karzai who decided some time ago that we should initiate such a dialogue. We've had two days of full discussions. The Minister and I have had a chance to talk at great length today about the problems in the region and the challenges in the region of South Asia for peace and security. We discussed all aspects of our bilateral relationship, the fight against narcotics production and trafficking, the common struggle that we have to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaida, the fact that the United States believes that we should do everything we can to try to help consolidate stability in Afghanistan itself.

Minister Abdullah had a chance to meet with Secretary Rice yesterday. They had a full discussion, of course, of all these issues. And we had three working groups that met concurrent with the meetings that we had. We had a working group on governance which talked about -- discussed the variety of ways that the United States Government and our civil society, our nongovernmental community can be helpful in building good governance and the rule of law in Afghanistan. We had another working group on economic cooperation and prosperity which deals with our effort to try to stimulate job creation and trade and investment between our two countries.

We also talked in the wake of President Bush's trip to South Asia three weeks ago about our strong hope that the United States might be of help to both Pakistan and Afghanistan in common job creation and that, we think, is a very promising field, indeed.

Finally, our working group on security met over the past two days and our delegation was supported by a very strong group of people from the Department of Defense, led by Under Secretary of Defense Eric Edelman. And we talked about the continuing, very strong commitment that the United States has to the security of Afghanistan, to the fact that we have the greatest number of foreign troops in Afghanistan are still American, that that commitment is to help the Afghan National Army to develop and to train and to take on the full responsibilities that it surely must in the future, but it's also for the United States military to be active in protecting the border areas, particularly the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan and to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaida forces who cross over that border in great numbers.

Finally, we had a very good discussion of the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. We discussed the relationship between Afghanistan and Iran. And in all respects, I think this was a very good start to a strategic dialogue that we hope is going to be a permanent feature of this relationship. Minister Abdullah was nice enough to come here with a very senior-level delegation of many ministers from the Afghan Government, as well as the National Security Advisor and, of course, the Ambassador of Afghanistan to the United States.

We were considerably assisted by our Ambassador to Afghanistan, Ambassador Ron Neumann, so it's been a great two days. And our delegation will be very happy now to return to Afghanistan some time in a few months, with a strong delegation from the Department of State, the Department of Defense, the White House, the Department of Treasury, so that we can continue this work.

You know, we do a lot of strategic dialogues between the United States and our allies and friends around the world. I can say personally, speaking personally, this one is as important as any of them and in many respects, there's more potential, I think, for growth in a bilateral relationship, in this relationship than any other I know. So Mr. Minister, welcome.

**FOREIGN MINISTER ABDULLAH:** Thank you. Thank you, Under Secretary Burns. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

And first off all, I would like to thank you and the U.S. Government for hosting this meeting on Strategic Partnership. And more than that, thank you and your people for your support in the past four and a half years, the support which has enabled Afghanistan to make significant progress in different fields of life. When the Partnership Declaration was signed in both presidents last year, last May, we needed to have this dialogue in order to operationalize the issues and get into details of that and work it out. I think we had very fruitful discussions in the past two days.

I was accompanied by Dr. Massoud, National Security Advisor as well as Deputy Ministers of Defense, Finance, Justice, Counternarcotics and Commerce as well as our Ambassador here in Washington. And we also, towards the end of our meetings we established a mechanism for follow up on the issues which have been discussed in details in areas of security, governance and prosperity. And I'm sure that within the limitation of what we have discussed and with the continuation of U.S. support the goals of Afghanistan Compact, which recently, it was endorsed by the international community and London Conference which is the framework of cooperation between the international community and Afghanistan and the goals of Afghanistan in the coming few years will be materialized.

Once again, thank you. And the fact that it took place on our New Year's Day -- yesterday was our New Year's Day, that shows the importance of this agenda for us. And we start our new year with a good issue in the agenda and I wish everybody success in making it a successful exercise.

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Thank you, Minister.

Barry.

