Defining Success in Afghanistan

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A Report by the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Success in Afghanistan is the establishment of a political order, security situation, and indigenous security force that is stable, viable, enduring, and able—with greatly reduced international support—to prevent Afghanistan from being a safe haven for international terrorists. The current American and Coalition strategy is making progress and should be continued. Since President Obama, NATO allies, and the Afghans have agreed that troops will be present in Afghanistan through 2014, the policy does not require substantial modifications at this point. This paper is thus primarily a report on the current situation in Afghanistan and a consideration of some of the prospects and challenges ahead. Our principal recommendation is that the U.S. and its allies should continue to resource and sustain the strategy now being executed, which is the only approach that can secure their vital national security interests in Afghanistan.

Situation Update

- The New Year finds the situation in southern Afghanistan fundamentally different from what it was at the start of 2010.
    - The Taliban has lost almost all of its principal safe havens in this area.
    - Its ability to acquire, transport, and use IED materials and other weapons and equipment has been disrupted.
    - Local populations have stepped forward to fight the Taliban with ISAF support for the first time in some important areas.
    - The momentum of the insurgency in the south has unquestionably been arrested and probably reversed.
- The insurgents do not have momentum anywhere in RC(East). Coalition operations continue to disrupt them in Greater Paktia and are increasingly pushing into their safe havens and support zones in Ghazni, Logar, and Wardak. Insurgents have not been able to conduct a coordinated campaign in Nangarhar or Konar or to make much use of isolated safe havens they retain in Nuristan.
- Despite alarmist reports from the Intelligence Community and elsewhere, the insurgency is not gaining strength in northern Afghanistan and is extremely unlikely to do so.
- Direct action operations against terrorists, insurgent leaders and facilitators, narcotics labs, and other key nodes of the various networks that support unrest in Afghanistan have increased both in pace and in effectiveness.

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- From a military standpoint, the counterinsurgency is going reasonably well, insofar as it is possible to judge over the winter. Challenges remain in the areas that have been or are being cleared, and the requirements for the next series of operations are becoming apparent.

- The theater remains inadequately resourced. The shortfalls, however, are considerably more likely to protract an otherwise successful campaign than they are to make it fail.

- Political progress has been much more limited, but that is to be expected this early into the implementation of the new strategy. It is too soon to judge the effectiveness of the current approach in this area.

- The real test of the security gains in southern Afghanistan will come in late summer 2011, when the insurgent fighting effort can be expected to reach its peak. The seasonal nature of enemy activity makes judging the depth of progress before then extremely difficult.

Challenges

The progress made over the last 18 months is real, but so are the challenges ahead. The corruption and illegitimacy of the Afghan government and the persistence of sanctuaries for insurgent groups in Pakistan are the two main concerns generally raised about the feasibility of success. Governance problems are at the center of any counterinsurgency effort and success in this area is ultimately a sine qua non for overall success. Cross-border sanctuaries are also a common feature among long-lasting insurgencies. We assess that significant progress is possible in Afghanistan without any fundamental change in the nature of the Pakistani sanctuaries, and that such progress will likely lead to a reduction in the effectiveness of those sanctuaries that success requires.

Governance

Improvements to Afghan governance will come through greater local participation in representative institutions in the Pashtun areas. This is not a foreign, ideological drive to "democratize" Afghanistan, but rather a recognition that local representative institutions are the foundation of Pashtun tribal culture.

Pashtun cultural traditions, which have eroded over time and can fairly be said to be norms only in some areas, have been produced by skeptics of success in Afghanistan as evidence that the Pashtuns are fundamentally unconquerable and also ungovernable. The fact that the U.S. and its allies are trying neither to conquer nor to govern Afghanistan is often lost in this discussion. The issue

at hand is not whether Westerners can govern Afghanistan, but whether or not Afghans can and, if so, what such an Afghan government would look like. The history of Afghanistan before 1978 (and even, to some extent, since then) strongly suggests not only that Afghanistan is governable, but that there is considerable consensus among Afghans about the general shape the government should take.

The current government structure runs counter to traditional Pashtun expectations about the relationship between local communities and the central government because it excludes the communities from having a meaningful voice in almost any decision. It hyper-empowers the executive vis-à-vis representative bodies at every level. This imbalance of powers generates a feeling of alienation and resentment among many Afghans, particularly Pashtuns. It has also facilitated discriminatory and predatory government behavior that fuels a sense of injustice and, therefore, passive and active support for the insurgency. Corruption and abuse-of-power must be addressed by the United States because they fuel the insurgency. Our challenge is not eliminate corruption in Afghanistan but to help the Afghan political leadership behave sufficiently in accord with Pashtun norms that groups that now feel marginalized and preyed-upon see an advantage in at least tolerating the new order.

The emergence of a functional and credible local security program in 2010 is perhaps the most striking and unexpected development—and potentially one of the most important. The Afghan Local Police (ALP) program is designed to extend the reach of Afghan and Coalition forces to rural areas rather than to replace them. Perhaps more importantly, ALP empowers villages and clusters of villages—not tribes—to resist the Taliban by supporting the consensus decisions of local elders arrived at in traditional Pashtun ways. It brings these traditional local structures into coherence with the central government at the level of the district—ALP sites are subordinated to district chiefs of police. This program offers a promising view of what at least part of the ultimate political solution to this conflict might look like.

Pakistan

The persistence of insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan is a major challenge for the success of our mission in Afghanistan. It is not, however, insuperable. Insurgencies with cross-border sanctuaries have two vulnerabilities—the loss of the sanctuary itself and the loss of the local networks required to make use of it. Afghanistan is not beset by hordes of insurgents flooding across the border, but rather by the movement of leaders, small numbers of highly-trained fighters, munitions, weapons, and other supplies. These assets require numerous and effective networks within Afghanistan to move, to sleep, to hide, and to operate.

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The current strategy focuses on those local networks both by attacking them with direct action and by conducting clearing operations, governance efforts, and other elements of traditional counterinsurgency operations. The U.S. has also been conducting limited operations against the sanctuaries themselves. The durable solution to the challenges we face in Afghanistan requires appropriately balanced action and success on both sides of the Durand Line with the recognition that our efforts should be concentrated on the areas we can directly affect—i.e., the places where we have soldiers on the ground, rather than in areas where we do not.

Alternatives

Success in Afghanistan is hard enough that one might prefer to find another way than counterinsurgency to attain our goals. The search for such different paths is natural and understandable. It will not, however, yield meaningful alternatives capable of ensuring America's core national security interest, namely, preventing a resurgent transnational terrorist safe haven.

It is not possible to deny safe haven to terrorists in Afghanistan without also pursuing a counterinsurgency strategy. The neutralization and ultimate defeat of the insurgency is a necessary prerequisite for preventing the return of al Qaeda and other transnational terrorist groups that thrive in the political vacuum that the insurgency creates. As long as local networks willing to support extremists exist and can operate freely in Afghanistan, terrorists will be able to use those networks however intense our direct-action operations might be. The current counterinsurgency strategy is the only approach that can disrupt and ultimately eliminate those local networks, thereby preventing the terrorists from returning to Afghanistan and ensuring that America achieves its vital national security objectives.

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Introduction

Success in Afghanistan is the establishment of a political order, security situation, and indigenous security force that is stable, viable, enduring, and able—with greatly reduced international support—to prevent Afghanistan from being a safe-haven for international terrorists. This objective is the most narrowly-constrained goal the United States and its allies could achieve in Afghanistan that would support their vital national security interests.

One year after President Barack Obama's decision to adopt the current strategy and send additional resources to support it, there is reason to have confidence in that strategy even as there are continuing causes for concern.

The troops of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) have done unprecedented damage to the insurgency within Afghanistan in 2010. They have cleared districts in southern Afghanistan that had been Taliban-held command, control, logistics, and facilitation hubs. A local defense program—called the Afghan Local Police (ALP)— appears to be taking root in the localities where it has been formed but also to be spreading organically to other areas. Direct action operations against terrorists, insurgent leaders and facilitators, narcotics labs, and other key nodes of the various networks that support unrest in Afghanistan have increased both in pace and in effectiveness. ISAF and Afghan forces have seized unprecedented amounts of explosive material, narcotics, and other insurgent paraphernalia. The combination of these activities, the clearing of insurgent safe-havens within Afghanistan, increased efforts to secure and patrol key lines of communication, and local security initiatives have had effects on the insurgency.

Some security progress has been made, but Afghanistan almost always looks better in December and January than it does in June because of the seasonal nature of the enemies' activity. The true test of this year's progress will come in the summer of 2011 when we can judge the extent to which the enemy has been able to rally and re-attack areas that we believe we have secured.

Progress on the political front has been much more halting, but that is not very surprising. As we saw in Iraq in 2007, political progress often lags behind security progress. Iraq's political challenges then resulted much more directly from insurgent violence, however, than do Afghanistan's. Corruption of all varieties permeates the government and severely undermines its legitimacy. The alliances that President Karzai has made with other powerful individuals in Afghanistan are fragile. Parts of the Pashtun population reject the government's legitimacy for reasons other than poor security. Ongoing insurgent activity nevertheless exacerbates Afghan governance failures. The threat of insurgent attacks conceals governance problems in some areas and gives malign officials cover and excuses to avoid confronting their own misdeeds. The quasi-tribal and ethnic nature of the violence also hinders political progress and exacerbates bad governance practices. It would nevertheless be naïve to imagine that simply reducing the level of violence in Afghanistan will naturally drive the country's leaders to govern better.

