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Calling It Quits in Afghanistan

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How many more American soldiers and innocent Afghan civilians have to die before the Obama administration withdraws from Afghanistan? The burning of Qurans at a U.S. base outside of Kabul and the riots that followed might jeopardize the U.S. training mission in Afghanistan. On top of limited and potentially unsustainable security improvements, the spiraling violence does not instill confidence in our ability to achieve a "victory." It is time for the United States to downsize its mission in Afghanistan. Despite good intentions, we have overstayed our welcome.

Planners in Washington seem to forget that Afghans view us as guests in *their* country. In 2010, well before U.S. Marines urinated on insurgent corpses and Florida pastor Terry Jones promised to "stand up" to Islam and burn a Quran, Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai imposed a crackdown on alcohol consumption and closed a number of expat bars around Kabul, because they were deemed offensive to Islam. The Afghan general who carried out the alcohol raids told the *Los Angeles Times* it was done for "Allah's sake." Many Afghans welcome assistance but resent the norms we have imposed on their society. Foreigners constantly change their mayors, their governors, and their customs. Afghans are told how to dress their women, what is culturally acceptable, and what is culturally repugnant. U.S. taxpayers are furious at politicians who think they know how to best spend other people's money, and yet Americans tend to ignore how intrusive our own military and civilian planners are to foreign peoples.

It should come as no surprise that a report published last May by the Kabul-based Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit concluded that negative sentiments in Afghanistan about democracy emerge from "the stated distaste among respondents for 'Western culture' and the potential threat it poses to 'Afghan culture,' traditional norms or values, and an Islamic identity."

The Quran burning and the grisly violence meted out against innocent people was not justified. Nevertheless, the fact remains that America is widely scorned throughout the region--in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

These underlying realities will not change with more time, more money, or more resources. To continue to train and assist the Afghan national army and police when distrust remains this high risks more violent incidents between U.S. military forces and their Afghan counterparts. Rather than become Afghanistan's perpetual crutch, Washington must cut its losses. The scale and length of this war has been a drain on U.S. taxpayers and is fiscally irresponsible. More importantly, no more American or Afghan lives should be lost in pursuit of a strategy that is not in America's national interest.