



# Congressional Testimony

## IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN: PERSPECTIVES ON U.S. STRATEGY, PART III

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CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

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Chairman Snyder and distinguished members of the committee:

The International Coalition's main objective in Afghanistan is to protect its members from another attack on their own soil. Yet in fighting to eliminate the Taliban, with which it has no direct conflict of interest, the Coalition has been diverted from fighting al-Qaeda, its main enemy. What should have been essentially a policing operation, albeit on a large scale, became a major counterinsurgency war, the primary mistake being fighting the Taliban as if they were an arm of al-Qaeda. The United States expends far more blood and treasure fighting the Taliban than it does fighting al-Qaeda. The implicit idea that crushing the Taliban altogether is necessary to defeat al-Qaeda is dangerously mistaken.

The Afghan war does not make the United States safer. On the contrary, the war is not an answer to the al-Qaeda threat, and it does not diminish the risk of another attack on Western countries. The relationship between fighting local insurgents and a potential Coalition fight against al-Qaeda is very much disconnected from the war in Afghanistan. Coalition strikes against al-Qaeda are not connected to the war in Afghanistan, and cooperation with Pakistan is a much more important determinant of the success or failure of such operations. The continuing war in Afghanistan, in fact, is a major asset for al-Qaeda, which is not engaged there. Indeed, no important al-Qaeda members have been killed recently in Afghanistan, and its fighters stay in Pakistan. The Coalition could continue to do exactly what it is doing now against al-Qaeda without waging the distracting war against the Taliban in Afghanistan. That is why the Coalition must disconnect these two strategic issues. The Coalition presence in Afghanistan is not actually helping in the fight against al-Qaeda and is, in fact, protecting its sanctuary in Pakistan from local tribal backlash and from the Pakistani army and intelligence agencies. Without the war in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda would be under much more pressure from Pakistani and local forces. The Coalition presence in Afghanistan is the major element driving hitherto limited cohesiveness between the very different insurgencies in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In addition, the war is an impediment to constructing a clear and efficient policy regarding Iran, because it would put the United States in a vulnerable position should Iran decide to support the Taliban.

The Coalition's best rationale for fighting the Taliban is to deny al-Qaeda the opportunity to create new operational bases in Afghan cities. The Coalition's strategy should start from that clearly defined interest. A more cautious strategy in Afghanistan, aimed at securing the urban centers in the Pashtun belt and Afghanizing the war, would allow the Coalition to fulfill its main objectives. It would deny al-Qaeda access to cities, a key point considering al-Qaeda's operating methods. Second, it would deny the Afghan war of its local appeal, making it more difficult for al-Qaeda to recruit volunteers. Third, the enormous resources devoted to this war could be directed toward what is known to be central to Coalition success: human intelligence and a focus on Pakistan. A defensive approach in the South and East of Afghanistan has no negative impact on operations against al-Qaeda, and would allow the Coalition to invest more resources into fighting its primarily enemy directly.

### **Who are the Taliban?**

The Taliban have a strategy and a coherent organization to implement it. To believe otherwise, as some U.S. analysts do, is to dangerously underestimate the adversary. The

Taliban are a revolutionary movement deeply opposed to the tribal structure in Afghanistan. They promote mullahs as the key political leaders in the society and state they seek to create. More so than in the 1990s, the Taliban today also are connected to the international jihadist networks and seek political support by opposing foreign occupation. The objective of the Taliban today is the same as it was in the 1990s: to take Kabul and to build an Islamic Emirate based on Sharia. The diversity of the insurgency confuses many foreign observers. First, the Taliban are not the only party fighting against the Coalition and the Afghan government. The Hezb-i Islami, with a more local and limited following, has its own independent organization. In the North especially, the Hezb-i islami can more easily recruit from non-Pashtun ethnic groups. Second, while it is true that the Taliban have multiple commanders, some with “star” quality that may suggest internal rivalry, this does not mean that the Taliban are inchoate or divisible.

