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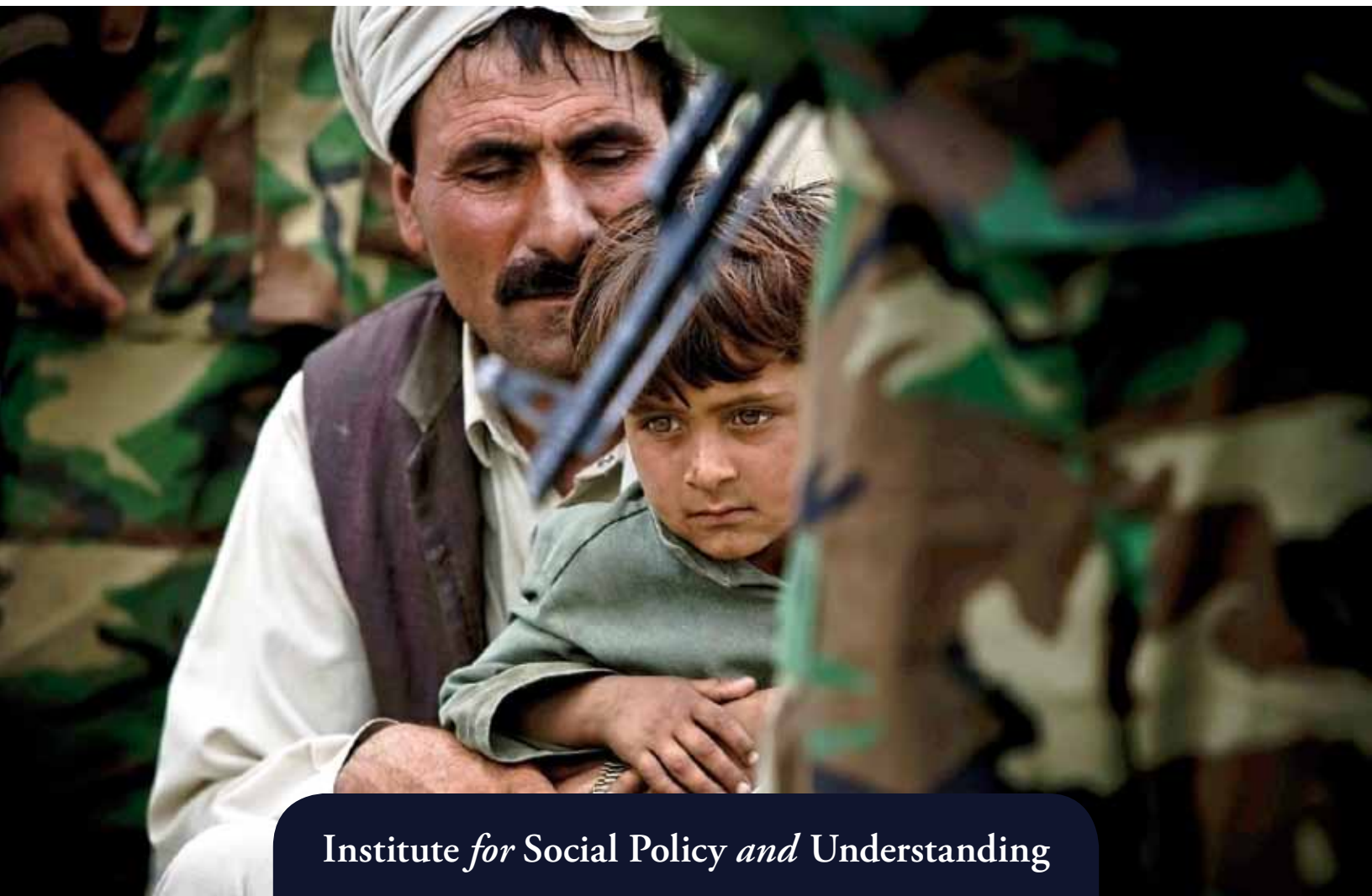
REPORT



ISPU

THE NEO-TALIBAN, COUNTERINSURGENCY & THE AMERICAN ENDGAME IN AFGHANISTAN

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Institute for Social Policy and Understanding



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REPORT

UZBEKISTAN

DUSHANBE

TAJIKISTAN

AFGHANISTAN

Mary

Alamyrat

Kulob
Qurghonteppa

Amu Darya

Termez

Fayzabad

Jowzjan

Mazar-e Sharif

Kunduz

Badakhshan

Sheberghan

Balkh

Kunduz

Talooan
Eshkashat

Sar-e Pul

Kholm

Baghlan

Maymana

Samangan

Pol-i-Khumri

Faryab

Sar-e Pul

Baghlan

Badghis

Bamyan

Charikar

Panjshir

Qala-i-Naw

Harirud

Chaghcharan

Bamyan

Parwan

Nuristan

Herat

Herat

Ghor

Chaghcharan

Bamyan

KABUL

Mahmud-e
Nurestan

AFGHANISTAN

Daykundi

Maidan-Shahr

KABUL

Laghman

Shindand

Wardak

Kabul

Sorubi

Farah

Khash

Uruzgan

Ghazni

Ghazni

Nangarhar

Farah

Tarin Kowt

Pul-i-Alam

Parachinar

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Delaram

Uruzgan

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F.A.A.

Balochistan

PAKISTAN

Quetta

Sibi

Dalbandin

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Introduction*

In November 2001, roughly a month after Operation Enduring Freedom had commenced, the Bush administration declared victory in Afghanistan. By hiring Northern Alliance militias to fight and using heavy bombardment and airstrikes, U.S.-led forces had dismantled much of the Taliban's control apparatus. Strapped for money, weapons, and support after many local Afghan commanders switched their allegiance to the U.S.-backed militias, the Taliban could not compete and so, following a classic guerrilla technique, they gave up and dispersed, living to fight another day. Many cadres went back to their villages; others, along with some leaders, dispersed into the Hindu Kush mountain range and Pakistan's tribal areas. Mullah Omar was last seen on a motorbike heading toward the mountains. Relatively soon, however, the Taliban began reorganizing and, by 2004, launched a full-scale insurgency in Afghanistan.

