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FIVE FACTS ABOUT AFGHANISTAN

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Op_ed

By MWC News

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Five Facts About Afghanistan by Ivan Eland

The corridors of power in the nation's capital are abuzz with the complexities of the situation in Afghanistan. If only we send 40,000 more troops, say the military brass, the U.S. could have some hope of turning the situation around and preventing Afghanistan from becoming a haven for terrorists yet again. Vice President Joe Biden has apparently suggested keeping the number of forces the same but shifting the U.S. mission more toward training the Afghan security forces and conducting Special Forces raids and drone attacks against al-Qaeda.



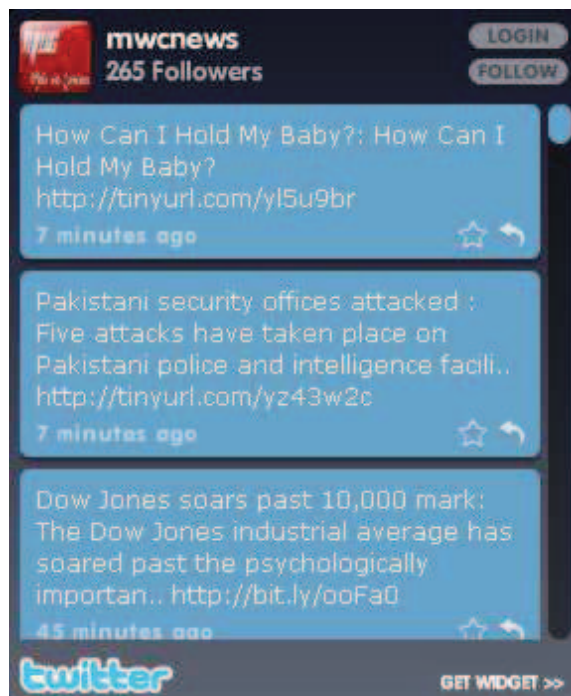
Instead, a few simple facts on the ground in Afghanistan point to a third alternative. First, al-Qaeda already has a haven—Pakistan—and could have one in any country that has instability—for example, Yemen, Somalia, or Sudan. The U.S. does need to focus more on the untamed areas of northwest Pakistan and encourage the Pakistani government to go after militants there.

Second, the U.S.-led nation-building occupation in Afghanistan is fueling the Taliban resurgence. If you follow the timelines, increases in Western forces have brought about the Taliban renaissance. Opponents of a U.S. surge believe that 40,000 more American troops could make the Afghan people regard the U.S. superpower as a foreign occupier. Incredible news: they already do, and have for eight years.

Third, there is a misperception among U.S. policy elites that a troop surge increased stability in Iraq, whereas it was mainly paying off Sunni opponents to quit fighting American forces that brought what probably will be only a temporary respite from the violence. It ain't over till it's over.

Fourth, ultimately, in a republic, escalating an unpopular war is political suicide. If the public and Congress are balking at sending a measly 40,000 additional troops, they will not ever be willing to send the number of troops needed to win.

Fifth, historical cases abound where a great power, by not committing enough forces early, lost to a lesser foe or won only with great difficulty. The power needs to bring sufficient strength early on to dominate the war or give up and get out. For example, in the late 1700s, the British lost the American Revolution by having insufficient forces in a rather large territory. In the early 1800s, Napoleon lost against the British and Spanish guerrillas because he failed to commit the effort needed to win. During roughly the same period, the Ottoman Empire and their surrogate, Egyptian Muhammad Ali, finally marshaled enough troops to defeat the fierce Wahhabi guerrillas in Arabia. The British—in the Anglo-Sudan War in the late 1800s and the Boer War around the turn of the 20th century—didn't initially send enough forces to win but then later sent more and won "ugly." In Vietnam, the United States gradually escalated to more than a half million troops, but this



was not enough to beat a North Vietnamese/Viet Cong force of only 100,000.

The bad news is that Vietnam was a much smaller country in population and area than is Afghanistan. Even the Army's new field manual on guerrilla warfare says that 20 to 25 occupation forces are needed per one thousand inhabitants. Frank Rich of the New York Times puts the Afghan population at 32 million. This would necessitate an occupation force of 640,000 to 800,000 to have a good chance of winning. The U.S. will have 68,000 troops there, and the Europeans provide just over 30,000 mostly ineffectual forces; with an added 40,000, this amounts to only a paltry 140,000. The motto for counterinsurgency war should be either commit enough forces to win early or get out. After eight long years of a lackadaisical effort, another 40,000 committed this late won't even lift the Obama administration out of the halfhearted category. The U.S. should cut its losses, withdraw from Afghanistan, and concentrate on pressuring al-Qaeda in Pakistan with a smaller military footprint—so as not to stir up more anti-U.S. Islamists than we are neutralizing.

Ivan Eland is Director of the Center on Peace & Liberty at The Independent Institute. Dr. Eland is a graduate of Iowa State University and received an M.B.A. in applied economics and Ph.D. in national security policy from George Washington University. He has been Director of Defense Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, and he spent 15 years working for Congress on national security issues, including stints as an investigator for the House Foreign Affairs Committee and Principal Defense Analyst at the Congressional Budget Office. He is author of the books, *The Empire Has No Clothes: U.S. Foreign Policy Exposed*, and *Putting "Defense" Back into U.S. Defense Policy*

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