

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Published on *The National Interest* (<http://nationalinterest.org>)

Source URL (retrieved on May 16, 2011): <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/damage-control-kabul-5315>

Damage Control in Kabul

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It took nearly a decade, but Osama bin Laden is dead. Unfortunately, Afghanistan is not fixed. Washington should give up trying.

The United States intervened in Afghanistan after September 11 to wreck al-Qaeda. Ousting the Taliban offered the added benefit of warning other governments that hosting terrorists was a sure ticket to destruction. Both objectives were quickly achieved.

If Afghanistan could be remade, this was the moment. But President George W. Bush decided to use September 11 as an excuse to reorder the Middle East. Hence the precipitous shift of resources away from Afghanistan, leaving bin Laden to escape and the

Taliban to return. The results were predictably disastrous.

President Barack Obama has twice “surged” U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan. He promised to start withdrawing personnel in July, a move that, he said, “will be significant.” A full exit is to come by 2014. But he faces strong pressure to maintain force levels lest supposed progress be lost.

The death of bin Laden should be the signal for President Obama to begin a speedy disengagement.

The United States went into Afghanistan to disrupt and oust the Taliban. In that Washington has been successful. The original organization has been dismantled. The number of al-Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan is estimated to be in the scores. Bin Laden’s long sojourn in Pakistan demonstrates that Afghanistan’s neighbor is now al-Qaeda’s real home.

Moreover, much terrorist energy has shifted to independent offshoots in other nations—today most importantly Yemen. For them Afghanistan is irrelevant. There is enough loosely governed territory on earth for terrorists to always find sanctuary somewhere.

Anyway, the lesson that America is able and willing to retaliate when attacked remains. Even in 2001 the Taliban appeared to be linked to al-Qaeda more by hospitality than ideology, and the Taliban leadership seemed none too pleased at what bin Laden brought down upon his hosts. The movement was committed to ruling Afghanistan, not provoking America.

The last decade likely has reinforced those sentiments. Today’s Taliban contains some Islamic extremists, but much of its manpower comes from Pashtun villagers determined to fight outsiders at home, not attack foreigners abroad. It seems unlikely that the Taliban would risk any power regained by inviting back al-Qaeda. In fact, unverified accounts suggest that some Taliban officials have offered intelligence about al-Qaeda to demonstrate their interest in holding political talks with the Kabul government and the U.S.

If America is not in Afghanistan to stop terrorism, then what are roughly 100,000 U.S. military personnel, along with tens of thousands of allied troops, military contractors, and aid workers, doing?

U.S. intervention is supposed to enforce “stability” in this “vital” region, just like Washington policy makers term most every other spot on earth. Yet for America’s first two centuries or so, no policy maker would have imagined having any reason to go to war in Central Asia. President Bush acted not because Afghanistan was strategically important to America but because it hosted al-Qaeda training camps.

The region is no more important today to the United States. Of course, Afghanistan matters much more to its neighbors, particularly Russia, China, Iran, India, and Pakistan. Some policy makers appear to fantasize that only a pro-Western government buttressed by an American military presence can prevent the region from degenerating into a renewed “Great Game” involving potentially violent geopolitical competition.

But it's too late. That struggle already is ongoing. All of these nations are involved, especially Pakistan, which has spent the last decade playing multiple sides. Exactly how deep the duplicity goes is not certain, but just as bin Laden's extensive sojourn in a Pakistani military town likely required some official acquiescence, there is no doubt that elements within Islamabad, most obviously the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, have sheltered and aided Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan. With cause, Afghan officials denounce the existence of "terrorist safe havens" in Pakistan.

American officials sometimes seem baffled at Islamabad's perfidy. But that nation's most vital security interest is its competition with India, and Afghanistan is a key battleground. The Pakistanis are not willing to sacrifice their fundamental interests simply to satisfy Washington's whims. Financial bribes can only go so far. And the U.S. could ill take military action against Pakistan.

Washington's military presence in next-door Afghanistan only increases frustration in the United States while further destabilizing Pakistan, a faltering state with nuclear weapons. Observed Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari: "Just as the Mexican drug war on U.S. borders makes a difference to Texas and American society, we are talking about a war on our border which is obviously having a huge effect."

Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations advocated staying in Afghanistan to prevent creation of "a fundamentalist caliphate stretching from Kabul to Kashmir and beyond," but American involvement seems more likely to create the forces necessary to bring that about. Washington is profoundly unpopular in Pakistan and jihadists flourish even as the U.S. pressures Islamabad to escalate its war within.

If Washington is not in Afghanistan to stop terrorism or preserve regional security, then what is it doing? Leslie Gelb, previously of the State Department and Council on Foreign Relations, declared: "Afghanistan is no longer a war about vital American security interests." Even Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, admitted that "Afghanistan does not carry a strategic value that justifies 100,000 American troops and a \$100 billion per year cost."

