

# What is Happening in Afghanistan?

Written by Grant Farr

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GRANT FARR, MAY 12 2018

On August 21, 2017, President Trump addressed the nation laying out his Afghan strategy. He did not offer much that was new, but he did say that the United States would continue the war in Afghanistan for an indefinite period of time, that he would send in a few thousand more troops, and loosen some of the restrictions President Obama had placed on military action in Afghanistan. This would allow American troops to engage in actual combat instead of functioning as advisors and trainers. He also threatened to withhold aid to Pakistan, which he accused of harboring terrorist organizations, particularly, but not only, the Taliban. In typical Trumpian overstatement, in his speech he declared that there are over 20 terrorist groups operating out of Pakistan, contradicting his own State Department, which lists only 13 such organizations. The Trump administration is clearly facing the same dilemma that the Obama administration confronted: Should it double down on its involvement in Afghanistan, increasing troop levels, and try to finally defeat the Taliban, or is it time to get out?

In an Opinion Piece in the New York Times, Susan Rice, the National Security Advisor under the Obama administration from 2013 to 2017 and former United States Ambassador to the United Nations, mentions a third option. She suggests, but does not recommend, an alternative, which she refers to as a “Korean-style” alternative, in which the United States “could acknowledge and resolve that its presence in Afghanistan is essentially permanent-but by doing so the administration should understand and be up front about the cost.” (Rice 2018) The truth is that American troops have been in Afghanistan for over 17 years and the battle against the Taliban, and other insurgent forces, has not gone well despite billions of dollars and thousands of American lives. Maybe it is time to rethink strategies.

### The Background

So, how did the United States get into this mess? While we associate the beginning of the war in Afghanistan with the terrible events of 9/11, in fact the United States' conflicts with the Taliban government, and with al Qaeda, go back to 1998 and the bombing of the United States Embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and Nairobi, Kenya. These nearly simultaneous truck bombings were reported to be revenge for American involvement in the extradition, and alleged torture, of four members of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad two months prior to the attacks. Over 220 people were killed in these two blasts, including 12 Americans. The attacks were the work of al Qaeda, which at that time was stationed in Afghanistan having been forced to leave Sudan in 1996.

After the bombings in Tanzania and Kenya, President Clinton immediately ordered missile strikes on al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan, which were mostly in the Jalalabad area near the Pakistan border. Also, U.S. officials pressed Afghanistan, which at that time was ruled by the Taliban, to surrender bin Laden and other al Qaeda members. They did not.

The United States entered the war in Afghanistan soon after September 11, 2001. While Afghans were not directly involved in the terrorist attacks of 9/11 – there were no Afghans on any of the planes that day – nonetheless the attacks had been planned by Osama Bin Laden and the al Qaeda leadership from their headquarters in Afghanistan. After Afghanistan refused to extradite the al Qaeda leadership, the United States, with the initial support of England and Canada and eventually with the support of over 40 nations, launched a military campaign in Afghanistan in late September 2001.

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Initially, Tommy Franks, then the commanding General of Central Command recommended to Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, that the U.S. invade Afghanistan using a conventional force of 60,000 troops. However, such a large invasion would take about six months to prepare, so Rumsfeld rejected Frank's plan, feeling that the U.S. needed to do something immediately. (Rumsfeld changed his approach two years later when the U.S. invaded Iraq with a large military force.)

Early on this campaign involved very few U.S. troops and was largely a show of support for the Northern Alliance, the Afghan political movement of Northern tribal groups that opposed the Taliban. On September 26, 2001, only fifteen days after the 9/11 attack, a few CIA agents from the "Special Activities Division", were parachuted into the Panjshir valley North of Kabul to support the Northern Alliance.

Two weeks later two 12-man Green Beret teams were airlifted by helicopter from the Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in Uzbekistan over 190 miles across the 16,000 foot Hindu Kush Mountains, in two Chinook helicopters. The flight was in zero visibility, and the Chinooks had to be refueled in flight three times during the 11-hour mission, establishing a new world record for combat rotorcraft missions.

