



The New, and Muddled, Future Of Afghanistan And Spread Of Jihad

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America's future in Afghanistan is confusing. The most difficult aspect of this confusion is it's felt at the highest levels of our government. No matter how bad situations have become throughout history, Americans have always been confident that even if they didn't know where we were going or how we were going to get there, our leaders did.

Unfortunately, in relation to Afghanistan and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), such is not the case, and America is beginning to understand that. Today, we see clearly that no one knows where we're going ... or how we are going to get there.

This confusion is particularly disastrous today because America must resolve to strengthen its presence in Afghanistan to send a clear message to the world that we intend to stay as long as it takes to secure that region and interdict the spread of Islamic terror organizations such as ISIS and Al Qaeda. The alternative is, simply, much too portentous to consider.

Many Americans are weary of our involvement in Afghanistan – a weariness encouraged by the words of scholars and analysts such as CATO Institute fellow Ted Galen Carpenter, who opined, “why are we still in Afghanistan more than 14 years after the initial invasion in response to the Taliban regime's decision to shelter Al Qaeda?”

Carpenter is, of course, responding to what appears to be a mission failure and is, in fact, correct in terms of the Obama administration's strategy. The Obama administration's strategy in Afghanistan is a convoluted, confusing interpretation of America's original intent in launching Operation Enduring Freedom, and was re-formulated following his election, by him and his staff to accomplish political objectives. America's long-term strategic benefit in the region, and the Afghan people themselves, have both taken a back seat.

President Obama's December 2010 announced pullout of troops from Afghanistan spurred a series of events which have led us to the state of affairs in which we find ourselves today. Our allies began planning an end to their involvement in OEF and began scaling back operationally.

If America was ready to call it quits, they weren't going to stick around. Mothers and fathers with sons and daughters in that country began planning homecomings. Americans subconsciously began to see our fight against terror as an unpleasant, dangerous task which would soon end. Most importantly, our enemies throughout the world of extremist Islam took heart and redoubled their commitment to the annihilation of "The Great Satan."

Any semblance of our original mission -- which was developed by military strategists and soldiers charged with its implementation -- faded away as President Obama announced it would soon be over. His announcement coincided with hints and suggestions peace talks with the Taliban would soon begin, and that the enemy we had fought with our brave Afghan allies would soon be part of the legitimate government. Carpenter is right to see failure in such a strategy.

The most egregious result of this, however, has been the expansion of a subtle mindset the American people would develop which assured them our fight against Islamic extremism and terror would soon be over. Like a long distance runner approaching the finish line, America began to breathe a sigh of relief, and prepare for a winding down of effort and resolve.

I cautioned against this in my October 7, 2014 commentary, *The Terrorist We Fight Today Will Be the Terrorist We Fight This Century*.

Contrary to Carpenter's position -- one that is held by an alarmingly increasing number of theorists on the subject -- America must not only resolve to stay in Afghanistan indefinitely, but we must convince the world that this is precisely what we intend to do. The American people have always been willing to invest in long term, dangerous missions when they are convinced there is no other way, and when they understand that their leaders are equally invested in success and intend to assure their sons and daughters are given the support they need to win.

The fallback position taken by those in leadership today, who are personally invested in withdrawal from Afghanistan, has been in part that, "the American people are tired of this conflict and want us out." The truth, however is, "the American people are tired of our soldiers being forced to pursue a mission which is principally controlled and coordinated by politicians with personal agendas and little to no practical military knowledge or experience."

Editor's note: See Garner's February 24, 2015 analysis, *Kabul in 2015. Saigon in 1975. There's a Glaring Comparison*.

If we give up in Afghanistan today, Russia will immediately begin reestablishing its control in that region. Vladimir Putin's hold in the Middle East is growing unimpeded, and most analysts agree he has long desired to erase the embarrassment of Russia's defeat there. Syrian President Bashar Al Assad made his first trip outside Syria since the beginning of the rebellion to travel Russia to confer with Putin on the future of Syria, long a Soviet, then Russian proxy in the region. In addition, some time ago, Russia negotiated with NATO to take a lead role in Afghanistan in many logistical operations, including narcotics interdiction.

While many in America see an expanded Russian influence in the area as insignificant, those who are more contemplative see it as extremely disruptive for several reasons. Russia's expanded influence will, of course, mirror America's decline of the same.

ISIS has been expanding throughout Afghanistan for months and has established a foothold in large swathes of the remote countryside. Though the mainstream media has not reported it, analysts have verified that ISIS is firmly established in 25 out of 36 Afghan provinces and is well established in Pakistan. As ISIS is surpassing Al Qaeda in strength, many former Al Qaeda fighters are transferring allegiance to this dangerous Islamist jihadi group.

