

# **Iraq, Times Two: A Comprehensive Counterinsurgency Strategy for Afghanistan**

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## **ABSTRACT**

While the United States continues to make military and diplomatic progress in Iraq, the situation in Afghanistan has gotten unquestionably worse over the last three years. Although the diversion of resources from the conflict in Afghanistan to the front lines in Iraq have undoubtedly contributed to America's current quagmire, it is now time to formulate an improved strategy to turn Afghanistan around from the abyss. Fortunately for the United States military and members of the U.S. diplomatic corps, such a counterinsurgency plan need not require generals to limit the manpower, and equipment from an Iraq operation that is continuing to strengthen the country's democratic hopes. Recent calls for a large troop deployment to Afghanistan in the hopes of diminishing the violent Taliban insurgency may be appropriate for a short-term American success story, but such a move would be drastically counterproductive to the immense progress already accomplished with respect to Iraqi sovereignty: progress that, to this date, has helped stem the violence associated with Islamic extremism and promoted accountability of Iraq's national parliament. What the United States should focus on in Afghanistan is building trust among the Afghan citizenry, raising the levels of economic opportunity, by establishing third-party structures to make a true democratic system work. Doing so would result in the Taliban-led insurgency falling short of its ambitions. Through a re-prioritization of objectives, the U.S.-Afghanistan mission will be restored, America's overall image will benefit, and its successful developmental and reconstruction effort will put a major blow in the sides of terrorist networks throughout the Middle Eastern region.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Washington insiders, prominent policy think-tanks and respected international scholars within the academic community all agree that President Barack Obama has inherited foreign-policy issues that rival, if not surpass, those of any previous American president. While U.S. soldiers continue to battle insurgents and Islamic fundamentalists in Iraq and Afghanistan, other Mideast issues are beginning to rise on the American foreign-policy agenda. A renewed uprising by Palestinian militants against the "Israeli occupation" is certainly one such flare-up: a strengthened movement of violence that undoubtedly contributed to the Israeli invasion of the Hamas-governed Gaza strip. The rising Iranian regional power intent on destroying American political influence in the greater Middle East is also prevalent on the mind of President Obama, not to be superseded by the revival of the historic struggle between the two nuclear powers of India and Pakistan (a revival that was sparked by the November 26<sup>th</sup> attacks against the Indian city of Mumbai by a Pakistani-based terrorist organization). With global security at stake, and with the

costs of failure simply too great in the War on Terrorism, especially in areas that are historically accustomed to violent and turbulent behavior, Obama's foreign-policy team will be pressured in all directions to deliver results for the benefit of international peace and security. Fortunately for President Obama, an opportunity is emerging that his White House could capitalize on by finally ending the prolonged and costly war in Iraq; a front in the War on Terror that President George W. Bush so enthusiastically created in March of 2003.

While some foreign-policy gurus wish to shift money, troops, and resources from Iraq to the bloody fight in Afghanistan, such a drastic transformation would prove to be extremely dangerous for U.S. national security. Thanks to President Bush's decision to send an additional 20,000 troops to Iraqi cities and towns, overall sectarian violence in Iraq has plummeted since the civil war of 2005-2007. The surge strategy has had a number of positive effects on Iraq's overall security environment. Not only has the strategy successfully co-opted Sunni tribes to the coalition's side, but Muqtada al-Sadr's once-powerful Mahdi Army has all but de-escalated in the face of fresh American troop deployments (Simon 2008). Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of all is the fact that ordinary Iraqis have become accustomed to a level of security from the brutal oppression of Sunni Insurgents and Shia militias that was all but absent in the past (Simon 2008). In general, Bush's surge has proved to be a dramatic success story, transforming Iraq from a lost cause to a country that shows signs of an American sponsored Arab democracy (Simon 2008). Victory in Iraq is closer than at any previous time of the American occupation, a development that many would have found hard to believe only two years ago. With such an accomplishment moving closer, diverting large numbers of U.S. troops to Afghanistan could undermine the creation of a stable security environment in Iraq that is especially necessary for the young Iraqi government to adequately function. It is also unlikely to meaningfully improve Afghanistan's current situation. Its problems result from more than a Taliban insurgency from the south and east. The numerous failures of the country are also products of a corrupt and incompetent Hamid Karzai government, coupled with an ethnically diverse population that consistently values the decentralized tribal structure of Afghanistan (Shultz and Dew 2006). Although restoring security on the ground in Afghanistan and bolstering the U.S.-backed central government against a resurgent Taliban authority is crucial, President Obama must be extremely careful in how he deals with these two wars.

Leaving Iraq just as the country is beginning to stabilize and rebuild would be rather counterproductive to the U.S. mission. After all, if economic and political restoration is not fulfilled in Iraqi cities and towns, the heroic sacrifices of over 4,000 U.S. soldiers over the past six years, and the expenditure of hundreds of billions of dollars in taxpayer money would prove fruitless and wasteful. Although controversial, the United States military must not waver in its struggle against Islamic extremism in Iraq: an endeavor that should be completed before a substantial amount of troops (50,000+) are deployed and diverted to the Afghan mission. While this is directly contrary to the recent Status of Forces Agreement between the U.S. and Iraqi governments, keeping U.S. forces in Iraq longer than the January 2012 deadline is especially important if our troops are expected to operate with full impunity and flexibility. Creating a sustainable democratic environment for all Iraqis, regardless of ethnic and regional origin (objectives that President Bush repeatedly used to justify the 2003 invasion) is a milestone that the United States must not turn its backs upon.