By the end of 2001 the Taliban had been essentially driven out of Afghanistan, and it appeared that the war was going well. There was an attempt to capture the remaining al Qaeda leadership, perhaps including bin Laden, as they were escaping from Afghanistan in the Tora Bora Mountains near the Pakistani border, but that effort was not successful.

Troop levels in the first year numbered at most a few thousand and their mandate did not extend beyond Kabul and surrounding areas. By 2002 eighteen countries were contributing to the force.

In December of 2001 an international conference, officially the International Conference on Afghanistan, was held in Bonn, Germany at which an interim Afghan government was formed, and Hamid Karzai was named the chairman, essentially becoming the acting president of Afghanistan. This conference included Afghan leaders who had participated in anti-Taliban activities, as well as important resistance leaders who had fought against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. The organizers of the conference, took a "big tent" strategy incorporating, rather than alienating, non-state actors who could potentially disrupt the state building process.

Karzai, who had been living in India and Pakistan much of his life, was a strange choice at that time, essentially a compromise candidate between the royalists who wanted to bring back Zahir Shah – the much beloved but elderly monarch, who had been in exile in Italy in since 1973 – and the men who had led the Mujahideen, the term used to describe the guerilla-type military groups led by Islamic Afghan fighters in the war against the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. Karzai was also a Popalzai Pashtun, an important tribe in Afghanistan.

In 2002 a *Loya Jirga*, national council of tribal leaders, was called to approve the interim government and Karzai as interim president. At this *Loya Jirga* it was decided to declare Zahir Shah, **the Father of Afghanistan**, an honorary title that conveyed respect and honor, but no real political role. He died in Kabul in 2007 at the age of 92.

Things were going well. By 2004, the United States had assisted Afghanistan in writing a new constitution and another *Loya Jirga* was held to approve this new constitution. The new constitution included a president and a two-chamber congress; a lower house called *Wolesi Jirga*, Pashtun for House of the People, and a *Meshrano Jirga*, House of Elders. In 2004, for the first time in Afghan history, national elections were held for the presidency and for an Afghan parliament. In 2005 the newly elected parliament met for the first time. Hamid Karzai was elected president in a national election that went pretty well. It appeared that Afghanistan was on its way.

It has been pointed out in retrospect, that the U.S. and NATO should have declared victory at this point of time and pulled out. But American interests had soon turned to another arena. On March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2003 the U.S. invaded Iraq, and American interests and attention were no longer on Afghanistan.

Beginning in 2005 the tide began to turn. The Taliban, under the leadership of Mullah Omar, and with the support of

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Pakistan and other Muslim countries, began to reassert themselves. By 2006 the Taliban had made significant gains, especially in southern and eastern Afghanistan where the Pashtun tribes are sympathetic to the Taliban's agenda. Although allied troop levels had been gradually increasing, reaching about 40,000 coalition soldiers in 2008, of which about 8,000 were Americans, beginning in 2009, it was decided to increase the coalition forces in Afghanistan to about 140 thousand, of which over 100,000 were from the United States. These soldiers were, in theory, to engage in counterinsurgency operations only: That is to clear and hold villages, to assist in nation building, and to win the hearts and minds of the people of Afghanistan. However, eventually many of these troops became involved in actual combat.

The troop increase did make a difference in the short run. Some areas of southern Afghanistan were cleared of Taliban by NATO troops, but most of these areas soon reverted back to Taliban control when the NATO troops withdrew. It became clear that the Afghan National Army was incapable of holding territory once NATO forces had left. Throughout the 2000s the Taliban continued to gain ground and eventually came to control major areas of Afghanistan.

