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**Chair of the Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan  
Oslo/Norwegen**

**Eingangsstatement\***

**Öffentliche Anhörung**

**zum Thema**

**„Internationale Evaluierungen des Afghanistan-Einsatzes:  
Ergebnisse, Lehren und erfolgte Maßnahmen“**

**am 18. September 2023**

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\* Der Sachverständige hat ein überarbeitetes Eingangsstatement mit Ergänzungen auf Seite 7 und 8 übersandt.



**Bjørn Tore Godal:**

***Norway in Afghanistan***

**Presentation in the Bundestag, Berlin 18.9.2023**

Liebe Mitglieder des Bundestages, meine sehr verehrten Damen und Herren,

Herzlichen Dank für die Einladung! Seit 1966 bin ich ziemlich oft zu Gast in Deutschland gewesen und meine Jahre als norwegischer Botschafter in Berlin gehören, beruflich gesehen, zu meinen schönsten. Meine deutsche Sprache ist leider nach 16 Jahren ohne Sitz in Berlin etwas rostig - and for precision and clarity I am happy to continue in English.

I left politics in 2001, as a defence minister, following the Labour Party defeat on the day before 9.11 – and was somewhat surprised in 2014 to be asked by the conservative government to chair The Commission on Afghanistan to evaluate the civilian and military efforts of Norway between 2001 and 2014.

As you may know, Norway was working closely with Germany in the north of Afghanistan for several years. Actually, our military forces in the Faryab province were under German regional command.

I believe our evaluation is still among the broadest undertaken by a NATO country, - and it is in my view, years later, not overtaken by events.

There will never be another Afghanistan, it is dangerous to generalise, but I believe there are lessons to be learned and a lot of explaining to do to our citizens. Conflict and terror are likely to prevail in many parts of the world, and conflict resolution *and* development will be a dominant feature in many places where west, east and south meet.

My presentation will give you a short overview of the Commission, its work, and its main findings.

The Commission was composed of ten members: we were two with a more general background– Lt-General Hagen (former chief of the Norwegian military intelligence) and me – and eight academic experts. A secretariat of six supported the Commission in its work. We were properly funded by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence.

In all, the Commission held 21 meetings, including travels to Kabul, Brussels, New York, Washington DC, and London; representing a total of about 50 days of meetings. Alas, we never made Berlin, but material from Germany was useful, notably the one-man report from ambassador Michael Koch in 2014, towards the end of the ISAF mission.

The Commission and secretariat interviewed a total of over 330 persons. The report contains a list of most of these; some could not be named. Nobody is quoted, to enhance openness. Among the names are Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, CEO Abdullah Abdullah, former president Hamid Karzai and a several other prominent Afghans; general David Petraeus and Amb. Douglas Lute, a number of other diplomats and military leaders from different countries and organisations and of course a number of Norwegians – including former prime ministers, defence ministers, foreign ministers, chiefs of defence; but also, next of kin to fallen soldiers, aid workers, officers, rank and file soldiers, journalists etc.

The Commission had access to extensive material from national and ministerial archives, including from the Norwegian Intelligence Service, as well as NATO and the UN.

The report is available in English on the net, with the title: «A Good Ally: Norway in Afghanistan 2001-2014».

Before moving on to the findings, I want to underline that the Commission clearly emphasised that the Norwegian engagement was a very small piece in a very large puzzle. The Norwegian engagement thus made very little overall difference in Afghanistan; in and of itself, it changed very little. The Norwegian military spending on Afghanistan amounted to a mere 0.26 % of the estimated total military effort. Our civilian aid represented 2.3 % of the total international aid in the period. Norway was thus a relatively much bigger civilian than military contributor.

The most fundamental overall conclusion is found in the first paragraph of the summary. Bear in mind that this was written in 2016:

“Despite over 15 years of international effort, the situation in Afghanistan remains discouraging. Militant Islamist groups still have a foothold in parts of the country and the Taliban are stronger now than at any time since 2001. Ongoing hostilities continue to undermine the potential for economic and social development, threaten to reverse whatever progress has been achieved, and weaken the opportunity to build a stable, functioning, democratic government.”

