



# AFGHANISTAN 2012: THE BEGINNING OF THE END GAME

*Azeem Ibrahim, ISPU Fellow*

*AFTER TEN YEARS and \$460 billion invested in an unstable country with untrustworthy leadership, it is time to end this war, which has taken the lives of 1,848 members of the US armed services and 955 coalition partners and an estimated 37,000 Afghan civilians. The end is in sight, but the future of war-torn Afghanistan is difficult to predict and demands an international solution.*

Foreign forces began leaving Afghanistan at the end of 2011. About 14,000 of them withdrew by the end of December: 10,000 from the United States and the rest from Canada, France, Britain, Poland, Denmark, and Slovenia. The British government announced that it is considering accelerating its departure program by pulling out up to 4,000 troops before the end of 2013.<sup>1</sup> American troop cutbacks will be deeper in 2012, when an estimated 26,000 more will leave. In reality, however, the 33,000 (10,000 in 2011 and 23,000 in 2012, according to President Obama's announcement on June 22, 2011) troops being withdrawn are part of the "surge" and approximately 68,000 American troops will remain in Afghanistan.

The end game approaches envisage four possible scenarios: chaos, civil war, a vacuum, or an uneasy truce overseen by the United Nations. But what has become increasingly clear is that Washington should deploy its military forces only when the mission is clear, concrete, and achievable. The current mission in Afghanistan did not fulfil these criteria.

Sen. John F. Kerry (D-MA), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, expressed a now widely

held belief that "while the United States has genuine national security interests in Afghanistan, our current commitment, in troops and dollars, is neither proportional to our interests nor sustainable", according to a June 8, 2011 Reuters article by Missy Ryan and Susan Cornwell. I do not believe that the military should have been allowed

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to remain in Afghanistan for as long as it has. While our troops have done everything we have asked of them, they cannot be expected to build a nation state where none exists. The presence of foreign armed forces in Afghanistan has proved to be counter-productive, as none of the reasons for a continued major military presence are persuasive.

The traditional four arguments for staying are:

- 1. We should wait until the Afghan army and police forces have been fully trained.**
- 2. Our deployment in Afghanistan keeps us safer by denying al-Qaeda a safe haven from which to plot attacks.**
- 3. Withdrawing now would be a military embarrassment.**
- 4. We would endanger the liberal and develop-**

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He founded ECM Holdings, a conglomerate of six global finance companies that included a private online bank, and a global macro-hedge fund. In addition, he has won over half a dozen prestigious entrepreneur awards over the last decade, was the youngest person on both the Sunday Times Scottish Rich list (2006) and Carter Anderson's UK Power 100 list, and, in 2009, he was named as a Top 100 Global Thinker by the LSDP European Social Think Tank. He has over 100 publications to his name.

### **mental progress that has allowed Afghanistan to open new markets, schools, and clinics in recent years.**

These arguments have been disputed by politicians and generals. But in the end, I believe, they all fail. I consider them individually below.

#### **1. We should wait until the Afghan army and police forces have been fully trained.**

Effective military and police forces are an essential part of governance. This assumes that governance in Afghanistan is the same thing as governance in Australia, Austria, or the United States: a unitary state has a monopoly of force and controls an area enclosed

within clearly defined and internationally recognized borders. Afghanistan's appearance on the world's political map as one unit is deeply misleading, for in reality it is not – and never has been – a unitary state. Rather, the state's traditional roles of dispensing justice, holding a monopoly of force, facilitating trade, and the like have been undertaken by local centers of power: normally local warlords. The "President of Afghanistan" is popularly known as the "Mayor of Kabul," reflecting his lack of power beyond the capital city.

The 2009 elections proved the point. The weak and corrupt central government in Kabul did not just send out ballots to all regions, for after all there are many over which it has no control. Instead, the election was consisted of central government representatives sitting down with the regional strongmen who control certain regions (viz., Mohammad Muhaqq, Rashid Dostum, and Mohammad Fahim) and making agreements with the latter to "deliver" their regions electorally in exchange for "central" government bribes. The election was operated on the same principles as a protection racket. Amrullah Saleh, head of Afghanistan's intelligence service, explained that this was the accepted policy. This example reveals that the central government does not control the country in any way that is analogous to a consolidated democracy or to a dictatorship, for that matter.