Alliances are also forming with many Taliban groups, and the concern is formerly regional Taliban leaders may be convinced to “take their show on the road” -- or at least provide a great deal of logistical support to ISIS and Al Qaeda international operations. Additionally, while the Taliban began with a regional focus and were little concerned with America or its allies, 14 years of fighting has hardened their resolve and increased their hatred of America.

An American withdrawal from Afghanistan will likely also increase the dissolution of that country, north and south. Rashid Dostum, Afghan First Vice President and former Northern Alliance leader of the Jumbish militia, signaled recently in partnership with Mohammad Mohaqiq, Hazara leader of the Wahdats, a reforming of the old Northern Alliance to fight the expansion of Taliban influence in the north.

While there may be some advantage to such a separation, it should be accomplished over a longer period of time and under much more controlled conditions. It should definitely not be as a result of the fear of an expanded Taliban influence in the region.

The increased strength of those committed to the annihilation of America and Israel should be reason enough to stay involved in Afghanistan. Troop level increases to 5,500 as announced by President Obama, however, are never going to assure success. We must recommit troops in the numbers necessary to be effective ... and plan to stay as long as it takes. This is a generational conflict, as is the offensive action against global jihad.

Obama himself said in 2009: "So I want the American people to understand that we have a clear and focused goal: to disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future. That is the goal that must be achieved. That is a cause that could not be more just. And to the terrorists who oppose us, my message is the same: we will defeat you."

Politics aside, his words at that time -- though today seemingly insincere -- were, and are, true and valid. Regardless of the costs, we must stay the course, and, as President Obama proclaimed, “disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda (and now ISIS) in Pakistan and Afghanistan.”

Redoubling efforts in Afghanistan while following the same strategy, though, would be folly. America must announce to the Afghan people we are staying and will continue to invest our blood and resources in the success of the Afghan people, and that we’re not going to take a back seat in policy development as it concerns our mission there. When America pours its sweat, money and blood in any country, it has every moral right to dictate policy and to pursue operations in the manner our mission leaders see fit. Former Afghan President Hamad Karzai, however, would never consider such a strategy. Current Afghan President Ashraf Ghani seems more than willing to agree.

America must begin by backing away from its insistence on negotiating with the Taliban -- the leaders in the north will never agree to that anyway. The suggestion that the Taliban can ever be

anything but the enemy sends such a mixed and convoluted message to Afghan Security Forces (ASF), diminishing their zeal and commitment to combat the Taliban.

Military strategists the world over know that a soldier, especially a poorly equipped, poorly paid soldier, must be committed to the extermination of an enemy or he will be unsuccessful. Risking your own death going into battle against an enemy you are told may be a legitimate part of the government tomorrow is disconcerting and does not lend itself to the fighting spirit necessary on the battlefield to defeat a committed enemy like the Taliban. America must give ASF soldiers a real purpose in the fight; a purpose that will carry them through. The first step in that purpose will be to drop any semblance of negotiating with their enemy.

While Obama conceives of a truce with the Taliban, no matter how tenuous, as a victory, now is not the time to consider it. The Taliban must be made aware that America will fight alongside their Afghan brothers until the last Taliban member is dead or surrendered. The Taliban must be made aware that the current Afghan government has no intent to negotiate a truce. Al Qaeda and ISIS will get the message as long as the Taliban leadership is convinced of it.

Obama stated in his announced intent to leave 5,500 troops in Afghanistan that the mission would remain that of merely training Afghan forces and prohibiting Al Qaeda from reestablishing a foothold in the country. As is the nature of most politicians, though, his words are minced and intent on demonstrating a determined mindset. The fact is, and most amateur analysts know this, Al Qaeda and ISIS have already reestablished a foothold in Afghanistan. More disconcerting than that is Al Qaeda is losing ground to, and in many cases joining forces with, the much more brutal ISIS.

We can do the right thing in Afghanistan, and we can secure a committed ally and a legitimate foothold there. As a result of the Iran nuclear agreement, the United Arab Emirates has already declared its intention to pursue a uranium enrichment program designed to develop nuclear weapons. Other countries in the Middle East will most assuredly follow. Many analysts predict Pakistan will balkanize in the coming years, leaving a nuclear armed nation split up in the hands of any number of Islamic jihadi groups. Only the ill-informed or childishly optimistically fail to see a need for America to have a strong presence in that part of the world under these circumstances. We have to be there as a calming influence if nothing else.