By 2012 the United States and NATO were looking for a way out of this worsening situation. In 2012 President Obama announced an exit strategy. The United States would end its major combat operations in December of 2014. The war was declared over, although over 9000 American troops remained in Afghanistan.

### **So Where Are We Today?**

To date the war has cost American taxpayers close to 2 trillion dollars. (Cordesman, 2017), 2,410 American servicemen have died in Afghanistan and 17,674 have been wounded (Defenselink, 2018). According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan more than 28,000 Afghan civilians have been killed and more than 50,000 injured since 2009.(UNAMA, 2017) In 2017 alone 786 Afghan civilians have been killed and 1495 injured. (UNAMA, 2018). Many of these deaths or injuries were from suicide attacks (UNAMA, 2017).

The Taliban now control over 40 percent of the Afghan provinces. While up to the present Kabul has been relatively free of violence, since 2017 there has been a sharp increase in attacks in the capital city. On May 31, 2018, a truck bomb killed at least 92 civilians and wounded nearly 500 in Kabul, one of the deadliest attacks since the beginning of the war. In total, Kabul has been home to 86 percent of this year's civilian casualties from suicide bombings. (UNAMA, 2017) In addition, on January 22 of 2018, the Taliban attacked the Intercontinental Hotel on the outskirts of Kabul. 14 foreigners were killed and 4 Afghans. Then, only five days later, attackers used an ambulance filled with explosives to bomb a hospital in Kabul killing over 100.

Aside from the failing military campaign, things on the civilian side are also not going well. The United Nations Development Programme's annual report on human development gives Afghanistan a ranking of 169, one of the lowest ranks of the 190 countries rated, placing Afghanistan among the African countries in its level of human development (UNDP, 2017).

Despite over 16 years and billions of dollars in aid, Afghan women are still treated as second-class citizens, married off at a young age, and fearful of being seen in public. Only about 17 percent of the women in Afghanistan go to school and just 14 percent of women are literate (UNESCO, 2017).

In a report by ONE, a global organization that fights extreme poverty around the world, Afghanistan ranks among the worst places for girls to get an education. The index, which measures such things as percentage of girls in different levels of school, class size, the training of teachers, and the amount of money the government spends on girls' schools, ranks Afghanistan the fourth worst in the world, just behind Chad and ahead of Niger. This is despite over \$750 million spent on education in Afghanistan since 2002 (Mellen, 2017).

In addition, the Afghan government has become increasingly incompetent and at war with itself. The so-called National Unity Government, NUG, includes both a president, Ashraf Ghani, and chief executive officer, Abdullah Abdullah. This arrangement is not in the Afghan Constitution, but was jerry-rigged by U.S. Secretary of State John

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Kerry in 2014 after a corrupt and inconclusive national elections threatened to bring down the government. Each side has stacked the government with ethnic cronies; Ghani with fellow Pashtuns and Abdullah with Tajiks and Uzbeks. The national government remains in disarray and engulfed in internal conflict. One of the Afghan vice presidents, Abdul Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek from the North of Afghanistan, recently fled to Turkey amid torture and rape accusations.

The government in Kabul has largely lost control of the provinces. Last year Noor Mohammed Ata, a powerful Tajik warlord and former governor of Balkh Province was dismissed by President Ghani. However, he has refused to step down and continues in power flaunting President Ghani.

## What Went Wrong?

Although the United States may have had the best of intentions going into Afghanistan, the overall results of U.S. involvement have been a disaster. The lists of mistakes are long and several recent books and articles have described the many mistakes, miscalculations, and errors made by the American effort in Afghanistan. Two particularly insightful and useful books are *From Kabul to Baghdad and Back*, by Ballard, Lamm, and Wood (Ballard, 2012) and *What Went Wrong in Afghanistan*, by Metin Gurcan. (Gurcan, 2016) The mistakes include the failure to recruit and train a national Afghan army, the inability to understand the ethnic and tribal complexity of the country, and the unintended creation of warlords and militarized non-government groups that now threaten the precarious national government. Let us consider some of these issues.