**QUESTION:** (inaudible) wide ranging talks. Did you have occasion to take up with the Minister the prosecution of an Afghan citizen and possible death sentence for converting to Christianity? And Mr. Minister, is that representative of the type of government, the type of society that the United States has committed itself to helping Afghanistan achieve, that somebody could be prosecuted and possibly killed for his religious beliefs?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Barry, I'll be happy to answer that question first and then have the Minister say a few words. We did discuss the case of Mr. Abdul Rahman. And I said on behalf of our government that we hope very much the judicial case, which we understand is now underway, would be held in a transparent way. And of course, as our government is a great supporter of freedom of religion and as the Afghan constitution affords freedom of religion to all Afghan citizens, we hope very much that those rights, the right of freedom of religion will be upheld in Afghan court. And so I said that we would follow the case closely through our ambassador and our Embassy in Kabul and we would certainly continue our dialogue on this issue with the Afghan authorities.

**FOREIGN MINISTER ABDULLAH:** Thank you. Of course on this issue, I was informed about it during my trip -- the day before yesterday, and we discussed it here. We know -- I know that it is a very sensitive issue and we know the concerns of the American people. In fact, in our embassy we received hundreds of messages of such kind. As far as I understand the nature of the case has been that the wife of the gentleman has registered a lawsuit against her husband. And then the Government of Afghanistan has nothing to do in it. It's a legal and judicial case. But I hope that through our constitutional process there will be a satisfactory result out of that process.

**QUESTION:** Follow up on that?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** What will be a satisfactory outcome for you --

**FOREIGN MINISTER ABDULLAH:** I'm not an expert on judicial cases, but I'm sure that the guideline for our judicial system will be constitution of Afghanistan.

**QUESTION:** Could you respond to that and is this acceptable or unacceptable for that man to be put to death for converting his religion?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Well, certainly from an American viewpoint, certainly not. We believe in universal freedoms and freedom of religion is one of them. But I should also note more particularly and concerning this case, that the Afghan constitution, as we understand it, also provides for freedom of religion. And so from an American viewpoint, while we understand the complexity of a case like this and we certainly will respect the sovereignty of the Afghan authorities and the Afghan system. From an American point of view, people should be free to choose their own religion and people should not receive any severe penalties, certainly not penalty of death or, in our case, we would even say penalty of imprisonment for having made a personal choice as to what religion that person wishes to follow.

**QUESTION:** Can I just follow up on that just to ask why the United States isn't calling for this man to be released? If it was any other country, if it was China, I'm sure you would. Why in this case are you not prepared to just say plainly that this is wrong and this person should be released?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** I think I gave you a fairly straightforward answer to the last question in particular and I'm happy to do that again if that satisfies your need. But you know, this is a case that is not under the competence of the United States. It's under the competence of the Afghan authorities. And so we raised it with the Minister. We put our view forward that our belief is in freedom of religion for all individuals. And if there is to be a trial, we hope that it's going to be transparent so all of you and we can observe that trial. And we hope that the Afghan constitution is going to be upheld. And in our view, if it's upheld, then, of course, he'll be found to be innocent. If he has a right of freedom of religion, that ought to be respected.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Just a quick follow-up and I have a different subject. Is the U.S. prepared to use any recourse or measures to ensure that this man is freed? Certain members of Congress are calling for that.

And if I might, you've made some comments in the recent week that Iran is helping to support al-Qaida or at least not cracking down on them within their own country, allowing them to roam free and perhaps even supporting them. Could you expand on that? Do you have evidence or intelligence to indicate that Iran has stepped up its cooperation with al-Qaida?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Well, on your first question, I think that obviously we've raised it with the Afghan Government. We ought to give the Afghan Government now the right to consider what it intends to do in the prosecution of this case. And the Minister has given you his answer. I'm sure he'll be happy to talk to you further about it. But it's within the competence of the Afghan authorities and we hope very much again that freedom of religion and the constitutional rights of that individual will be upheld.

On the second question, when I testified before the House two weeks ago I did say, and our government has repeated this, of course, many times in the past, that we believe that Iran has not met its commitments to the United States and to other countries around the world, and that is to crack down on al-Qaida terrorist elements, individuals who we believe do reside in Iran.

And this gets to a larger point, and that is that the Iranian Government of President Ahmadi-Nejad continues the 25-year tradition of making Iran the central banker of the terrorist groups in the Middle East and also the leading director of terrorist incidents in the Middle East. We in the United States have been on the receiving end of terrorist attacks sponsored by the Iranian Government, going all the way back to the early 1980s in Lebanon, and that has continued over the last two decades.

