

Secure Afghanistan

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With a heavily decried government, a corrupt administration, a flourishing economy of opium, the situation in Afghanistan is particularly grim. According to Mary Kaldor and Marika Theros, Barack Obama’s plan to focus the American military agenda on Afghanistan can only be successful if a complete change in strategy is undergone.

During the election campaign, Barack Obama made much of the situation in Afghanistan¹. Indeed he argued (rather disappointingly since the war in Iraq should be regarded as a terrible mistake regardless of what was happening in Afghanistan) that the reason he was against the war in Iraq was because it diverted attention from Afghanistan and the hunt for Al Qaeda. He has already expressed his commitment to an Afghan “surge” and he plans to send extra combat brigades to the area. He also made it clear that he was ready to continue “operations” in Pakistan.

A surge will, however, be pointless unless it also involves a fundamental change of approach. At present, there is a huge tension between the War on Terror, the goal of militarily defeating America’s enemies, and the goal of stabilisation and protection of the Afghan population. This tension is reflected in the two military commands: the American forces, known as Operation Enduring Freedom, and the International Security Assistance Force

¹ This text was first published online at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/>, December 11, 2008: “Secure Afghanistan”, (<http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/kaldor/secure-afghanistan>). The sub-headings of this version have been added by www.laviedesidees.fr

(ISAF) - NATO forces authorised by the United Nations. Despite the fact that top officials in the US, NATO, and UN administrations frequently declare – in various communiqués and fora – that the war in Afghanistan cannot be won militarily and despite the adoption by NATO and the US of a “comprehensive” and “whole of government” approach that brings together civilian and military efforts to address the range of causes of insecurity for ordinary Afghans, the thrust of the international intervention remains within a traditional security narrative that focuses on stabilizing the state militarily and prioritizes the hunt for terrorists and insurgents over the protection of civilians. What is needed is not withdrawal, since this would leave ordinary Afghans to the mercy of the Taliban, warlords and drug runners, but a new human security approach that would prioritise the protection of individuals in Afghanistan as well as in neighbouring states.

A dreadful situation

The situation in Afghanistan is dire. Over the past three years, the intensified armed conflict between Allied forces and the insurgency has engulfed the civilian population, who are also the main victims of a resurgent Taliban. The combination of light ground forces, supported by overwhelming firepower, in highly kinetic operations has inevitably resulted in significant civilian casualties and so-called “collateral damage”. The heavy reliance on air strikes is because there are not enough forces in this huge country and because force protection takes precedence over the protection of Afghans. It is symptomatic of the priorities of the war that while we know that there have been some 1,011 deaths among coalition forces as of November 2008, there are no official statistics of civilian casualties. These probably number thousands from direct firepower, while many more have died from the indirect effects of the war – disease and homelessness, for example.

In addition to air-strikes, other heavy-handed measures, such as torture, arbitrary searches, and detentions, have also damaged the credibility of the multi-national forces. These tragedies are often compounded when US and NATO officials deny casualty figures, only to have the United Nations or journalists independently confirm them. They then shift the blame to the insurgency, stating that they deliberately mingle with civilian population to evade detection and to increase civilian casualties for the purpose of propaganda. Even if true, and it is an obvious tactic for insurgents to adopt, this attempt to pass the blame makes it appear that international forces are uninterested in protecting the people they supposedly came to liberate. Many reports now indicate that Afghans are starting to question the foreign military presence

that they welcomed in 2001, increasingly viewing it as a major source of their daily insecurity.

As well as being victims of violence, Afghans are among the poorest people in the world. Afghanistan ranks 174th out of 178 countries on the UNDP 2007-2008 human development index. Even after almost seven years of reconstruction and development assistance, a large percentage of the population suffer from shortages of housing, clean water and electricity, and cannot afford the rising cost of food. Afghan women face the highest rates of illiteracy and maternal mortality in the world and unemployment still hovers around 40-70 percent with few prospects available.

International aid levels to Afghanistan remain low and consistently lag behind stated requirements. The little aid that has been delivered tends to be supply-driven and to reflect donor preferences rather than addressing the population's real needs. According to the highly critical OXFAM/ACBAR report released last March on aid effectiveness, only \$15 billion of the \$39 billion originally pledged has been disbursed. Out of that, a "staggering" 40 percent of the aid has returned to donor countries through company profits and consultants' salaries. More than half the international aid is bound by national procurement rules that require resources and services be purchased from the donor country.

