

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

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## NATO's Neglected Mission

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

| April 7, 2011

| [Malou Innocent](#) <sup>[2]</sup>



As NATO begins to focus on its new mission in Libya, its main mission in Afghanistan remains an unresolved debacle.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai recently announced <sup>[3]</sup> that his central government will be taking over seven areas of the country from the international coalition. But the Afghan government remains incredibly weak, widely distrusted, and underrepresented in poorly secured areas of the country. The 150,000-strong Afghan army, whose performance and effectiveness remains <sup>[4]</sup> questionable <sup>[5]</sup>, has an officer corps teeming with ethnic fissures and competing sub-national interests. Meanwhile, the Afghan police force has developed <sup>[6]</sup> a reputation for desertion, illiteracy, and, among Afghans, rapaciousness.

Even the administrative structure of the Afghan state remains brittle. The Interior Ministry, for example, is teeming with foreign civilian advisers, mostly American contractors <sup>[7]</sup>. And just three years ago, the Finance Ministry had no idea where 80% of its money was going, according to the Special Advisor on Development for the United Nations Assistance

Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), whom I interviewed in Afghanistan. The World Bank estimates that the Afghan government will not be financially self-sufficient until 2023 [7], with the international community, primarily U.S. taxpayers, flipping the bill.

Overlooking the sorry state of the Afghan government, the Obama administration's latest status report on the war claims that new counterinsurgency tactics have shown progress. As a result, the administration will begin the reduction of U.S. forces this July [8], which troops and how many of them remains up in the air. In truth, much of southern Afghanistan—the focus of the coalition's military offensives—has seen only limited and potentially unsustainable security improvements, while the size of low risk areas in the north, west, and center of the country has shrunk considerably [9].

Amid this atmosphere of violence and uncertainty there have also been mounting tensions between the international coalition and the civilian government of Hamid Karzai. Last year, right before I went to Afghanistan, 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 [10] the *Los Angeles Times* it was for "Allah's sake."

This may not matter much to us in America, but these issues matter considerably to the conservative local Afghans who live under foreign occupation. They see outsiders changing their mayors, governors, and customs; they are told how to dress their women, what is culturally acceptable, and what is culturally backwards. In America, we get angry when people redistribute our taxes, yet we forget how intrusive our own government is to foreign societies.

Additionally, over the past year, night raids have been greatly expanded and civilian casualties have gone up dramatically. Just last month, nine Afghan children gathering firewood in Kunar were killed in a NATO air strike [11]. General David Petraeus, the commander of international troops, apologized profusely; Karzai said his apology was not enough.

All of this combined to create a tinderbox of resentment ready to go up in flames. The spark came several weeks ago when Florida pastor Terry Jones burned a Koran. This set off angry and violent demonstrations [12] in several cities across Afghanistan. Nineteen people have died [13], including seven U.N. workers. Dozens more have been injured. Karzai thought that he stood to gain some political capital from the development and used the incident as an opportunity to condemn the occupation.

America is widely scorned throughout the region. The United States has spent over \$400 billion dollars (with the meter still running) to put in place a weak, unaccountable, and illegitimate Afghan central government. And violence and inter-cultural hostility between locals and foreigners continues to rise. This is what our leaders are calling a "victory."

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