And one of our major objections to the policies not just of Ahmadi-Nejad but of the predecessor governments has been this unstinting support for terrorism. It remains one of the great American concerns about that government.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Do you face the same challenges from the Iranian Government in Afghanistan as you do in Iraq?

And a question for Dr. Abdullah. Are you satisfied with the cooperation with Iran on the issue of terrorism or not?

**FOREIGN MINISTER ABDULLAH:** On the issue of our relations with Iran, we have in the past four years that has been our policy to improve our relations with all neighboring countries and we have established good neighborly relations with almost all neighboring countries. Iran has been helping us in the reconstruction process. Iran has been supportive of the political process in Afghanistan. So that has been the status of our relations and, in fact, friends of Afghanistan have encouraged always the promotion of good relations and interactions between Afghanistan and its neighbors, of course in a transparent manner.

**QUESTION:** But I'm asking specifically on the issue of terrorism. Are you facing challenges in this regard or not?

**FOREIGN MINISTER ABDULLAH:** I thought that that part was raised to the Under Secretary. But -- and if it is for me, on the issue of terrorism we don't have evidences of that, efforts against Afghanistan, no.

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** I would just answer your question by saying that we have noted quite frequently of late the clear evidence of Iranian support for terrorist groups in Iraq, especially through the provision of sophisticated IED technology. And there's no question about the fact that Iran continues to support Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other terrorist groups in the Middle East that have directed terrorism at Lebanon and at Israel as well as at the moderate Palestinian -- the great majority of Palestinians who comprise the moderate community there.

So Iran's record of support for terrorism is sustained, unfortunately. And as I said, along with the fact that we object very strongly to their seeking a nuclear weapons capability, this issue of terrorism is also on the front line of our concerns with the Iranian Government.

Charlie.

**QUESTION:** Nick, on Iran, could you bring us up to date on your meetings in New York and what seems to be taking a longer time than was anticipated originally just getting the presidential statement?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Thank you, Charlie. Yes, there was a meeting yesterday afternoon, a five-hour meeting in New York at the United Nations, among the members of the P-5 as well as Germany. So Russia, China, Britain, France, Germany and the United States were all represented.

I thought in many ways it was a productive meeting because it demonstrated what unifies all those countries. All of us said to each other, and this included the representatives of Russia and China, that we do not wish to see Iran acquire a nuclear weapons capability. All of us said that we believe that Iran is heading down that road, particularly in the dangerous area in which it has currently embarked of centrifuge research and development. And all of us said and agreed that Iran is out of compliance with the International Atomic Energy Agency.

And in rejecting the additional protocol and rejecting further cooperation with the international community, Iran is heading in a direction of confrontation with all the countries that I mentioned and the larger coalition of countries that voted against it at the IAEA. So that unified -- those points were ones of unity yesterday.

I think that there is a great deal of sentiment that there ought to be a presidential statement that would call upon Iran to suspend its nuclear activities and to honor its obligations to the IAEA and to return to negotiations. And you know in multilateral diplomacy it sometimes takes a while to work out the wording of the statement, but if you remember what I just said unites these six countries, I think we'll see a presidential statement at some point not too long into the future.

And that will be a powerful message to Iran that it continues to be isolated. It will reflect and reinforce the vote of the IAEA on February 4th and we hope the Iranians will receive the message and act on it and draw back from the centrifuge enrichment that it's currently embarked upon, which I think has been rejected by all countries of the UN and IAEA with the exception of Cuba and Syria.

Barry.

**QUESTION:** Ever since Stephen Hadley accused Iran of, you know, just trying to distract attention from the real issues by proposing talks with Iraq -- talks with the U.S. about Iraq, we haven't seen anything overt about that process moving forward. Is it dead in the water or is there still -- I know that the U.S. has been interested in talking and approached Iran to talk about their intervention, their interference in Iraq. Is that now a dead letter?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Well, Barry, your question gives us an opportunity to clarify a few things that have been swirling in the press for a couple of days now.

The United States has absolutely no intention of engaging in talks or negotiations with the Iranian Government on the issue of their nuclear ambitions, and we've made that clear. We made it clear yesterday to the countries with which we met at the United Nations and we've made it clear publicly and I've just made it clear again.

