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Afghanistan: Western Advisers Withdrawn Following Killings

By JOHN WENDLE

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Amid the routine confusion at the Ministry of Interior in [Kabul](#), changes are immediately apparent to the returning visitor: conspicuously absent is the usual contingent of foreign soldiers and police advisers arriving for meetings in armored SUVs, freshly pressed shirts, body armor, crew cuts and wraparound shades; instead, they seem to have been replaced with Kalashnikov-toting Afghan police, who stand a silent watch amid the chaotic hustle of the ministry compound.

The absence of foreign advisers and security personnel is a consequence of the incident a week and a half earlier, when two high-ranking U.S. officers were shot and killed at a secured office in the ministry amid a wave of riots sweeping the country following the burning of Korans and other religious materials at the U.S. base at Bagram. Hours after those shootings, [NATO](#) withdrew all of its military and civilian advisers from [Afghan government](#) ministries -- and they have not returned, despite a frenzy of debate in the U.S. over the consequences for the [Obama Administration's](#) withdrawal plan of U.S. personnel being unable, temporarily and for security reasons, to mentor their Afghan counterparts.

Many Western advisers stationed in Kabul opposed the decision by General John Allen, commander of NATO and U.S. forces in [Afghanistan](#), to withdraw them from their offices, even if -- as NATO insisted -- the move was temporary. "Pulling all advisers from the ministries as a blanket reaction to an incident at the Interior Ministry was an extreme reaction, giving the

message that we don't trust anyone," says Santwana Dasgupta, an American support manager at the Ministry of Higher Education. "During these times, I believe it is even more important for the international community to reach out to the Afghans they know, express their dismay at the Koran burnings and not to hide in fear," Dasgupta tells TIME. "I think it is a shame that internationals are asked to run and hide."

"My beef is not that we were under lockdown -- this has happened before for a variety of reasons -- but more about the public way it was mandated that no Americans should visit any ministries," says Dasgupta. "It smacked of tit for tat, and given the cordial relationships we at the Higher Education Project enjoy with the ministry and universities, this message was disappointing." She does concede, though, that she would rather stay home than risk her Afghan colleagues getting injured if she were targeted.

But not all advisers were withdrawn -- some of those not working in U.S. State Department or NATO programs have remained. "We were never sent home," says a European adviser speaking on condition of anonymity. "And, actually, I feel safer at my office than I do in my house because the security is quite good at the ministry. I haven't received any updated security restrictions from my embassy." This adviser, who has only been in Kabul for a little over a month, says that right now "there's no friction between the Afghan and foreign staff after the Koran burnings. They are all educated and know us and our customs, so they understood that it was a mistake. Also, I don't advise the military, I work in development, so there is not as much of a threat."

Many other foreign advisers, however, particularly those working with the Afghan military, continue to do their works as best they can from their bedrooms, guesthouses, dormitories and barracks. TIME's request to interview military advisers affected by Allen's orders were declined until such time as they're cleared to return to their positions.

As NATO has struggled militarily in the face of rising insurgency, the training of [Afghan security forces](#) has become the centerpiece of the mission there. Viable government and security institutions are deemed vital to prospects of withdrawing U.S. and NATO troops. But if the advisers are unable to advise their Afghan counterparts, many ask, then why is the U.S. still in Afghanistan?

A June 2011 report by the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee entitled "Evaluating U.S. Foreign Assistance to [Afghanistan](#)" clearly shows the importance the Obama Administration has placed on building the capacity of the [Afghan government](#) and the optimistic light in which it paints those prospects. "The Administration's fiscal year 2012 request for Afghanistan includes roughly \$3.2 billion in foreign aid. This funding level reflects the pivotal role the [State Department](#) and USAID are expected to play to help consolidate our military gains and ensure a successful transition. It gives our Embassy and USAID Mission in Kabul the necessary resources to build basic Afghan capacity," the report argues, adding that this request is a 22% decrease from fiscal year 2010-enacted levels.

The report does warn that despite the best efforts of the State Department and USAID to build capacity, Afghan ministries may not be ready to stand on their own after U.S. withdrawal, and it

also warns that "our overreliance on international technical advisors to build Afghan capacity may undermine these efforts. Our aid projects need to focus more on sustainability so that Afghans can absorb our programs when donor funds recede." It also cautions that a sudden drop in aid could trigger a major economic recession in Afghanistan, further imperiling the country's security prospects.

Westerners working in Kabul, however, warn that if advisers are kept out of Afghan ministries -- either for security reasons or because of funding cutbacks -- the 10 years of work the U.S. has put into its nation-building exercise in Afghanistan will be jeopardized.

"I understand why the military advisers were pulled as they are a definite target, but where this all went wrong was pulling out the civilian advisers," says a senior foreign adviser at one of the ministries. "I don't think it was right to pull the civilian advisors out of the ministries for two reasons: first, it encourages similar attacks when Taliban see they can easily disrupt the government by attacking the international staff; and second, the disruption caused to our work by not being on site was huge. We cannot be active advisors and capacity builders of the Afghan government from a distance." Echoing a sentiment widely shared by Westerners involved in capacity building in Afghanistan, this adviser warns, "We must be able to interact with our national colleagues and should not appear to be more precious than them."