### *Afghan National Army*

One of the major United States' strategies for success in Afghanistan has been the creation of an effective Afghan National Army, a strategy that was thought to have been successful in Iraq. The strategy works like this: A national army is created (or if it already exists, it is improved) and then the United States turns the fighting over to this national army and leaves. However, this strategy has not been successful in Afghanistan, (and it is now apparent that it was also not successful in Iraq), largely because the U.S. Military did not appreciate the challenges in creating a national army in a multi-ethnic country.

The problems of creating an effective military in Afghanistan are many. They include illiteracy, corruption, desertion, and other issues. However, one major problem lies in the ethnic and tribal make up of Afghan society. Afghanistan is made up of several ethnic and tribal groups; groups that have cooperated at times in Afghan history, but are generally, and presently, in open hostility with each other. Although an accurate census has never been taken, it is estimated that the population of Afghanistan is something over 30 million. Of these about 40 percent are Pashtun, 27 percent Tajik, 10 percent Hazara, and 9 percent Uzbek, with another minor percentage of other ethnic groups. While they are all citizens of the country of Afghanistan, each ethnic group has its own culture, language, history, and home area in Afghanistan. And they do not particularly like or trust each other.

The Pashtun have dominated the government of Afghanistan from the beginning of the country in 1747. All of the Afghan kings have been Pashtun, most of the Taliban are Pashtun, and both modern presidents, Karzai and Ghani, are Pashtun.

However, leadership in the military is a different story. The Northern Alliance, which was a political and military alliance that opposed the Taliban government, was comprised almost exclusively of non-Pashtun groups from the northern areas of Afghanistan. Since it was the Northern Alliance that drove the Taliban out in 2001, these Northern groups, who were mostly Tajiks, have dominated the Afghan military up to the present. In fact, most Pashtun are loath to join the Afghan military, since they tend to be sympathetic to the Taliban, which is largely a Pashtun organization. As a result, the ethnic makeup of the Afghan military does not represent the ethnic makeup of Afghan society.

But why is this a problem? These different ethnic groups do not trust or even understand each other. Therefore, if a Tajik soldier is sent to the Pashtun area of Afghanistan, he may not be accepted by the local people, and he may not

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even understand their language. His ability to effectively fight the Taliban will be negatively impacted. In short, the Afghan National Army's ability to fight effectively is severely hampered by its ethnic composition.

It is of interest to note that when the British occupied the subcontinent, they solved this problem by forming ethnic specific militias. They formed militias such as the Khyber Rifles, the Sikh Khalsa Army, or the Punjab Army, each made up of soldiers from the same ethnic group, avoiding the problem of ethnic or tribal conflicts within the military units. (Defencehunters, 2017) This ethnic imbalance in the military has improved somewhat in the last couple of years, but still remains a major problem.

## *Local Militias and Commandos*

As a result of the profound inability of the Afghan National Army as a whole to effectively fight the Taliban, the United States has turned to two other strategies. The first is to create an elite fighting unit of specially trained soldiers. The Afghan National Army Commando Corps was created in 2007. Trained by American advisors, the ANA Commando Corps has about 20,000 soldiers, but it does over 80 percent of the fighting. Since the total number of soldiers in the Afghan regular army is about 175,000, this means that the Commando Corps constitutes just over 10 percent of the military, but does most of the fighting. It is largely made up of Tajik soldiers and led by Tajik officers.

This Commando Corps, although an effective fighting unit, is greatly disliked and feared by local populations, largely because of their ruthless tactics. The commandos are famous for their night raids, for instance, which are highly successful in capturing Taliban as they sleep, but which frighten local villagers who fear the attacks during the dark when women and children are vulnerable.

Another strategy has been to create and arm local militias. Again, this is a strategy that was thought to be successful in Iraq, where it was called the Sunni Awakening, but recent evidence has shown that this strategy has backfired, as these non-governmental militias often turn against the national government.