The Taliban’s structure is resilient: centralized enough to be efficient, but flexible and diverse enough to adapt to local contexts. (In addition, the Taliban have been pragmatic in their use of criminal gang and opium resources.) Maulani Haqqani enjoys great prestige due to his bravery during the jihad against the Soviets and some autonomy in the day-to-day management of the war in the eastern provinces. But Haqqani’s network is not independent of the larger Taliban network and does not have an autonomous strategy. He does not appoint cadres on his own authority or have an autonomous strategy. Haqqani obviously is not competing with Mullah Omar for the Taliban leadership. His biography indicates a strong commitment to the Taliban and he comes from the same madrasa network as the Taliban leadership of the 1990s. Rather than a weakness, the local autonomy of Taliban commanders is necessary due to the nature of guerilla warfare, and in fact, it constitutes a strength. The Taliban are not confused or in conflict over who is in charge in a particular district or province. Foreign observers recalling Iraq may wishfully imagine exploiting competition or infighting among Taliban commanders, but the fissures are not there.

Ironically, the Coalition is unwittingly helping the Taliban maintain its cohesion by killing those commanders in the field most capable of opposing the central shura. Prime examples are Mullah Akhtar Osmani, killed in December 2006, Mullah Berader in August 2007, and Mullah Dadullah in May 2007. Evidence of the resilient character of the Taliban’s structure is the fact that the Coalition’s killing of major leaders and its battlefield victories have not reversed the Taliban’s momentum. In fact, the Taliban have always been able to regroup after tactical setbacks due to the resilience of their political structure. Neither the deaths of senior Taliban military commanders, nor the severe losses in 2005 in the Arghandab Valley, stopped the movement. The Taliban’s military organization demonstrates a good level of professionalism in the regions where they dominate. Today’s Taliban are without question the best guerilla movement in Afghanistan’s history. The insurgency is able to mobilize thousands of fighters nationwide. Since 2006, the Taliban have been using field radios and cell phones to coordinate groups of fighters. They are able to coordinate complex attacks, are mobile, and are improving their use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Their intelligence is good. Taliban sympathizers ensure that the moves of the coalition are known in advance if Afghan government forces are involved. Whether the Coalition wants to admit it or not, the Taliban soldiers are also courageous. The insurgency accepts heavy losses, which contradicts the claim that a majority of the Taliban are motivated by money. The British soldiers in Helmand were surprised in 2006 to find an enemy able to stop them in direct confrontation.

The Taliban has a strategy and a coherent organization to implement it, and a majority of the fighters are local to the South and East (the situation in the North is more complex). In addition, “The Taliban has created a sophisticated communications apparatus that projects an increasingly confident movement”<sup>i</sup> and “the Taliban routinely outperforms the coalition in the contest to dominate public perceptions of the war in Afghanistan.”<sup>ii</sup>

The Taliban build on the growing discontent of Afghans through a relatively sophisticated propaganda apparatus, which employs radio, video, and night letters to devastating effect. Videos – made in al-Sahab, the Taliban’s media center in Quetta, Pakistan – are readily available. Among the most popular are videos showing the seizure of NATO material in Khyber Agency (in 2008) and the August 2008 ambush of a French contingent. The Taliban have also used Internet websites to chronicle the advance of the jihad (with obvious exaggerations). Propaganda material, in the form of preachers calling for jihad against the Coalition, is often distributed through cell phones. In addition, the Taliban regularly monitor Afghan media and, less systematically, foreign outlets as well. Mullah Dadullah, a key Taliban commander, had invited Al Jazeera to meet him on several different occasions, allowing the Taliban to successfully create a hero-like persona from clips (his death in 2007 gave him the status of martyr). In this context, the conventional wisdom that the Taliban, being fundamentalists, are not open to new technologies has also been debunked by their sophisticated use of modern media for propaganda purposes.

