

HOW NOT TO DEFEAT AL QAEDA

To Win in Afghanistan Requires Troops on the Ground

By Kimberly Kagan and Frederick W. Kagan, *The Weekly Standard*, October 5, 2009

President Obama has announced his intention to conduct a review of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan from first principles before deciding whether or not to accept General Stanley McChrystal's proposed strategy and request for more forces. This review is delaying the decision. If the delay goes on much longer, it will force military leaders either to rush the deployment in a way that increases the strain on soldiers and their families or to lose the opportunity to affect the spring campaign. The president's determination to make sure of his policy before committing the additional 40,000 or so forces required by General McChrystal's campaign plan is, nevertheless, understandable. The conflict in Afghanistan is complex, and it is important that we understand what we are trying to do.

At the center of the complexity is a deceptively simple question: If the United States is fighting a terrorist organization--al Qaeda--why must we conduct a counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan against two other groups--the Quetta Shura Taliban and the Haqqani Network--that have neither the objective nor the capability to attack the United States outside Afghanistan? Shouldn't we fight a terrorist organization with a counterterrorist strategy, customarily defined as relying on long-range precision weapons and Special Forces raids to eliminate key terrorist leaders? Why must we become embroiled in the politics and social dysfunctionality of the fifth-poorest country in the world? Surely, some surrounding President Obama appear to be arguing, it makes more sense to confine our operations narrowly to the aim we care most about: defeating the terrorists and so preventing them from killing Americans.

This argument rests on two essential assumptions: that al Qaeda is primarily a terrorist group and that it is separable from the insurgent groups among whom it lives and through whom it operates. Let us examine these assumptions.

Al Qaeda is a highly ideological organization that openly states its aims and general methods. It seeks to replace existing governments in the Muslim world, which it regards as apostate, with a regime based on its own interpretation of the Koran and Muslim tradition. It relies on a reading of some of the earliest Muslim traditions to justify its right to declare Muslims apostates if they do not behave according to its own interpretation of Islam and to kill them if necessary. This reading is actually nearly identical to a belief that developed in the earliest years of Islam after Muhammad's death, which mainstream Muslims quickly rejected as a heresy (the Kharijite movement), and it remains heretical to the overwhelming majority of Muslims today. The question of the religious legality of killing Muslims causes tensions within al Qaeda and between al Qaeda and other Muslims, leading to debates over the wisdom of fighting the "near enemy," i.e., the "apostate" Muslim governments in the region, or the "far enemy," i.e., the West and especially the United States, which al Qaeda believes provides indispensable support to these "apostate" governments. The 9/11 attack resulted from the temporary triumph of the "far enemy" school.

Above all, al Qaeda does not see itself as a terrorist organization. It defines itself as the vanguard in the

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Leninist sense: a revolutionary movement whose aim is to take power throughout the Muslim world. It is an insurgent organization with global aims. Its use of terrorism (for which it has developed lengthy and abstruse religious justifications) is simply a reflection of its current situation. If al Qaeda had the ability to conduct guerrilla warfare with success, it would do so. If it could wage conventional war, it would probably prefer to do so. It has already made clear that it desires to wage chemical, biological, and nuclear war when possible.

In this respect, al Qaeda is very different from terrorist groups like the IRA, ETA, and even Hamas. Those groups used or use terrorism in pursuit of political objectives confined to a specific region--expelling the British from Northern Ireland, creating an independent or autonomous Basque land, expelling Israel from Palestine. The Ulstermen did not seek to destroy Britain or march on London; the Basques are not in mortal combat with Spaniards; and even Hamas seeks only to drive the Jews out of Israel, not to exterminate them throughout the world. Al Qaeda, by contrast, seeks to rule all the world's 1.5 billion Muslims and to reduce the non-Muslim peoples to subservience. For al Qaeda, terrorism is a start, not an end nor even the preferred means. It goes without saying that the United States and the West would face catastrophic consequences if al Qaeda ever managed to obtain the ability to wage war by different means. Defeating al Qaeda requires more than disrupting its leadership cells so that they cannot plan and conduct attacks in the United States. It also requires preventing al Qaeda from obtaining the capabilities it seeks to wage real war beyond terrorist strikes.

Al Qaeda does not exist in a vacuum like the -SPECTRE of James Bond movies. It has always operated in close coordination with allies. The anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s was the crucible in which al Qaeda leaders first bonded with the partners who would shelter them in Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden met Jalaluddin Haqqani, whose network is now fighting U.S. forces in eastern Afghanistan, as both were raising support in Saudi Arabia for the mujahedeen in the 1980s. They then fought the Soviets together. When the Soviet Army withdrew in 1989 (for which bin Laden subsequently took unearned credit), Haqqani seized the Afghan city of Khost and established his control of the surrounding provinces of Khost, Paktia, and Paktika. Haqqani also retained the base in Pakistan--near Miranshah in North Waziristan--from which he had fought the Soviets. He established a madrassa there that has become infamous for its indoctrination of young men in the tenets of militant Islamism.