And as you know, Secretary Rice and other U.S. officials have said that Ambassador Khalilzad does have -- has had for some time -- the authority to engage the Iranian Government in Baghdad, not to negotiate on the issue of Iraq but to hear the concerns that we have about Iranian activities and behavior in Iraq. And so that's a very, very limited channel and a very limited window and it does not extend to some kind of opening of direct talks.

Now, why do we say that? Because we're convinced that a policy of isolation, isolating Iran and of increasing the pressure on Iran through diplomacy at the IAEA and now at the United Nations, where Iran is under some questioning by a great number of countries, that's the right policy.

**QUESTION:** Yes, I understand. But we've heard of no progress on that front.

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Progress in?

**QUESTION:** In setting up --

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** I just have nothing to report to you on that.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Mr. Lambros.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Secretary Burns, on this issue today, what will be the role of NATO in this Strategic Partnership program in which U.S. and Afghanistan agreed today?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Perhaps both of us could speak to this and this might be the last question that we take.

Mr. Minister, please.

**FOREIGN MINISTER ABDULLAH:** On the NATO, certainly the issue of role of NATO and coalition forces were discussed here. And while this is, of course, a bilateral case, at the same time NATO's role in Afghanistan, which is a really prominent one in the stabilization of the country, was a part of our discussions and we discussed different scopes of cooperation between NATO and Afghanistan, including Partnership for Peace and Afghan cooperation programs which recently our delegation led by the Minister of Defense visited Brussels and they talked about details of that.

NATO today has increased, enlarged its role to the southern Afghanistan and there is the issue of synergy in working together between NATO and the coalition forces, which is already being worked out. So as a part of discussions on security, we discussed some details of cooperation between Afghanistan and NATO as well.

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Mr. Lambros, Secretary Rice and I both in our discussions with the Minister reconfirmed the commitment that the United States military has to help protect Afghanistan and to work with the Afghan National Army in training. And obviously the United States is going to maintain the largest force of any country in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future.

We're very proud of the fact that NATO, with the United States as a leading member of NATO, is now deploying from the north and the west of the country, also deploying south. British, Canadian and Dutch forces will be deploying southward to Kandahar and Uruzgan and Helmond Provinces over the next three months and we think that is a logical extension of the commitment that NATO made three years ago this month when it first decided to go into Kabul in a very limited way.

So the combination of the coalition forces and the NATO forces represent a substantial commitment to the security and future of Afghanistan and we're proud of the job that NATO is doing. But I should also say since all of us had been to see -- Afghanistan to see what the Afghan Government is doing, we're very proud to see the development of the Afghan National Army and of the way it's working with the NATO forces.

**QUESTION:** Secretary Burns, may I have a question on Greece?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** On Greece?

**QUESTION:** Yes. As it was reported extensively, the day after tomorrow you are going to meet with the new Greek Foreign Minister, Madame Dora Bakoyannis. May we know the reason for this meeting, something on your agenda, and how do you assess today the relation between Greece and the United States of America?

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Secretary Rice is going to be receiving Minister Dora Bakoyannis on her first visit as Foreign Minister to the United States, and I know Secretary Rice is looking forward to that. And I think all of us here who work with Greece believe that our relationship right now is stronger than it's been in many, many years. We have great respect for Prime Minister Karamanlis as well as Foreign Minister Bakoyannis and I think given the cooperation that Greece has shown in Afghanistan, Kosovo, it's really an outstanding relationship.

Okay. Do you want to take one more of your journalists?

**FOREIGN MINISTER ABDULLAH:** Perhaps one.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Minister, you recently said that Mullah Omar, Usama bin Laden and Zawahiri were all hiding in Pakistan. So what evidence do you have to support this claim and would you demand an international military action against the terrorists hiding in tribal area in which U.S. and Afghan forces should also participate?

**FOREIGN MINISTER ABDULLAH:** On the issue of terrorism and these leaders of terrorism and their presence, what I have stated might have been that to the best of our intelligence and information all these three gentleman are not in Afghanistan. That has been my statement. But I think wherever they are, they are a threat to all of us. They are posing a threat to peace and stability in our region and it is incumbent on all of us to work together to deal with them and to put an end to this problem, including the issue of dealing with the people which you named.

**UNDER SECRETARY BURNS:** Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Minister.

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