### **THE PROGRESS OF IRAQ**

Given the substantial differences between the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. approach to each needs to be discussed separately. In Iraq, we see recent yet fragile progress that could be unraveled if the wrong decisions are made in the White House. At the end of 2006, the U.S. appeared

headed for complete failure as Sunni insurgents and Shia militias battled each other in the streets of Baghdad (Simon 2008). With American deaths reaching in the hundreds each month, it certainly seemed like the violence in Iraqi cities was spiraling dangerously out of control (Simon 2008). In fact, it was not uncommon for the ordinary Iraqi citizen to find blood-soaked bodies in their backyards and neighborhoods at the height of the civil war (Simon 2008). The Iraqi economy was barely functioning and the government was unable to provide many social services for the men, women, and children of Iraq (Byman 2006). It appeared that the insurgent groups were the only viable bodies while the newly-formed coalition government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was perceived as weak and ineffectual (Byman 2006). The situation in Iraq had deteriorated during 2006 with al'Qaeda, Shia militia, and Sunni insurgent attacks multiplying into an outright civil war, with tribal warlords in rural areas joining the fight for their own security and self-interests (Shultz and Dew 2006). The Iraqi security forces, including the provisional Iraqi Army and the National Iraqi Police Force, were a pathetic excuse for a defender of the population, namely due to their compromised loyalty to the central government and their tendency to pledge allegiance to particular ethnicities (Shultz and Dew 2006). Al-Anbar province, Iraq's largest to the west of Baghdad, serves as an illustration of how overwhelmed the army and police forces were in relation to the al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) terrorist apparatus, not to mention the heavily-armed, yet influential, Islamic fighters of the Sunni Triangle (Shultz and Dew 2006). Al'Qaeda's unprecedented declaration of an Islamic state in Iraq in October of 2006 only reiterates the extreme power and brutal oppression that the Islamic terrorist network practiced over Anbar's frightened civilians (Simon 2008).

Today, the gruesome scenes of gun battles and body-ridden streets has become largely part of the past. While the increase of 20,000 U.S. soldiers in Sunni and Shia neighborhoods was certainly a large part of the pacification, a more appropriate aspect of the strategy is associated with the newly-developed "bottom-up" approach that General Petraeus has formulated (Kahl and Odom 2008). Rather than coercing Prime Minister Maliki into bolstering Iraq's national police for the sole purpose of cracking down on Shia militias in Sadr City (a strategy that proved ineffective before the surge took place), the United States wisely decided to fine-tune its counterinsurgency doctrine with the unique aspects of Iraqi society (Simon 2008). Namely, coalition forces successfully appealed to the traditional tribal units that are so heavily influential to the lives of many Iraqi citizens (Simon 2008). Neighborhood watch groups, tribal leaders, and grievance committees rose to prominence, helping to spot insurgent activity and providing U.S. forces with relevant information on their whereabouts and capabilities (Simon 2008). The counterinsurgency cooperation between U.S. forces and local Sunni tribes also led to cooperation on economic and social programs that further undermined the insurgent's ability to draw young Iraqis into its ranks (Simon 2008). Perhaps most importantly, the oppressive behavior of AQI towards Iraq's Sunni population, many of who were supporters of their activities, (especially in al-Anbar province) prompted local tribal leaders to turn against the jihadists (Simon 2008). While this resulted in a noteworthy improvement in security, more important is the shift in ideology within various Iraqi tribal sectors. While this is certainly beneficial in its own right, this newly developed sentiment quickly grew into a nationwide grassroots, anti-al'Qaeda campaign (Simon 2008). The American forces that were formerly perceived by Sunni Rejectionists and various tribal affiliates as dangerous foreign invaders bent on destroying a unique Iraqi culture was thoroughly modified into a more progressive and accurate mindset, directly aiding the prospects for the overall American mission (Simon 2008). The United States, for better or for worse, became the only way to keep the tribes and citizens safe from the attacks of Shia extremists and al'Qaeda hardliners (Simon 2008). It was this "bottom-up" strategy, a development largely formulated through an observance of Iraqi history, customs, and society (a strategy that was quickly multiplied to include other

Iraqi provinces), that eventually created the “Sons of Iraq” program credited for eliminating much of the violence between Sunnis, Shias, Kurds, Arabs, and Muslims (Simon 2008).