Success therefore requires direct efforts to improve Afghan governance. This is not mission-creep. The objective of improving

Afghan governance is strictly required to obtain a stable political order that can survive the withdrawal of international forces. That objective is a core part of President Obama's oft-repeated goal of preventing Afghanistan from once again degenerating into a safe-haven for al Qaeda and affiliated transnational terrorist and insurgent groups.

Improvements to Afghan governance will come through greater local participation in representative institutions in the Pashtun areas. This is not a foreign, ideological drive to "democratize" Afghanistan, but rather a recognition that local representative institutions are the foundation of Pashtun tribal culture. America and its allies should not aim—and are not aiming—to remake Afghanistan in their image or according to their ideals. Afghanistan must be built to suit Afghans, and that is the course on which American and international efforts are embarked today.

Political progress will take even longer to achieve and to gauge than security progress. The government will have to demonstrate increased willingness to stop and punish

MAP 1: AFGHANISTAN

egregious corruption and abuse of power that increase passive support for the insurgency, to curtail practices that favor some groups at the expense of others, and to establish working relationships with local representative bodies in insurgent-prone areas. The gradual extension of the government's legitimacy will stem from the rebalancing of the central government with local interests, community by community, as local representative bodies obtain compromises from the central government and reach accords with their executive officials from Kabul.

No discussion of defining success in Afghanistan would be complete without a consideration of its neighbors, particularly Pakistan, for two reasons: First, because of the serious nefarious role Pakistani security services play by providing sanctuary to our principal adversaries, and, second, because government collapse in Afghanistan poses a serious threat to the stability of Pakistan itself as well as to our ability to work with Islamabad to attack al Qaeda and related movements.

The Afghan insurgent groups that pose the greatest danger to the success of our mission in Afghanistan are the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST) and the Haqqani Network (HQN), with the Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HiG) a distant third.[1] The QST has sanctuaries in Baluchistan, directly across the Durand Line, in Quetta, and even deeper into Pakistan. QST leaders have sought refuge as far afield as Karachi. The Haqqani Network maintains sanctuaries in North Waziristan, with its headquarters in Miramshah less than 30 miles from the Afghan border. These Pakistani sanctuaries provide space for insurgent leaders to hide out, plan, recruit, raise funds, allocate resources, train fighters, rest, and refit. Some leaders continually move from Pakistani sanctuaries into Afghanistan, although effective ISAF direct-action operations over the last eighteen months have reduced the number of enemy commanders willing to take such risks. Some fighters move regularly from sanctuaries in Pakistan to attack ISAF and Afghan forces across the Durand Line, but they form a small (if highly trained and motivated) minority of insurgent fighters overall, the overwhelming majority of whom are Afghans fighting within walking distance of their homes. The Pakistani sanctuaries, thus, are not bases from which the insurgents continually invade Afghanistan but rather safe areas in which high-value individuals and materials can be protected and allocated.

The persistence of insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan is nevertheless a major challenge for the success of our mission in Afghanistan. It is not, however, insuperable. All insurgencies that benefit from external sanctuaries suffer from two vulnerabilities. They can lose their sanctuaries, thus placing their leadership and essential materiel and training facilities at risk, or they can lose the local networks within the country they are actually attacking, thus losing their ability to make use of the their leaders' expertise and advanced materiel. In the latter case, leaders in sanctuary become generals without armies living in increasingly irrelevant exile. The best counter-insurgency strategies naturally attack both vulnerabilities, attempting to reduce the effectiveness of the sanctuaries while simultaneously reducing or eliminating the local networks that enable insurgents to operate away from their sanctuaries.

This balanced approach is necessary and underway. Drone strikes against terrorist leaders are underway in Pakistan. On its own, this campaign of targeted strikes would probably do nothing more than temporarily

disrupt insurgent leadership, since there is no historical case of targeted strikes alone permanently disabling an insurgent or terrorist network. These operations must necessarily be complemented by effective counter-insurgency within Afghanistan itself—including the elimination of local insurgent networks, the development of effective Afghan security forces, and the establishment of a stable and minimally effective Afghan government. The durable solution to the challenges we face in Afghanistan requires appropriately balanced action and success on both sides of the Durand Line with the recognition that our efforts should be concentrated on the areas we can directly affect—i.e., the places where we have soldiers on the ground, rather than in areas where we do not.

The consideration of Afghanistan's neighbors leads, finally, to a consideration of the potential costs of failure. The Pakistani government can, to a considerable extent, choose to provide or withhold sanctuary for Afghan insurgents. A collapsed Afghan state, an ethnic civil war, or an Afghan state governed by Taliban leaders will not have that choice to provide or deny sanctuary. Terrorist groups flourish in conditions of anarchy or ideological and operational camaraderie. Nothing in the Taliban's history suggests that any Taliban leadership would have the ability to prevent them from finding sanctuaries in Afghanistan, even a relatively peaceful Afghanistan.

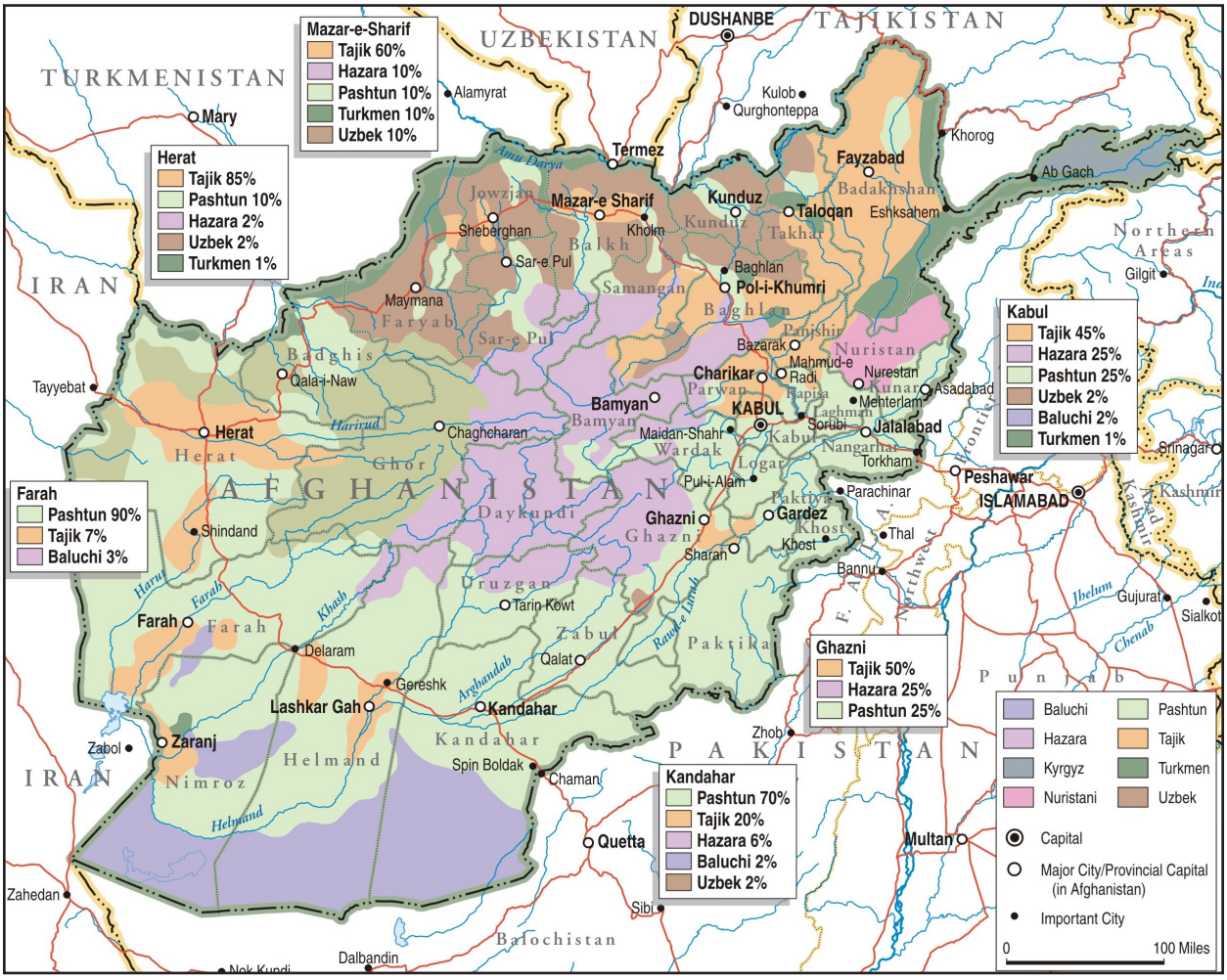
But Afghanistan will almost certainly not be peaceful in the wake of a premature U.S. and international withdrawal. Strong indications suggest that Afghanistan's northern minorities—the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras—are already considering their options in such a contingency and possibly beginning to re-arm in preparation for renewed inter-ethnic conflict. India, China, Iran, and Russia all have historical links to these groups and powerful incentives to support them against a reviving Taliban regime. Ironically, premature or foolish attempts to "reconcile" with senior Taliban leaders could trigger this conflict by persuading the former Northern Alliance and its international partners that the Taliban is, indeed, on its way back to power.