This also means that the government lacks the power to raise tax revenue, without which it cannot pay for an army or a police force. It is estimated that the intended combined army and police force apparatus of 450,000 men would cost \$3 billion per year, *five times more* than the total revenue collected by the central government per year. Moreover, training these forces has been permeated with inefficiencies. Conducted at huge expense by private American and German contractors at a cost of \$7 billion over the last eight years, the result has been "a strikingly ineffective and remarkably corrupt police force. Its terrible habits and reputation have led the inhabitants of many Afghan communities to turn to the Taliban for security," according to Robert A. Wehrle.

"Operationally, the effort is broken. Assets are misdirected, poorly managed and misused," wrote Wehrle, an American advisor to the Afghan Ministry of the Interior, in February 2010 after returning from a fifteenth-month stint in Kabul. "Graft and corruption in the Afghan forces are endemic, and coalition forces unwittingly enable that corruption."<sup>2</sup> Belatedly, numbers of police recruits are being sent abroad for training, but it may be too little, too late. If the Pentagon does not dramatically alter the current training scheme, neither governance or peace has a bright future in Afghanistan.

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When is a policeman fully trained? Former Defence Secretary Gates essentially admitted that such a decision can be made only on an arbitrary political basis when he identified the key objectives: "to provide some minimal capability at the local, district and provincial level for security, for dispute resolution, for perhaps a clinic within an hour's walk."<sup>3</sup> This is hardly a clear, concrete, and achievable mission. In addition, there is currently a shortage of skilled trainers and the ever-present danger of trained policemen and soldiers joining the other side, where they are often better paid by drug-financed Taliban.

The situation with training the Afghan army is likewise problematic. General Martin Dempsey, President Barack Obama's top military adviser, has said the American military is reviewing how to carry out the NATO goal of handing over to Afghanistan full nation-wide responsibility for security by the end of 2014. However, efforts to speed

up the training and deployment of Afghan forces are undermined by an annual desertion rate of over 25 percent and a basic training dropout rate of 30 percent. According to some Pentagon estimates, the Afghan army needs to reach a total of 250,000 soldiers and the national police force should add more than 100,000 officers before they can be realistically expected to defeat their opponents. Just giving an illiterate villager a rifle and a uniform is not going to change the future. Sales of American weapons to Afghanistan, nearly \$20 billion from 2009 through 2011 according to Andrea Shalal-Esa,<sup>4</sup> creates the probability that war in some form will continue even after NATO forces leave.

According to the American Army Field Manual on Counter Insurgency, the criteria of success are: "Protect the population; Establish local political institutions; Reinforce local governments; Eliminate insurgent capabilities; Exploit information from local sources."<sup>5</sup> However, the reality is that military operations have caused such a degree of collateral damage that civilians are deeply suspicious of both the international forces' motives and methods. There is little prospect of this on-the-ground reality changing, for violence is a rational response on the part of a population feeling frustration, futility, or a fear of reprisal.

**2. Our deployment in Afghanistan keeps us safer by denying al-Qaeda a safe haven from which to plot attacks.**

Successive American administrations have argued that Afghanistan once again become an ungoverned area if the allies leave. In other words, it would become a safe haven for terrorists to plot attacks against the United States and our allies. After all, it is argued, 9/11 was planned there. If we leave, the area will be free for the terrorists to plan another attack. On the surface, the goal of "defeating al-Qaeda and denying it and its partners a secure base from which to launch attacks on the United States and its allies" sounds perfectly reasonable, as Senator John Kerry, Chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said in his

December 16, 2010 statement. On this argument, leaving the country ungoverned or badly governed is not just irresponsible, it is reckless.