The emergence of political reconciliation and general improvements in democratic governance within the capital and its surrounding provinces is another piece in the Iraqi success story. While the first national election in Iraq occurred in 2005, at the start of one of the bloodiest periods of the American occupation, the recent 2009 provincial and national parliamentary elections demonstrated to the world how passionate Iraqi civilians are in becoming a major factor in their own destiny (“Is it Really Coming Right?” 2008). There is not only evidence that more Iraqis nationwide participated in the elections, but there is reason to believe that the Sunni population (the same group that largely boycotted the 2005 election for the National Assembly) turned out in droves in the hopes of increasing their power share in the Iraqi national government (“Is it Really Coming Right?” 2008). Such a political development is vitally important to the security interests of the Iraqi state, especially given the beneficial development of former Sunni insurgents. Rather than continuing on the blind course of routinely beheading and executed their Iraqi brethren, these same individuals are now embracing a more sophisticated process (democracy) in the hopes of gaining power. The proliferation of political parties and candidates in the 2009 elections – over 400 parties and 14, 600 candidates – indicates a growing acceptance of democracy as the way to gain political power, a legitimate tool that is overshadowing the former influence of guns and bullets (“Is it Really Coming Right?” 2008). This is a major transition from the 2005 elections, which was hampered by widespread insecurity and downright intimidation by al’ Qaeda elements, radical Sunni fighters and the powerful Shia army of Muqtada al-Sadr. This change indicates that Iraq is the closest it has ever been in achieving and maintaining a stable political and security environment.

There are also signs the political divide among Sunni, Shia, and Kurds is gradually eroding. This is all the more evident in the progressive behavior of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki himself, a man who has virtually abolished his focus on restoring Shia dominance over Iraq’s political landscape (“Is it Really Coming Right?” 2008). It is becoming increasingly apparent that Shia parties and members of Maliki’s government are shedding some of the suspicion towards Sunnis that once pervaded the Shia establishment (“Is it Really Coming Right?” 2008). In contrast to previously belligerent moves against the Sunni population, Maliki’s party has slowly reached out to Sunni military leaders, tribal warlords, and political elites in the hope of increasing his popular support come election time (“Is it Really Coming Right?” 2008). Another essential indication of Mr. Maliki’s changed approach to governing is the very effective anti-insurgent movement he has run with help from the United States since the surge began in January of 2007. Government forces now control most of Sadr City, a Shia slum in Baghdad that was previously held by supports the radical Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr (“Is it Really Coming Right?” 2008). This military victory would have been nearly impossible two years earlier, when Shia and Sunnis were battling each other throughout Baghdad, Basra, Ramadi, and Falluja. Such a dramatic transformation is a lasting clue of how the political environment has changed in recent months. The Iraqi Security Forces’ (ISF) engagement of the Mahdi army is just a symbol of how serious Baghdad’s politicians are in their attempts to strengthen central authority. As long as the Iraqi electoral system prevails in the coming months ahead, and as long as voting continues to be construed as legitimate, free, and fair, all Iraqi parties will have an incentive to cooperate with each other and operate within the system. The spread of democratic practices among Iraq’s provinces is especially encouraging at this point, and indicates that Iraq has the potential of avoiding state failure and becoming a stable, democratic state in the Middle East.

## REMAINING CHALLENGES IN IRAQ

As one might expect, significant challenges remain for Iraq. While the ISF has increased tenfold in the past four years (to more than 500,000) and shown remarkable courage in the face of adversity, concerns have emerged as to how to fully integrate former Sunni insurgents into the official Iraqi military (“Is it Really Coming Right?” 2008). The fact that Maliki and his associates are Shia and control virtually every government post in Baghdad, as well as a large part of the military, police force, development teams, and employment agencies, is a major obstacle to any effort of mutual reconciliation. Ordinary Sunnis desperately searching for work routinely view the integration process as biased against them and their families, a problem which could easily splinter Iraq back into a bloody civil war by turning young Sunni men back into insurgents and terrorists (Simon 2008). As Steven Simon (2008) notes, Sunni cooperation with both U.S. forces and the Shia-led Iraqi central government may erode to dangerous levels if they believe that “civilian jobs and vocational training is all that is in store for them.” The risk that the Sunnis, a minority religious bloc when compared to the Shia population, will unite and violently oppose the Maliki-led Baghdad government is all too real if the 146,000 American soldiers currently on the ground begin to withdraw in a premature fashion (Simon 2008). If U.S. forces leave before a final political settlement, Sunni leaders who currently view American forces as their only true security and political partner, may not hesitate to join the very same violent insurgent groups that they have denounced for the past two years. Without a substantial U.S. presence in this ethnically fractious Arab state, the Sunnis may come to see insurgent organizations as their only source of security, thus turning violently against Baghdad. If this happens, the successful “bottom-up” strategy that the United States continues to rely upon in order to weaken AQI’s structure would fail.<sup>1</sup>

## A SUSTAINED U.S. COMMITMENT

General David Petraeus has pointed out that the progress made in Iraq over the past two years is susceptible to reversals. The reconstruction of schools, the building of hospitals, the investment boom in the oil industry, and the widespread security gains made by the ISF are all achievements that may be lost if thousands of U.S. troops are pulled out of Iraq. The political accommodation that is needed between the Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds will be extremely difficult, in not impossible to achieve if it was not for the talent of the United States to broker talks between tribal leaders, sheiks, and ayatollah’s (Kahl and Odom 2008). To complete the political and economic restructuring of Iraq, the U.S. must remain engaged in its affairs possibly for years to come.