From 2003 to 2008 the United States largely ignored Afghanistan, comfortable with the notion that it was the "good war," and focused on the insurgency in Iraq. As the "good war" went bad, American forces gradually became embroiled in violence, rampant corruption, and a flourishing heroin trade. Over ten years, approximately 11,000-14,000 Afghan civilians have died as a direct result of the war, and coalition forces have lost over 2,300 soldiers. Now that this war has become deeply unpopular both at home and abroad, the United States and its allies remain stuck in a quagmire, seeking a way out. In December 2010 the Obama administration released a declassified summary of its strategy review for Afghanistan and Pakistan, stating: "[In] Afghanistan, the momentum achieved by the Taliban in recent years has been arrested in much of the country and reversed in some key areas, although these gains remain fragile and reversible."¹

This paper addresses the United States' endgame in Afghanistan within the context of the insurgency since it began in 2002. Most analyses focus obsessively on policy decisions being implemented by the United States and minor tactical successes. But the situation in Afghanistan requires that American policymakers and the public understand and examine the other side of the conflict. Who are we fighting? Where did we go wrong? How have the insurgents capitalized on those mistakes? This paper explains who the neo-Taliban are, as well as their political goals and organizational structure. It then describes how they reinvented themselves as a Pashtun and nationalist movement, benefitted from the allegiance of disaffected tribes, and consolidated power through horizontal networks. Subsequently, the U.S.-led counterinsurgency is analyzed. The report details how politico-military failure, civilian

Now that this war has become deeply unpopular both at home and abroad, the United States and its allies remain stuck in a quagmire, seeking a way out.

abuse, and a delegitimized host government have marred the effort. Conclusively, the Karzai regime's unpopularity, the rebels' military gains, and the inability of the United States and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to defeat this rural insurgency all make the prospects of a neo-Taliban defeat dismal.

*This Policy Brief is largely based on an academic paper published in 2010. Shehzad H. Qazi (2010) 'The 'Neo-Taliban' and Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan', *Third World Quarterly*, 31: 3, 485 — 499.

Who Are the neo-Taliban?

Whereas government officials, the popular media, and the insurgents themselves use the name “Taliban” to refer to the guerrillas, the current movement differs from the one that began in Kandahar in 1994 and does not feature all of the same fighters as the “old Taliban” did. The current Taliban movement, which began in Pakistan in 2002, features many local Pakistani groups and tribesmen from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). With the exception of a few key leaders, most of the “old Taliban” initially did not join this movement. As a matter of fact, after their fall many of Mullah Omar’s chief lieutenants, among them Mullah Obaidullah, Berader, Syed Mohammad Haqqani, and Akhtar Mohammad Mansur, actually surrendered to Hamid Karzai. They submitted a letter in which they announced their acceptance of him as the country’s interim leader and pledged to stay out of politics in exchange for immunity from arrest. Their request, however, was ignored. In fact, the government’s policy of continual harassment and jailing of these leaders ultimately caused them to flee to Pakistan and join the insurgency.²

The Organization of the neo-Taliban

The movement’s initial organization began in early 2002, after Mullah Omar reestablished contact with his commanders. Mullah Dadullah, among others, was sent to recruit new fighters from Pashtun villages, madaris in Karachi, and parts of Baluchistan, and to contact and seek support among those Afghani tribal leaders and elders still in Afghanistan.³ Once the insurgency began, however, the resistance was no longer limited to remnants of the Taliban.

The current insurgency features a diverse set of actors: local groups, political parties, jihadi groups of the 1980s and 1990s, and different tribal components, all of which have a single common denominator: resisting the post-Taliban order. The neo-Taliban comprises new groups with new agendas. As table 1 shows, three main insurgent groups can be identified: the Quetta Shura (QS), the Haqqani Network (HN), and Hizb-e-Islami Gulbedin (HIG). Mullah Omar is no longer the Taliban’s “Supreme Leader”; rather, his leadership is limited to the Quetta Shura, also known as the Rahbari Shura (Supreme Taliban Shura). The QS consists of four regional military councils (*figure 1, page 8*) located in Quetta, Peshawar, Miramshah, and Gerdi Jangal, and includes ten committees: Military, Finance, Political affairs, Culture and Information, Interior Affairs, Prisoner and Refugees, Education, Recruitment, Repatriation Committees,

The current Taliban movement, which began in Pakistan in 2002, features many local Pakistani groups and tribesmen from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

Table 1: Neo-Taliban Insurgent Groups

GROUP	LEADER	CURRENT LOCATION	AREAS OF OPERATION & SUPPORT IN AFGHANISTAN
Quetta Shura (QS)	Mullah Mohammad Omar Akhund	Quetta, Pakistan	Uruzgan, Zabul, Kandahar, and Helmand provinces
Hizb-e-Islami Gulbedin (HIG)	Gulbedin Hekmetyar	Bajaur Agency, Pakistan	Laghman, Kunar, Nuristan, Nangarhar, Paktia and Paktika
Haqqani Network (HN)	Sirajuddin Haqqani and Jalaluddin Haqqani	Miramshah in North Waziristan, Pakistan	Khowst, Logar, Wardak, Paktia, and Paktika

Source: Rogio, Bill. "The Afghan Taliban's Top Leaders." *The Long War Journal* (2010), www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/02/the_talibans_top_lea.php; Jones, Seth G. "Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan." 176. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008.

and the Ulema Council. Lastly, whereas the neo-Taliban's command organization is not strictly hierarchical, figure 2 provides a general command structure to display the flow and execution of policy decisions at the various leadership levels.⁴

Thomas Ruttig aptly describes the movement's organizational nature: "Organizationally, the Taliban is a network of networks."⁵ Like its predecessor, the neo-Taliban have sought local alliances in order to spread the insurgency. As can be seen, Sirajuddin Haqqani leads the HN and also leads the QS' Miramshah military council. Moreover, Gulbedin Hekmatyar's HIG began cooperating with the Taliban at the local level in 2002, helping the latter gain footholds in many districts of southern and southeastern Afghanistan. But as HIG wanted to establish itself independently, cooperation ended or became minimal. Finally, Arab volunteers also have a strong impact on the insurgency, although "their relationship with the Taliban is often uneasy."⁶

Figure 1: Taliban Regional Military Councils

QUETTA REGIONAL MILITARY SHURA	Leader: Hafez Majid Regions: Directs activities in southern and western Afghanistan
PESHAWAR REGIONAL MILITARY SHURA	Led by: Abdul Latif Mansur Regions: Directs activities in eastern and northeastern Afghanistan
MIRAMSHAH REGIONAL MILITARY SHURA	Led by: Siraj Haqqani Regions: Directs activities in southeastern Afghanistan, including the provinces of Paktika, Paktia, Khost, Logar, and Wardak
GERDI JANGAL REGIONAL MILITARY SHURA	Led by: Mullah Abdul Zakir Regions: Exclusive focus on Helmand and Nimroz Province