The main source of wealth is the drug economy. As of 2007, Afghanistan supplies 93 percent of the world's opium and accounts for 52 percent of the country's licit gross domestic product (GDP) and 33 percent of total GDP. The latest UNODC report predicts an increase in production in the southern parts of the country in 2008, the area hit hardest by the insurgency. The drug economy purportedly funds more than one third of Taliban operations. It has become the single largest source of revenue for warlords, insurgents, and criminal organizations as well as government officials including police.

The US favours aerial spraying although the UN, NATO, and Afghan government oppose it, concerned that it will alienate farmers and drive them to support the Taliban. Without real options for alternative livelihoods, peasant farmers feel that poppy production is the only means to guarantee their family's welfare. Even then, they receive less than 20 percent of drug revenue while the rest goes to a nexus of traffickers, traders, corrupt government officials, and factional commanders. The emphasis on poppy eradication

programs directed at the farmer merely fuels anger in already unstable provinces. This is exacerbated by the active involvement of many government officials in the drug trade and the failure of the government to go after them. By early 2007, “not a single high ranking government official has been prosecuted for drug-related corruption”.

The Afghan state: weaknesses and corruption

The sway of the Karzai government does not extend much beyond Kabul. The growing power of former warlords and commanders, whose brutality and abuses precipitated the Taliban takeover in the 1990s, has created a climate of fear, terror, and lawlessness. The US-led Coalition forces’ reliance on anti-Taliban militias to defeat the Taliban in 2001 led to the empowerment of these factional commanders. During the Bonn process, they were rewarded with positions in the government. This has entrenched a culture of impunity and effectively surrendered the state to the warlords and militia commanders. Nowhere is this more evident than with the Afghan police force, which has been thoroughly infiltrated by the warlords and militias, and which is increasingly viewed as a tool of oppression and predation by ordinary Afghans. Moreover, this same police force was re-tasked by the international forces to counter-insurgency operations rather than law enforcement. This shift in priorities has further undermined the police’s main task of protecting civilians and supporting the rule of law and has led to their widespread mistrust.

Similar to the police, the justice system suffers from rampant corruption, lack of human capital, and is subject to political pressure. This has led to a vacuum that the Taliban, in many areas, are only too eager to fill with the establishment of parallel administrations. Their harsh system of courts offers a greater degree of predictability and reliability than the corrupt, slow, and ineffectual formal courts. They issue prompt rulings on a number of criminal and civil matters, including land disputes, family disputes, loan disputes, robbery, and murder. Essentially, they are delivering the basic governance tasks that the police and judiciary should be doing.

The Taliban also seems to be more adept in using various media platforms to exaggerate their strengths, to project themselves as a national movement, and to exploit legitimate grievances of the local population. By framing the conflict as a wider war on Islam, the Taliban are appealing to national and religious sentiments in their attempt to obtain wider public support. They keep their messages simple and portray themselves as a just force in

contrast to the corrupt Afghan government. In contrast, the government and the multi-national forces tend to issue top-down strategic messages to the population that are often inconsistent and generally contradict the every day experience of ordinary Afghans.

Unlike the police and the judiciary, the Afghan National Army (ANA) is more or less gaining the trust and respect of ordinary Afghans and is considered the least corrupt among the country's emerging institutions. Built from scratch, it is now nearly 70,000 strong and current plans will expand it to over 130,000 troops over the next five years. But despite its increased professionalism, the army still lacks the skills and resources to confront the insurgency. Indeed, a recent US government report found that the army faces critical equipment shortages, is incapable of conducting operations without the support of international forces, and has a high desertion rate.

At the operational level, the international effort in Afghanistan remains fragmented and suffers from a lack of coherence and unity of effort. This confused international structure has proved to be one of the greater obstacles to operations in Afghanistan. The divisions, rivalries, and "organizational tribalism" of the international community have prevented the development of a coherent strategy guiding and integrating the different elements of the stabilization and reconstruction effort. The sheer number of actors complicates efforts to enhance structures for coordination. In addition to the two separate military commands, there are several UN agencies, three special civilian representatives (UN, EU, and NATO), dozens of bilateral development agencies, and thousands of NGOs and contractors involved in rebuilding the country.

