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## A Race against Time or a Race to Civil War?

| [More](#)<sup>[1]</sup>

|  
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The drawdown of U.S. forces from Afghanistan will start this July, with a complete withdrawal of “[combat troops](#)”<sup>[3]</sup> by the end of 2014. The newly emerging conventional wisdom, however, is that Afghan security forces [are not ready](#)<sup>[4]</sup> to take over responsibility, since serious efforts to strengthen those forces [only really](#)<sup>[4]</sup> began in 2009. But rather than validate an open-ended mission to build national institutions in Afghanistan, looming problems in the hand off from foreign to indigenous forces epitomize the flawed process of state-building.

The 285,000-strong Afghan army and police, under the authority of the Ministries of Defense and Interior, respectively, are expected to increase to a total of 305,000 by this October. However, numbers tell only part of the story.

In a new [report](#)<sup>[5]</sup> entitled “No Time to Lose,” British charity Oxfam and three other NGOs warn that the army and police, collectively known as the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), account for a substantial portion of harm inflicted on Afghan civilians. “At least 10 per cent of Afghan civilians killed in the conflict in 2010 were killed by their own security forces,” according to the report. Aside from casualties, violations of human rights, including sexual abuse of children, mistreatment of detainees, and cruelty inflicted on villagers by local police, who many Afghans consider criminal gangs, illustrate the full extent of the problem.

Even worse, while the justice systems function swimmingly for those with “political connections,” the vast majority of Afghans have little recourse to stop such abuses because, “There is no satisfactory mechanism by which an individual can lodge a complaint against the ANSF.”

As the saying goes, “no justice, no peace.” And, as I learned during a trip to Afghanistan last year, many Afghans, especially those living in rural subsistence areas, seek redress for communal disputes by turning to their local district mullah. He provides basic security and rudimentary justice and, more often than not, doubles as a Taliban operative. Because the national government is either profoundly incompetent or entirely absent in many areas, those classified as “insurgents” by U.S. forces pick up the slack and provide for the practical needs of local people.

Interestingly enough, support for the insurgency may thrive not in resource-starved provinces, but in areas where malevolent government authorities wield their powers with impunity. Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar once proclaimed [6], “If the police of a state consist of people who are immoral and irreligious...how can they protect the property, dignity, and honor of the people?”

If this weren't enough, the ethnic composition of the ANSF may very well create the dynamics for a future civil war. In the Afghan National Army (ANA), Uzbek and Hazara officers are underrepresented, while Tajik officers are overrepresented [7]. Pashtun representation in the officer corps is in line with its share of the population, but recruiting ground forces in Pashtun areas has been difficult, despite them making up roughly 40 percent of the population. This “lack of ethnic balance across the force,” according to a RAND report [8], remains an important personnel issue.

An American trainer helps to explain the problems composing an ethnically diverse and representative army:

The influence of ethnicity has profound implications for patronage, nepotism and other corruption. Moreover, ethnic divisions may be further complicated by fighting that took place between ethnic groups during the Soviet/Afghan and Civil Wars. During this period, killings along ethnic lines were commonplace. A mentor may never quite know how deep the mistrust and anger goes between different ethnic tribes, but it is clearly a factor in how Afghans interact with each other.

Many of these problems are not new. The International Crisis Group (ICG) warned in 2009 [9] that the army ranks are rife with “ethnic and political factionalism.” And despite efforts to create a national force imbued with a unified “Afghanistan-first” mentality, “From the lower officers upward,” one retired military officer told the ICG, “it is not a national army. It is a political army. You have people working for different factions within the ministry of defense, so today what you have is an army that serves individuals not the nation.”

One expert I spoke to while in Afghanistan, who was one of the first Americans to help rebuild the country in 2001, offered this simple analogy: think back to the American Civil War. Few Confederate soldiers went to jail. Robert E. Lee went on to be a professor. Davis went to jail briefly, and was let out and wrote his memoirs. The moral of the story is that all the southern states were reintegrated. But imagine if Union soldiers went door-to-door to look for Confederate soldiers to bring them to jail. The Civil War would have never ended. But this is what is happening now in Afghanistan. Former elements of the Northern Alliance, mainly comprised of Tajiks, Hazara, Uzbeks, and Turkmens, are hunting former Taliban, mainly Pashtuns, in the south and exacting tribal and ethnic vendettas left over from the 1990s.

The starkest example [10] of this was last year's offensive in the southern village of Marjah. Despite the area being predominately Pashtun, Operation “Moshtarak”—Dari for “together”—was led by non-Pashtun Tajik and Hazara soldiers. Such problems pervade other incursions in the south.

This author, a staunch proponent of withdrawal, is under no illusions that as U.S. forces begin exiting Afghanistan, bloodshed will likely follow. But it's important to proceed with our eyes open and learn the right lessons from our decade-long involvement. To a certain extent, Afghanistan's amalgam of disparate tribal and ethnic groups—many of whom have historic grievances against one another—will always hamper stabilization. But rather than merely attributing Afghanistan's impeding doom solely to the absence of functioning central government institutions, we should

also consider how the process of building those national institutions will lead to increased violence and conflict.

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