The neo-Taliban are anything but a monolithic and united movement. As one officer explained: "Before going to Afghanistan, I thought the Taliban was a monolithic group but I realized that many fighters were members of local tribes and clans fighting against a predatory government in their area or in other places were bandits and criminals."⁷ Members of the resistance who call themselves "Taliban" are hardly a united group with a single vision for Afghanistan, unlike the 1990s Taliban. At times several spokesmen, all claiming to speak for the Taliban, have given contradictory reactions to the selective targeting of aid workers and political targets; one approves the act and claims responsibility, while the other denies any responsibility. Some of

Figure 2: Quetta Shura Command Structure and Direction of Policy Decisions

MULLAH OMAR	The Taliban commander, assisted by the Supreme Taliban Shura.
SUPREME TALIBAN SHURA	The Supreme Taliban Shura acts as an authoritative institute, outlining policies and decisions, carrying out strategic planning and issuing orders to regional commands.
REGIONAL COMMANDS	Regional command is more informal, as its work depends on the situation; they control the sub-command in tribal boundaries and region assigned.
LOCAL COMMANDS	The local commands are local Taliban groups and control the intelligence structure; their nature of work depends on the ground situation. It directs order to village cells as "Fatwa."
VILLAGE CELLS	The village cell acts in a semi-independent manner; it is a recruiting hub and carries out financial incentives. Their activities are based on the regional situation.
INDIVIDUAL TALIBAN	Individual Taliban carry out propaganda to communicate with and draw out the population. They motivate youths and Madrassa students.

Source: Khan, Mahrukh. "Resurgence of the Taliban." 9. Islamabad 2009.

those who have identified themselves as Taliban have laid down pan-Islamist political aims, whereas others have expressed goals limited to Afghanistan's boundaries.⁸

The Ideological Nature of the Neo-Taliban

The movement's ideological nature has been subjected to much discussion. It has been suggested that the neo-Taliban comprises "two principle ideological groups": one that is aligned with al-Qa'eda and supports the views of Mullah Omar and the hardline Taliban who emerged near the regime's end, and another one that has returned to the Taliban's Pashtun roots and finds its base of support within alienated Pashtun communities.⁹ This distinction is accurate; however, the actors identified are not, for the HN remains close to al-Qa'eda, whereas Mullah Omar has actually distanced himself from al-Qa'eda. In fact, his rhetoric emphasizes nationalist goals.¹⁰ Moreover, whereas the insurgents depend heavily on their ability to mobilize Pashtun, the neo-Taliban is more than a Pashtun nationalist or tribal movement. The movement's leaders avoid tribal language or vocabulary in their statements and are not driven by tribal or sub-tribal politics. What the neo-Taliban have done is to recruit fighters or allies nationwide by exploiting local grievances that are important at a particular location or time. Thus they accept anybody who shares their views and obeys their rules, regardless of ethnicity and tribe.¹¹

As crafted by its leaders, the neo-Taliban's ideological nature is dualistic, featuring a vertical organizational structure in the form of a supra-tribal and supra-ethnic, Islamist, and nationalist shadow state. Its horizontal structure is defined by networks rooted in Pashtun tribal society.¹²

The Local Taliban

Whereas initially many of the fighters came from Pakistan, Pakistani madaris provided a stream of recruits to the Afghan insurgency, and members of the Pakistani Taliban regularly crossed the border to engage U.S. forces, over the years the resistance has become almost completely localized. It is estimated that eighty to ninety percent of the fighters operate in or around their

communities.¹³ Staffen de Mistura, the serving United Nations (UN) Special Representative to Afghanistan, underscored this point, saying¹⁴:

The Afghan Taliban has a range of interests and activities of about six miles. They are very local. They don't go to Kabul. They fight and operate at night, or whatever, in the six-mile range. So they are quite linked to the territory, and quite interested in their own territory.

Similarly, Nir Rosen, an independent journalist, explains: "Most of the Taliban that I've met are poor madrassa students living off whatever charity people give them. They are local guys fighting for local reasons."¹⁵ Many of the participants are part-time fighters because they are farmers or laborers.

As seen from the movement's activities, the new resistance comprises small units of fighters led by local leaders who sometimes coordinate their activities. There is not a standard operational strategy, as commanders adapt and adopt strategies based on local circumstances. For example, they might partner with certain outfits in one region while remaining aloof in another.¹⁶ The politics of their immediate vicinity influences the locals' decisions to fight.

The Spread of the neo-Taliban in Afghanistan

Between 2003 and 2006 the Taliban gained control of much of southern Afghanistan. Taking over parts of Zabul and eastern Paktika provinces in 2003, they also had strongholds in Uruzgan and Kandahar by 2004 and near Kandahar city and in northern Helmand province by 2005-06. At the same time, they pushed out the government's presence from Ghazni, northern Paktika, Khost, and southern and central Helmand. By 2008 Taliban fighters were on the outskirts of Kabul, launching attacks on three of the four roads linking it to other provinces.¹⁷

As the leaked Afghan Interior Ministry map (*map 1, pg. 12*) shows, by April 2009 over 50 percent of Afghanistan was under a "high risk of attack" by insurgents, while thirteen districts were under insurgent control. A map released later that year by the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS) showed that 80 percent of Afghanistan was under "heavy insurgent" attacks (*map 2, pg. 12*). Finally, the UN released a security-risk assessment of Afghanistan in late 2010 featuring two maps (*map 3, pg. 13*), one from March 2010 and another from October 2010. The assessment's major conclusion was that the security risk in Afghanistan had increased. Two more important conclusions can be drawn from the maps: the south continued to face a very high security risk, as most of it was under the insurgents' de facto control, and new areas in the north faced a high risk of attack, signaling the Taliban's expanding reach.

Today the neo-Taliban have roughly 30,000 fighters (*table 2, below*) and shadow governors in thirty-three of the country's thirty-four provinces.¹⁸ If there is one trend that can be observed, it is that over the past decade the insurgency has not been contained and certainly not reversed. Why have they been able to increase their presence and activities throughout Afghanistan? From a western perspective, the failure of the American-led forces to establish control over Afghanistan and curb the insurgency is attributed to a lack of required troops and "half-hearted" nation-building attempts. This analysis rests on the assumption that a large number of troops and a strong financial plan will enable counterinsurgency to overcome a guerrilla movement. This reasoning overlooks some of the more fundamental social and political factors that insurgents can use to their advantage, ones that counterinsurgents may not be able to overcome just by building schools and bridges. The reasons for the neo-Taliban's success may be similar to those of the Taliban in the 1990s: their ability to mobilize the Pashtun and exploit local grievances to win allies.