Should inter-ethnic conflict of the variety seen in the 1990s resume, some results are predictable. Afghans will once again flee the conflict in the hundreds of thousands or millions (some 5 million fled in the 1980s and 1990s). Afghan migrants will destabilize neighboring states once more, badly undermining Pakistani efforts to get their own tribal regions under control and generating a renewed source of tension and conflict with Iran. It is not clear that the increasingly fragile Central Asian states to Afghanistan's north could survive an influx of refugees. It is certain that a war-torn Afghanistan will once again offer promise to international terrorist groups to regain their footing there either by moving into lawless areas or by promising threatened Afghans protection.

Success in Afghanistan is hard enough that one might prefer to find another way than counterinsurgency to attain our goals there. The search for such different paths is natural and understandable. It will not, however, yield meaningful alternatives capable of ensuring America's core national security interest, namely, preventing a resurgent transnational terrorist safe haven. President Obama has defined the minimum American objectives in Afghanistan consistent with our interests and security. He has authorized the continued pursuit of a strategy narrowly focused on those objectives. He has

provided his commanders and civilian leaders with the minimum level of resources that could reasonably be expected to support that strategy. The alternatives to the present course are not scaled-back commitment, reduced exposure, or accepting greater risk—they are abject and dangerous failure. We must succeed in Afghanistan.

Success in Afghanistan is achievable within the current regional context and with the current strategy and resources. There are no guarantees in war, however. The possibility of success is not equivalent to the certainty of success. The core elements of a successful strategy are in place in Afghanistan today to meet the current threat in the current conditions, and lead Afghanistan on a trajectory to a stable and enduring political order.



MAP 2: ETHNO-LINGUISTIC DIVISIONS IN AFGHANISTAN

State of Play

The Relationship between the Insurgency and Transnational Terrorism [2]

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 *mujahideen* 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 Miramshah 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 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 Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan. These groups—they include the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, led by Baitullah Mehsud until his recent death-by-Predator; the Tehrik-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi; and the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), responsible for the Mumbai attack—now provide some of the same services to al Qaeda that the Taliban provided when they ruled Afghanistan.[3] 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, and 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 Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa 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

Map 3: Eastern Afghanistan

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.[4]

Consequently, it is not possible to deny safe-haven to terrorists in Afghanistan without also pursuing a counterinsurgency strategy. The neutralization and ultimate defeat of the insurgency is a necessary prerequisite for preventing the return of al Qaeda, LeT, and other transnational terrorist groups that thrive in the political vacuum that the insurgency creates, and that rely on Afghan Pashtuns to provide the social substructure that makes them safe, secure, and viable.

The Shape of Afghanistan and the Insurgency

Afghanistan's remoteness and rural character make it difficult for Americans to understand the shape and limits of the challenges we face. Whereas violence in Iraq was concentrated along three river valleys that nearly converge in the vicinity of one city of overwhelming importance (Baghdad), the insurgency in Afghanistan can seem almost amorphous and the space within which it could operate almost boundless. Our unfamiliarity with the way Afghanistan works exaggerates the scale of the problems we must solve and makes it hard even to describe a clear series of actions we can take that can lead to the achievement of our goals in the end. Afghanistan is not simply an amorphous collection of independence-seeking tribes and ethnic groups, and the enemy cannot simply retreat into the mountains, deserts, or more distant valleys and continue to pose a meaningful threat to our security or our success.

The insurgency in Afghanistan persists almost exclusively among the Pashtun ethnic group, which forms a plurality but not a majority of the Afghan population. The Durand Line, which forms the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, separates the Pashtuns into two groups, with the majority in Pakistan. Many Pashtun tribes cross the border, which Afghanistan has never formally recognized. Afghan Pashtuns themselves are further subdivided into two major tribal confederations, the Durrani and the Ghilzai. The Durrani homelands are primarily in southern Afghanistan in the provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Oruzgan, and Zabul—an area traditionally known as Zabulistan. For much of Afghanistan's history as a state it has been ruled by Durrani Pashtuns. The Ghilzai homelands are concentrated further to the east, particularly in the provinces of Paktia, Paktika, and Khost—an area often referred to as Loya (or Greater) Paktia. These two large confederations have no formal leadership and do not act cohesively. Each is further subdivided into groups of tribes, then into tribes themselves, and the tribes are further divided into clans and other subgroupings.

The complexity of Pashtun tribes is overwhelming, but its importance can be overdrawn. Tribal, sub-tribal, and occasionally super-tribal conflict is a driver of instability in Afghanistan and tribes are unquestionably important. But they are not decisive. Few tribes act cohesively across large areas. Most Afghans live in areas where tribes are intermingled. Tribal boundaries generally do not persist in urban areas. Feuds within tribes can be more important than conflicts between tribes. There is no solution to be found in Afghanistan by "mobilizing,"

"arming," or "empowering" the tribes—but no solution will work that does not take tribes into account.

Very few non-Pashtuns participate actively in the Taliban insurgency, although there are some, particularly in mixed areas along the northern edge of the Pashtun areas. Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras do occasionally join the Taliban formally (and Uzbek Islamist splinter groups known as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Jihad Union are based in Waziristan and allied with the Taliban and al Qaeda). More often, criminals and arms dealers within those ethnic groups supply Taliban fighters with weapons as a matter of business rather than ideology. Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras in their ethnic homelands in northern and central Afghanistan generally regard the Taliban as a serious threat, recalling the vicious civil wars of the 1990s when Taliban fighters swept into their lands (and both sides committed atrocities and war crimes).

Durrani kings in the 19th century muddled Afghanistan's ethnic geography intentionally by settling Pashtuns in pockets in the north. Such pockets remain, especially in Kunduz, Baghlan, Faryab, and Balkh Provinces. The Pashtun belt itself also extends into southern Herat Province, Badghis, and Ghor. To the extent that the Taliban insurgency has managed to spread into the north it has remained almost entirely confined to these Pashtun pockets. There has been no significant "Talibanization" of Tajik, Uzbek, or Hazara groups in the northern provinces, and there is very little prospect of any such development. On the contrary, the appearance of Taliban strength near the Tajik and Uzbek heartlands has generated fear among Tajik and Uzbek leaders and a tendency to seek to re-arm militias while demanding protection from Kabul and ISAF. But the northern warlords have generally maintained their control over security in the key cities of Mazar-e Sharif and Herat, and Pashtun insurgents in the north have little ability to challenge them other than locally.

Kandahar is by far the most important city in Pashtun Afghanistan. It is the largest city (one of the few population centers that could reasonably be called a city) in the Afghan Pashtun areas. In contrast with Kabul, which has a mixed population, Kandahar is almost entirely Pashtun. Throughout Kabul, its environs, and the north, east, and west of Afghanistan, Dari (a variant of Farsi or Persian) is the dominant language and Persian tradition the court culture (most Afghan city and place names are actually Dari forms). These factors make Kandahar essential homeland for any Pashtun-nationalist ideology. The Taliban itself, unsurprisingly, was established in Kandahar Province in 1995; Mullah Mohammad Omar, its founder and leader, is from Kandahar. President Hamid Karzai, on the other hand, is from the village of Karz just south of Kandahar City; his principal Pashtun political rival, Gul Agha Sherzai, is also a Kandahari.

Kandahar is also a vital economic hub. It sits at the southern tip of the Hindu Kush mountains and astride the roads that link Pakistan, Kabul, and Herat. It is traditionally part of a larger market area that includes the extremely fertile Helmand River Valley to the west, although instability has severely damaged that trade corridor. The route from the border crossing at Wesh/Chaman through Kandahar into Helmand, Farah, and then Herat is also traditionally part of the larger transit system that links Central Asia to Karachi.

Kandahar is thus in a sense the capital of a human and economic system that includes

parts of Zabul, Oruzgan, Kandahar, and Helmand Provinces. That system is surrounded by sparsely populated marginal lands in Nimruz, Farah, northern Oruzgan, Zabul, and western Ghazni Provinces. The southern portions of Helmand, Kandahar, and Nimruz Provinces are dominated by a vast, largely uninhabited, plateau of rock and hard-packed sand known as the Reg Desert, which continues south across the Durand Line into the Pakistani Province of Baluchistan. To the north, the westward extension of the Hindu Kush mountains raise desert peaks. There is, therefore, a definable and limited area in southern Afghanistan for which the Quetta Shura Taliban and the Afghan Government, supported by ISAF, are struggling. The Taliban insurgency cannot persist in a meaningful form if it is expelled from the densely-populated parts of this area. The government, conversely, cannot be said to control its territory if the Taliban has a strong presence here. These considerations are among the reasons for ISAF Commander General Stanley McChrystal's decision to make clearing the Central Helmand River Valley and Kandahar the main effort for ISAF in 2009 and 2010.