### **The Flaws in COIN Strategy**

In 2009 the coalition has tried to define a new strategy—aiming to marginalize the insurgency by regaining control of the countryside in the provinces most affected by the insurgency. Since the Iraq war, the U.S. Army has rediscovered classic counterinsurgency theory. The current “shape, clear, hold, and build” strategy requires control of territory and a separation of insurgents from the population. Troops clear an area, remain there, and implement an ambitious development program intended to gain the support of the population. The pertinent element is to stop thinking about territory—a mistake made during the first years of the war—and focus instead on the population. Yet the context in which these theories were created is quite specific: First, there *was* a state, albeit a colonial one; second, the insurgency was initiated by a group of nationalist intellectuals who, as far as the rural population was concerned, were outsiders. Two factors explain the failure of the current policy: the underestimation of the Taliban and the impossibility of “clearing” an area of insurgents.

The relationship between the Taliban and the population is one key element of the new strategy. A common misperception is that the insurgents are terrorizing the Afghan people and that the insurgents’ level of support among the people is marginal. This has led to the objective of “separating the Taliban from the population” or “protecting the population” from the Taliban. Yet at this stage of the war and specifically in the Pashtun belt, there is no practical way to separate the insurgency from the population in the villages, and furthermore there is no Afghan state structure to replace the coalition forces once the Taliban have been removed. In fact, this approach reflects a misunderstanding about just who the Taliban are. Even if it is possible to find examples where the Taliban are not local and oppressive to

villagers, the situation in the Pashtun belt is much more complex. The Taliban have successfully exploited local grievances against corrupt officials and the behavior of the foreign forces, framing them as a jihad. Moreover, the Taliban are generally careful not to antagonize the population. They are much more tolerant of music and of beardless men than before 2001, and Mullah Omar has repeatedly made clear that the behavior of the fighters should be respectful (paying for the food they take, and so on). Most of the insurgents are local and, especially in cases of heavy fighting, the local solidarities tend to work in favor of the Taliban and against foreigners in a mixed of religious and nationalist feelings.

How do we control the supposedly cleared areas? Trust between coalition forces and the Afghan people (especially the Pashtuns) simply does not exist, and, after eight years in the country, the battle for hearts and minds has been lost. The coalition forces still have not worked out how to be accepted locally. It is counterproductive to patrol villages with soldiers who are ill-equipped to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers and whose average stay is six months. This miscalculation has been compounded by the past poor behavior of some coalition forces—the beating of prisoners, arbitrary imprisonment, aggressive behavior on the road—and the unwitting bombing of civilians.

The absence of a state structure in the Pashtun belt means that military operations, other than a token Afghan army presence, are predominantly foreign in composition. Because the police are corrupt or inefficient, there is no one left to secure the area after the “clear” phase. And because the pro-government groups are locally based (tribal units mostly), they can go outside their area only with great difficulty. The so-called ink spot strategy—subduing a large hostile region with a relatively small military force by establishing a number of small safe areas and then pushing out from each one and extending control until only a few pockets of resistance remain—is not working because of the social and ethnic fragmentation: Stability in one district does not necessarily benefit neighboring ones, since groups and villages are often antagonists and compete for the spoils of a war economy. In this context, securing an area means staying there indefinitely, under constant threat from the insurgency.

Finally, given the complexity of the strategy—one that requires a deep understanding of Pashtun society—one must ask whether the coalition has the bureaucratic agility and competence to implement it and outsmart the Taliban, who are obviously quite good at playing local politics. I would submit that the coalition does not have that capacity and therefore should stick with a simpler strategy in Afghanistan.