Haqqani held onto Greater Paktia, as the three provinces are often called, and invited bin Laden to establish bases there in the 1990s in which to train his own cadres. When the Taliban took shape under Mullah Mohammad Omar in the mid-1990s (with a large amount of Pakistani assistance), Haqqani made common cause with that group, which shared his ideological and religious outlook and seemed likely to take control of Afghanistan. He became a minister in the Taliban government, which welcomed and facilitated the continued presence of bin Laden and his training camps.

Bin Laden and al Qaeda could not have functioned as they did in the 1990s without the active support of Mullah Omar and Haqqani. The Taliban and Haqqani fighters protected bin Laden, fed him and his troops, facilitated the movement of al Qaeda leaders and fighters, and generated recruits. They also provided a socio-religious human network that strengthened the personal resilience and organizational reach of bin Laden and his team. Islamist revolution has always been an activity of groups nested within communities, not an undertaking of isolated individuals. As American interrogators in Iraq discovered quickly, the fastest way to get a captured al Qaeda fighter talking was to isolate him from his peers. Bin Laden's Taliban allies provided the intellectual and social support network al Qaeda needed to keep fighting. In return, bin

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Laden shared his wealth with the Taliban and later sent his fighters into battle to defend the Taliban regime against the U.S.-aided Northern Alliance attack after 9/11.

The relationship that developed between bin Laden and Mullah Omar was deep and strong. It helps explain why Mullah Omar refused categorically to expel bin Laden after 9/11 even though he knew that failing to do so could lead to the destruction of the Taliban state--as it did. In return, bin Laden recognizes Mullah Omar as *amir al-momineen*--the "Commander of the Faithful"--a religious title the Taliban uses to legitimize its activities and shadow state. The alliance between al Qaeda and the Haqqanis (now led by Sirajuddin, successor to his aging and ailing father, Jalaluddin) also remains strong. The Haqqani network still claims the terrain of Greater Paktia, can project attacks into Kabul, and seems to facilitate the kinds of spectacular attacks in Afghanistan that are the hallmark of al Qaeda training and technical expertise. There is no reason whatever to believe that Mullah Omar or the Haqqanis--whose religious and political views remain closely aligned with al Qaeda's--would fail to offer renewed hospitality to their friend and ally of 20 years, bin Laden.

Mullah Omar and the Haqqanis are not the ones hosting al Qaeda today, however, since the presence of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan has made that country too dangerous for bin Laden and his lieutenants. They now reside for the most part on the other side of the Durand Line, among the mélange of anti-government insurgent and terrorist groups that live in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan. These groups--they include the Tehrik-e Taliban-e Pakistan, led until his recent death-by-Predator by Baitullah Mehsud; the Tehrik-e Nafaz-e Shariat-e Mohammadi; and the Lashkar-e-Taiba, responsible for the Mumbai attack--now provide some of the same services to al Qaeda that the Taliban provided when they ruled Afghanistan. Mullah Omar continues to help, moreover, by intervening in disputes among the more fractious Pakistani groups to try to maintain cohesion within the movement. All of these groups coordinate their activities, moreover, and all have voices within the Peshawar Shura (council). They are not isolated groups, but rather a network-of-networks, both a social and a political grouping run, in the manner of Pashtuns, by a number of shuras, of which that in Peshawar is theoretically preeminent.

All of which is to say that the common image of al Qaeda leaders flitting like bats from cave to cave in the badlands of Pakistan is inaccurate. Al Qaeda leaders do flit (and no doubt sometimes sleep in caves)--but they flit like guests from friend to friend in areas controlled by their allies. Their allies provide them with shelter and food, with warning of impending attacks, with the means to move rapidly. Their allies provide communications services--runners and the use of their own more modern systems to help al Qaeda's senior leaders avoid creating electronic footprints that our forces could use to track and target them. Their allies provide means of moving money and other strategic resources around, as well as the means of imparting critical knowledge (like expertise in explosives) to cadres. Their allies provide media support, helping to get the al Qaeda message out and then serving as an echo chamber to magnify it via their own media resources.