The argument seems strong; however, it is actually incredibly naive. First of all, al-Qaeda and other radical terrorist groups do not actually need Afghanistan to launch attacks; there are plenty of other ungoverned areas. Second, many if not most attacks have been planned in “governed” areas anyway. Third, we will eventually have to leave the country, which is hardly a secret. Fourth, it seems ever less plausible that our presence there actually protects us from terrorism.

Let’s examine each point in detail. First, Afghanistan is not the only ungoverned area from which terrorist groups can and have launched attacks. Others include Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (never fully under Pakistani control), much of Yemen (where the Christmas Day bomber trained), Somalia, Sudan, and, as the 70% control figure shows, much of Afghanistan itself. And Afghanistan is vast: 647,500 square kilometers of mountainous terrain with no effective border at all on the Pakistani side.

Second, terrorists do not need ungoverned areas from which to launch attacks. The 7/7 attacks were planned in Britain, the 2004 Madrid bombings were planned mainly in Spain, much of 9/11 was planned in Germany, and the failed attack on Glasgow airport was planned in Scotland. The thousands of homegrown terrorist attacks foiled by Western security services every year testify to the fact that fighting in Afghanistan cannot protect us from terrorism.

Third, everybody knows that one day the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) will leave. However formidable a fighting force the Afghan army might be by then, there is no way that it will have the power to prevent terrorist plots emanating from its long mountainous and essentially non-border with Pakistan. Once these ISAF troops are gone, Afghanistan will once again be the “safe haven” it was for terrorist plots before we arrived.

Fourth, it looks increasingly obvious that our presence in Afghanistan does not protect us from terrorism; rather,

it provokes more. There is much anecdotal evidence that our presence has radicalized Afghans, which only widens the pool of people among whom terrorists can recruit. A weak government combined with widespread civilian casualties has allowed the Taliban to increase its support. In other words, our presence is more of a provocation than a protection.

The very real fear now is that once American forces withdraw, the country will move from a situation of insurgency into one of civil war. The security situation has been deteriorating steadily. Civilian deaths through air strikes increased during 2011. According to United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) figures, 1,462 Afghan civilians were killed during the first six months of 2011, among them nine boys aged between 7 and 13 who were collecting firewood. The response: a national outcry of protest. In May 2011, President Karzai, who continues to use increasingly anti-NATO rhetoric, issued a “final warning” as more civilians were killed in NATO airstrikes, saying that the American-led coalition risks being seen as an “occupying force.”<sup>6</sup>

Taliban militants and suicide bombers killed almost the same number of Afghan civilians during the same period. UNAMA and AIHRC attributed 1,167 Afghan civilian deaths to anti-government elements in the first six months of 2011, up 28% from the same period in 2010. The escalating civilian death toll reaffirms that the conflict, certainly the propaganda war, is becoming impossible to win.

### **3. Withdrawing now would be a military embarrassment.**

Politicians are understandably wary of using this argument in public. Who could admit to service families that their loved ones were putting themselves in mortal danger as a face-saving exercise for the country’s generals? However shameful it might be for the United States to begin a negotiated withdrawal from Afghanistan, keeping troops in place to secure a mere public relations objective is even more shameful.

**4. We would endanger the liberal and developmental progress that has allowed Afghanistan to open new markets, schools, and clinics in recent years.**

Since clearing Marjah, for example, Afghanistan's Ministry of Education has reopened schools, pupil enrollment has skyrocketed, markets have reopened, and literacy rates have improved. Thanks to the security that we provide, around 85 percent of the population can now reach some type of healthcare facility within an hour, and three times more Afghans have electricity than in 2003. Moreover, there is the social argument: the allied presence has improved Afghan's lives in terms of civil and human rights, secularism, girls' education, and much else. The Taliban, lest we forget, forbade music, kites, and beardlessness. To leave, goes the argument, would be to reverse these gains. While it is heartrending to even think about abandoning so much progress, there are three problems with this set of arguments.

First, we cannot stay there forever, for Afghanistan is not our country. Eventually we will leave. President Obama hopes to withdraw by 2014, and the day after that happens maintaining progress will be up to the Afghans. It seems highly improbable that this will happen seamlessly or even partly successfully, as is happening right now in Iraq. The December 2011 Bonn Conference on Afghanistan's future offered few details beyond 2014. Marred by Pakistan's boycott, conference delegates made pledges without offering specifics and President Karzai declared that his country would need \$10 billion annually to support security and reconstruction.