Success in southern Afghanistan is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for successful counter-insurgency in Afghanistan as a whole. Afghanistan's rulers have traditionally come from among the Durrani Pashtun elite based in Kandahar. Their Pashtun oppositionists have thus come naturally from among the Ghilzai tribal groups in Kandahar and also to the east. Mullah Omar himself is a member of the Hotak Tribe, part of the Ghilzai confederation. Jalaluddin Haqqani, a member of the Zadran Tribe (also Ghilzai) from Paktia Province, founded a long-lived Ghilzai military opposition group, which his son, Sirajuddin, now commands. The Haqqani Network was created to resist the Soviet invasion, with considerable assistance from the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI). Jalaluddin was a famous *mujahideen* commander, and the first to take and hold a city from the Soviets as they departed (Khost).

From its inception, the Haqqani Network has concentrated on the Greater Paktia area, its tribal heartland. Greater Paktia is comprised of mountainous and compartmentalized terrain. The Khost Bowl, a vale formed by a ring of mountains reaching 10,000 feet in height to its north, east, and west, is relatively warm and fertile. It is geographically connected much more closely to Pakistan than to the rest of Afghanistan, as transit from Khost to Gardez, the capital of neighboring Paktia Province, is through the forbidding Khost-Gardez Pass, which meanders for miles among 8,000-10,000-foot peaks. Southwest of Khost is sparsely-populated Paktika Province, whose northern and western districts are meaningfully part of Greater Paktia, but whose southern and western expanses are not. The Waziri tribal areas in Paktika are not fundamentally part of Afghanistan at all—their inhabitants identify with their tribal cousins across the Durand Line in Waziristan. Southern Paktika is much more closely tied to Zabul than to Khost; and western Paktika is more part of Ghazni.

The Haqqani legend and emphasis on Greater Paktia are, thus, somewhat distorting. Khost is an isolated city largely disconnected from the rest of Afghanistan. Gardez, on the other hand, is tied more closely to Ghazni and looks more toward Kabul than toward Pakistan. Another way to look at this region, therefore, is to consider the wide floodplain that stretches south

from the outskirts of Kabul in Logar and Wardak Provinces, through Ghazni, Paktia, and Paktika Provinces toward Zabul. This floodplain, which runs along the northern edge of the Pashtun belt, contains the Ring Road running from Kabul to Kandahar and the most fertile agriculture lands in this portion of the country, as well as the bulk of the population. That is one of the reasons why the Haqqani Network has worked diligently to expand its reach beyond Greater Paktia into Ghazni, Logar, and Wardak Provinces and thereby toward Kabul itself. Here, too, we find a definable human and economic system with recognizable boundaries. An insurgency that does not control Khost and have reasonable control over Ghazni, Gardez, and Sharana (the capital of Paktika Province) rapidly loses its credibility and relevance. If the Afghan Government does not control Logar, Wardak, and the Ghazni-Gardez-Sharana triangle, on the other hand, it cannot claim to have legitimacy in the Ghilzai heartland.

The contested areas east of Kabul are even more difficult to describe because they are more fragmented and isolated by geography. The most populous and important is the Jalalabad Bowl and the Kabul-to-Khyber highway that runs through Nangarhar Province. Northeast of Nangarhar is Konar Province, which runs along the Konar River and the Durand Line opposite the Pakistani districts of Bajaur, Mohmand, Dir, and Chitral—traditional centers of Islamist terrorism and insurgency in Pakistan. Konar and Nangarhar are largely inhabited by Pashtuns. To the north lies Nuristan, inhabited by Nuristanis who are ethnically distinct from Pashtuns and extremely xenophobic as a rule. Nuristan and Konar are isolated to the north and west by a rock wall 10,000-feet high crossed by very few, barely trafficable passes. Movement of significant numbers of people or amounts of cargo is largely confined to the road that runs along the Konar River through Asadabad. Controlling that road and the pass at the base of the Konar River Valley is the key to controlling movement from this isolated area to anywhere that matters. Although the Hezb-e Islam Gulbuddin insurgent group is strongest in this area, it is not firmly in control. Numerous Taliban groups and splinter factions operate in the compartmentalized terrain of eastern Afghanistan. They pose a limited threat to the Afghan government and are primarily of concern to the U.S. because they can provide sanctuaries to terrorist groups in the forbidding mountains in which they live.

There are, thus, five major areas in Afghanistan that the government must hold and the insurgents must contest: Kabul and its immediate environs; the densely-settled areas of Kandahar, Helmand, Zabol, and Uruzgan; Herat; Loya Paktia, along with Ghazni and southern Logar and Wardak; and the inhabited areas east of Kabul around the Jalalabad Bowl and up the Konar River Valley. ISAF and the ANSF have established reasonably solid security in Herat and Kabul. They are maintaining more tenuous security in the Jalalabad Bowl and fighting to push stability up the Konar River Valley. Regaining control of Helmand, Kandahar, southern Uruzgan, and parts of Zabol has been ISAF's main effort for the past 18 months and has seen much progress. The situation in Loya Paktia, Ghazni, and parts of Logar and Wardak has not yet received adequate attention. The problems are finite and the requirements for success are clear. Whether or not we and the Afghan government can meet those requirements in the face of a determined enemy, of course, will remain unclear until the war is over.

2009-2010: Charting a New Course in Afghanistan

The last eighteen months have witnessed a transformation in almost every aspect of the American and coalition effort in Afghanistan. As late as April 2008, NATO documents on Afghanistan did not recognize the existence of insurgents, referring instead to violent extremists who were destabilizing efforts to turn security responsibilities over to the Afghans and conduct economic development. The NATO declaration on Afghanistan following the Strasbourg Summit in April 2009 formally recognized that an insurgency threatened the NATO mission and undertook to combat that insurgency. The November 2010 declaration following the Lisbon Summit was even clearer: "We will continue to assist the Afghan authorities in providing security and stability. ISAF and Afghan operations are improving security and freedom of movement throughout Afghanistan including in the south where the insurgency is particularly active."[5] The Strasbourg summit also recognized the growing challenge that corruption posed to the mission's success, a theme that was emphasized even more clearly by the McChrystal assessment in the summer of 2009.

The strategy approved by President Obama in December 2009, recently reaffirmed following the December 2010 Annual Review of Afghanistan and Pakistan (ARAP), was thus the first to commit the United States, NATO, and their non-NATO allies to fighting an insurgency and addressing corruption and abuse of power within the Afghan government. It significantly reduced the emphasis on development and economic progress and on the protection of physical infrastructure that had marked previous ISAF approaches. It focused instead on protecting the Afghan population and helping the Afghan government begin to address those of its own failures that were alienating the people and creating fertile ground for insurgent recruitment and activity. The strategic concept underpinning current U.S. and international efforts in Afghanistan has thus been in place for thirteen months.

General McChrystal's review identified four pillars of the new approach, which remain focal points of General Petraeus' strategy today (as articulated, for instance, in his counterinsurgency guidance):

- "Develop a significantly more effective and larger ANSF with radically expanded coalition force partnering at every echelon;
- "Prioritize responsive and accountable governance—that the Afghan people find acceptable—to be on par with, and integral to, delivering security;
- "Gain the initiative and reverse the insurgency's momentum as the first imperative in a series of temporal stages, and;
- "Prioritize available resources to those critical areas where the population is most threatened."[6]

Every one of these pillars reflected a fundamental change in the previous ISAF approach. The U.S. and the international community had previously consciously chosen not to pursue a rapid expansion of the ANSF. This choice reflected concerns that increasing quantity would require

sacrificing quality and that Afghanistan would be unable to pay for a larger military on its own. Both concerns were valid, but they received more weight than they deserved. Producing a larger military faster naturally reduces the overall quality of the force, but the ANSF only has to be good enough to fulfill the missions it is given. The last year has shown that it was possible to increase the Afghan National Army substantially and still have its planning and combat abilities improve significantly.[7] The concern about the affordability of the ANSF was premature. It does not matter what army Afghanistan could theoretically afford if the current army cannot safeguard the state. The recognition, now embodied by the Lisbon Declaration and President Obama's statements, that the international community will be supporting Afghanistan for a long time has reduced this particular concern to manageable levels.

The prioritization of good governance, acceptable to the Afghan people, was also a new departure for a command and international effort that had previously focused almost entirely on economic development and helping the government deliver services to the people. To the Western eye, this departure might not seem so large—economic development and government services are among the principal elements of good governance in the West. In a desperately poor country such as Afghanistan, however, they are much more like fringe benefits than core requirements of the government. The Afghan people seek security first and foremost, followed by basic justice and the ability to resolve disputes. International efforts that fueled corruption in the government in the name of economic development actually set the overall mission back significantly. Corruption accentuates the sense of injustice already prevalent in an impoverished, war-wracked society. Personal insecurity makes economic development a secondary concern. The McChrystal review marked the start of a process that is only now reaching fruition whereby the U.S. and its international partners start to work aggressively to address the failures of governance that are fueling the insurgency, rather than those that are most amenable to the tools of traditional Western aid programs.

It seems odd to say that reversing the insurgency's momentum was a new departure in ISAF strategy, but it was. Previous approaches had been primarily defensive in nature. ISAF forces had focused on securing roads and important physical infrastructure, relying on direct-action operations and periodic, brief "clearing" operations that were more like raids, in an attempt to prevent the insurgents from interfering with the development efforts that were thought to be the keys to success. The McChrystal strategy in contrast emphasized taking the fight to the enemy and matching our efforts against the degree of threat to important population centers rather than against the value of economic corridors or development projects.

