



Middle East wars can't end soon enough

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It's a start. President Barack Obama announced Wednesday that he would withdraw 10,000 U.S. troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2011. He promised, "(We) will bring home a total of 33,000 troops by next summer, fully recovering the surge" of troop levels he began in 2009. About 67,000 troops then would remain in Afghanistan. The reason was that the surge accomplished its mission "to refocus on al-Qaida, to reverse the Taliban's momentum, and train Afghan security forces to defend their own country."

He promised even more troop withdrawals after that, until, "By 2014, this process of transition will be complete, and the Afghan people will be responsible for their own security." Republican House Speaker John Boehner endorsed the withdrawal.

The real problem with the war in Afghanistan was with the mission definition. After 9/11, we supported action against al-Qaida terrorist elements that had attacked us, killing 3,000 Americans, and which were hiding in Afghanistan. Preferably, this should have been done directly by Congress.

Instead, Congress gave President George W. Bush broad authorization for war in Afghanistan, including the typical, expensive "national building exercise." Next came, in 2003, the war in Iraq, diverting troops from Afghanistan.

The withdrawal of the 33,000 troops from Afghanistan will leave troop levels there at about where they were when Obama took office in January 2009, Malou Innocent, a foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute, told us. She said that the mission in Afghanistan has combined two different actions, fighting al-Qaida terrorists and the Taliban counter-insurgency.

"The enemy we are geared to fight is the counter-insurgency," but we should be going after al-Qaida, she added. "The Taliban are an indigenous movement that would require many, many more troops to fight in a counterinsurgency. If we begin to conflate our enemies, we'll be fighting more enemies than we really need to."

She said that the troop withdrawals could be much greater. Indeed, she stressed, the number could go down "even to zero" if the strategy used to fight al-Qaida in Sudan and Yemen were adopted in Afghanistan. Under that, good intelligence is combined with drone attacks on al-Qaida, which, in any case, now largely operates in what the president called "terrorist safe havens in Pakistan."

On nation building, she said, "We've turned our soldiers into social workers. That's difficult to execute." That's especially the case in a country that has hundreds of separate squabbling tribes. Trying to turn Afghanistan into a model democracy always has been a fool's errand.

The president's speech was given amid the background of his re-election bid. He's obviously campaigning on how he supposedly won, and wound down, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Afghan war is costing taxpayers at least \$100 billion a year. As the president said, "America, it is time to focus on nation building here at home."

Indeed. The end to these wars can't come soon enough.

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