The current counterinsurgency methods formulated by General Petraeus is continuing to give the Iraqi military ample time to increase its membership, without compromising the overall goal of battling insurgents, militias, and terrorists. As expected, this counterinsurgency doctrine is, and should, place American counterterrorism operations as one of its primary objectives. Such a mindset would not only support the strengthened capabilities of the 500,000-member Iraqi Security Force, but may have the effect of shifting the U.S. mission to exclusively focusing on the most dangerous elements of the Islamic insurgency. Add this duty with a sustained U.S.-supportive and advisory role towards the Iraqi Army and National Iraqi Police Force and such a strategy becomes increasingly tolerable by the American public at home (Polling Report: Iraq 2009). In the minds of ordinary Americans, their loved-ones will no longer be

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<sup>1</sup> In addition, with a rise in armed Sunni groups, the Shia militias that previously stood down their weapons to commit to a brokered ceasefire could easily pick those weapons back up; the result would be nothing but chaos, not to mention the carnage that would spread to Iraq’s innocent civilians. A fast diversion of troops on the ground from Iraq to Afghanistan could be the main turning point towards a repeat of Iraq’s 2005-2007 sectarian bloodshed.

risking their lives on the frontlines to the same extent as during the violent years of the Iraqi civil war. This sentiment is already being widely shown across the United States, evident in the American public's resounding 69 percent approval of President Obama's decision to keep 35,000-50,000 troops on the ground for advisory missions after the 2011 withdrawal (Polling Report: Iraq 2009). While a counterterrorist and advisory mission for American troops is appropriate for Iraqi stability at a tactical level (namely by giving Iraqi brigades ample American support), such a re-prioritization has a positive sentimental effect on the American psyche as well. By reversing the combat roles of both parties, the overburdened U.S.-Iraqi military relationship that has strained American families for the past six years will be thoroughly dismantled (Kahl and Odom 2008). Exploiting the role of advising- collecting information, analyzing intelligence, and training potential Iraqi army and police units to counteract AQI, Sunni insurgents, and remnants of Shia militias-a sustainable American involvement in Iraq will certainly prove to be a successful policy change required to adequately draw down coalition forces in the future (Kahl and Odom 2008). Such a reformed strategy may also prove exceedingly easy to convince to the American electorate, by removing the possibility of mass American casualties. Thankfully, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates is already performing these roles.

Although AQI has been severely damaged since the surge began, fighters loyal to the terrorist organization are still operating in areas north of Baghdad, particularly in Mosul where fighters remain influential over the local population (Katzman 2008). Since U.S. intelligence strongly concludes that Mosul is only remaining haven for AQI activity, an effective counterterrorist campaign in this area would help bring about a near-finishing blow to its capabilities (Dagher 2008). Driving out the final bastion of militants will thus give the Iraqi government an additional amount time to concentrate on second-tier issues involving the economy, development projects, the rule of law, and education. Parts of Iraq may always be home to Al'Qaeda militants, but diminishing them to manageable levels will give Iraqi citizens a sense of safety, a feeling as important as the reality of security itself. The only possible way to achieve this goal, while continuing to protect the interests of the Iraqi population, is for a substantial contingent of U.S. troops further assisting Baghdad in its fight against Islamic fundamentalism.

### **THE AFGHAN CONFLICT**

Now it is time to turn the bulk of our attention to the conflict in Afghanistan, a country experiencing worsening problems on a daily basis. Unfortunately, it appears that these issues are not confined to specific areas of public policy. In addition to the disturbing corruption and patronage that is spreading within Hamid Karzai's administration, Afghanistan's social and economic situation is deteriorating faster than the United States can respond. As if these domestic issues are not enough to turn a country into a failed state, the resurgent Taliban (the same Islamic movement that the United States "toppled" in Operation Enduring Freedom) is gaining ground throughout the mountainous Islamic country (Thompson 2008). A recent report and analysis by the Paris-based International Council on Security and Development has even claimed that the influence of the Taliban has reached an unprecedented 72 percent of the nation (Thompson 2008). In fact, Taliban and Al'Qaeda attacks on Afghan security forces and government compounds has gotten so bad that many of the schools opened to secularize institutional life have closed for fear of violence, kidnapping, and extortion (Rubin 2007). Couple these recurring themes with tribal infighting and warfare over scarce humanitarian resources and the total picture of Afghanistan becomes one of the most flawed American campaigns in its history of military intervention. While a lack of U.S. troops, foreign aid, and civil service personnel certainly contributes to this dilemma, a large part of the cause is due to Afghanistan's history as a state: a turbulent past that includes centuries of tribal domination, decentralization, ethnic conflict, and the consistent rise of Islamic movements. This complex

history is not only responsible for widespread western colonial failures and the lack of unified national self-determination, but is the primary driving force behind many of NATO's woes in the current Afghan quagmire.