Table 2: Estimated Strength of Taliban Fighters ¹⁹

YEAR	2003	2005	2006	2010-2011
neo-Taliban Fighters	7,000	12,500	17,000	25,000-36,000

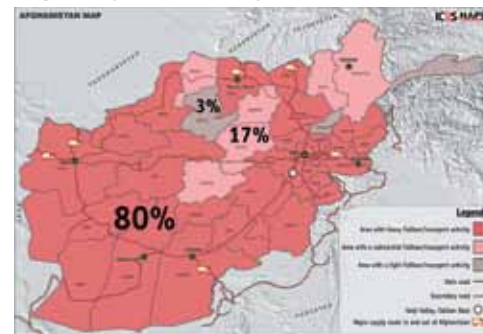
If there is one trend that can be observed, it is that over the past decade the insurgency has not been contained and certainly not reversed.

Map 1: Leaked Afghan Interior Ministry Map, April 2009



Source: Tait, Paul "Government Map Shows Dire Afghan Security Picture." (2009), www.reuters.com/article/2009/08/05/us-afghanistan-map-idUSSP43015420090805.

Map 2: Map from ICOS, September 2009



Source: "Afghanistan Map." Map of the Taliban's presence within Afghanistan. Kabul: International Council on Security and Development, 2009.

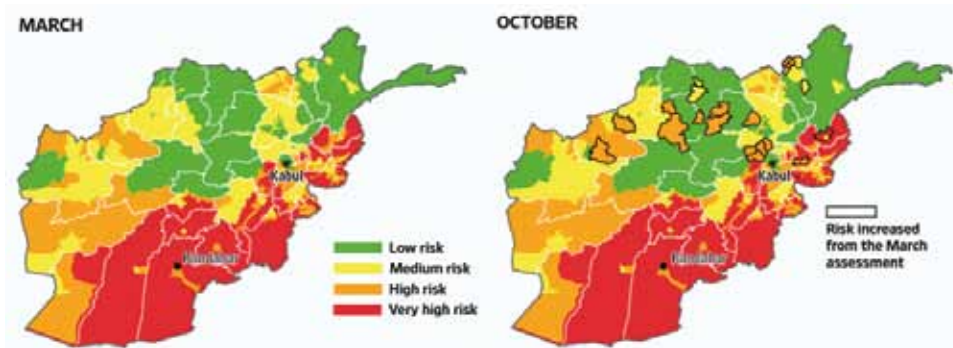
Pashtun Alienation

The control of Afghanistan is predicated upon support from the Pashtun, the country's largest ethnic group. Their continued exclusion from any participation in the governance and decision-making processes has contributed immensely to inflaming the insurgency. Following the Taliban's fall, the Tajiks and other non-Pashtun groups who had helped the United States defeat them dominated much of the post-invasion governing order. The interim government that followed the Bonn Conference, as well as the transitional administration that followed the 2002 Emergency Loya Jirga, were both formed with little Pashtun input. Moreover, all of the key ministries—Foreign, Defense, and Interior—and security institutions were headed by Tajiks. As Pashtuns saw non-Pashtuns dominating the commissioned and non-commissioned ranks of the Afghan National Army (ANA), they realized that even though they were 40 percent of the population, they were being socio-politically marginalized. This reality disillusioned many Pashtuns, who understood that they lacked representation at the center and disliked the idea of a non-Pashtun establishment.²⁰

Moreover, near and after the Taliban's fall the Tajiks attacked the northern Pashtuns and displaced, raped, tortured, and executed them, along with looting their property and livestock. Many were also targeted by the Afghan National Militias (comprised of non-Pashtun militias) and American forces for being "Taliban sympathizers," and thus were killed, raped, and abducted. Such victimization only exacerbated their sense of alienation. Even though Karzai himself is a Pashtun, he lacks support within the Pashtun community because he is viewed as an "impotent figure-head" influenced by foreigners and non-Pashtuns, a front man for the non-Pashtun United Front, and the person responsible for the non-Pashtuns' ascent to political power. Amin Tarzi explains that the Pashtuns, who were satisfied with the old Taliban because they had imposed Pashtun control over the country, were now longing for their past power.²¹

This sense of marginalization and other brutalities (discussed below) resulted in many Pashtun communities joining the insurgents. Out of this despair emerged that section of the insurgency that has returned to the Taliban's Pashtun roots. Their support base comes from alienated and disenfranchised Pashtun communities.²²

Map 3: Hostile Territory | UN Security Assessment Map, March & October 2010



Source: Trofimov, Yaroslav "U.N. Maps out Afghan Security." *Wall Street Journal* (2010), <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203568004576043842922347526.html>.

Local Grievances

The post-Taliban government depends on local strongmen, warlords, and militia leaders. This reality created two problems that helped the neo-Taliban's rise. As local warlords became the new governors and sub-national heads of the administration, they started filling ministries and bureaucracies with their own supporters, thereby giving the system of appointments a patrimonial nature. This sparked inter- and intra-ethnic power struggles between competing local leaders and opened up spaces in which the Taliban could reappear.²³

In Kandahar, Uruzgan, and Helmand provinces, local strongmen and tribal leaders who were aligned with Karzai "acted as bulwarks against the penetration of the Taliban," but also "systematically marginalise[ed] [their local political rivals] from all positions of power and (...) harass[ed] them."²⁴ Moreover, warlords brutalized and intimidated the population through extortion, torture, arbitrary arrest, and imprisonment. These atrocities, which made tribal leaders and others cognizant of their socio-political marginalization, pushed those being harassed by Pashtun or non-Pashtun tribal leaders toward supporting the only alternate source of protection: the neo-Taliban. Inter-ethnic and tribal political rivalries continually helped the neo-Taliban recruit locally because those who were disgruntled, out of power, or unhappy with a rival controlling the village would support them. A system of quid pro quo developed: the neo-Taliban would offer protection in return for political power-sharing to those tribes being attacked by rival leaders of the United States-Karzai camp.²⁵

