

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Occupy Afghanistan

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In an [essay](#) for *Armed Forces Journal*, Army Lt. Col. Daniel L. Davis writes that after traveling across Afghanistan and speaking with more than 250 soldiers in the field, “What I saw bore no resemblance to rosy official statements by U.S. military leaders about conditions on the ground.” Further down he continues, “I witnessed the absence of success on virtually every level.”

It’s hard to disagree.

Davis’s essay comes weeks after the [top-secret](#) 2011 National Intelligence Estimate on Afghanistan [finds](#) that security gains in the Afghan war are unsustainable and that pervasive corruption, government incompetence and militant safe havens in Pakistan have undercut progress.

I’m reminded of a [comment](#) made recently by Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), who chairs the Senate Intelligence Committee:

There have been gains in security . . . but the Taliban is still a force to be reckoned with. They still occupy considerable land in the country.

“Occupy” is the operative word in that sentence. That gains in Afghanistan are “[fragile and reversible](#)” is the oft-repeated mantra of defiant optimists who invoke our inability to achieve key objectives—improve local governance, eradicate corruption, convince Pakistan to shut down safe havens, etc.—as reason to remain in Afghanistan indefinitely. Mind you, the opposite is also true: if such

objectives are somehow reached, then we can never leave, since leaving would risk jeopardizing the gains we've won.

The intractable cross-border insurgency, of course, will outlive the presence of international troops. After all, a local district mullah who moonlights as a Taliban operative has nowhere else to go. Indeed, as the last ten years have shown, insurgents can outlast coalition troops by merely reemerging after we've left—*that's* an enduring occupation.

In [separate dissents](#) appended to the report mentioned above—a report that reaches similar [conclusions](#) about the war made in the [2010 N.I.E.](#)—the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Marine Gen. John Allen, and the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Ryan Crocker, agreed in the judgment that the Taliban have shown no readiness to abandon their political goals. And, according to Col. Brian Mennes, who commands 3,300 troopers of the 4th Brigade: “The Taliban are going to have a role in post-war Afghanistan. . . . They are Afghans. They are there—it's just physics!”

Coalition night raids and drone strikes have managed to eliminate the Taliban's numerous shadow governors, mid-level commanders and weapons facilitators; however, as the 2011 N.I.E. was quoted as saying, the Taliban's “strength, motivation, funding and tactical proficiency remains intact.” And “many Afghans are already bracing themselves for an eventual return of the Taliban.”

From war fighters and trigger pullers to desk-bound spooks and armchair analysts, the conclusion reached is that after a decade of war, we still haven't won. The reason? All politics is local.

Remember that a key component of the Obama administration's strategy for Afghanistan was winning over local people and luring them away from the Taliban. But the always-perceptive [Captain Cat](#), who has worked on Afghan peace building, offers insight into what went wrong:

As we talk and sip tea, the younger man's brother arrives, wrapped in a patu. He keeps his hair long, jihadi style, and it pokes out of his pakool. He was a more senior commander than his younger brother, and only reconciled a few months ago.

I ask the commander what he does with his days. “The government doesn't trust anyone who is reconciled, so no one will hire us. My other brother does small jobs, he owns a cart in town and he sometimes does delivery work. He gets calls from Miram Shah from the Taliban and they tell him “look at your life now, pushing carts. What kind of a man are you?”

“I really regret reintegrating with the government, I wish I hadn't—but if I go back now, the Taliban will kill me”.

We shake hands and I leave them. Miserable, bored and ashamed, they will while away their days wondering how to feed their families, when the Taliban will come for them and why they put their trust in the government. It's hard not to wonder the same thing.

Tragically, the vast majority of Afghans were initially happy with the foreign-troop presence. They took a “wait-and-see” approach. But that spirit has largely deteriorated. Conversely, the Taliban are reviled, but the general view among many Afghans toward the movement is either ambivalence or that the Afghan government is worse. Perhaps more importantly, as the Afghan government’s head of Rural Rehabilitation and Development insisted to me at his office in Kabul awhile back: “Taliban is part of our culture.”

The coalition’s deus ex machina is [reconciliation with the Taliban](#). While such an outcome to the war is hardly a victory worth celebrating, it’s difficult to imagine a lasting solution that does not involve the war’s other occupying force, the Taliban.