### **AFGHANISTAN'S TRIBAL, ETHNIC, AND ISLAMIC HISTORY**

Perhaps the most unique characteristic that differentiates Afghanistan from other multiethnic nations in the developed and developing worlds is the animosity and hostility produced by a fragmented ethnic nature. In addition to the mainstream Pashtun, Tajik and Uzbek elements of Afghan society, smaller groups continue to reside throughout the larger territory of Afghanistan; groups that include Turkmen, Baluchi, Nuristani and Hezara ethnic identities that practice their own customs, their own traditions, war-fighting skills, and ways of solving disputes (Shultz and Dew 2006). The undeniable fact that many of these distinctive tribes view themselves as crucial components to the Afghan way of life radically contributes to the difficult task of establishing a single, unified central government (Shultz and Dew 2006). There is a widely-held consensus in the academic community that the Afghan-state, a decentralized tribal society that is predominated by sectarian fragmentation, and centuries-old tribal warfare, is a factor that makes American "nation-building" a monumental campaign (Shultz and Dew 2006). Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Persians frequently fight against one another not only for the control over power, food, and natural resources, but in some cases, to satisfy the desire for glory and admiration (Shultz and Dew 2006). As Richard Shultz and Andrea Dew (2006) note, "Ask a Pashtun 'who he is, what *qawm* (clan) or extended family clan he comes from, and where he comes from,' and his answer will map his exact place in the ethnic/tribal order, who he owes loyalty to, who he will fight against" (p.151). This interaction simplifies, yet exposes the common mindset that many individual members of Afghanistan's various ethnic groups possess in comparison to others in the tribal hierarchy: glory, honor, and courage must be displayed in the protection of ones own tribe, first and foremost (Shultz and Dew 2006). In fact, the historic rivalries and personal vendettas that many tribes have with one another helps explain why killing and blood is measured not with disdain and cruelty but with honor and upward mobility (Shultz and Dew 2006). With such an emphasis on violence for settling the score, it becomes clear that the United States is not only attempting to stem the movement of Taliban insurgents and Al'Qaeda terrorists within Kabul and other major cities, but is trying to change the way Afghans behave. With social attitudes so historically embedded in the tribal structure and in the way the country operates, promoting an effective counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan is inconceivable without emphasizing its ethnic elements.

On this basis, the Pentagon's decision to send an additional 30,000 American soldiers into a "nation-building" role is likely to be a waste of time, money, and manpower that would quickly expose a stigma that the world's remaining superpower is desperately hoping to salvage a politically feasible victory in Afghanistan. Perhaps a more appropriate strategy would include a shifting of priorities for the soldiers already on the ground. Rather than burdening American soldiers with the job of bolstering a central government that the Afghan population already views as incompatible with their way of life, commanders should devote all their efforts towards embracing the original plan of driving out Al'Qaeda militants and making sure terrorist base camps are prevented from becoming established within its territory. Surely, the same amount of U.S. and NATO troops on the ground and in the air can succeed in these objectives, given the fact that Coalition forces steadfastly achieved this same exact mission (uprooting of the al'Qaeda establishment from Afghanistan) in October-December of 2001.

The tribal structure engrained within the culture of Afghanistan is only one factor that the United States must take into account. The second factor, the one that usually receives the most attention today, is

the significance of Islamic movements throughout Afghanistan's centuries-old history: radicalism which is not only responsible for the failures of past colonial powers, but serves as the backbone of an apocalyptic ideology compelling residents to destroy westernization in the greater political, economic, and social structures of the Middle Eastern region (Shultz and Dew 2006). Since the 1960's, long before the former Soviet Union attempted to establish a puppet-communist government in Kabul, three Islamic movements emerged on the scene that carried the values many scholars believe have helped harbor feelings of distrust towards foreign invaders: the scriptural Sunni Hanafi campaign, a Sunni political movement spread through Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, and a Saudi-based Wahhabi sect that undoubtedly created the strong morale necessary for Mujahideen fighters to resist Russian troops during its ten-year occupation (Shultz and Dew 2006). For reasons relevant to Afghanistan's political situation, the Muslim Brotherhood and its Wahhabi counterpart are the two Islamic fundamentalist ideologies that contribute to the obstacles that American troops currently face in 2009.

In order to fully determine how powerful these two Islamic political movements are with respect to Afghanistan and the Muslim world at large, students and scholars alike must take another look into the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan throughout the 1980s. Like Britain's intervention before the First World War, the Soviets gradually realized after a few short years that military might, sophisticated technology, and the ability to impose its will on the Afghan people proved counterproductive in the face of deeply-committed Islamic fighters; various Mujahideen units that respected Muslim culture and understood the limitations of Russian conventional tactics (Shultz and Dew 2006). Although the hit-and-run, unconventional, and small-armed ambushes against Soviet troops (methods adapted from the tribal warfare skills of the Afghan tribes) were vital to the Mujahideen's success in dispelling the "infidels" after ten years of violent struggle, more important is how the power of radical Islamic thought immersed itself within Mujahideen military accomplishments. Sunni fundamentalism, as well as Shia extremism, were not only responsible for the brotherhood, loyalty, and optimism that united the dispersed structure of the anti-Soviet force, but gave Muslims throughout Afghanistan the rationale they needed to take the fight to the enemy (Shultz and Dew 2006). In fact, it could be safe to say that the "kill the foreign invader" mindset instilled Muslim units with a sense of universal importance: defending tribal lands within the Muslim world and protecting innocent Afghan men, women, and children from colonial aggression was their unwavering duty. Unfortunately for the Kremlin, this was only discovered after the defeat of its ten-year campaign, one that ended the lives of 26,000 Russian soldiers and drained the monetary resources required to keep the regime afloat (Shultz and Dew 2006). As the United States enters its eighth year of combat in Afghanistan, and as the Obama administration attempts to change course, it would be especially wise for his administration to not disregard the history of this unique collective of tribes and ethnicities. Regrettably, as of now, the failed attempts at reconstruction are slowly resulting in the same hostile sentiment prevalent during the Russian invasion decades earlier. The United States, through its reliance on military force, is quickly decreasing its international credibility amid a rising anti-western crusade, all the while drying up the economic reserves of a nation that is already experiencing an economic recession.