A prominent example of this was the case of Mullah Omar's lieutenants mentioned earlier. Anand Gopal lists eleven major commanders who were, at some point, victims of official harassment, abuse, and torture in prison and ultimately fled to Pakistan to join the QS. Some of them returned to Afghanistan as leaders of the insurgency, while others led the organization and administration from Pakistan. By 2005, most of old Taliban leaders and field commanders had joined the insurgency.²⁶

The neo-Taliban's expansion to northern Afghanistan, traditionally enemy territory for them, shows a continuation of this trend. The insurgents have won over members of the Jamiat-i-Islam, the Junbesh-e-Milli, and other jihadi groups of 1980s that had been marginalized by,

and thus became hostile to, the Karzai regime. In other instances, commanders of northern militia groups joined them after being sidelined or marginalized by their own leadership. While the insurgents exploited local power rivalries to gain influence, the Afghan security forces' use of heavy-handed counterinsurgency methods also drove people into their arms.²⁷

Tactics Used by the Neo-Taliban

Many of the tactics used by insurgents to spread their control in the south and north mirror those used by the 1990s Taliban. As Taliban specialist Abdulkader Sinno stated, the Taliban followed two major goals: (1) co-opt or sideline their rivals by promoting defections within their ranks and (2) establish strongholds from which to pursue their military and political activities and expansion. The Taliban effectively used their expert knowledge of the Pashtun power tapestry and village politics and continually capitalized on their own momentum.²⁸

Beginning in 2002, the neo-Taliban entered the Afghan countryside and approached villages that they presumed to be hospitable in order to establish bases there.²⁹ As mentioned, they began consolidating support by recruiting local communities that were opposed to or had been targeted by the Karzai regime and its local allies.³⁰ In the north, they also exploited tribal fault lines and recruited people belonging to the lesser tribes or lower strata of the tribal hierarchy. Their complex intelligence network keeps them very well informed about village politics and enables them to exploit the conflicts in a very sophisticated manner. In spreading their control to northern non-Pashtun areas, they have let their Uzbek and Turkmen associates lead the effort, thereby displaying a clear strategy to combat Afghanistan's socio-political divides.³¹

In many instances, insurgent infiltration begins with clerics coming to villages to spread anti-government propaganda and, at times, to distribute money and invite people to join the jihad. Sympathy for the neo-Taliban among the local clergy, who preach against the government, helps garner support for them. Next, political emissaries and agents infiltrate to revive old contacts and gain new support; they are followed by small groups of armed men who train locals and establish local militant teams. This stage also features insurgents engaging foreign and government forces and executing terrorist attacks. The final stage consists of extensive local recruitment accompanied by attacks on counterinsurgent forces.³²

In contrast to Pakistan's intelligence agencies, which have supported the Afghan Taliban heavily, the insurgency has developed its own momentum. The neo-Taliban's recruitment and organization efforts are indigenous, as highlighted by their northward spread. Hamid Karzai, quoted in a cable dispatched from the American embassy in Kabul, underscored this point: "But 'Pakistan is a puzzle to me now,' Karzai admitted. 'I see things happening on a massive scale in the northwest that are not the work of ISI.'"³³



Fourth Generation Warfare

The neo-Taliban's military strategy is what is known as "fourth generation warfare." "Fourth Generation Warfare 'uses all available networks—political, economic, social, and military—to convince the enemy's political decision makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit.' It is an evolved form of insurgency."³⁴ Afghani jihadi groups have always studied Mao's theories of guerrilla warfare, and the neo-Taliban has adapted his "strategic defensive" and "strategic stalemate" techniques.

In the first stage, the rebels concentrate on clandestine recruitment, training, organizing, obtaining funding, establishing intelligence and operation networks, developing sources for external support, and so on. The neo-Taliban completed this stage in 2002. In the second stage, the guerrillas launch terrorist strikes, cause defections to their side, provide governmental services (e.g., law, order, and security), and begin a protracted guerrilla struggle from strong base areas. As John Nagl writes, a propaganda campaign consisting of clandestine radio broadcasts, newspaper articles, and pamphlets challenges the established authority's control and legitimacy. The strategic stalemate technique, a protracted-war strategy, features a mixture of politico-military tactics. The urban strategy of fourth generation warfare is to weaken the government, kill government and opposition leaders, and to intimidate police officials and military officials. The goal is to put immense pressure on enemy decision makers, causing them to eventually capitulate, regardless of success or failure on the battlefield.³⁵

As the insurgency gained momentum, the neo-Taliban began a targeted assassination campaign against bureaucrats, policemen, and diplomats who were supporting the United States and the Karzai regime. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), doctors, and other institutions were also targeted. Their advances would often follow a strong propaganda campaign and the notorious "night letters." This phase's strategy sought to break down state control. As the government's structure was already weak and lacked legitimacy, targeting officials would cause them to flee and further reduce government or administrative control in the designated area. By further targeting government services and reducing the latter's control, the neo-Taliban would ultimately gain increased control of society. During this phase, they also relied on coercing the populace, killing students and teachers, and threatening schoolgirls and their parents against attending co-educational institutions.³⁶

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The neo-Taliban began demoralizing the government by repeatedly launching suicide bombing attacks against selected targets, foreign troops, and the ANA and by beheading prisoners. This did achieve results, for by 2005-06 the Afghan Military Forces (AMF) had cut back on patrolling along with other police forces. The neo-Taliban established control on the basis of providing justice, set up judiciaries in the countryside, and used the Shariah to offer a sort of quick, swift, “ready justice”—actions that won them significant popularity. After establishing a shadow government, they enacted strategies for gaining support: keeping civilian casualties at a minimum through managed and carefully targeted violence, refraining from interfering in the 2004 elections, warning (as opposed to instantly killing) alleged “collaborationists” through threats, staying out of the populace’s everyday affairs, imposing law and order, prohibiting harassment, banning house searches, and only recruiting fighters who had not mistreated civilians.³⁷

Why Has Counterinsurgency Failed in Afghanistan?

Economic development, good governance, and the provision of essential services, all occurring within a matrix of effective information operations, must all improve simultaneously and steadily over a long period of time if America's determined enemies are to be defeated.

– John A. Nagl

With the current crisis in Afghanistan and the failure of the American and international forces to carry out meaningful counterinsurgency or nation-building in the country, it is essential to ask what went wrong. The US Army/Marines Counterinsurgency Field Manual (hereinafter: *Manual*) explains that two broad goals of a counterinsurgency are to invade a certain region, attempt to diminish support for the insurgency, and then neutralize the “bad” actors. Trying to establish security; allowing people to pursue social, economic, political, and cultural activities; and providing basic services can achieve the first goal. The long-term goals include economic development, infrastructural development, and stable governance. The second goal is pursued through offensive combat operations designed to kill insurgents, especially hardcore militants, or to impose such heavy costs for resistance that they surrender.