Could al Qaeda perform all of these functions itself, without the help of local allies? It probably could. In Iraq, certainly, the al Qaeda organization established its own administrative, logistical, training, recruiting, and support structures under the rubric of its own state--the Islamic State of Iraq. For a while, this system worked well for the terrorists; it supported a concerted terror campaign in and around Baghdad virtually unprecedented in its scale and viciousness. It also created serious vulnerabilities for Al Qaeda in Iraq, however. The establishment of this autonomous, foreign-run structure left a seam between Al Qaeda in Iraq and the local population and their leaders. As long as the population continued to be in open revolt against

the United States and the Iraqi government, this seam was not terribly damaging to al Qaeda. But as local leaders began to abandon their insurgent operations, Al Qaeda in Iraq became dangerously exposed and, ultimately, came to be seen as an enemy by the very populations that had previously supported it.

There was no such seam in Afghanistan before 9/11. Al Qaeda did not attempt to control territory or administer populations there. It left all such activities in the hands of Mullah Omar and Jalaluddin Haqqani. It still does--relying on those groups as well as on the Islamist groups in Waziristan and the Northwest Frontier Province to do the governing and administering while it focuses on the global war. Afghans had very little interaction with al Qaeda, and so had no reason to turn against the group. The same is true in Pakistan today. The persistence of allies who aim at governing and administering, as well as simply controlling, territory frees al Qaeda from those onerous day-to-day responsibilities and helps shield the organization from the blowback it suffered in Iraq. It reduces the vulnerability of the organization and enormously complicates efforts to defeat or destroy it.

The theory proposed by some in the White House and the press that an out-of-country, high-tech counterterrorist campaign could destroy a terrorist network such as al Qaeda is fraught with erroneous assumptions. Killing skilled terrorists is very hard to do. The best--and most dangerous--of them avoid using cellphones, computers, and other devices that leave obvious electronic footprints. Tracking them requires either capitalizing on their mistakes in using such devices or generating human intelligence about their whereabouts from sources on the ground. When the terrorists operate among relatively friendly populations, gaining useful human intelligence can be extremely difficult if not impossible. The friendlier the population to the terrorists, the more safe houses in which they can hide, the fewer people who even desire to inform the United States or its proxies about the location of terrorist leaders, the more people likely to tell the terrorists about any such informants (and to punish those informants), the more people who can help to conceal the movement of the terrorist leaders and their runners, and so on.

Counterterrorist forces do best when the terrorists must operate among neutral or hostile populations while under severe military pressure, including from troops on the ground. Such pressure forces terrorist leaders to rely more on communications equipment for self-defense and for coordination of larger efforts. It greatly restricts the terrorists' ability to move around, making them easier targets, and to receive and distribute money, weapons, and recruits. This is the scenario that developed in Iraq during and after the surge, and it dramatically increased the vulnerability of terrorist groups to U.S. (and Iraqi) strikes.

Not only did the combination of isolation and pressure make senior leaders more vulnerable, but it exposed mid-level managers as well. Attacking such individuals is important for two reasons: It disrupts the ability of the organization to operate at all, and it eliminates some of the people most likely to replace senior leaders who are killed. Attacking middle management dramatically reduces the resilience of a terrorist organization, as well as its effectiveness. The intelligence requirement for such attacks is daunting, however. Identifying and locating the senior leadership of a group is one thing. Finding the people who collect taxes, distribute funds and weapons, recruit, run IED-cells, and so on, is something else entirely--unless the counterterrorist force actually has a meaningful presence on the ground among the people.

The most serious operational challenge of the pure counterterrorist approach, however, is to eliminate bad guys faster than they can be replaced. Isolated killings of senior leaders, spread out over months or years, rarely do serious systemic harm to their organizations. The best-known example is the death of Abu Musab al Zarqawi, founder and head of Al Qaeda in Iraq, in June 2006, following which the effectiveness and

lethality of that group only grew. It remains to be seen what the effect of Baitullah Mehsud's death will be-- although it is evident that the presence of the Pakistani military on the ground assisted the high-tech targeting that killed him. Such is the vigor of the groups he controlled that his death occasioned a power struggle among his deputies.

One essential question that advocates of a pure counterterrorism approach must answer, therefore, is: Can the United States significantly accelerate the rate at which our forces identify, target, and kill senior and mid-level leaders? Our efforts to do so have failed to date, despite the commitment of enormous resources to that problem over eight years at the expense of other challenges. Could we do better? The limiting factor on the rate of attrition we can impose on the enemy's senior leadership is our ability to generate the necessary intelligence, not our ability to put metal on target. Perhaps there is a way to increase the attrition rate. If so, advocates of this approach have an obligation to explain what it is. They must also explain why removing U.S. and NATO forces from the theater will not make collecting timely intelligence even harder--effectively slowing the attrition rate. Their argument is counterintuitive at best.