### **AFGHAN "KILLING FIELDS"**

How far does this quagmire go exactly? Is it comparable to Iraq's insurgency between 2005-2007 and if so, what should the United States do to mitigate the growing violence in Afghanistan and the growing incompetence of Hamid Karzai's government? According to Barnett Rubin (2007), a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, the political and economic circumstances in Afghanistan are far worse than Iraq's dark days. In addition to the huge influx of foreign fighters and Al'Qaeda terrorists across the

porous and insecure Afghanistan-Pakistan border, economic growth and job opportunities for the Afghan population are virtually absent (Rubin 2007). While it is true that U.S. soldiers and Afghan civilians have been dying at a slower rate than the conflict in Iraq, violence is not, and should not be, the only evaluation for assessing progress. The scene in southern Afghanistan, the area where a majority of Pashtun tribes reside, is controlled largely by Taliban forces who wish to return to power (Rubin 2007). The severity of the mission is demonstrated by the current situation on the ground: U.S. combat casualties have steadfastly surpassed the previous levels of 2006 and 2007, figures that lend credence to the tremendous achievements of Taliban warlords in their quest of rallying popular support in a number of local areas (Tarrant 2008). Wardak Province, an area extremely close to the gates of Kabul, has become a breeding ground for insurgent activity against the First Battalion of the 506<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment (Tarrant 2008). In addition to American troops having to pacify a province nearing the size of Rhode Island, the territory is in constant bombardment by Taliban ambushes, rocket fire, and the intimidation of Islamic fundamentalism at the expense of Afghan villagers (Mulrine 2008). No doubt that the failures of NATO in quelling the deteriorating security in Afghanistan is the reason for Secretary Gates' pledge to send an additional 20,000 troops to the country, not to mention the developmental inadequacy of American and NATO troops (Mulrine 2008).

However, despite the decision to move troops from Iraq to Afghanistan, will such a move really improve safety and legitimize the Afghan government? Chances are that the increased troop levels will not serve these objectives, not so much because the United States military is incapable of defeating the Taliban uprising (the U.S. military is the most effective in the world), but because the domestic issues that plague Karzai and his administration are too broad for a foreign power to resolve. The justice-system in Afghanistan is a case in point. Due to the advancement of Taliban fighters to the outskirts of Kabul, more and more Afghans are turning to Islamic courts to settle legal disputes instead of bringing their cases to official government-sponsored judges (Nelson 2008). City dwellers and rural residents of all classes and in all regions are increasingly viewing the Taliban court structure as preferential, not because they support the tenants of Islamic law but because the western-based legal system is fraught with corruption and is often too slow in addressing common grievances (Nelson 2008). As Habib Noor, an Afghan taxi driver comments, whoever pays the biggest bribe to government judges wins the case, regardless of the legal facts involved (Nelson 2008). Not only do these negative comments coerce otherwise moderate Afghans to embrace tyrannical Islamic law (a development that would certainly increase the Taliban's legitimacy as a political force), but the resulting popular discontent ruins the image of Kabul's ability to provide governance and security for its people. With such endemic problems dictating social life, often related to corruption and public mistrust of the western-backed government, a meager force of 20,000 soldiers is insufficient to fix such deep-rooted problems. There is no way, other than withdrawing a substantial amount of American troops from Iraq to Afghanistan (a move that would jeopardize success in Iraq just as the country is turning the corner), to seriously put a dent in each and every internal complaint.

In addition to the less than effective court system within the borders of Afghanistan, the original goal of eliminating Al'Qaeda and Taliban militants is transforming into a slow campaign to quell the market forces of the drug trade (Klein 2008). Drug trafficking, opium production, and general drug distribution to other parts of the world is an increasingly difficult issue that many American troops find hard to combat while, at the same time, getting fired upon. This is not surprising given the fact that members of the military are not trained to do the work of drug enforcement agents and local police forces. While the drug problem was practically absent from the streets in Iraq, U.S. troops in Afghanistan are often forced to either fight the Islamic insurgency through force and diplomacy or take on a narco-police role by shutting down the large amounts of opium making its way out of Afghanistan (Klein 2008).

While the second option seems irrelevant to the U.S. mission, one must take into consideration the fact that much of the profits made through opium exports are directly benefiting the insurgents and terrorists that are harming security (Klein 2008).<sup>2</sup> For counterinsurgency commanders, the pervasive cartel-insurgent relationship is making the U.S. effort exceedingly difficult. The choices for the United States, as of today, are as follows: 1) allow the corrupt Karzai government to keep ruling while allowing drugs to enter into Afghan markets, possibly giving national leaders an incentive to skim some of the profits, or 2) stop the drug trade while tolerating a new iron-clad Taliban dictatorship in Afghanistan; a result that has the potential to, once again, give the Al'Qaeda network a safe-haven to resume its apocalyptic aspirations while making the American power look weak and ineffective. As stated earlier, a redeployment of American forces from Iraq to the Afghan conflict will prove unlikely to change this "lose-lose" prediction.