### **Three Zones for a Defensive Strategy**

The central measure is to transform the political game by defining what areas are important in the long-term, namely the cities. Why are the cities a major stake? First, the pro-Western population lives there. This is a key political stake, for if the coalition is not able to protect these people, there is no social base left for an Afghan partner. The June killing of at least ten Afghan translators who were apparently targeted by the Taliban is an indication of how difficult it is nowadays to work safely for the Coalition. Second, it is not only the cities that are threatened, but also the major ways of communication that are indispensable for the flow of people and goods. Most of the roads outside the largest cities (Kandahar, Herat, Kabul to the south, among others) are not safe. The level of penetration of the insurgency in the cities

is becoming a threat. In the South, the Taliban have a constant presence in the cities and in some neighborhoods can even attack police stations at night. Kabul is more and more populous, with large areas of migrants or refugees and little, if any, state presence. The Taliban and Hezb-i islami penetration south of Kabul, in the Musawi and Chaharosyab districts, is growing despite some police operations. The deterioration of the security in Herat and more generally in the West will pose an acute security threat over the next few months. The Herat urban area's geography makes it extremely difficult to secure the city, and the insurgents could easily penetrate the suburbs. In the 1980s, despite a major effort by the Soviets and the Afghan army, the *Mujahideen* were fighting very close to the urban area.

The U.S. must **define three areas: strategic (under total control), buffers (around the strategic ones) and opposition territory**. Policy should be strongly differentiated between these areas.

1) The strategic zone is defined as the part of the territory composed of urban centers and territories linked economically to them (oasis, etc.), main roads, and provinces in which the Taliban opposition is weak or non-existent (essentially part of the northwest). In these areas, military control must be total (or near total). The institution building process must be focused on strategic areas, mostly the cities, where the population is partially opposed to the Taliban. This is where the national institutions must be reinforced, schools, police, army etc. The control of the ANA must be reinforced in the cities, even if there is no short-term threat from the Taliban.

2) In the opposition territory, the use of force must be limited to preventing a military concentration of Taliban troops and all moves that could threaten the first two areas. In the opposition areas, mostly in the south and the eastern part of the country, the strategy must be a defensive one in the sense that these areas will not be put under military control, but a pro-active one in the sense that U.S. forces must deter the opposition from launching operations outside these places against the strategic zones.

3) The buffer area is a grey one, where militias can be used with a lot of caution and caveats. Military operations must be conducted on a limited level mostly to protect the area, avoiding civilian casualties as a priority. The war will be decided most probably in these buffer areas around the strategic ones. The use of militias is part of the possible means of protecting the strategic zones, but this must be very carefully managed and initiated in a conservative way. Three caveats are important. First, contrary to current thinking, the use of tribes is generally not a good idea. Once arms are given out there is no easy way to control the groups; the double game is the rule, not the exception. In the long run the territory is not under control and the level of violence could explode. Second, the militia must be territorially linked to the strategic zones, because the militia must be militarily under the protection of the army (ANA or foreign). The use of an isolated militia in opposition territory is a poor idea. Last, militias must *never* be allowed to fight (or even to cross) territory other than theirs to avoid destabilizing the local balance of power.

### **Reallocate Resources**

Contrary to popular belief, the war in Afghanistan suffers not from underfunding but from a strikingly bad allocation of resources. First, aid is going mostly to areas where the level of

control is generally nonexistent and where integrity is largely recognized to be lacking. Second, troops are not efficiently distributed: 20,000 troops are mobilized in Helmand province to no effect, when they are needed elsewhere (in Kunduz, for example) to fight or to protect cities. The troops currently deployed in the North are neither trained nor motivated to fight a counterinsurgency war, a priority now, since governments are implicitly demanding zero-casualty tactics.

## **Development Resources**

Is there enough money for reconstruction and development, or is a civilian surge needed? Before any more resources are allocated, the priority must be to fix the current system, which is deeply flawed because of a serious lack of accountability and wrong geographical focus.

