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The Mythical Connection between Terrorism and Failed States

| [More](#) ^[1]

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The White House must be pleased with the news coverage surrounding President Obama's decision to draw down more than 30,000 troops in Afghanistan. Most commentators have praised the president for making a difficult decision, though a few are desperate for him to reverse course (it's not too late to "fix it," says [Robert Kagan](#) ^[3]). On balance, the President's claim that "the tide of war is receding" has ruled the day.

"The light of a secure peace can be seen in the distance," the President explained. "These long wars will come to a responsible end."

That storyline conveniently ignores the fact that the president's decision, if fully implemented, will still leave more than 60,000 troops in Afghanistan. Depending upon the pace of the drawdown after next summer, there will certainly be more troops in Afghanistan (I predict that there will be nearly twice as many more) in January 2013 than were there when Barack Obama was sworn in as president in January 2009. Yes, there might be a glimmer of light in the distance; the war might eventually come to an end. But that light is still quite faint, and eventually looks to me like a very long time.

But the President was obviously quite determined to prove that he is heeding the wishes of the American people who have grown tired of this war, and want the troops to come home. One line from the [president's speech](#) ^[4] has received more coverage than the rest:

"America, it is time to focus on nation building here at home."

The nation's mayors will be pleased: they [said much the same thing](#) ^[5] a few days before the speech.

Nation building has always been especially unpopular on the right, but that softened a bit under George W. Bush. Though still skeptical of nation building at home, many conservatives acceded to it abroad, because they thought that it might be useful, or even essential, to combating terrorism.

But there was plenty of evidence long before last night's speech to demonstrate that effective counterterrorism doesn't depend on nation building. The first paper that I read on the subject was published in March 2002 [6], a mere six months after 9/11. Then Justin Logan and I got into the game. With Justin taking the lead, we published a long Cato Policy Analysis [7] in January 2006, and then adapted and expanded this work for four [8] additional [9] articles [10]/book chapters [11]. (And this doesn't count our many short op-eds on the subject. e.g. here [12], here [13] and here [14].)

The killing of Osama Bin Laden undermines the nation-builders' claims yet again. The raid that killed him wasn't contingent upon the creation of a modern criminal justice system in Afghanistan. Hamid Karzai is still corrupt, and yet Bin Laden is still dead. Our troops and aid workers have paved roads, dug wells, and built schools and hospitals. These efforts have no doubt improved the lives of some Afghans. But these activities were largely irrelevant in our quest to crush al Qaeda.

The *New York Times*, however, remains unconvinced [15]:

We know that "nation building" has become taboo in Washington, but helping Afghanistan build a minimally functional government is also part of the way out. Mr. Obama and his team clearly need to come up with a better way to manage Mr. Karzai, or work around him, and a more rational assistance plan.

Or we could just skip the whole charade. We don't need to "fix" Afghanistan before getting out of Afghanistan. A few failed states have produced terrorists, but the vast majority have not. Meanwhile, some committed killers have come from very healthy states. There is no clear correlation between poverty, education levels, government corruption, and violent extremism. Measuring a state's weakness or "failedness" (made popular by various failed states indices [16]) tells us almost nothing about whether it will pose a security threat to its neighbors or the wider international community.

It is too soon to say that Barack Obama, the former community organizer, has turned his back on organizing communities abroad. I think that is unlikely. Most Americans, including many Republicans, want to focus our resources here at home, but that has been true for years.

But perhaps the sheer weight of public opposition to nation building, combined with mounting evidence that it isn't necessary, will produce a lasting policy change. And if Obama won't embrace it, perhaps his successor will.

More by

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[4] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/remarks-president-way-forward-afghanistan>

[5] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/06/20/us-mayors-afghanistan_n_880370.html

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