

## The real story behind Petraeus's collapse

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To most people who follow developments in Afghanistan, it was clear that building a viable Afghan state would take more troops, more money, and more patience than the United States and its international partners could ever commit. These [long-standing reservations were only intensified](#) last November, when U.S. President Barack Obama announced plans for a 30,000-troop surge that would not only pacify population centers and train Afghan security forces, but also begin to wind down by July 2011—within 18 months of escalation.

But at a Senate hearing yesterday (before U.S. CENTCOM commander [General David Petraeus passed out from dehydration](#)), it became glaringly obvious that “success,” if it’s even still achievable, will take [far longer than July 2011](#). Under [intense questioning](#) from both Sens. Carl Levin and John McCain, Gen. Petraeus explained that the drawdown would be based on conditions at the time, adding, “In a perfect world, Mr. Chairman, [we have to be very careful with timelines](#).” (It’s not as if Gen. Petraeus promised the president that he can “[train and hand over](#)” the fight to Afghan security forces before next summer... Oh wait, he did.)

Indeed, earlier this year, military leaders hoped to have two successes to put before the White House for review: Kandahar and Marjah. Operations in Kandahar, a key Taliban stronghold, have been [delayed until autumn](#). In Marjah, a village of roughly 80,000, in the southern province of Helmand, [results are mixed](#).

On the eve of the offensive in Marjah, the coalition’s largest military operation since the invasion, U.S. Army General Stanley McChrystal, the top commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, said, “[This is all a war of perceptions](#).” In keeping with that logic, Marjah was hailed as an exemplar of population-centric counterinsurgency, a successful offensive that would be ceaselessly repeated in the media and used as a prop to retain public support for the war. Before the February offensive, the Taliban had been collecting taxes, providing policing and a rudimentary court system, and protecting the opium economy that many residents relied on. After the offensive, Afghanistan-based journalist Anand Gopal found that many residents [despised the Afghan police at least as much as the Taliban](#). Worse, after the coalition cleared the area, there was no judicial system in place to jail suspected Taliban insurgents. With summer approaching, NATO forces—not Afghan troops—still control much of Marjah.

Marjah shined a harsh light on the Afghan National Army (ANA)—the entity that is supposed to take over responsibility for security and allow U.S. forces begin to come home. Despite being one of the war’s very few success stories, a report released last month by the International Crisis Group (ICG) found that [ANA training has prioritized quantity over quality](#). “Kabul powerbrokers are distributing the spoils of increased NATO spending on army development among their constituents in the officer corps, fuelling ethnic and political factionalism within the army ranks,” the report said.

One retired military officer told the ICG: “From the lower officers upward, 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.”

These developments do not bode well for the coalition's strategy. In this respect, the Obama administration's overly ambitious policies do more than needlessly inflate Afghan expectations; they severely erode America reputation in globally. Promising to "end the tragic conflict in Afghanistan and promote national reconciliation, lasting peace, stability and respect for human rights in the country" is absurd. Promising to do so according to an 18-month timetable is laughable. Afghanistan has been in [continuous war since the 1970s](#). Americans should recognize that the Obama-McChrystal-Petraeus strategy grossly overestimates America's power to spread wealth and stability, and demand a new set of goals that will allow the United States to bring this long war to a swift end.

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