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The Training Mission You Don't Hear About

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Tuesday's attacks in Kabul are certainly a dispiriting reminder that 10 years after the first American fighters arrived in Afghanistan to oust al Qaeda and its host Taliban government, the country is far from secure. Today, there has been a flurry of reporting suggesting that the spectacular attacks on the U.S. Embassy and NATO headquarters mean the Afghan effort is doomed. Cato Institute foreign affairs analyst [Malou Innocent writes](#) in the Huffington Post, "[T]he attack is a vivid reminder of how poorly things are going, and why America needs to leave."

No doubt, the news is not good. There are unanswered questions about how the insurgents trucked major loads of ammunition into a heavily fortified city, circled by a 'ring of steel' of 25 checkpoints manned by Afghan police. And how the attackers accessed an empty building within shooting distance of the U.S. Embassy and International Security Assistance Force headquarters. (Shawn Stroud, the spokesman for the international Training Command, defends the Afghan Security Forces, writing via email today there is "no evidence whatsoever of any 'rogue elements' in the events.")

It may well turn out that rogue elements in the Afghan police did facilitate the attack... the force hardly has an unblemished record. But consider this. The attack was quelled in 20 hours. None of the Americans or NATO troops in the insurgents' crosshairs were killed. Afghan security forces fought back (five Afghan police were killed along with 11 Afghan civilians), and Stroud says Afghan security forces have "been in the lead throughout in response." It was Afghans who stormed the building and killed the insurgents. It was Afghans who killed the suicide bomber before he could detonate himself on the Airport Road.

Could the same have been said just two years ago, when -- according to General William Caldwell, the three star in charge of creating the new Afghan Army and Police -- the troops were largely "untrained, ill-equipped, underpaid and poorly led."? On a recent reporting trip to Kabul, I watched the training effort myself. Today, Afghans are signing

up for the Army and Police at record rates -- an average of 9,000 a month are surging into recruiting centers across the country. Caldwell's team has begun mandatory literacy training for all the Afghan security forces, which is making them more capable fighters and is also helping them believe in their own future. Afghans have some incredible mentors, teachers like Col. Ed Naessens, the head of the Physics department at West Point, who is instructing young cadets at the Afghan National Military Academy. And Amanda Banks, a police trainer from North Carolina, who is teaching a fledgling group of women in the police force how to do searches and pat downs. Neither of them say things are going poorly and that America needs to leave. Banks told me she tells her students that "Anything worth having is worth working for."

In talking to military leaders -- both Coalition and Afghan -- I sensed an unmistakable optimism that the Afghans would be able to stand up so that the Americans can go home at the end of 2014. This is "viable and can be done," Caldwell told me. But that's assuming the United States and its coalition allies continue to fund the mission, to the tune of \$6-\$8 billion a year. Convincing Congress to keep its checkbook open while spectacular attacks continue might be Caldwell's toughest fight yet.