It is in the context of this disheartening conclusion that the Commission evaluates the Norwegian effort. Overall, the Commission found that Norway had three overarching objectives in Afghanistan, as expressed by the government in Parliament. These were: to support the United States and NATO, to help combat international terror, and to assist in building a stable and democratic Afghan state.

In addition to assessing the Norwegian engagement based on these three objectives, the Commission emphasised three areas that it considered particularly important: the Norwegian engagement in Faryab, the role of Norwegian special forces and the intelligence service, and Norwegian peace diplomacy.

The Commission's overall conclusions on the extent to which Norway achieved its objectives are as follows:

The first and most important objective was to support the US and help secure NATO's continued relevance. By and large, the Commission finds that Norway achieved this goal. Norway supported the international effort and was a good ally. (I may add on a personal note; none of us here were in the front seat, the victim from 9.11 was).

The second objective was to help to combat international terror by preventing Afghanistan from once again becoming a haven for international terrorist activities. This has only been partially achieved, the Commission stated. The "War on Terror" was not only controversial but failed to rid Afghanistan of international groups such as al Qaida and the so-called Islamic State.

The third objective was to help to build a stable and democratic Afghan state through long-term development cooperation and peace diplomacy. This objective has not been reached. Afghanistan's formally democratic institutions are fragile, and the war continues, the commission wrote in 2016.

The Commission drew several conclusions as to why Norway – and the international community – failed to reach this last objective. These include that the objectives and the approaches employed were at times internally inconsistent, or even contradictory. Security considerations drove the agenda for state-building and development aid. The military campaign dominated international efforts, and initiatives to talk to the Taliban did not get the necessary support. The international coalition's strategy for combatting terror and insurgency prioritised short-term security goals. The choice to include the former warlords in the new Afghan regime undermined the state building project. International actors often became part of local power struggles they did not understand and could not influence, and thus contributed to abuse of power and corruption.

The emphasis placed on democratic elections was important for the international legitimacy of the state building project. However, the increasing and extensive fraud that neither local nor international actors were able to prevent, undermined the confidence in elections in the local population. Moreover, the extensive international military presence generated a sense of occupation among segments of the Afghan population.

The Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Faryab was Norway's largest and most visible military contribution in Afghanistan. The province also received extensive Norwegian development assistance. The intention of the PRT model was to strengthen the Afghan central government's control in the provinces and to promote state-building and development. This proved difficult, if not impossible. It was very difficult for external actors to build confidence among the local population in an Afghan state that lacked legitimacy.

The Norwegian Special Forces and the Intelligence Service developed close cooperation in Afghanistan. So close that it garnered international attention. They developed a concept where the full resources of the Norwegian Intelligence Service were directly available to the special forces in the field.

On one occasion, then Foreign Minister Steinmeier expressed his gratitude to the Norwegian forces for their assistance in the successful operation to rescue a German hostage in Kabul.

Their joint activities in Kabul from 2007 were particularly important. The special forces, supported by the intelligence service, had a clearly defined mission that focused on safeguarding Kabul and building up the Afghan Police Crisis Response Unit (CRU) 222. Both represented important contributions to building an Afghan state. [The special forces were the last to leave Kabul AirPort last August. The Afghan forces they had mentored to a high level were told by their leading officers not to fight.]

Norway's engagement in peace diplomacy helped to put dialogue between the parties on the agenda and led to close contacts with Afghan authorities and later the US. Along with Germany, Norway was one of the first countries to develop contacts with the Taliban. Already by 2007, Norway began paving the way for negotiations between Afghan authorities and the Taliban, in consultation with President Hamid Karzai. Norway also actively sought to influence the internal processes in Washington until 2011, when the US first opened to the possibility of negotiations.