Counterinsurgency operations can also be divided into three stages: (1) seek to secure the population, break the insurgents’ initiative and momentum, and shape the conditions for further engagement; (2) achieve stability, which includes providing governance and essential services and beginning economic development. Furthermore, relations with the populace are cultivated and strengthened, and the host nation government begins to establish its legitimacy by providing security, effective governance, and essential services; and (3) conduct stability operations in which the host nation government takes the lead.³⁸

After over seven years of occupation, there exists no apparent strategy to target the Taliban’s fourth generation warfare and the United States has barely completed the first and second stages in Kabul alone. Nagl emphasizes that successful counterinsurgency relies upon such “non-kinetic activities” as providing electricity, jobs, and a functioning judicial system.³⁹ This pursuit has been unsuccessful, as half of the Afghan population lives under the poverty line and even Kabul suffers from electricity shortages. In addition, the Karzai administration remains judicially paralyzed. The third goal will not be achieved in the foreseeable future.

After over seven years of occupation, there exists no apparent strategy to target the Taliban’s fourth generation warfare and the United States has barely completed the first and second stages in Kabul alone.

Instability and Karzai's Challenge of Legitimacy

The second stage seeks to achieve stability. In this regard, the host nation government's legitimacy and the rule of law are vital to any counterinsurgency effort. Nagl explains that "legitimate governance is inherently stable" and allows for stability and development in society, whereas illegitimate governance is "inherently unstable," and the moment the government loses its coercive power, "the populace ceases to obey it," which results in a breakdown of order. "A counterinsurgency effort cannot achieve lasting success without the host nation government achieving legitimacy."⁴⁰ According to the Manual, there are six indicators of legitimate governance:

1. Ability to provide security for the populace;
2. Selection of leaders at a frequency and in a manner considered just and fair by a substantial majority of the populace;
3. Culturally acceptable level of corruption;
4. A high level of participation in or support for political processes;
5. A culturally acceptable level and rate of political, economic, and social development; and
6. A high level of regime acceptance by major institutions.

With a fledging insurgency, a shattered rule of law, rampant violence, an increasing civilian death toll, the manipulated elections of 2004 and 2009, extremely high levels of corruption, a lack of development, and Karzai's severely weak authority, the current Afghan government does not satisfy a single indicator of "legitimate governance." It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the United States and Karzai have failed to counter the neo-Taliban.⁴¹

Karzai's government has faced these problems for various reasons. First, the Loya (Grand) Jirga of 2002, which appointed Karzai to rule Afghanistan, was composed of warlords and

political elites who were not freely elected, as tradition demands; rather, they were chosen by the United States. After manipulating the 2004 elections and ensuring Karzai's selection as president, the United States created a strong centralized system of government rather than a federal or broader power-sharing system. Karzai's lack of legitimacy is rooted in the Loya Jirga, which sought to sideline other political groups. This tightly centralized system of rule further alienated Karzai from the people, because he did not have the consent of "a wide variety of Afghan social groups." The 2009 election rigging has further exacerbated this problem.⁴²

Second, Karzai has been in a Catch-22 situation: including the Tajiks in the government cost him the Pashtun's support, because they feared being marginalized. Alternatively, excluding all non-Pashtuns other than the Tajiks cost him their support as well, for the former feared a return of the Pashtun order that would suppress them. Furthermore, the lopsided distribution of power in local administration, land, and resources increased conflict, caused instability, and strengthened the insurgency. The counterinsurgents' promotion of good governance did not increase Karzai's legitimacy, for in many areas the neo-Taliban had already mobilized enough people against the government that such measures were nullified.⁴³

Third, opium production has continued to increase ever since the American invasion. Afghanistan now produces 7,700 tons of opium, over 92 percent of total global production; by 2008, this was valued at \$3.4 billion. Eradication policies have failed and pitted farmers against the police. The government's use of local strongmen to force farmers to stop growing poppy has led to arbitrary rule by force and patronage.⁴⁴

Fourth, much of the instability and lack of legitimacy comes from the United States' tight control over Afghan politics. International agencies have monopolized the country's reconstruction; policy prescriptions have been flown in from the United States, Britain, and Germany; and international non-governmental agencies have controlled the distribution of developmental aid, effectively cutting Karzai's control of state expenditures. Rather than building state institutions to carry out public services, Washington has relied on American contract firms to inspect food safety and build schools and hospitals.

Finally, the Afghan government has no judicial control over the prisons and detention centers being used by the United States to detain, torture, and murder members of al-Qa'eda, the Taliban, and future Guantanamo detainees. All of this has sidelined Afghan control and opinion in the decision-making process and severely restricted the government's ability to exert its influence over regional power elites. The United States' counterinsurgency doctrine advocates this policy, stressing a "unity of command" (i.e., all organizations function under the authority of the military force), which makes aid agencies and NGOs appear to be puppets of the occupying forces, causing them to be the recipients of violence and mistrust. This image undermines the legitimacy of the host nation.⁴⁵ A recent example of this was the United States Army's provision of \$1 million to the Shinwari tribe to end poppy cultivation and keep the Taliban out. The military provided the aid directly to the tribal elders, who ultimately squandered it in an intra-tribal conflict, thereby bypassing the Nangarhar provincial government. The aftermath was a sidelined and marginalized government that appeared even more illegitimate, as well as an untrustworthy tribal ally who could not be held accountable.⁴⁶

In 2003, against the backdrop of militias and warlords who controlled the state and opium production dominating the country, the neo-Taliban rode in, just like the Taliban in 1994, and claimed to offer solutions to lawlessness, the corruption of officials and soldiers sent from the center, and the disillusionment with what many Afghans had started calling a "foreign occupation."⁴⁷ They filled the void by restoring law and order, dispensing speedy justice, protecting poppy farmers from government officials, and fighting to rid Afghanistan of that foreign presence. They found allies in areas opposed to the foreign presence and poppy eradication effort. Except for areas in which the tribal structure remains intact, people continue to turn to the neo-Taliban to settle disputes and establish law and order.⁴⁸

Civilian Abuse, Troop Excesses, and Heavy Reliance on Airpower

Among the largest drawbacks of the American-led counterinsurgency forces are civilian abuse, troop excesses, and heavy reliance on air power, all three of which the Manual strictly cautions against. In fact, the Manual clearly states that a successful counterinsurgency effort requires familiarity with the localities' key groups, leadership structure, and cultural values and norms, as well as providing security within the host nation's legal guidelines and cultural norms.

