

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## *The Massacre in Panjwai*

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March 13, 2012

[In today's \*Politico\*](#), my coauthor Robert Naiman and I examine the U.S. mission in Afghanistan in the wake of the [sad and inexplicable massacre of 16 Afghan civilians](#)—nine of them children, most of them allegedly toddlers—by a U.S. soldier in Panjwai, Kandahar. While we address some of the possible policy implications, it is equally instructive to read what is happening on the ground. On Monday, the *New Yorker's* Amy Davidson aggregated reports from local witnesses. I would encourage everyone to read Davidson's [piece](#) in full; below are some of the more interesting excerpts:

First, in the early hours of Sunday, there was noise. "I told my son not to speak because the Americans are here," an Afghan woman told the BBC. "They went next door and the first thing they did was shoot the dog. And then there was a muffled bang inside the room—but who could go and see?"

A mother using the word "Americans" to scare her child into silence is alone cause for reflection. And "who could go and see"? Despite the dark and noise and confusion—was there more than one soldier? A helicopter?—some Afghans in the village saw something. Here is what another woman told the BBC:

There was one man, and he dragged a woman by her hair and banged her head repeatedly against the wall. She didn't say a word.

And Mohammad Zahir, age twenty-six, [to the AP](#):

He was walking around taking up positions in the house—in two or three places like he was searching. . . . He was on his knees when he shot my father. . . . [My father] was not holding anything—not even a cup of tea.

Abdul Hadi, age forty, to the *Times*.

My father went out to find out what was happening, and he was killed. . . . I was covered by the women in my family in my room, so that is why I survived.

Gul Bashra, identified as a “mother,” [on Al Jazeera](#) (and the woman who told the BBC about the noises):

They killed a child who was two years old. Was that child Taliban?

Anar Gula, an elderly neighbor, [to the Times](#):

All the family members were killed, the dead put in a room, and blankets were put over the corpses and they were burned. . . . We put out the fire.

War is heart wrenching, as Afghans surely know. Their country has been in [near ceaseless conflict for the last thirty years](#), and according to the [latest U.N. report](#) on armed conflict in Afghanistan, 2011 was the fifth straight year in which civilian casualties rose. Although insurgents were mainly responsible for those deaths, [in 2009 the Obama administration adopted a new mission](#): protecting ordinary Afghans and winning over their allegiance, a case put forward most vigorously by [General David Petraeus \(ret.\)](#), [General Stanley McChrystal \(ret.\)](#), and other [military and civilian experts](#) in what now seems like eons ago.

Today, the metric for success is to help Afghans establish some semblance of internal security, a shifting goalpost that was always an uphill battle. During and after the [surge](#), it was clear that the administration’s new strategy [did not have enough troops, enough time or enough competent local partners](#)—as called for by the U.S. Army and Marine Corps in [its counterinsurgency \(COIN\) field manual](#)—to compete credibly with the Taliban. As a result, officials in Washington and Kabul fed foreign observers stage-managed showpieces like the offensive in [Marjah](#).

Applied according to doctrine, COIN in Afghanistan would have required several hundreds of thousands of troops, ten to twelve years of implementation and local government leaders who were not motivated primarily by personal advancement. [It’s difficult to imagine a successful application of COIN](#) in that landlocked country even if the coalition had these essential building blocks. After all, in addition to the oft-mentioned issue of cross-border militant sanctuaries, the cultural chasm between foreigners and rural locals has always persisted—and the Taliban have readily exploited this rift.

As Army Special Forces Maj. Fernando M. Lujan noted in a [March 4 article](#), “One of the first things we learned was the power of a simple narrative, repeated endlessly by the Taliban: The coalition is here to occupy Afghanistan and destroy Islam.” Indeed, right after last Sunday’s massacre and the allegation that the soldier’s multiple deployments may have created mental-health issues, [the Taliban issued this statement](#):

If the perpetrators of this massacre were in fact mentally ill, then this testifies to yet another moral transgression by the American military because they are arming lunatics in Afghanistan who turn their weapons against the defenseless Afghans without giving a second thought.

Although a new *Washington Post*-ABC News [poll](#) shows that 54 percent of Americans believe we should withdraw before the Afghan army is “self-sufficient,” [the administration remains committed to withdrawing in 2014](#). Between now and then, it hopes to set up a minimally functioning government in the middle of central Asia that is resistant to internal insurrection and to foreign invasion. It’s going to be a long two years.