### **A REVISED AFGHAN STRATEGY**

With so many scenarios that all point in the direction of a bleaker environment for the United States Military and the Afghanistan central-government, U.S. officials both in Washington and Kabul must reevaluate their mission, along with what objectives are realistic. Of course, the goal of establishing a strong central government in the capital city of Kabul is one major theme that must be discarded from the agenda. Afghanistan's tribal and Islamic history has proven that creating and sustaining a U.S.-style executive branch with Hamid Karzai at the helm is unlikely to work due to the country's scattered nature (Thompson 2008). In embracing this correlation, a more reasonable government structure must be established, namely through provincial institutions, that would exclusively focus resources and aid towards all segments of the Afghan population (Thompson 2008). Such a plan may not only give Afghan civilians a bigger stake in the political process, but would increasingly deter local officials from engaging in corrupt activities as democratic principles slowly arise. In contrast to provincial governments, the current political order in Kabul is failing to give ordinary Afghans adequate representation. Similarly, the government is simply too weak to deliver the basic necessities that all are essential for a good quality of life: food, housing, social programs, job opportunities, electricity, education, etc. Increasing regional power brokers at the expense of federal leadership, although contrary to the American-version of democratic governance, is a transfer of power that is necessary if Afghanistan is able to take the next step towards anti-corrupt political behavior and popular representation.

A new U.S. mission of improving the legitimacy of provincial governments has another advantage: it coincides with the traditional tribal structure of Afghanistan's ethnic groups (Bacevich 2008). Tribal leaders and their corresponding cultural importance will be preserved, if not expanded, by placing more power into their hands instead of the elite politicians in Kabul that so many Afghans view with outright hostility and skepticism. Such a move may also dissuade Afghans from taking up arms and joining the rank and file of the insurgency for economic and political reasons. This is every more the case when one considers the fact that many members of the insurgency simply join for the hope that of receiving a paycheck to feed and clothe their families (Fick and Nagl 2008). Some even view the insurgency as a form of protest against the Karzai administration, attracting Muslims who strongly oppose the elitist and corrupt nature of central government politics (Rubin 2007). This being the case, reforming the American approach toward a new system, largely governed through tribal councils and provincial parliaments, has the peripheral affect of slowly but surely diminishing the insurgent movement.

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<sup>2</sup> The funding from drugs is increasingly being portrayed as an unlimited source that further contributes to the ample opportunities of al'Qaeda and Taliban militants in their quest to expand their presence back to the capital city (Klein 2008).

With a reliance on provincial-lines of authority, the original U.S. objective of establishing a large and permanent Afghan army is another plan that can be eliminated. Rather than invest time, money, and manpower in creating a U.S.-style conventional military, incorporating former Sunni insurgents, Shia dissidents and tribal militias into official security occupations (such as police officers, and army contractors), should be a primary mission in the reformed American plan for Afghanistan (Bacevich 2008). Similar to its Iraq, a militia-turned-policemen program in Afghanistan may have the similar affect of strengthening legitimate security forces at the expense of Islamic fighters (Fick and Nagl 2008). Afghanistan's overall safety as a country would be improved rather quickly as compared to the creation of a modern army with a bureaucratic chain-of-command structure. The Al' Qaeda terrorists streaming in from Pakistan's tribal belt would find it extremely difficult to establish a permanent base of support in any area of the country once provincial and local forces were readily available for combat. Secondly, the criminality involved with the drug trade that often operates unchecked due to the limitations of Afghanistan's overstretched national police force may be steadily decreased. Criminals that formerly exploited the absence of law enforcement personnel would find themselves apprehended, arrested, charged, and prosecuted for breaking local law. And thirdly, provincial-led prosecution of criminals would give the general population the much-needed belief that local authorities are solely working on their behalf: a development that would further defeat the insurgency's dream of drawing in potential recruits for reasons of government inaction. Arming local Afghans "kills two birds with one stone." Not only will citizens gain accountability over the actions of local officials, but the attacks sponsored through insurgent and terrorist channels that were formerly viewed as justifiable would be severely diminished to the barbarism they truly represent: acts of desperation for the sole purpose of fulfilling a narrow-minded nihilistic aspiration.

### **A STRENGTHENED ROLE FOR THE AMERICAN DIPLOMATIC CORPS**

Creating effective provincial governments with control over local security forces is only one part of the solution to stem the growing tide of "Talibanism" in the historically violent country. The U.S. also needs a "surge" in civilian personnel, both in aid workers, American diplomats, and special envoys. This would provide more of the resources required to build up the Afghan infrastructure, education system, and economy: all-important sectors of society that the Taliban has recently used to increase its membership among young men desperate for work.