In Afghanistan, these militias have generally been formed in the North, among Tajik and Uzbek populations. Various regional tribal leaders, (read Warlords), have been given arms and political cover with the idea that they would be able to keep the Taliban or the Islamic State forces out of their areas, and be able to hold territory once the Taliban or the Islamic State forces had been driven out.

It has not worked that way. Instead these militias have been accused of terrorizing local populations and threatening their own people. These paramilitary groups have little adherence or interest in rules of war and have often turned to extorting money from local people. Recently the Ministry of Interior, the governmental agency with the assignment of keeping tabs on these non-governmental militias have issued a series of new guidelines aimed at controlling these armed groups (Cesaritti, 2017). However, these guidelines seem to have little effect. And these groups continue to operate outside of governmental control

The fall of Kunduz in October of 2015 was an example of the problem of these local militias. Kunduz is a city with a population of just over 250,000 in Northern Afghanistan populated largely by Tajiks and Uzbeks. The city was thought to be immune to attacks by the Taliban since it was out of the area in which the Taliban are active. However, in the fall of 2015 the Taliban attacked the city, capturing the city government and forcing the Afghan local police to flee. In the chaos that followed this lawlessness much of the looting, rape, and other violence was conducted by local "pro-government" militias, and not by members of the Taliban or ISIS (Cesaretti, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

The situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate. Despite President Trump's promise to increase troop numbers the Taliban continues to gain ground. The creation of an Afghan National Army has struggled with ethnic and tribal differences and the creation of local militias has ended up arming local warlords with little or no allegiance to the Afghan government. What should the U.S. do? If it leaves, the present Afghan government of Ashraf Ghani will certainly collapse. Yet the longer it stays, the stronger the Taliban become. The U.S. is losing the war and has

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become a part of the problem, not the solution. Perhaps there are lessons to be learned from the disastrous war in Vietnam 50 years ago. In hindsight the American people now understand a number of things that went wrong in that war that may be a lesson for the war in Afghanistan.

For one, Americans discovered after the loss of thousands of American, and Vietnamese, lives, that the United States was fighting to support a corrupt government that the Vietnamese people did not want. The same is true in Afghanistan. The Ghani government is hugely unpopular in Afghanistan, and although there is no agreed upon alternative, the Afghan people want him out.

Americans also learned in Vietnam that ideological wars are not won by military campaigns. The war against the Taliban, and for that matter, the wars against al Qaeda and the Islamic State, are wars of ideologies. It will not be won on the battlefield, but in the hearts and minds of people. And it is in this arena, the arena of ideas and philosophies, that the United States is losing.

Americans also learned from Vietnam that their leaders, from McNamara to Nixon were being dishonest with the American public. Victory is just around the corner, they told the American people. And now, the rosy reports that Americans hear from political and military leaders about successes in the war in Afghanistan are also questionable. Recently, in the wake of last month's terrorist attacks in Kabul, reporters asked the general who leads the United States Central Command if victory is still possible. General Joseph Votel replied "Absolutely, absolutely." (Dobbs, 2018) The trouble is that previous presidents and previous commanding general have been telling the American public that for 16 years now and in fact things have been getting worse.

Defeat in Vietnam was also disheartening and embarrassing to the status of the United States in the world of nations. But Americans have learned from Vietnam, that as embarrassing as the defeat in Vietnam was, the United States survived and moved on. Defeat in Afghanistan will also be a blow to the prestige of the United States on the world stage. But the United States will get over its defeat in Afghanistan just as it recovered from its defeat in Vietnam.

Finally, as in Vietnam, the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan will result in an internal struggle and even bloodshed. The Ghani government will not survive and there will be a period of internal strife and bloodshed as ethnic groups settle old scores. But Afghanistan, like Vietnam, will survive and eventually reenter the world of nations.

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