As a result, the last pillar—prioritizing resources to critical areas—led to a fundamental reorientation of ISAF's forces and efforts. The insurgency, as we have seen, had been steadily gaining ground in and around Kandahar since at least 2007, yet ISAF had an extremely limited presence there in the summer of 2009. General McChrystal identified Kandahar as the theater's main effort, devoting ever-increasing resources to that problem at the expense of other areas that he considered either less important or less threatened. This approach diverged from the previous ISAF strategy that had tended to see all areas as more or

less equal in importance, and that therefore scattered much more limited resources across the country in a way that made concentrating efforts on a given problem extremely difficult.

None of these changes would have mattered without the addition of necessary resources. Although President Obama chose not to send to Afghanistan the troops that General McChrystal identified as necessary for a "fully-resourced" counter-insurgency effort, the number of American troops in that theater has increased from 30,000 to 100,000 during his presidency. Allied contributions raised the total number of ISAF forces (including the American contingent) from 55,000 in January 2009 to around 150,000 today. The U.S. also significantly increased the number of special mission units operating in Afghanistan, as well as the amount of information, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities necessary to develop actionable intelligence for them and for the general purpose forces. Significant additional intra-theater airlift was added, including helicopters, Marine Ospreys, and Air Force transports.

The expansion of forces required a significant effort to build infrastructure within Afghanistan, including bases, outposts, lines of communication (LOCs), logistics hubs, and communications capabilities. It also included the addition of new headquarters necessary both to command the larger forces and also to improve cross-theater coordination of efforts. It took almost exactly one year to get all of these additional resources in place: the president announced his decision on December 1, 2009, and the last additional U.S. formation (the headquarters of the 10th Mountain Division) was activated in Afghanistan on November 3, 2010.

General McChrystal also fundamentally restructured the NATO headquarters in Afghanistan. This topic may not be exciting to non-specialists, but it is extremely important. At the start of 2009 the command-structure was completely dysfunctional. ISAF was a NATO headquarters subordinate to the NATO Joint Forces Command at Brunnsum, itself subordinated to the Supreme Allied Command, Europe (SACEUR). It was not subordinated to U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), in whose area of responsibility Afghanistan falls, although American special mission units conducting counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan under the rubric of Operation Enduring Freedom did report to the CENTCOM commander. The organization training the Afghan National Security Forces (Combined Security Transition Command—Afghanistan, or CSTC-A) also belonged to CENTCOM rather than to NATO.

Worse still, CSTC-A retained responsibility for Afghan security forces even after they had completed training and deployed to combat—the training command, in other words, was also an operational command and, furthermore, was grading its own homework. There was no operational-level command parallel to the Multinational Corps-Iraq (MNC-I) commanded so ably by Lieutenant Generals Raymond Odierno, Lloyd Austin, Charles Jacoby, and now Robert Cone. Afghanistan was divided into five regional commands (North, East, Capital, South, and West), each assigned to a NATO country. Only RC(East), where the U.S. held command continuously, had a standing division headquarters assigned to it; the others were run by small, ad hoc international formations that were non-

doctrinal and had not trained or prepared together before deployment. Nevertheless, the regional commands carried the burden for developing most of such theater strategy as there was at the time—ISAF strategy before 2009 tended to be the agglomeration of regional command desires and interests rather than an overall approach driven by country-wide concerns and realities.

Every aspect of this problem has been transformed. ISAF is now responsible both to SACEUR and to CENTCOM. Lieutenant General David Rodriguez stood up the ISAF Joint Command (IJC), a three-star operational headquarters similar to MNC-I (although to its detriment, it has never yet been fielded as an organic, standing corps headquarters as MNC-I always was). CSTC-A became NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan, another three-star headquarters responsible only for building and training the ANSF. Operational coordination with the ANSF now lies appropriately with the IJC, the operational headquarters. RC(South) was divided in two and now has two complete and organic division headquarters—the Marine Expeditionary Force in RC (Southwest), (Helmand and Nimruz), and the 10th Mountain Division in RC (South), (Kandahar, Oruzgan, and Zabol). The activities of the special mission units have been integrated with the efforts of the general purpose forces to a greater degree than ever before. The command reorganization has also allowed an unprecedented degree of strategic and operational planning and resource allocation across the entire theater.

ISAF and its American component, U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A), have also established for the first time a number of organizations designed to combat the challenges of corruption and poor governance. Task Force 2010 was established to review U.S. contracting practices in Afghanistan with an eye toward reducing and ultimately eliminating misguided spending that was fueling corruption and the insurgency. Task Force Spotlight was established to focus specifically on the complicated matter of the private security companies used by U.S. Forces and contracting agencies. This fall, General Petraeus established Task Force Shafafiyat ("transparency") to coordinate all of ISAF's anti-corruption and good-governance efforts. Shafafiyat, commanded by Brigadier General H.R. McMaster, oversees Task Forces 2010 and Spotlight; as well as Combined Joint Interagency Task Force (CJIATF) Nexus, which has been focusing on the relationship between narcotics trafficking and the insurgency; the Afghan Threat Finance Cell; and a number of other law enforcement efforts.

The U.S. also established Combined Joint Task Force 435 to coordinate all of the U.S. military's efforts on detainee affairs and rule of law. Under the command of Vice Admiral Robert S. Harward, CJTF-435 has overseen the construction of a new detention facility in Parwan to replace the outdated and overcrowded facility in Bagram, and has trained and prepared Afghan police and corrections officers to take responsibility for the facility in 2011. CJTF-435 is now working on turning the Sarpoza Prison in Kandahar—site of a major jailbreak in 2008—into a modern rule-of-law facility manned by Afghan police and corrections officials mentored by and partnered with Americans.

The emergence of a functional and credible local security program in 2010 is perhaps the most striking and unexpected development—and potentially one of the

most important. Coalition forces have been working with local security forces since 2001. The U.S. and some of its partners were working with such forces (including some that are now part of the Taliban), in fact, since the 1980s when they were key allies in the struggle against the Soviets. American strategy toward Afghanistan in the 1990s, such as it was, relied almost entirely on local proxies. After the fall of the Taliban, the U.S. and the international community insisted on a program to disband the fighting forces of Afghanistan's warlords that altered the characters of those militias but did not entirely eradicate them. Ever since then, various commanders have tried different approaches to restarting local defense initiatives, but all have failed.

The premise of local defense initiatives is two-fold: counter-insurgency works best when local communities not only reject the insurgents, but also agree to fight to keep them away; this principle seems especially applicable in a localized, rural, and tribal society like Afghanistan where warrior spirit, independence, and communal self-defense are prized traditions. Previous attempts have foundered on a number of problems, however. The notion of arming tribes—that is, building up local tribal militias known in many parts of Afghanistan as *arbakai*—was clearly problematic. Tribal conflict is one of the factors fueling the insurgency; tribal structures have been badly damaged by thirty years of war; and it is almost impossible to support one tribe without creating the perception of favoring it over its traditional foes, thereby alienating them from ISAF and the government. A somewhat more successful approach was tried in Wardak Province. Known as the Afghan Public Protection Program (APPP), this effort empowered local leaders to select young men to join the force, sent them to training in coordination with the Interior Ministry, and then returned them to their district to protect it. The structure of the program was designed to address another traditional problem with local security forces—fear by the central government that they will allow local communities effectively to secede from its control. But the centralized aspects of the APPP, the fact that no Coalition forces were directly tasked with supporting it, and its structural reliance on a charismatic local leader prevented it from spreading.

The current local security effort, the Afghan Local Police program, is designed to address all of these previous failings. ALP is an Afghan government program that resulted from long and difficult negotiations between ISAF and President Karzai. The length and difficulty of those negotiations was itself a good start—it meant that both sides were forced to address the promises and dangers of the program, consider their interests and objectives, and find mutually-acceptable compromises. ALP is not a tribal program, but rather operates in local areas with mixed tribes. Local elders lead the effort by first committing to the program, then identifying young men to serve in it. U.S. Special Forces teams train those young men and support them when they fight the enemy. But ALP groups are subordinate to district chiefs of police, and their weapons are issued by the Afghan Interior Ministry. ALP sites are established only where the Afghan government has approved them, and each site has a dedicated American team to oversee it.

The ALP program, finally, is designed to extend the reach of Afghan and Coalition forces rather than to replace them. ALP sites are selected in areas that are important to the insurgency or the population, but not enough of a priority to warrant the deployment of

Afghan or Coalition general purpose forces. They are often along insurgent supply lines or in less populated but operationally significant rural districts. They allow the counter-insurgent forces to be "bigger than they are" while also demonstrating the willingness of Pashtun populations not only to reject the Taliban, but to fight against them with limited, but dedicated, American help.

MAP 4: SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN

Current Situation

The additional resources and changes in command structures have allowed ISAF to conduct coordinated operations against the insurgents over large areas for the first time. ISAF's main efforts have been in Helmand and Kandahar Provinces, the most important areas in Afghanistan for the Quetta-based Taliban leadership. In Helmand, the U.S. deployed Marine forces in 2009 to supplement the British and Danish troops already there and to begin clearing operations along the central Helmand River Valley. In February 2010, General McChrystal launched Operation MOSHTARAK, a major effort to clear enemy safe-havens in the district of Marjah, which lies to the west of Helmand's capital, Lashkar Gah. Marjah had been under uncontested Taliban control for a number of years and served as an important command and control center, supply depot, rest-and-refit area, and support base for operations throughout Helmand Province. The physical challenges of clearing the district were significant—previous U.S.-supported development efforts had created a maze of small canals that made the area extremely fertile but also compartmentalized. The long-term Taliban presence had allowed the enemy to prepare defensive positions and gain or coerce support from the local population. The clearing operation, nevertheless, was successful, and by summer Marjah was no longer under Taliban control.