Second, maintaining the social progress mentioned above is ultimately a question of societal values. No military can enforce values, for that is not a military role. Unless we are seriously going to consider staying forever in the 30% of Afghanistan under NATO control to protect the population from the reintroduction of mores we do not like, these practices – however barbaric and unjust they appear to us – are going to remain. Even the civilian elements of the strategy, such as drilling wells

and opening schools, cannot stave off practices that western sensibilities find repugnant.

c. Afghanistan has never been pacified. The Afghan government, mired in corruption and in place thanks to a fairly fraudulent election by international standards, is not worth the further loss of NATO lives. What we should consider is the parallel case of our next door neighbor Mexico. Even there, the combined efficacy of the American army, police force, the FBI, and the southern border states' national guards currently cannot prevent large parts of this country from suffering lawlessness, drug-related crime, and near anarchy.

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This analogy holds for Afghanistan. Regardless of how well governed Afghanistan might become, there would still be a large, virtually ungoverned space right next to it in northern Pakistan. This border is long and porous, and the spaces involved are vast and inhospitable. Parts of this region have never really been under Islamabad's writ. Even within Pakistan proper, Islamic radicalism fomented, sympathy for the United States is virtually nonexistent, and the ground is ripe for terrorist recruitment. It was announced on December 10, 2011, that the Taliban were holding peace talks with the government of Pakistan; a Pakistani Taliban spokesman later denied this. Such confusion over leadership and organization only makes it harder for Islamabad to strike a deal to end the violent insurgency gripping the country or to suppress it militarily. The fluidity of the situation is further proof that even if the Afghan army were well trained, the large

effectively ungoverned space next door could serve as a base of operations for al-Qaeda or other groups.

### The End Game: Where Do We Go from Here?

On December 7, 2011, a bi-partisan letter from members of the House of Representatives, signed by Congresswoman Barbara Lee and others, urged President Obama to expedite troop withdrawal and recognize that there is no military solution. The letter noted that, in fact, “the longer we keep our troops there, the longer we delay the progress of an Afghan-produced political solution.”

The Obama administration’s stated policy since July 2011 has been to defeat the hardcore Taliban militarily and engage with its moderate elements, if they can be reached. Presumably they would not include the 44 names on the list revealed by Former Afghan Minister of Information, Sheik Mohamed Tashkiri, to the newspaper, Asharq Al-Awsat of Taliban leaders wanted by the US forces. This list includes; Mullah Omar, leader of the former regime who has a 10 million dollar bounty on his head, his aide Mohammed Tayyib Agha, Taliban spokesman Qari Yusuf Ahmadi, in addition to opposition leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. According to journalist, Mohammed Al Shafy,<sup>7</sup> moderate Taliban elements include former Taliban Ambassador to Pakistan, Abdul Salam Zaeef. Zaeef has renewed his commitment to a national unity government that includes the Taliban and different factions of the Afghan nation. Also mentioned are former Taliban Foreign Minister Mullah Wakil Ahmad Muttawakil, and former Taliban envoy Sayed Rahmatullah Hashemi, who studied at Yale University. The issue of negotiating with any Taliban at all is sensitive and highly contentious, particularly in the United States. I have written extensively of the need for a negotiated settlement. While certain elements in the Congress may still find this untenable, there is a growing realization that some kind of compromise peace is the only realistic option, with a political rather than a military solution to end the growing sense of stalemate.

There is considerable skepticism about why the Taliban would want to enter negotiations “when they think they are winning,” as Peter Bergen suggested in a CNN interview.<sup>8</sup> Given the Taliban’s belief that the international community will abandon Afghanistan in 2014, which will lead to Karzai’s fall, all they need to do is wait and continue stockpiling weapons. If, however, moderate Taliban leaders can be assured that the world community will sustain the present system and political structure, then they may come to the negotiating table under the leadership of a UN initiative or another international body. As I stated in an interview in 2009 with Neil Conan on National Public Radio,<sup>9</sup> 90% of Taliban supporters are just pragmatic opportunists; it is time to identify and dialogue with the moderate elements and try to reach some sort of power-sharing agreement.