America's mission has devolved into yet another well-meaning but largely futile effort at nation building. Washington hopes for a relatively strong, stable, democratic, and pro-Western government in Kabul to govern an Afghanistan which generally respects human rights, including those of women. It is a reasonable objective. But it seems beyond America's capacity, at least at a cost and in a time that the American people are willing to support. Rather, "the battle against the Taliban is mainly for Afghans themselves," as Gelb observed.

Washington officials claim to be making progress, but the most recent National Intelligence Estimates for Afghanistan and Pakistan were more negative. Many analysts argue that the actual metrics look less promising. Afghanistan is like a balloon: squeeze it in one place and it bulges somewhere else. The United States has made progress in the south but Taliban activity has increased in the north. Virtually everyone expects a bloody spring. Explained the administration in a recent assessment of the war: "the Taliban remains confident of its strategy and resources."

The future looks bleak. The U.S. military has relied on extra troops that the administration has vowed to remove. What happens when those forces leave? Bing West, a former assistant secretary of defense, observed: "The criterion of success, however, are districts standing on their own without U.S. rifle companies. In ten years, that has not happened." Even Gen. Petraeus acknowledged that progress is "fragile and reversible."

Current strategy relies heavily on assassination of Taliban leaders, which is unlikely to seriously weaken a popular insurgency and appears to be radicalizing the movement, and on local security forces, which have demonstrated little effectiveness and undermine the central government. Plans to drop "government in a box" into areas cleared of Taliban have not worked. There is little honest and competent government in Kabul, let alone any extra to distribute elsewhere. Moreover, the Taliban has engaged in its own campaign of assassination against government officials.

Afghan political progress simply has not followed American military success. While Kabul is full of people dependent on the regime, Hamid Karzai appears to have little broad-based support. Those with whom I spoke last year were profoundly cynical about everything from stolen votes to looted aid. One need only look at Kabul's garish "poppy palaces" to see who is doing well by either the Afghan government or Western governments.

Washington plans to continue expanding the army and police forces, but the process is slow and fraught with difficulty. A new report from four NGOs estimates that 10 percent of all Afghan civilian casualties fell at the hands of their supposed protectors in the security forces. Pashtuns, the nation's dominant ethnic group, are underrepresented in the army. One Afghan told me: "Don't send in the Afghan National Police. They make Taliban" (by abusing the local population). The local population also expresses fears about insurgent infiltration of the forces.

Maybe all this can be fixed, but at what cost? This is a project for a generation.

There are still Afghan liberals who desire a free society and oppose an allied withdrawal. However, a decade of Western intervention has inflamed a natural resentment of foreign troops—and what are perceived as their domestic puppets—which feeds the insurgency.

Many Afghans have grown disenchanted with their liberators and support for America's presence has fallen. Wrote ^[3] Gilles Dorransoro of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: "Afghans obviously see the coalition as an occupying force. With war crimes committed by some rogue U.S. troops and vile pictures of American servicemen smiling near the bodies of dead civilians still circulating widely via mobile phone—even to the most remote Afghan villages—the credibility of the coalition is destroyed."

In fact, it was President Hamid Karzai who publicized the otherwise little noted Koran burning in Florida, which led to deadly riots across Afghanistan. A government supporter tried to explain away the killings of several UN employees in the otherwise largely peaceful city of Mazar-e-Sharif as not being anti-Western, but just reflecting natural Afghan hostility towards non-Muslims generally, including the Soviets. His explanation was hardly reassuring.

The Taliban still isn't popular. However, many Afghans divide the insurgents into "good Taliban" and "bad Taliban" and are ready to deal with the former.

A deal would appear to be the best of a bad set of options. The late Richard Holbrooke hoped to negotiate, but Gen. David Petraeus "was looking for something closer to a surrender than a negotiation from the Taliban, and his remains the default position in the Obama administration," complained *Time* columnist Joe Klein. Other officials don't want to talk until the United States has established clear military advantage—but what if the Taliban adopts the same strategy?

Any deal would inevitably involve compromise. America's bottom line should be simple: no hosting terrorists. The best outcome might be a highly federal system in which the Taliban likely would rule areas of Pashtun dominance. Liberties respected would vary by region, which would not always be to America's taste.

It would be a sad outcome. But Americans are not dying in Afghanistan today to protect America. To the contrary, the ongoing war creates more enemies and terrorists, while undermining neighboring Pakistan. No wonder a new poll showed six of ten Americans believe that the United States "has accomplished its mission in Afghanistan and should bring its troops home." In March two-thirds of Americans opined that the war had not been worth fighting.

Leaving may not be good, but it would be far better than staying. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said "our resolve is even stronger following bin Laden's death" and warned against a "hasty" exit. What is hasty about withdrawing after ten years? Osama bin Laden got the United States into the Afghanistan war. Now President Obama should use bin Laden to get us out.

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