The clearing of Marjah, following operations in 2009 along the Helmand River Valley, allowed coalition forces to develop an increasingly secure area in Central Helmand, particularly in the Nawa, Nad Ali, and Garmsir Districts, as well as Lashkar Gah. Fighting continues in and around Marjah and Nad Ali as Taliban forces attempt to disrupt the ISAF hold and, if possible, re-establish themselves in those historic safe-havens. Fighting has intensified in Sangin, along the Helmand River to the north of the cleared areas and south of the Kajaki Dam. Sangin has become the northern flank of clearing operations in Helmand, and it is likely to remain violent for some time to come.

Taliban efforts to encircle and penetrate Kandahar had gone almost unchecked before 2010. As the year began, ISAF forces had virtually no presence in the city itself (fewer than 1,000 U.S. military police were deployed in the city as mentors partnered with the Afghan National Police) and little presence in the surrounding areas outside of the districts near Kandahar Airfield (KAF), the headquarters of RC(S). The Taliban had long-established safe-havens in Maiwand, Zhari, Panjwayi, Ghorak, and Khakrez Districts to the west and north of the city and was digging into Arghandab District, traditionally known as the gate of Kandahar. Taliban presence within the city itself was significant, particularly in the District 9 (Loya Wiala) in the north and District 6 (Malajat) in the southwest. The Taliban did not have urban sanctuaries in Kandahar similar to those al Qaeda in Iraq maintained in Baghdad, but the insurgents did have freedom of movement, safe-houses, some supply staging areas, and the ability to conduct attacks throughout the city. Taliban courts in Malajat and other suburbs summoned Kandaharis from the city to judgment, and many felt obliged to comply.

The increase in forces ordered by President Obama in 2009 allowed ISAF to launch counter-offensive operations around Kandahar in 2010. The counter-offensive has been piecemeal and gradual, but steady. U.S. forces deployed into Arghandab in September 2009 and began efforts to clear that district, but met with much resistance.

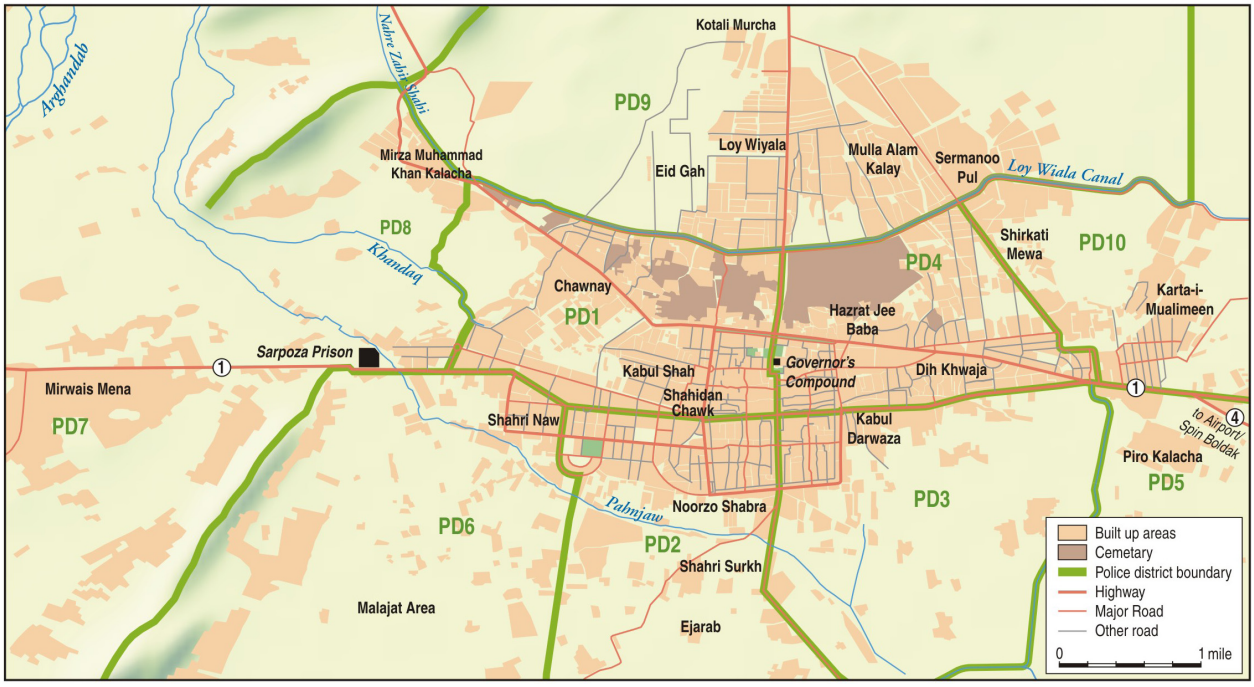
Attempts at forming local defense initiatives before the creation of the Afghan Local Police program had mixed results. Renewed clearing operations over the last month, led by an Afghan Border Police unit commanded by Colonel (soi-disant General) Abdul Raziq, appear to have been more effective, but it is difficult to be sure over the winter. As with so much in Afghanistan, the real depth of progress will only be apparent when the insurgents attempt to return to cleared areas in the spring.

Shortly before relinquishing command on November 3, RC South's British commander, Major General Nick Carter, conducted a multi-brigade operation to clear Taliban strongholds in Zhari and Panjwayi Districts. These operations were notable because Coalition Forces had fundamentally abandoned those two districts to the Taliban after Operation MEDUSA in 2006, allowing the insurgents to establish a degree of control that approached real sanctuary not far from Kandahar City. Like the insurgent stronghold in Marjah, safe-havens in Zhari and Panjwayi supported Taliban operations throughout the Province and into neighboring provinces as well. The operation was also notable because of the participation of Afghan Army *kandaks* (battalions) deployed for the purpose from other parts of the country. The Afghan Army has traditionally resisted requests to move forces around, and deployment to Kandahar is a distressing prospect for Afghan soldiers in other parts of the country. Three kandaks deployed from the north and east, nevertheless, and took active part in the effort to clear Zhari and Panjwayi.

Colonel (General) Raziq's forces had previously cleared the Malajat District of Kandahar City, and an American combat brigade (with only one infantry battalion, however) moved into the city itself. ISAF also deployed a Battlefield Surveillance Brigade—an unusual formation with a large capacity to gather and analyze intelligence of all kinds and a limited ability to maneuver—to oversee the key transit corridor from Kandahar to the Wesh/Chaman border crossing.

ISAF and ANSF forces continue to hold all of the areas they have cleared in Helmand and Kandahar—marking a sharp contrast with previous ISAF undertakings in that area. The Taliban has made a number of attempts to contest that hold with spectacular attacks, targeted assassination campaigns, and IEDs, as well as small-arms attacks on ISAF and ANSF positions that are generally ineffective. ISAF has responded by dismantling the Taliban assassination cell in Kandahar, repulsing attacks on its own positions, and seizing large amounts of IED-making materials and components. ISAF has also aggressively targeted the narcotics facilitators and financiers who link the drug market to the insurgency, seizing unprecedented amounts of raw and finished opium, precursor chemicals, and equipment.

The Afghan Local Police initiative has played an important but unheralded role in these operations. ALP sites in Khakrez District, Kandahar, and in several districts in Oruzgan and Day Kundi Provinces to the north, have begun to disrupt insurgent lines of communications that had run from Pakistan through Zabul into Oruzgan and then either south into Kandahar or southwest into Helmand. These ALP sites have made more progress in disrupting these insurgent LOCs in 2010 than the Dutch contingent deployed in Oruzgan had made during its entire stay. Among other things, the effectiveness of the ALP program, particularly in Oruzgan, has allowed ISAF to make progress in that



MAP 5: KANDAHAR CITY

province even without replacing the Dutch contingent when it departed in August 2010.

The New Year thus finds the situation in southern Afghanistan fundamentally different from what it was at the start of 2010. The Taliban has lost almost all of its principal safe-havens in this area. Its ability to acquire, transport, and use IED materials and other weapons and equipment has been disrupted. Local populations have stepped forward to fight the Taliban with ISAF support for the first time in some important areas. The momentum of the insurgency in the south has unquestionably been arrested and, it is probably fair to say, actually reversed.

The war in the south is, however, by no means over. Political progress has been very uneven. Governor Ghulab Mangal in Helmand is widely seen as successful and reasonably effective. The power-broker and malign actor whom he supplanted at the insistence of Great Britain in 2006, Sher Mohammad Akhundzada, nevertheless remains a powerful force in President Karzai's court and continually seeks to undermine Mangal and regain his position within the province. It is not clear how long Mangal would last without continued clear and active Coalition support, or how long the governmental reforms he has made in Helmand would survive his departure. On the other hand, Sher Mohammad has failed in every attempt to persuade President Karzai to replace or undermine Governor Mangal, or even to save or reinstate the corrupt and divisive police chief of Marjah, Abdul Rahman Jan, who was removed at Coalition insistence a few months into operations there. Coalition support for Mangal, at any event, remains strong, and it is quite possible that President Karzai has come to see the utility in supporting him despite the protestations of a family friend and ally.