Finally, of course, the war is spreading. Despite having signed a pledge of non-interference at the Kabul Declaration in 2002, the six neighbouring states retain their links to client networks in Afghanistan that are capable of destabilizing the country as an insurance policy. The insurgent sanctuary and recruiting base within Pakistan remains one of the biggest challenges to stability in Afghanistan. The recent attacks in Mumbai have highlighted the complex regional ramifications of the continuing conflict.

Perspectives for a human security approach

So what can be done? How would a human security approach address these monumental challenges?

First of all, a human security approach would end air strikes and reorient military tactics away from attacking insurgents towards protection and engagement at local levels. In the US, there is talk of adopting the kind of population-centric approach that General Petraeus adopted in the “surge” in Iraq. But, quite apart from the questions that have been raised about the effectiveness of the “surge”, this will be an even more difficult undertaking in Afghanistan, since the populations are more widely spread out and the terrain more difficult to traverse. It will require a different kind of co-operation with the local population that would begin with the establishment of a local governance framework that protects the rights of civilian populations, and takes responsibility for law enforcement. Further, new operating guidelines must be set so that troops work alongside local civilian leaders to understand and develop localized security strategies and tactics. Only by engaging directly and cooperating with the locals openly and transparently, can these units contribute to an overall human security plan that earns their legitimacy in the eyes of the public, deflates the ranks of insurgents and sets the pre-conditions for development.

Secondly, there is an urgent need to rebalance economic and military efforts and give priority to the provision of basic services and legitimate ways of making a living. NATO leaders reiterate the importance of reconstruction but they see it as an add-on to the military effort and complain that civilians have not done enough. But economic activities are impossible without security; they can only take place in the context of a changed security approach that emphasises protection and stabilisation. Legitimate ways of making a living include agricultural alternatives to drug production or the legal production of opium for medicines such as codeine and morphine, as proposed by the French NGO Senlis.

Thirdly, key to both security and the establishment of a functioning licit economy is the establishment of legitimate political authority and an end to the culture of impunity. The forthcoming Afghan elections in 2009 and 2010 can provide a renewed opportunity to regain the trust of the population through the implementation of robust vetting and complaints processes to bar candidates implicated in atrocities and organized crime – something that was not done in previous elections. As well as vetting election candidates, it is critically important

to provide technical and financial resources that could help to establish fully-functioning law and order institutions with the proper vetting processes of police and judges, internal affairs, oversight and operating rules. In addition, it is necessary to continue to strengthen and build an effective, legitimate, and self-sustaining national army that can gradually replace international forces. This will also help counter rumours about permanent US bases and long-term occupation that the insurgents successfully exploit for propaganda purposes and that fuel anxieties amongst Afghanistan's neighbours.

Legitimacy also requires the engagement of ordinary Afghans in the political process, especially women. It would also mean reaching out to "reconcilable" elements within the insurgency. The majority of foot soldiers in the insurgency are disgruntled individuals, unemployed and fed up with corruption and poor governance. Strategic communications need to be rethought, not as top down messages but as a genuine vehicle, which would give voice to Afghan grievances, not only through the media but also through civil society debates, local *shura*, and other safe forums.

Fourthly, the UN must be mandated to act as the main strategic coordinating body, providing guidance, direction and authority. Moreover, the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom should sign a status of force agreement with the Afghan government and be brought within the framework of the UN mandate. This legal vacuum has left US forces unrestrained, creating significant problems regarding detention practices, the use of torture, and the lack of accountability for civilian deaths.

Finally, there is a need to establish a multilateral regional framework involving governments and civil society from all the neighbouring states and beyond. Without talks with Iran, Pakistan, India, and the Central Asian states, peace and stability in the region will remain illusive.

Can the incoming Administration together with NATO allies achieve all this? The danger is that the hunt for Osama Bin Laden will remain the dominant narrative and that a so-called population-centric strategy, likely to be adopted by the new Administration, will be viewed as a means to an end – defeating Al Qaeda. Until these priorities are reversed and the protection of Afghans is seen as equal in importance to the protection of Americans, the

prognosis is grim – a spreading conflict in the whole region that could boomerang frighteningly in the comfortable West, as it did in Mumbai.

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