In addition to the military costs, the coalition has given billions for development in Afghanistan. According to the Afghan Ministry of Finance, more than 60 multilateral donors have spent about \$36 billion on development, reconstruction, and humanitarian projects in the country since 2002, with little accountability or integrity. Since 2001, some \$25 billion has been spent on security-related assistance to Afghanistan, such as building up the Afghan security forces. Donors have committed the same amount on reconstruction and development, yet some leading donors have fulfilled little more than half of their aid commitments. Only \$15 billion in aid has been spent so far, of which it is estimated a staggering 40 percent has returned to donor countries in the form of corporate profits and consultant salaries.<sup>iii</sup> First, there are limitations on the amount of money that can be spent, especially because the territory under government control is rapidly shrinking. Second, any investment made in the countryside controlled by the Taliban will simply help finance the insurgency. Third, there is no easy and simple relationship between development and violence. As seen in other cases (the Basque and Kurdish insurgencies), more development and improved economic conditions do not necessarily translate into an improved political situation. Finally, a civilian surge would not address the heart of the problem: huge corruption and inefficiency in Kabul—a war economy.

In addition, the current allocation of resources is flawed. If Helmand province were a state, it would be the world's fifth-largest recipient of funds from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). These disparities are also reflected in the pattern of combined government and donor spending for 2007–2008. The most insecure provinces of Nimroz, Helmand, Zabol, Kandahar, and Uruzgan received more than \$200 per person, while many other provinces got less than half that amount, and some, such as Sari Pul or Takhar, were allocated less than one-third of that amount.<sup>iv</sup> This irrational distribution of resources is partially due to the fact that part of the aid is coming from the 26 NATO-led Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). Each PRT is headed by the largest troop-contributing nation in a given province (according to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force). Thus the U.S. and U.K. PRTs are investing in the most contested areas, with few significant results. The aid is part of the war economy, especially in the South, with insurgents taking a cut of almost every project implemented in the rural areas. The coalition must stop rewarding the most dangerous areas and focus on those where success is attainable. In addition, whatever the official line, the current policy is resulting in the transfer

of increasing levels of responsibility from the Afghans to the coalition, resulting in Afghan officials appearing powerless vis-à-vis the local PRT, especially in places where the Taliban dominate. Increasing levels of aid could backfire and accelerate the disintegration of local institutions.

The coalition then has to shift the focus of investment from war-torn areas to more peaceful localities where there is more accountability. Aid must go where there is control on the ground: cities, towns, and districts with local support for the coalition. The current system of cascading contractors and subcontractors is resulting in—if not technically corruption—inefficiency and dishonesty. The focus on narcotics should not distract the United States from its main responsibility: reforming the system, starting with USAID, toward more transparency. Reducing the number of overpaid experts and consultants and limiting the subcontractor system would be a start.

### **Reorganizing the Coalition**

The new strategy I suggest requires a redistribution of troops. Two elements are critically wrong at present: the overemphasis on the South and the lack of sufficient troops in the North. The coalition is fighting where it is losing (in the South) and has no counterinsurgency troops where the Taliban could be beaten (in the North). This misallocation of resources is both the result of a flawed strategy and of NATO's approach. Some 20,000 troops should be mobilized where there is a real need and a real prospect of success—not in the rural Pashtun belt or in Helmand, where coalition troops are fighting a losing battle with high casualties. In the North, the Taliban are locally strong in Kunduz, Badghis, and Faryab, but in most places the situation is still reversible. The problem here is that the main contingents, beginning with the Germans, are not able to fight the Taliban and protect the population. The only solution to this problem is a political negotiation and the awareness of what is really at stake here: the credibility of NATO as a military alliance.

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<sup>i</sup> International Crisis Group, *Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words*, Asia Report no. 158, July 24, 2008, p. i.

<sup>ii</sup> Sean Naylor, "Insurgents in Afghanistan Have Mastered Media Manipulation," *Armed Forces Journal*, April 2008, p. 1, <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2008/04/3489740>.

<sup>iii</sup> Matt Waldman, *Falling Short: Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan*, ACBAR report, March 2008, [http://acbar.org/ACBAR%20Publications/ACBAR%20Aid%20Effectiveness%20\(25%20Mar%202008\).pdf](http://acbar.org/ACBAR%20Publications/ACBAR%20Aid%20Effectiveness%20(25%20Mar%202008).pdf).

<sup>iv</sup> op.cit. :3.