Illegitimate actions include “unjustified or excessive use of force, unlawful detention, torture, and punishment without trial.” All such acts, while unlawful, also cause popular discontent and defeat the counterinsurgency’s long-term purpose.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, as American forces untrained in counterinsurgency techniques began operating in Afghanistan, they often exhibited heavy-handed behavior. Reports of severe abuses against civilians have emerged, even against the Special Operations Forces. The populace’s grievances include a lack of respect for local customs, such as random house searches that continuously violate the privacy of Afghan women and residences, as well as the arbitrary arrest and sometimes killing of innocent Afghan civilians because American forces mistook them for insurgents. Night raids are especially unpopular. In 2009, a group of elders in Zabul warned: “Stop the special operations at night that kill civilians and terrify our women and children. If you don’t, you will lose our support. We will close our shops, block the streets, move to the mountains and fight you the way we fought the Soviets.”⁵⁰ American forces also implicitly supported the Northern Alliance’s war crimes and human rights violations against the Pashtuns, including mass expulsions, murder, rape, and the violent killing of Taliban prisoners of war in their 2001 advance toward Kabul. The list of human rights violations and war crimes committed by American forces also includes burning the bodies of dead militants, threatening to destroy communities that put up resistance, and illegally detaining prisoners at the Bagram airbase and other secret prisons.⁵¹

Bagram prison, known as “Obama’s Gitmo,” is notorious for its torture and mistreatment of prisoners. One victim, who was arrested in Kirmati village (Paktia) and taken to Bagram Airbase, described the treatment as follows⁵²:

They threw us in a room, face down. We were there for a while. Then they stood me up and led me somewhere, and then they took off my blindfold. I saw that I was alone. I saw that there were some other people in the room, but I was the only prisoner.

I was on the ground, and a man stood over me, and he had a foot on my back. An interpreter was there at this point. He asked me, “What is your name?” and I told them.

They made me take off my clothes, so that I was naked. They took pictures of us, naked. And then they gave us new clothes, which were dark blue.

A man came, and he had some plastic bag, and he ran his hands through my hair, shaking my hair. And then he pulled out some of my hair, some hair from my beard, and he put it in a bag... The most awful thing about the whole experience was how they were taking our pictures, and we were completely naked. Completely naked. It was completely humiliating.

Although this victim did not join the insurgency, there are other stories of individuals and entire sub-tribes, such as Ishaqzai and Noorzais, joining the Taliban as a result of such harassment and humiliation. Malim Feda Mohammad, a Taliban commander in Kandahar, was once abused, stripped, and beaten in prison. His harassment forced him to join the insurgency.

The list of such excesses and human rights violations include using firepower to enter houses, firing weapons inside the house, and arbitrarily arresting and killing people during operations.⁵³ Moreover, such local forces as the Afghan National Army (ANA), the Afghan National Police (ANP), and other militias that were entrusted with leading the local counterinsurgency effort on the ground that they would be better at maintaining order, have also been involved in civilian abuse and human rights violations. These forces are undisciplined, unable to create or maintain law and order, and have developed a reputation for abusing the population. Afghan forces have extorted money from locals, threatening to arrest them for being “Taliban” if they do not comply, and have arbitrarily arrested and abused many locals. Moreover, the abuse of Pashtun civilians by the Tajiks, who dominate the ranks of these forces, has created ethnic strife.⁵⁴

In addition, the United States’ indiscriminate use of air power has caused massive civilian damage and turned the Afghan people against Karzai and the foreign presence.⁵⁵ Whereas air support may have “enormous value in counterinsurgency operations,” writes Nagl, it must be used very infrequently because strikes from the most “precise weapons can cause unintended civilian casualties,”⁵⁶ thereby creating an extended family of enemies, changing attitudes from neutrality to anger and active opposition, causing grievances that insurgents can exploit to mobilize support, and breeding enmity toward the host nation government. Nagl concludes

that regardless of whether it is justified under international law or not, the resulting civilian deaths cannot be ignored as collateral damage. Commanders should use appropriate and measured levels of force in an attempt to limit civilian casualties, even when the insurgents' headquarters are being targeted.⁵⁷

American forces, which make extensive use of aerial fire power to contend with the rising insurgency, have regularly violated this doctrine. The tactic has backfired, turning locals against the occupying forces and giving the neo-Taliban areas of support from which it can securely attack American forces. Heavy bombardment also caused much collateral damage and created many internally displaced people (IDPs). These IDPs were unemployed and sought refuge in camps, which ultimately became "recruitment grounds" for the neo-Taliban. Since 2007 even Karzai has warned NATO forces that civilian casualties from aerial bombings "had reached unacceptable levels."⁵⁸ Abuses by American-led troops has continually turned local opinion against the counterinsurgency and contributed to local sympathy for the Taliban.⁵⁹ When much of the American force's actions violate its own Manual, let alone American and international law, can an American administration hope for success in Afghanistan?



The Endgame in Afghanistan

Afghanistan features all conditions—poverty, political instability, large populations, and rough terrain—that scholars have shown to favor insurgencies. Moreover, the track record of insurgencies tilts the balance in the favor of the insurgents. Out of the 73 insurgencies that either took place or ended between 1945 and 2006, governments have won 28, insurgents 26, and 19 ended in some kind of draw.⁶⁰ These empirical facts, when coupled with Afghanistan's history of resisting foreign invaders, the insurgency's current strength, and the failure of the counterinsurgency efforts, severely limit American options. The Obama administration's stated policy remains the arrest and reversal of the Taliban's momentum. Amidst the rhetoric of aggression and hope, the situation, however, is not very bright.