There has been little meaningful political progress in Kandahar Province thus far.

The provincial government remains firmly under the control of President Karzai's half-brother, Ahmad Wali Karzai and Governor Toryalai Wesa, who is widely seen as Ahmad Wali's puppet. Kandahar City Mayor Hamadi remains in power and is still seen as complicit in Ahmad Wali's power syndicate. Afghan National Police in Kandahar remain heavily influenced by the deputy commander of the police zone in which they fall, Mirwais Noorzai. They are widely seen as corrupt and, often, as agents of Ahmad Wali and his allies.

Little progress is not the same as no progress, however. Three recent appointments offer some hope of change in Kandahar—the selections of Shah Mohammad Ahmadi as Arghandab District Governor, Niaz Mohammad as Arghandab District Chief of Police, and Khan Mohammad as Kandahar Provincial Chief of Police. All three are members of the Alokozai Tribe (of the Durrani Confederation), the dominant tribe in Arghandab District that has fallen under the sway of the Taliban following years of perceived discrimination at the hands of the Karzais (members of the Popalzai tribe) and Sherzais (members of the Barakzai Tribe). Khan Mohammad is also an effective representative of the Kandahari *mujahideen* who fought against the Soviets and did not then join the Taliban. These appointments appear to signal a new willingness on the part of the Karzais to reach out to their Alokozai rivals and the *mujahideen* network of which they are not a part. If nothing else, Khan Mohammad, Niaz Mohammad, and Shah Mohammad Ahmadi are not generally seen as part of the Karzai network in Kandahar. As long as Ahmad Wali remains the effective head of Kandahar Provincial Government, however, it will be difficult if not impossible to convince Kandaharis that the nature of that government has changed in any meaningful way.

The war has not stopped in other parts of the country despite the recent focus on the south and southwest. Security has improved considerably within Kabul and in some of its suburbs and has stayed relatively good along the Kabul-Jalalabad-Torkham Gate road. U.S. forces have made progress in Konar Province, partly by repositioning away from isolated and marginally-relevant outposts in Nuristan in order to mass more forces on more populated and operationally significant areas. Insurgents retain the ability to move through and attack in Wardak, Logar, Parwan, and Kapisa Provinces, although their ability to stage from those provinces into Kabul itself has been significantly degraded.

South of Kabul, direct-action teams have taken a toll on the Haqqani Network and its affiliates in Greater Paktia, Logar, and southern Wardak Provinces. An American battalion pushed into the Andar District of Ghazni Province (directly south of Ghazni City and a significant insurgent stronghold) to support the Polish Task Force that has responsibility for that province. But Ghazni remains heavily under the insurgency's influence, as evidenced by the almost total failure to persuade the province's large Pashtun population to vote in the parliamentary elections in September. Coalition Forces have also been unable to eliminate insurgent resistance to the construction of the Khost-Gardez Road (which runs through the heart of the Zadran Tribal area and, thus, part of the Haqqani Network's home turf) or to clear and hold the Khost Bowl itself. There has been no meaningful political progress in this area.

The insurgents, on the other hand, do not have any momentum to speak of anywhere in RC(East). Coalition operations continue

to disrupt them in Greater Paktia and are increasingly pushing into their safe-havens in Ghazni, Logar, and Wardak. Insurgents have not been able to conduct a coordinated campaign in Nangarhar or Konar or to make much use of isolated safe-havens they retain in Nuristan.

Nor, despite alarmist reports from the Intelligence Community and elsewhere, do the insurgents have the momentum in northern Afghanistan. The Pashtun pocket in Konduz District remains challenging, but the insurgents have not been able to expand their operating areas there and U.S. and German forces have been working to disrupt their safe-havens. Afghan Local Police programs are emerging in Afghanistan's northwestern provinces and have helped Coalition and Afghan forces reverse the relatively minor gains the Taliban had made in Badghis and Faryab, as well as Herat. The major inhabited areas of northern and western Afghanistan—Balkh Province (where Mazar-e Sharif is located), Herat City and Province, the famed Panjshir Valley, Bamian Province, northern Ghazni and northern Day Kundi Provinces (which, together with Bamian, form the Hazarajat, the area inhabited by the Hazaras)—remain generally stable and do not face an increasing Taliban threat.

Which is not to say that all is perfect in those areas. "Former" warlords like Ismail Khan (Herat), Mohammad Atta (Balkh), Marshal Fahim (Afghanistan's First Vice President), and others still dominate their traditional areas, ruling corruptly and sometimes erratically. Their vices are not vexing their populations enough to generate violence or support for insurgency against the government, however. They will have to change their manner of ruling—or be replaced by people who govern differently—if Afghanistan is to become a well-governed state, but they pose no immediate threat to current counter-insurgency operations or the stability of Afghanistan and so are properly not the focus of efforts.

From a military standpoint, then, the counter-insurgency is going reasonably well, insofar as it is possible to judge over the winter. Challenges remain in the areas that have been or are being cleared, and the requirements for the next series of operations are becoming apparent. The theater remains, in our view, inadequately resourced. The shortfalls, however, are considerably more likely to protract an otherwise successful campaign than they are to make it fail. Some political progress at the local level suggests that more is possible, but also demonstrates the difficulty of making any progress in the realm of governance.

It is easy to enumerate additional evidence of progress and challenges in the development of the ANSF, the government's ability to spend money (legally) and provide (licit) services, economic development, and so on, but other reports present much of this data and it is, to many, somewhat beside the point. Even the military progress and prospects identified above will be (mistakenly in our view) dismissed as irrelevant by some. For many skeptics, the real question about the prospects of our success is: Is it possible to help the Afghans develop any kind of government that will be stable, legitimate, and able to prevent the country from becoming again a sanctuary for terrorists?

The Way of the Pashtuns

Much has been made in some circles of *Pashtunwali*, the traditional code to which Pashtuns are supposed to adhere. *Pashtunwali* includes rigid traditions of hospitality, which have been interpreted by some Afghans to require defending terrorists who are "guests" from outside attack; honor, which, when injured, demands vengeance; independence, which can be used to justify resistance to anyone who can be labeled an "outsider" whether from the next continent or the next village; and justice (understood since the Pashtuns' conversion to Islam as the enforcement of *shari'a* with an admixture of pre-Islamic Afghan judicial traditions). These cultural traditions, which have eroded over time and can fairly be said to be norms only in some areas, have been produced by skeptics of success in Afghanistan as evidence that the Pashtuns are fundamentally unconquerable and also ungovernable.

The fact that the U.S. and its allies are trying neither to conquer nor to govern Afghanistan is often lost in this discussion. The issue at hand is not whether Westerners can govern Afghanistan, but whether or not Afghans can and, if so, what such an Afghan government would look like.

As with many shibboleths, the "ungovernability" of Afghanistan is belied by its history. Founded as an independent Durrani kingdom in 1747, Afghanistan has governed itself in various configurations ever since. Even at the height of British influence, London never tried to govern Afghans—it only sought to control their foreign policy. Durrani kings ruled Afghanistan almost continuously (there was one short-lived Ghilzai break in the Durrani line) from 1747 until the Communist Revolution in April 1978. Periods of internal conflict and civil strife were no more prevalent or destructive in Afghanistan during that period than they were in any of the states of South Asia or the Middle East—the governability of which is not generally questioned.

The nature of Afghan governance under the Durrani monarchy is instructive (and often referred to by Afghans as a paradigm for thinking about the present and future). It relied heavily on an aspect of *Pashtunwali* that is too often overlooked—the centrality of consensus decision-making by elders who are seen to represent their communities. Pashtun governance has historically worked when the process of representative consensus decision-making has been respected. In general terms, each village has its own group of elders (who may or may not be old, but generally are). Even today, almost any Pashtun villager knows who the elders are, whether or not they direct village life. When groups of villages must decide common matters, elders in each village select representatives from among their number to attend a *Jirga* or council that meets to discuss issues that must be resolved. A successful *Jirga* achieves consensus without dissent—a difficult feat given another common Pashtun trait: fear of losing face by admitting error or publicly changing position. As a result, successful *jirgas* usually require two things—careful pre-negotiations, and time for multiple sessions. Through pre-negotiations, participants in a *Jirga* attempt to iron out their major differences or at least narrow them to the smallest possible number and the least controversy. *Jirga* members do not often change their positions during a session—many sessions, therefore, end without resolution. But periods of quiet, prayer, and discussion between sessions

allow for further negotiations and for the decent interval during which publicly declared positions can be subtly modified. In this way, Pashtuns can work their way from disagreement to consensus without losing face or sacrificing the moral force that comes from uniting the community (or groups of communities) behind the decision. It is an arduous process, frustrating to many Westerners, but it is natural for most Pashtuns and certainly among rural Pashtuns.