The Norwegian engagement may be divided into two phases or tracks. The first track stretches from 2007-2010 and involves contacts directly with the Taliban leadership in

Quetta in Pakistan. It took two years before Norway informed US authorities about these contacts, partly out of fear that this could make our partners in dialog military targets. After all, we talked to terrorists.

The second track stretches from 2010 to 2014 and beyond. Contact was here with the Taliban's Political Commission in Doha, Qatar, and built on earlier German contact. Efforts were primarily directed at facilitating contacts between US and Afghan authorities, and the Taliban.

Neither Norwegian nor other attempts to negotiate a settlement were successful. Peace diplomacy was nonetheless an important Norwegian contribution. The Commission finds that the high-level dialogue between the Norwegian authorities and their Afghan and US partners likely helped to influence their view on the potential for negotiations with the Taliban. Together with others, Norway sought to influence the Taliban's thinking as to what a political solution must and would entail.

The Norwegian engagement naturally involved more than the three key areas I have covered until now. While small in overall terms, the military involvement in Afghanistan was extensive and posed challenges for the Norwegian Armed Forces. In all over 9000 Norwegian women and men served with the military in Afghanistan. 10 lost their lives, 19 were seriously injured.

Like other contributions to Afghanistan, the core objective of Norway's development assistance was to contribute to building a democratic and, in the long term, well-functioning and economically independent Afghan state. At the end of 2014, the international and Norwegian state-building efforts had achieved some results compared to the situation in 2001. However, compared to the ambitious goals, the results were disappointing, not least considering the significant resources invested in the project.

From an early stage, Norway's goal was for the Afghan authorities to take responsibility for development and state-building to the greatest extent possible. From a development point of view this was a sound policy objective, but it proved unrealistic.

(As requested by the Afghan authorities and based on traditional Norwegian development assistance practice, the Norwegian authorities distributed the funds across several areas. Chief among these were education, rural development and good governance, with women's rights and gender equality as a cross-cutting theme.)

The gradually worsening security situation made monitoring and evaluation of projects in the field difficult. Even considering security, Norwegian performance assessment was too weak.

In increasing the civilian aid, Norwegian authorities did not adequately consider the low absorptive capacity in the Afghan state administration and the limited Norwegian administrative capacity. The conditions for properly following up such an extensive aid effort were not in place. Norway addressed this in part by channelling the funding to multi-donor funds of the World Bank and to the UN, which assumed responsibility for the administration.

Overall, Norwegian aid was part and parcel of the overall international framework of extensive aid and inadequate follow-up and control. The aid thus contributed to the growing problem of corruption.

The Commission put forward several both general and specific lessons for Norway from its engagement. I do not have time to go into these in detail here today but will refer to one particular point. The commission report in 2016 created big headlines, surprise and a mixture of cautious comments from government circles plus selective enthusiasm from others. This underlines the need for one of the main recommendations: “Whenever Norway engages in a conflict area, the government should inform parliament The Storting more systematically on the intended objectives, means, anticipated results and experience along the way”.

If asked, in hindsight, what are my more personal reflections, based on our report, but beyond the concrete mandate - and in view of the later events?

First, given the US led strategy, it was wrong not to have binding trilateral agreement between the US, the Taliban *and* the Afghan government, *before* the military withdrawal. Trump turned down good advice. Biden followed. They both felt America was tired of futile fighting and perhaps fragile moral in the leading Afghan circles they had nourished - and tried to boost, for years.

Second, war and development do not fit well together. Fighting terrorists is a very specialised task for special forces and police. That worked fine in Afghanistan for a year or two. – Interviewing top military leaders in US and UK, our commission met a British general in London who told us: «Having done with the most prominent terrorists, we should have left a big brown envelope in the biggest square of Kabul with the message: Do not do it again - or we shall come back! We should then have left development to the



UN, donor countries and NGOs, plus the local civil Afghan society. We would then have avoided a long war that we are about to lose », the general said, in 2015.