Veteran UN negotiator Lakhdar Brahimi and retired American ambassador Thomas Pickering head a New York-based task force, The Century Foundation International Task Force on Afghanistan in Its Regional and Multilateral Dimensions, that is looking at such a reconciliation process. In their 2011 report, they recommend that the best way to facilitate such a process would be the use of the United Nations, due to its institutional experience in such roles. However, its presence within Afghanistan as UNAMA has already somewhat compromised the traditional perception of the UN as peacemaker. After all, it has operated in Afghanistan under the same mandate as the ISAF has. The contradiction of operating a military strategy against the Taliban, who live amidst the civilian population, has obviously been a major propaganda failure. As a result, it is now very difficult to perceive the UN as an impartial peacekeeper.

To add to the complexity, recent events are again proving the almost intractable nature of achieving any type of reconciliation. Leaders of the Northern Alliance, who helped depose the Taliban in 2001, announced in October 2011 that they are preparing to renew the struggle when necessary. Former Afghan

vice president Ahmad Zia Massoud said bluntly: “We will not accept Taliban.”<sup>10</sup> Massoud is the younger brother of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the legendary Northern Alliance leader against the Soviets, and the son-in-law of Burhannudun Rabbani, former president and, until his recent assassination, head of President Karzai’s High Peace Council.

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On December 8, 2011, this leader of the National Front asked the UN to investigate the Kabul suicide attack that had occurred two days earlier at Abul Fazl Shrine, in which more than fifty-nine people were killed and nearly two hundred were wounded. The Pakistan-based Lashkari Jhangvi has claimed responsibility. This is bound to exacerbate tensions between the Northern Alliance and Pakistan, both of whom are trying to strengthen their alliance with the Taliban before the American withdrawal. Saleh Mohammed Registani, former defense attaché for the Northern Alliance, said that when Taliban leaders return to the south and east of Afghanistan, “we will go back to the 90s. We will not give in to the Taliban and we will not negotiate with them.”<sup>11</sup>

The most vulnerable area is southern Afghanistan. If its large Pashtun population feels that the international community is supporting non-Pashtun groups (e.g., the ethnic tribes in the National Alliance) and this division is allowed to fester, the achievements of the last eight years could be compromised. The 2009 elections were unfortunate in that they were hardly free or fair and further divided the country into Pashtun and non-Pashtun areas.

The Afghan people are weary of the war, and public support for it in the West is waning. At the same time, the status of peacemaking in Afghanistan today suggests that Kabul and certainly President Karzai himself are not as ready for reconciliation as their rhetoric sometimes suggests. The Taliban must recognize that in many parts of the country, peace and international aid have brought improved living standards that they cannot duplicate. Taliban leaders are also feeling pressure to negotiate due to the ambivalent nature of their relations with Pakistan. Both sides are wary about sending signals that might be construed as weakness. Yet the time seems to be right, now that the American troop reduction is becoming a reality and there is still time for negotiations before the end of 2014.

Although Afghanistan has had long periods of conflict in its history, it has also enjoyed long periods of peace. There is no reason why this cannot be re-established. Peace should not be seen as an American issue, but as a regional issue. At present, UNAMA is the only credible organization that can speak with both the Taliban and Kabul. Despite some misperceptions over its current role it could continue to be the primary facilitator, as specified in a number of UN resolutions. The UN and possibly the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) should act as facilitators in the peace process, along with such key countries and organizations as the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India, Iran, and the European Union.