Pursuing a counterinsurgency strategy against the Taliban and Haqqani groups--that is, using American forces to protect the population from them while building the capability of the Afghan Army--appears at first an indirect approach to defeating al Qaeda. In principle, neither the Taliban nor the Haqqani network poses an immediate danger to the United States. Why then should we fight them?

We should fight them because in practice they are integrally connected with al Qaeda. Allowing the Taliban and the Haqqani network to expand their areas of control and influence would offer new opportunities to al Qaeda that its leaders appear determined to seize. It would relieve the pressure on al Qaeda, giving its operatives more scope to protect themselves while working to project power and influence around the world. It would reduce the amount of usable intelligence we could expect to receive, thus reducing the rate at which we could target key leaders. Allowing al Qaeda's allies to succeed would seriously undermine the counterterrorism mission and would make the success of that mission extremely unlikely.

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WHY THE TALIBAN ARE WINNING--FOR NOW

The last few years have been a strategic fiasco, but this war is still winnable. Here's how.

By Kimberly Kagan, *Foreign Policy Magazine*, August 10, 2009

The war in Afghanistan has not been going well, and it is no surprise that Americans are frustrated. Many observers can rightly point to signs of progress: the functionality of specific Afghan government ministries and programs, the slow growth of the Afghan National Army, the building of major infrastructure such as roads and dams, and agricultural improvements. These accomplishments, however, have not created the conditions that the United States has aimed to achieve: an Afghan state with a competent government considered legitimate by its people and capable of defending them, such that Afghanistan can no longer function as a safe haven for Islamist terrorist groups. Indeed, as Gen. Stanley McChrystal, commander of coalition forces, recently suggested, the situation shows signs of deteriorating: Afghan enemy groups remain highly capable, have gained momentum, and have expanded their areas of operations. Violence against coalition forces is rising. So the question is: Why haven't we been winning in Afghanistan?

Although I served on McChrystal's assessment team, I do not know how he would answer this question, nor could I speculate about his recommendations for the strategy going forward. But after much research, as well as two visits to Afghanistan this year, I personally think that the military operations themselves are failing because there has been no coherent theaterwide counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan. Despite U.S. President Barack Obama's newly announced "Af-Pak" strategy, the U.S. and coalition campaign this summer is a continuation of the poorly designed operations from 2008. And the sheer inertia of military operations means that it will be hard to turn this supertanker around for the better part of this year. But turn it around we must, starting with correcting the following flaws in the strategy that McChrystal and his team inherited from their predecessors.

I. Fighting in the wrong places

NATO forces are widely dispersed throughout Afghanistan, even in the Pashtun areas in the south and east, rather than concentrated on one or two priorities. A possible exception is Helmand, the only province in which two brigades are deployed -- the British force and the recently arrived U.S. Marine expeditionary brigade. In contrast, during the surge in Iraq, the United States concentrated about half of its forces in Baghdad and its suburbs. Baghdad was the center of gravity of the fight. If we controlled it, we'd win; if the enemy controlled it, we'd lose. So five brigade combat teams -- roughly 25,000 troops with their enablers -- protected the city of 8 million people. Four more teams protected Baghdad's southern approaches, and at least one, sometimes two, additional teams protected the city's northern suburbs.

There is no simple equivalent to Baghdad in Afghanistan. Instead, most of the population -- and the insurgency -- is dispersed in rural areas. Nevertheless, some areas, such as Kandahar city and the districts around it, are more important -- to the enemy, to the Afghan government, and to us -- than others. And yet, there are almost no counterinsurgents whatsoever in all but two of the districts around Kandahar, and none in the city itself, just a scant footprint from the Afghanistan national security forces. Worse still, the ratio of

counterinsurgents to the population in those two districts is approximately 1 to 44, close to the minimum requirement. A good evaluation of our priorities in Afghanistan would yield a significantly different, and more effective, distribution of coalition forces. This is undoubtedly why McChrystal recently told reporters that he will be concentrating forces around Kandahar city.

2. Fighting in the wrong ways

Another problem is that NATO forces have briefed counterinsurgency doctrine better than they have practiced it. Almost all NATO units in Pashtun areas claim that they are protecting the population by engaging in a sequence of military operations known as “shape-clear-hold-build.” But these forces move through the sequence too rapidly. Based on recent experiences in Iraq, shaping an area requires 30 to 45 days, clearing it requires three to six months, and holding it takes longer than that. With very few exceptions, NATO forces in Afghanistan have never operated on such timelines. They condense shaping and clearing operations into a few weeks, and then they transition prematurely into what they perceive as a hold phase. As a result, NATO forces rarely gain permanent control over areas -- or if they do, those areas are so small as to have little effect on the insurgency or the population. The enemy simply dissipates and then returns.