Third, Taliban was weak the first few years and some of them were asking to be included in the Bonn negotiations. Many of them felt misused by Al Qaida. These approaches were rejected both by the US and the rest of us. That was wrong. To seek the most inclusive political basis for conflict resolution at an early stage can be decisive.

Fourth, engage within local structures, like councils of the elderly, with local tradition and support. Avoid telling people that they are wrong when they are not enthusiastic about centralised government structures they are not used to. Afghanistan has for centuries been a very decentralised state with weak central institutions. The Taliban will now probably balance between their rigid centralistic norms and the collaboration with locally well-founded traditional power structures as long if they do not threaten the Taliban overall position.

Fifth; some of the development projects have not been in vain; as our Commission were told in UN organisations in New York; «Remember the Taliban has got children, too. » In health and education and some rural projects we still have a basis for further development. **We have a humanitarian obligation irrespective of Talibans behaviour. One third of the continued Norwegian support is humanitarian.**

**Sixth; following Talibans military victory the fundamental forces have the upper hand with the emir in Kandahar on the top. The more moderate and political elements are still present both in Kabul and elsewhere and may, long term, have a future. Alas not for now.**

What are my reflections within the broader question of the value of peace settlement and conflict resolution. When Taliban approached Norwegian diplomats in 2006-07, they referred to the Oslo agreement between the PLO and Israel. How was it possible for a NATO ally to communicate with people listed as terrorist in Washington? Well, we did not ask.

Since the Oslo agreements of the 90ties Norway has pursued the track of peace facilitation in a few numbers of regions. *Facilitation* is the key word, rather than mediation or arbitration. The conflicting parties must have a sincere wish to come to an agreement. The facilitator is there to help them see the possibilities. The parties must then have sufficient control in their respective homeland and among their people. Other militant groups or states must be prevented from acting as spoilers.

Norway's record is mixed, due to these factors. Oslo I and all brought a degree of Palestinian self-management and elections in the occupied territories. But the planned process towards a two-state solution was hampered by the killing of the Israeli prime minister Rabin in 1995, by one of his own citizens. Then the vicious circle started, following events like the election of Netanyahu, new settlements, the victory of Hamas, terrorist attacks, Palestinian infighting, - it all undermined the foreseen prospects.

In Columbia, the settlement signed in Cuba with Norwegian participation is still valid, but both, the government and the old guerrilla, have too little control to avoid local and at times escalating conflict.

In Sri Lanka, the conflicting parties, in the end, settled for a military solution, provoked by lip-service to peace and reciprocal escalation. The government won and Oslo became irrelevant.

Yet, it is my firm conviction that inclusive peace efforts should be tried wherever possible as an alternative to continued bloodshed. Final and stable peace can be very difficult to reach, but reduced conflict level is an aim itself.

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We do not know for certain our future political masters, not in Norway, nor in Germany. Whatever happens, we have over many years cultivated a pretty stable foreign, security and development policy, which is heavily in demand in an unstable world.

The future roles of major global players are uncertain. Putin has taken us back to the aggressive Soviet past. President Biden has indicated that the US missionary role as a nation- and state-builder is on the decline, while still focusing on support to the Ukraine, with mixed **domestic** US support.

My old neighbour in Grunewald during my years as ambassador, Egon Bahr, talked and wrote in more principal terms about the need for an international division of labour between the US and the EU, the latter organisation firmly based on UN principles.

Alas Norway is not a member of the European Union, but in foreign policy we are closely related. And we have compatible resources, both within a European and an Atlantic context.

Norway and I believe the other Nordic countries are well placed as partners to Germany in this respect.

I believe smaller and bigger allies should be more vocal! And of course, not be defined only by our biggest ally. More than 20 years ago Egon Bahr published his book: «Der deutsche Weg. Selbstverständlich und normal». Since then, German contributions have been substantial both, in Europe and internationally. I – and most fellow Norwegians – sincerely appreciate that.

Thank you for your attention!