The role of other nations in this reconciliation process cannot be underestimated. The European Union understands just how important this role is, although it appears to be waiting for a clear statement and policy from the Obama administration and for the United States to take the lead. Regional actors (e.g., Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) understand that a political process is important and necessary, regardless of where their sympathies lie, and Tajikistan is willing to support the reconciliation process. China, which has mainly focused on trade and economic matters,

favors a political settlement, while Russia remains mainly concerned with preventing the spread of drugs and terrorism to its own territory. Iran, regarded as the Northern Alliance's principal supporter, is more interested in preventing the establishment of a strategic American presence in the region; however, it does not officially support the Taliban as a political group.

Pakistan's position is more complex. President Zardari has established a good relationship with President Karzai, and Pakistan has been an official advocate of reconciliation. The Taliban has had a very close relationship with the Pakistani government as well as with elements of the army and the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI). Pakistan-supported peace *jirga* initiatives have been held in Kabul (2007) and Islamabad (2008). In spite of this, however, the Taliban presence in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) is causing tension. Taliban recruitment, training, and logistics bases are still intact. Moreover, it is a common perception that Pakistani security forces will attack only those elements it regards as an immediate danger to their national security. Afghans on both sides of the border are aware that the ISI continues to support the Taliban, the Haqqani network, and the Hezb-e-Islami armed groups. This support for hardcore Taliban elements is reflected by their punishing of those who show any interest in reconciliation without their permission.

Pakistan is also concerned that Kabul may be too close to India, since India has supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban. India, however, favors reconciliation and supports the current Afghan government. Saudi Arabia, like Pakistan, supports reconciliation but is ambiguous in its relations with the Taliban, as their views are close to those of the Saudi Wahhabis. Saudi Arabia also remains very suspicious of Iran's influence and intentions. In 2008, King Abdullah made approaches that signalled he was prepared to play a bigger role in peacemaking.

The contest for power both in Kabul and in the provinces will hopefully be based on the constitution

and the Taliban's acceptance of elections as the basis for allocating power. The 2004 constitution established Islam as the country's basic law, and the Taliban will probably press for more conservative control in the name of the Sharia. This is of deep concern to human rights advocates, particularly those who advocate for women's rights, and is likely to be a major point of contention. Other areas of conflict will be who controls the police and the army, justice for those convicted of war crimes, the severance of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and containing the production and trafficking of narcotics.

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Once ISAF has completely withdrawn, it is hoped that a UN peacekeeping and monitoring presence staffed from Muslim countries would be established. In general, Taliban leaders believe that the OIC and the UN have a role to play in reconciliation. However, those who may be open to reconciliation are often afraid to speak openly. The UNAMA's Program Takhim-e-Solh (PTS), established in 2007 as an ongoing reconciliation program, has seen its effectiveness undermined by a lack of defined leadership and the sense that in a situation of uncertainty, good initiatives and effective reconciliation can fail.

Of course, another view deserves further reflection: Afghanistan does not necessarily have to remain a unified, centrally governed state. Historically, Afghanistan has always been defined as the primary center of power being located in Kabul with the Pashtun tribe, and with the regional tribes being managed by their elders. Devolution into smaller, more homogenous



regional governments could be an answer. As there can be no going back to the way things were forty years ago, the Afghans themselves will have to agree on the kind of nation-state they want their country to be. The resulting borders will then have to be affirmed by all of its neighbours, who will also have to agree to support the Afghans' decisions.

Giandomenico Picco, former high-level UN negotiator with extensive in-country experience, suggests that the new Afghanistan may emerge as a confederation with Kabul being an open city, a state that would be sustainable both because its people and its neighbors are committed to it. If Afghanistan is to avoid becoming a failed state, reconciliation will be needed to create the concept of "multiple identities" where one can, for example, be simultaneously a Tajik and an Afghan. Any attempt to demonize another tribe or country as "the enemy" will destabilize the whole new-nation concept. An interesting parallel in nation building is the status of Kurds in Iraq, as all American troops have now been withdrawn.<sup>12</sup>

Tokyo will host another international conference on Afghanistan's future in July 2012. Hopefully new leaders will emerge before then, leaders who will no longer support the war but who will have the courage to envision a different future for this troubled part of the world. As the war in Iraq is declared officially over and 2012 starts, perhaps there is new hope for Afghanistan as the end game begins.

## Endnotes

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