As Barack Obama begins his first four years in the Oval Office, he should not hesitate to use each and every presidential power at his disposal to finally turn the U.S.-led Afghanistan campaign into a success story, something that his predecessor George W. Bush failed to do during his tenure. Rather than continue on the blind course of concerted military strikes against militant compounds, possibly invoking more anti-Americanism in the region, President Obama should recognize the faults of the status quo while finally improving the strength and stature of both the U.S. Foreign Service (including USAID) and the State Department in Washington. This boost in manpower and influence to both diplomats and aide workers in Washington, Baghdad, and Kabul would surely give them the resources they so desperately require when politicians task them with the job of building up a nation's domestic infrastructure, education system, economy, and general reconstruction (Holmes: 2008). Unfortunately, improving the U.S. Foreign Service has been opposed by many "hawks," who wish to divert a large portion of the U.S. budget towards the military establishment (Holmes 2008). According to J. Anthony Holmes (2008), a former President of the American Foreign Service Association and former U.S. Ambassador to Burkina Faso, the military-diplomatic gap has gotten so wide that the Defense Department budget exceeds the State Department twenty-four times over (Holmes 2008). As if this statistic is not enough to demonstrate

the inequalities prevalent in U.S. diplomatic corps, there is ample evidence concluding that the Bush White House, most likely due to its post-September 11 hype, places ninety-nine cents out of every dollar the U.S. spends on national security affairs directly to defense and intelligence services; leaving the once influential diplomatic core in the dust (Holmes 2008).

While this Defense-State Department relationship certainly seems like a separate matter, the failure of the United States to adequately re-staff USAID, OCS (the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization), and State is unquestionably a cause of America's current doomed strategy in Afghanistan. State Department officials and members of the U.S. diplomatic core all agree that a vast part of the resurgent violence in Afghanistan, let alone the re-Talibanization of many cities and towns, is heavily associated with an absence of post-conflict, reconstruction, and USAID workers in the area (Holmes 2008). This should not be a surprise to anyone who understands how essential an active economy, fair political system, and strong job growth are to a nation's development. In contrast to redeploying U.S. forces in the very unlikely hope that the Taliban offensive will stop in its tracks, diplomats, conflict management teams, economic powerhouses, and foreign-aid organizations should be given ample room to revitalize a struggling Afghan economy. Even if the Obama administration does decide to place a substantial amount of American forces on Afghan soil, the priorities of the military must change radically from its current role of juggling combat with post-conflict reconstruction; an evolving policy that would certainly decrease the risk of interference between the diplomatic core and the military establishment. Policymakers must not forget that the main rationale for establishing the U.S. Foreign Service in the first place was to tackle the world's problems in a different direction, a route that force was often incapable of achieving. In certain circumstances such as the conflict in Afghanistan, helping hands and compassion can be a far better way to turn the tide against a rising insurgency than a brute reliance on guns and bullets. The U.S. Military should not, and cannot, be burdened with non-defense issues while expected to destroy the Taliban's bloody insurgency. This is the job of the U.S. Foreign Service, a team of diplomats that President Obama must not only rebuild, but unquestionably send to the world's troubled areas with utmost vigor. Such a move would not only take unnecessary weight off the backs of our brave young men and women in the battlefield (thus giving them freedom to do what our politicians are asking them to do), but would fight the insurgency in two directions: military on the one hand, and humanitarian on the other.

## CONCLUSION

As the United States enters the eighth year of combat in an exceedingly hostile Afghanistan, the current faults in America's strategy have been widely exposed. Yet, while the Bush administration's shift of resources from Afghanistan to Iraq is largely responsible for the current failure in American foreign policy, there is still time to achieve success on both fronts.

Thankfully, a new approach to Afghanistan need not come at the direct expense of Iraq's stability. In the last two years, the U.S. has managed to dramatically improve the prospects for a stable Iraq. For the first time in Iraq's history, the prospects of Iraqi national sovereignty, democratic practices, and an effective security establishment are closer to being implemented than ever before. Of course, Iraq still has a long way to go in reconstructing their economy and creating an enduring political environment. Similarly, Iraq's security forces are continuing to find it exceedingly difficult to defeat the final remnants of Al'Qaeda militants in Northern Iraq. Yet, despite these recurring problems, the objectives that have been routinely cited by Iraqi officials can be achieved through a sustained U.S. troop presence. Such an American contingency force would not only give Iraqis the necessary time-frame required to improve

their nation's strength and way of life, but would generate an enormous political opportunity for an Iraqi government that is desperately attempting to show the international community that a democratic state in the Middle East is indeed possible. Shifting troops from Iraq to Afghanistan may serve an immediate purpose in stemming the violence to disturbing proportions on the Afghan front, but doing so runs the risk of compromising everything the United States and its allies have accomplished in the last two years in Iraq. Rather than blindly following the fixation of increased boots on the ground, the United States must revamp its diplomatic and community outreach campaigns to successfully protect the Afghan population. A broad-based regional discussion on common problems between India and Pakistan should be on the works as well. Doing so should be able to shift Afghan support from the insurgency into Hamid Karzai's administration, in addition to constant American supervision in the fields of government accountability, economic opportunity, and judicial fairness: institutions that will inevitably lead to an influx of Afghan support from the insurgency to Hamid Karzai's administration. And finally, the United States must exercise restraint in its highly optimistic objectives for Afghanistan, recognizing that some goals may simply be too far-fetched to accomplish in a decentralized, tribal-based society. Taking all of these recommendations into account, there is no reason why the United States cannot capitalize by defying the odds and turning the impossible into the probable.

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