Afghans have a tradition of selecting leaders through a *Jirga*. The first Afghan king, Ahmad Shah Durrani, was selected by a *Jirga*, convened from among the leaders of Durrani military commanders who had been employed by the recently deceased Persian king Nadir Shah. The Afghan Constitution was formally adopted in 2004 by a Loya Jirga (or Grand Jirga) that nominally represented the major power blocks in Afghanistan (apart from the Taliban, who were excluded). In June 2010, President Karzai held a "Peace Jirga," aimed at being similarly representative and, in fact, more open to Taliban participation, although it produced little concrete result. The repeated convening of recent Afghan *jirgas* and Loya Jirgas, however, demonstrates that both the concept and the practice of this key element of *Pashtunwali* continue.

Ahmad Shah Durrani was selected by a *Jirga*, but he did not rule through one. His reign and, even more, those of his successors were marked by steady efforts to increase the independence and authority of the central government at the expense of local leaders, warlords, power-brokers, communities, and so on. Challenges to the central authority resulted from disagreements over who should be the central authority and over specific policies, but also over the relationship between the center and the localities. In general terms, local leaders and communities accepted a certain degree of central authority but insisted on guarantees that their own traditional processes could continue without interference. Local-versus-central tensions waxed and waned as successive rulers (and here we can include the Communists, who sought an unprecedented degree of centralization) tried to increase their control and communities resisted. The historical trend favored the centralizers. As is often the case with reactionary movements, the leaders who supplanted "excessive" centralizers did not undo all of the centralizing their predecessors had conducted. The central Afghan state over time gained the ability to tax, to conscript armies, to wage war and make peace, to establish macro-economic conditions, to legislate, and to modify Afghanistan's legal code. By the time the Taliban seized power, no Afghan military or political movement seriously questioned these rights.

The Taliban itself, as reactionary a movement as Afghanistan has ever seen, did not attempt to dismantle the centralized state. On the contrary, it sought to use the hard-won progress of its predecessors to implement its own, Islamist vision of just governance. The Taliban established ministries for everything—including, in Islamist fashion, for the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice, but also for fishing, agriculture, mining and industries, and so on. Taliban efforts at centralization fueled some resentment against the movement.

None of the modern resistance movements in Afghanistan—none of the *mujahideen* factions fighting the Soviets, none of the Taliban factions, and none of their Northern Alliance opponents—have ever advocated destroying the unitary Afghan state, federalizing it, eliminating the

central government, devolving power to communities, or otherwise undoing two centuries of Afghan state-building. The fundamental casus belli for each movement has been, rather, who will control an Afghan state, the shape and power (relative to ethnicities or local communities) of which all groups generally agree on. Resistance movements have fought about what policies the state should pursue, but not about whether the state should pursue policies, let alone whether or not it should exist. This fundamental agreement on the shape and basic nature of the Afghan state stands in marked contrast with, say, the United States of the Civil War era, Russia during its own civil war, France during the Revolution, and Yugoslavia after the Cold War. Afghans generally agree that there is and should be such a thing as Afghanistan, that it should have a central government, and, broadly, on the kinds of powers that central government should have. The disagreements, now as ever, are about who should run the place and how, exactly, it should be run.

The current legal form of the government is a problem in this equation. The current Afghan constitution, and the ways in which it has been realized in practice, has created a system in which the power of the executive is not balanced either by a national legislature or by local elected officials. Afghanistan's parliament has extremely limited powers to resist presidential desires even when it is in session, and the constitution allows the president to rule effectively by decree when it is not in session. The parliament does not have effective "power of the purse" because of the way Afghan budgets are made and voted on—and because the overwhelming proportion of the Afghan state budget comes from the international community and goes directly into executive institutions without requiring or permitting legislative involvement. The president appoints provincial and district governors at his discretion and without even the requirement for any legislature to "advise and consent" to the appointment; and no legislative body has the authority to remove a presidential appointee. Provincial and district councils are directly elected, but, like the national parliament, have virtually no ability to check the actions of the presidential appointees who control the flow of money, the armed forces, and the police down to the local level. The current government structure, in other words, is fundamentally antithetical to traditional Pashtun expectations about the relationship between local communities and the central government because it excludes the communities from having a meaningful voice in almost any decision at any level.

Corruption and abuse of power fuel the insurgency in this context. Afghanistan's previous rulers were by no means pure and without flaw, although they never demonstrated corruption on anything like the scale of the current government, if only because they never had access to resources on this scale. But Afghans have not historically taken up arms against their rulers for being corrupt. The corruption of the current Afghan leadership, rather, reinforces the sense of injustice and helplessness created by the imbalance of powers within the current Afghan state. It is precisely that imbalance of powers, of course, that makes possible corruption on this scale in the first place.

Neither the corruption nor the abuse of power is surprising. Although Karzai became Afghanistan's leader through a somewhat traditional *jirga* process, he found himself at the head of a government that did not conform with Afghan traditions. He himself had a very limited power base

in the traditional sense. He had not been a prominent tribal leader before 2001—he had not, in fact, been prominent at all. He was not chosen because he himself had negotiated the formation of a block of powerful leaders that he could then readily control. He was chosen through a complex, internationally-mediated negotiation process because he was acceptable to all sides. He then had to try to govern through a non-existent state in process of formation. Lacking a powerbase of his own and presented with powerful executive authorities, he relied heavily on his family and on known and trusted allies to consolidate his position and perform state functions. Financial opportunities, such as those provided by Kabul Bank, buttressed the role of the Karzai family, created shared financial interests with rivals, and enticed them into supporting the government. The tenuous balance of power created by these means, within the Pashtun community and between Karzai and the northern powerbrokers, is fragile, unstable, and unsustainable over the long term.

This method of governing through the executive does not accord with Afghanistan's needs and traditions. Presidential authority and patronage have marginalized the role of traditional, collective community decision making within the Pashtun community. As in the monarchical period, the central, executive authority must come to tailored agreements with Pashtun local communities and their consensus-making bodies to balance central authority with local desires. The relationships with northern powerbrokers must be placed on a more stable footing, based on political accommodations rather than overt financial interests. These adjustments should satisfy many of Karzai's basic desires by creating a longer term basis for stable, central governance in a unitary state. It requires an international guarantee of security for Afghanistan while short-term compromises create fluctuations in the balance of power among rivals. But such a polity would be much more stable in the long term and much closer to what is required to achieve American objectives in Afghanistan as well.

The traditions of local, Pashtun, consensus politics remain in many communities and are viable as the counterinsurgency campaign reduces insurgent threats, actively seeks to include marginalized groups, and serves as a neutral conduit between the community and the government. Communities seem generally to want some ability to reject officials, such as district governors or police chiefs, appointed by Kabul. Presidential selection of provincial and district governors, for instance, to say nothing of their powers, is not defined by the constitution. The Afghan parliament could pass a law calling for the election of those positions and Karzai could ratify it, which is all that would be required. Rebalancing the relationships between legislative and executive bodies at every level can also be done by law, by decree in some cases, or even simply by procedural changes.

We must be very clear, however—moving to elective governors or more powerful legislatures is not by itself a panacea and would need to be undertaken cautiously. As long as powerful patronage networks control key parts of the Afghan state, such changes would likely be cosmetic and could, in fact, destroy any remaining belief in the possibility of political change among Afghans who now feel alienated from the government. The international community has relied for too long on structural and procedural approaches to Afghanistan's problems. Success requires helping to change the way Karzai and

Afghanistan's elites see how the state can and should be run—structures and procedures are the details that will follow that change.

We are not starry-eyed about the prospect of accomplishing such change. It will be very difficult, and it may prove impossible. In that case, our mission will fail with all of the dire consequences that will follow. But hard is not hopeless in Afghanistan any more than it was in Iraq in 2007. There is sufficient potential convergence of interests between the U.S. and its allies and President Karzai, and indeed the ultimate desires of many of his rivals, to suggest that success in this endeavor is possible. There is also sufficient basis in Afghanistan's history and culture to suggest that it can be enduring.

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Notes

[1] For more information on the Quetta Shura Taliban, see http://www.understandingwar.org/files/QuettaShuraTaliban_1.pdf. For a brief description of the Haqqani Network, visit http://www.understandingwar.org/themenode/haqqani-network. To read more about Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin, see http://www.understandingwar.org/themenode/hezb-e-islami-gulbuddin-hig.

[2] This section was derived, in part, from "How Not to Defeat al Qaeda," by Frederick W. Kagan and Kimberly Kagan, *The Weekly Standard*, October 5, 2009, accessible at http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/017/011bhign.asp.

[3] For more information on these enemy groups, see http://www.criticalthreats.org/pakistan/two-front-war and http://www.criticalthreats.org/pakistan/king-dead-long-live-king-hakimullah-mehsud-takes-power-ttp.

[4] For more information on the al Qaeda and Associated Movements (AQAM) network, please see the forthcoming AEI Critical Threats Project report, "Al Qaeda's Operating Environments," at www.criticalthreats.org.

[5] For the full text of the Lisbon Summit Declaration, see http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_68828.htm?mode=pressrelease.

[6] McChrystal review, p. 2-2.

[7] For more information on the growth of the Afghan National Security Forces, see "Accelerating Combat Power in Afghanistan," by LTG James A. Dubik, U.S. Army (ret), Institute for the Study of War, December 2009, accessible at http://www.understandingwar.org/report/accelerating-combat-power-in-afghanistan.

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