What’s more, coalition and Afghan forces are excessively focused on securing supply lines and reducing the threat of improvised explosive devices through tactical efforts rather than by countering the insurgency. Consequently, many forces -- especially Afghan forces -- are distributed along the ring road, the main corridor that circles the country. Static positions such as these waste troops. Of course, our forces must be able to maneuver along strategic corridors, but the best way to do that is by securing populated areas and maneuvering off the ring road to defeat the enemy in its sanctuaries and support zones.

In other areas, combat forces are trying to do the right things but, again, in the wrong places. As the Iraq experience demonstrated, successful counterinsurgency often entails distributing forces from larger to smaller bases in order to live among the population. But in some remote areas of Afghanistan’s eastern theater, such as Nuristan, where the enemy has little operational or strategic effect, combat forces have overextended themselves. They have moved off large forward operating bases, pushed into strategically insignificant areas, and established small combat outposts that can barely sustain themselves: The units there are too tiny to do anything but protect their outpost. A better approach is to concentrate forces for counterinsurgency operations and run greater risks in places of lesser importance.

3. Fighting with the wrong assumptions

What too often determines where coalition forces conduct their shape-clear-hold-build operations is the prospect for conducting development projects -- not population security. This tends to favor the important over the urgent, the possible over the necessary. For example, major combat operations in the British area of Helmand have been conducted in order to permit development. The Kajaki dam and the agricultural development zone near Lashkar Gah have driven the concentration of forces within the province and, indeed, within the southern region generally. In eastern Afghanistan, U.S. forces have conducted operations to build roads, such as the Khost-Gardez Pass road. These projects are important for long-term development, but they are only sometimes important for achieving our military objectives and should not be allowed to dictate the disposition of scarce military resources.

Moreover, military and civilian efforts in Afghanistan make the wrong assumptions about development. Too often they emphasize the value of a development project as a model -- as a demonstration of Afghan government competence and Western goodwill. Completing a specific dam, for example, shows the population that the Afghan government can provide services in general; clearing a specific village shows that the Afghan national security forces can secure the population in principle. But if the model is not replicated widely and rapidly, it's simply a demonstration of what might be accomplished. Demonstration effects will not defeat the insurgency. Either a venue is secure and has an operating government, or it does not. A good counterinsurgency plan succeeds by generating synergies among good, localized projects -- not by identifying a thousand points of light and hoping that they constitute an electrical grid.

4. Fighting successfully -- or failing?

Metrics are important in any war, and based on recent reports, the Obama administration is preparing a new set of indicators to measure whether the fight in Afghanistan is succeeding. As important as identifying good metrics is rejecting bad ones. Violence against coalition forces, for example, is an unreliable indicator of success or failure. For one thing, as we saw in Iraq, violence against friendly forces can increase at the start of a counteroffensive to regain control of areas that the enemy holds. No violence, in turn, might mean that an area is completely controlled by the enemy. The metrics of success are not simply statistics, and they cannot be determined independently of a campaign plan, which sets out a hierarchy of tasks and objectives.

5. Can we win?

Some answer simply and sharply in the negative: They claim that Afghanistan has never been centrally ruled (which is wrong) and that it has been the "graveyard of empires" (which is true in only a specific handful of cases). Failure is not at all inevitable. The war in Afghanistan has suffered almost from the start from a lack of resources, especially the time and attention of senior policymakers. The United States prioritized the war in Iraq from 2007 until 2009, for strategically sound reasons. Some of this parsimony also comes from flawed theories of counterinsurgency: U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, for example, misreads the Soviet experience in Afghanistan, which has consistently led him to argue incorrectly against expanding the size of the force there, claiming that it increases the risks of failure.

We can win in Afghanistan, but only if we restructure the campaign and resource it properly. Adding more resources to the military effort as it has been conducted over the past few years, without fundamentally changing its conception, design, and execution, would achieve little. This was also the case in Iraq before the surge, and the change in strategy and campaign plan that followed was as important to success as the additional resources. This explains why McChrystal might adopt a different campaign design -- perhaps requiring additional military resources -- when he submits his formal assessment to the U.S. secretary of defense and NATO secretary-general sometime after the Afghan elections.

The fact that we have not been doing the right things for the past few years in Afghanistan is actually good news at this moment. A sound, properly resourced counterinsurgency has not failed in Afghanistan; it has never even been tried. So there is good reason to think that such a new strategy can succeed now. But we have to hurry, for as is often the case in these kinds of war, if you aren't winning, you're losing.

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