Since early 2010 the United States has stepped up military operations in southern Afghanistan. General Petraeus (commander, International Security Assistance Force [ISAF]) is implementing an aggressive combat strategy. Nevertheless, the results so far have been as expected. The year 2010 has been the bloodiest one for ISAF, with 711 casualties. Despite the Obama administration's insistence that overall Taliban influence is decreasing and that the allied forces are clearing the Taliban heartland of Kandahar and Helmand, the situation is in many ways actually the reverse. In the aftermath of Operation Moshtarek, it was reported that the Taliban benefited from civilian deaths and displacement and continued to recruit young people. Moreover, the locals' high and rising anger against NATO forces, due to the occupation, civilian casualties, and night raids, were also reported. For example, 61 percent of the interviewees from Helmand and Kandahar reported adopting a more negative view of NATO forces after the operation was carried out.⁶¹

While reaffirming its current strategy, the Obama administration and other influential actors and opinion makers are conceding that a military solution is not at hand. The review released in December 2010 stated: "In 2011, we will intensify our regional diplomacy to enable a political process to promote peace and stability in Afghanistan, to include Afghan-led reconciliation."⁶² Staffen de Mistura also argued: "There is no military solution. We all know it. And by the way, the Taliban know it too." Stability and peace in Afghanistan will only be achievable "in the long-term if we have a regional contract of engagement."⁶³ Even the latest Council on Foreign Relations report accepted that "[r]econciliation with senior Taliban leaders on appropriate terms must be part of the United States' overall strategy. Irregular conflicts rarely end in a surrender ceremony on a battleship."⁶⁴

The Obama administration's stated policy remains the arrest and reversal of the Taliban's momentum. Amidst the rhetoric of aggression and hope, the situation, however, is not very bright.

At the London International Conference on Afghanistan in January 2010, Hamid Karzai announced his government's plan to enter into negotiations with the Taliban, saying that it was time to "reach out to all of our countrymen, especially our disenchanting brothers."⁶⁵ Just a few days before the conference Kie Eide, the then-UN Special Representative to Afghanistan, had met with some QS leaders in Dubai. Of course secret negotiations have been reported since 2007, with reports in October 2008 and November 2009 of more back-channel talks between the neo-Taliban, the Afghan government, and the United States.⁶⁶

As is becoming clear, the troop surge and military operations are aimed at consolidating support in major cities and along roads. The goal is to push the insurgents out of city centers and impose enough pressure on them so that they will agree to participate in Karzai's reconciliation and reintegration program. A special fund of \$1.5 billion was also set to provide monetary incentives, especially for low- and mid-level fighters.⁶⁷ The American endgame in Afghanistan, therefore, is not victory, because a military victory is nowhere in the cards; rather, it is a negotiated settlement that will allow a face-saving withdrawal.

Recommendations on Future Actions

This section briefly mentions some recommendations that the American government should undertake to move forward in Afghanistan.

- **Beyond hot negotiations:** So far the insurgents and the Afghan government have spent more time sending feelers to one another than they have in structured dialogue.⁶⁸ Both parties have yet to move beyond preliminary meetings. With an expected drawdown of American forces beginning in July 2011, a more substantial and structured dialogue must take place. Parties should begin engaging in more robust and target-oriented rounds of negotiations with an appropriate timeline in mind.

- **Talks must not only be Afghan-led, but American-backed and UN-supported:** The current idea guiding the peace initiative is that Afghans have to reconcile among themselves. While NATO forces are allowing insurgents to pass through their areas and travel to Kabul, the United States has not officially backed any talks. The UN's current role is that of a low-profile facilitator. Without American backing, Karzai's decision-making power remains limited and prevents him from engaging in serious negotiations with the insurgents. The United States should put its weight behind the Karzai regime and actively participate in working for a diplomatic settlement. In addition, any Afghan reconciliation effort should be conducted jointly and under the auspices of the UN and the Afghan government so it can benefit from much-needed regional participation and receive international recognition.

- **The Afghan Peace Dividend:** The conflict threatens security in multiple Asian countries. There is a "peace dividend" to be had from the end of the insurgency, with regional powers benefiting economically, geo-politically, and domestically. Regional powers that stand to benefit should be given a stake in establishing stability, as opposed to helping spawn instability, and preserving the peace in Afghanistan. As Staffen de Mistura said: "[E]veryone seems to be keen at this stage about the stability of Afghanistan. No one has any gain at the moment out of the instability of Afghanistan."⁶⁹ Afghanistan needs a multilateral diplomatic effort, and talks should include participation from Pakistan, Iran, China, India, and Russia.

- **National Reconciliation:** Afghanistan has suffered war for over thirty years. This conflict has fragmented society; created deep fissures between different groups; and created a vicious

The United States seeks to expand the CIA's footprint in the country so it can facilitate more aggressive Pakistani-led ground actions.

cycle of brutalization, death, and revenge. National reconciliation is one of several factors needed for stability. Three important features of this reconciliation should be:

- The Karzai regime will hold fresh elections that allow political participation from groups currently excluded from the political structure.
- An Afghan National Advisory Council of prominent Afghan leaders should be created. Today there are at least six major political figures⁷⁰ who have an important role to play. A political space should be created so they can productively participate in their country's future.
- The UN and the Afghan government should work on a model that promotes conflict resolution and reconciliation at the district and sub-district levels. Using traditional methods of conflict resolution can be effective and efficient.

Conclusion

The American-led counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan has been a tremendous failure due to short-term policies, a lack of understanding of local power tapestries and contours of the ethno-cultural political divides, and continuous violations of its own counterinsurgency doctrine. President Karzai, who lacks control and legitimacy, is comically referred to as the “Mayor of Kabul.” The United States has been uninterested and ineffectual in bringing democracy to Afghanistan. As a matter of fact, democracy was not even mentioned in its proposed Bonn Agreement; it was added later at the request of the Iranian delegate. Furthermore, reconstruction efforts have been more directed toward spreading capitalism and enforcing neo-liberal policies than in relieving the people’s problems.⁷¹

Since 2003 and with American backing, Karzai has brought the “moderate” Taliban into mainstream Afghan politics. This group, of course, excluded the top Taliban leaders with links to al-Qa’eda. By 2007, over 3,500 lower cadres of Hizb-i-Islami and several other smaller groups resisting the American occupation had been inducted into the political process. This, however, did not quell the rampant insurgency.⁷²

The Obama administration has maintained the rhetoric of aggression and power, describing the Afghan war as “salvageable.” The current policy, however, is not aimed at reversing the momentum of the insurgency, but at negotiating a settlement that will enable a face-saving withdrawal.⁷³ The time to begin a serious engagement with the senior neo-Taliban leadership is now.

The state’s lingering strategic perception that non-state actors are useful to achieving regional objectives will also have to change.

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مِنْ طِينٍ مَّهِينٍ

ثُمَّ عَلَّمَهُ الْقُرْآنَ
مِيزَانَ حَسْبِ الْإِنسَانِ
أَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ لِنُوحٍ
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