America must recommit troops and determination to the mission. We can do this with strong leadership, clear objectives and a determination not to allow the mission coordination to be usurped by politicians or lawyers with personal agendas. America's very capable military leaders must be allowed total control over every step of the mission.

America must signal to the Afghan people we are going to be there as long as we have been in South Korea, Germany or Japan if that's what it takes. But the Afghan people must be assured our presence there is going to bring real, honest, stable economic improvement to the country. We can secure the country once again and, partnering with American entrepreneurs, begin in the north, providing an economic future for the people.

Our efforts in Afghanistan to date -- following the routing of Bin Laden and Al Qaeda remnants and the defeat of the Taliban -- have been designed to alter the structural political environment of the country so the people themselves could, and would, prohibit the Taliban and other Islamic

extremist groups a safe environment in which to grow stronger. Every counterinsurgency professional knows an insurgent group is defeated when the people themselves decide that it's in their own best interest. Insurgencies are defeated by the people, not an outside force.

Our counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan have been thwarted for several reasons, none of which are attributable to the Afghan people. Once the most dangerous part of Operation Enduring Freedom was completed successfully, on or about December 1, 2001, the future of OEF became convoluted.

The idea was to funnel money into the country to create jobs and to recruit and train a force which would provide stability while a democracy could take hold. Those entrusted with that task, most often politicians and lawyers, too often had ulterior motives and the idea of a stable democratic environment fell by the wayside; replaced by more self-serving objectives.

The jobs provided to local Afghans were, for the most part, meaningless simple methods of putting money into the economy. Few, if any, of the "jobs" were ever considered "professions" or meaningful employment. Though they provided funds for the poorest of Afghans, they did not provide dignity or purpose. Also of note is that the additional adverse impact on the economy hit fast and hard, and basically diluted any real benefit -- occurring too fast for natural economic adjustment.

Conversely, a simple walk on the streets of major cities and villages in Afghanistan on April 5, 2014 during voting in the first democratic election was enough to demonstrate to any outsider the righteousness of America's efforts to create a situation in which people were allowed to cast their vote. The enthusiasm and joy was obvious on every face, right down to the least significant person in any village. We did that part right. Unfortunately, it was all downhill from there.

We have, in fact, never fully given the people of Afghanistan the desire to do this themselves. We've never given them the desire to completely cut ties with the Taliban or, for that matter, any other Islamic group bent on jihadi terror to achieve an objective.

If we secure the entire country once again, which would take a reinvestment of boots on the ground, then work slowly to introduce real economic development in the north, (the northern part of Afghanistan is most amenable to such with its large Tajik and Uzbek population), working with investors and businessmen from America, we can give the Afghan people a multitude of reasons for them to fight off any insurgency. The opportunities for American investment and business development in Afghanistan are well-known.

American troops, in place in the north for security purposes, should also live and work more closely among the people. The huge, thick, impregnable walls behind which Americans secure themselves must come down.

Counterinsurgency experts know once a process such as this takes hold, security for those assisting in the implementation of such a process is provided by the people. They have, at that time, a vested interest.

Once people in the northern part of Afghanistan begin enjoying the benefits of a stable, permanent, economic relationship with America, those in the south more Pashtun and more connected with the Taliban will want the same.

Additionally, in the north, ASF would have a vested interest in fighting to protect their homeland, jobs and futures for their families. Now, they are fighting because we told them they should. That is a poor incentive for anyone.

This strategy of walking away may be beneficial to our most powerful political leaders, but it will result in the deaths of thousands of people who stood by us and trusted us, all the while strengthening the largest, most secure safe haven for Islamic extremism in the world.

Admittedly, Afghanistan is a monumental problem, but ignoring it will transform it into a “monumental problem knocking on our front door.” With courageous, determined, responsible leadership, America can assist Afghans in making Afghanistan a strong dependable ally.

Walking away from Afghanistan is a losing game. We, for better or worse, are responsible for Afghanistan and must follow through on our commitment to its people. Staying there under the conditions outlined herein will provide security and economic benefit to America for generations to come. Afghans will stand with us and fight Islamic extremism to the end. We desperately need this. All of our other Middle Eastern allies are distancing themselves from us ... while more and more are appear to be aligning with Russia.

Our leaders must make the case to the American people that we must resolve to win as long as it takes, and, as a nation, we must finally keep the promises we made to a friend. Disengaging in Afghanistan will be a terrible mistake, and future generations will rue the day. Reestablishing our presence there, signaling a long-term solid relationship, will counter and eventually destroy the growing Taliban/ISIS influence, sending a message of American orchestrated stability to the entire Middle East.

But we can do this with strong leadership and by allowing our military commanders total control over the mission.