



"Safe Haven Myth" Bites the Dust

posted by **ROBERT DREYFUSS** on 09/16/2009 @ 09:43am

One of the most intelligent and thoughtful comments on Afghanistan so far comes from Paul Pillar, the former chief analyst for the US intelligence community and a renowned expert on terrorism, who **writes in today's *Washington Post*** that the real issue in Afghanistan is: What is a "terror haven"? Pillar's argument ought to be required reading for anyone thinking about what "success" in Afghanistan means, since the chief fall-back argument for anyone who supports a long-term counterinsurgency strategy there is that the United States cannot allow the country to become a safe haven for Al Qaeda.

Pillar asks:

"The debate has largely overlooked a more basic question: How important to terrorist groups is any physical haven? More to the point: How much does a haven affect the danger of terrorist attacks against U.S. interests, especially the U.S. homeland?"

And he answers his own question:

"The answer to the second question is: not nearly as much as unstated assumptions underlying the current debate seem to suppose."

Instead, he says, would-be terrorists can use globalization and Internet technologies to plan, organize, and train from anywhere. He points out that preparations for 9/11 "took place not in training camps in Afghanistan but, rather, in apartments in Germany, hotel rooms in Spain and flight schools in the United States." And, most important, he says:

"Al-Qaeda's role in that threat is now less one of commander than of ideological lodestar, and for that role a haven is almost meaningless."

Pillar's argument makes a bulls-eye on the central issue for Afghanistan policy going forward. If the US goal there is to create a strong, democratic state with a modern army, a centralized government, and a growing economic infrastructure, then, yes, it's a generational project that will necessarily require a heavy-handed US military presence. But if the US goal is simply to prevent 9/11-style attacks on the United States by Al Qaeda and its allies, then it's hard to argue for a counterinsurgency strategy a la General McChrystal. Earlier this year, President Obama seems to have initially defined US goals in the more limited sense, that is, as an anti-Al Qaeda program.

Since then, however, under pressure from the US military and hawkish advisers, Obama's "limited" counterterrorism approach to Afghanistan has morphed dramatically into a much larger, and more open-ended, counterinsurgency and nation-building approach.

In any case, says Pillar, comparing the unfounded assumptions about Afghanistan-as-terror-haven to the Vietnam-era domino theory:

"The Obama administration and other participants in the debate about expanding the counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan can still avoid comparable error. But this would require not merely invoking Sept. 11 and taking for granted that a haven in Afghanistan would mean the difference between repeating and not repeating that horror. It would instead mean presenting a convincing case about how such a haven would significantly increase the terrorist danger to the United States. That case has not yet been made."

Meanwhile, growing doubts about US Afghan policy are coming not only from congressional Democrats, such as Nancy Pelosi and Carl Levin, but from Republican-leaning realists, too. A **letter to Obama** from a group that might be called "the Project for Another Type of New American Century" -- an ad hoc group that includes representatives from the New America Foundation, the Cato Institute, and other moderate and libertarian-minded thinkers -- says:

"We are concerned that the war in Afghanistan is growing increasingly detached from considerations of length, cost, and consequences. Its rationale is becoming murkier and both domestic and international support for it is waning. Respectfully, we urge you to focus U.S. strategy more clearly on Al Qaeda instead of expanding the mission into an ambitious experiment in state building."

The letter, circulated in part by Steve Clemons' blog, **the Washington Note**, echoes the point made by Paul Pillar about alleged safe havens:

"The rationale of expanding the mission in order to prevent 'safe havens' for Al Qaeda from emerging is appealing but flawed. Afghanistan, even excluding the non-Pashto areas, is a large, geographically imposing country where it is probably impossible to ensure that no safe havens could exist. Searching for certainty that there are not and will not be safe havens in Afghanistan is quixotic and likely to be extremely costly. Even if some massive effort in that country were somehow able to prevent a safe haven there, dozens of other countries could easily serve the same purpose. Even well-governed modern democracies like Germany have inadvertently provided staging grounds for terrorists. A better strategy would focus on negotiations with moderate Taliban elements, regional diplomacy, and disrupting any large-scale Al Qaeda operations that may emerge."

You can find all the signers of the letter **at Clemon's blog posting**.

Of course, by signing the letter, Clemons underlines his disagreement with his New America Foundation colleague, Peter Bergen, a principal exponent of the idea that Al Qaeda and the

Taliban are in cahoots to reestablish the pre-October 2001 terrorist safe haven in Afghanistan. Bergen is a believer in the "protect the population" theory of counterinsurgency in the Afghan context, though he's skeptical of the idea that the US political system will allow the dispatch of additional troops.

But last month, in response to a piece by Stephen Walt -- one of the signers of the "realist" letter - - who'd criticized the "safe haven myth," Bergen **wrote a response** for **the *Foreign Policy* AfPak Channel** that said, in part:

"If the Taliban did come back to power in Afghanistan, of course they would give safe haven to al Qaeda. ... The idea that Afghanistan is not an ideal place from which to launch anti-American attacks is simply absurd.

"The idea of attacking iconic targets in Washington and New York was first hatched in Afghanistan in 1996; the coordination of the attacks took place in Afghanistan over the next several years; the pilots were given their specific orders about target selection and their duties by the leaders of al Qaeda when they travelled to Afghanistan in 1999, and all 15 of the 'muscle' hijackers passed through al Qaeda's Afghan training camps."

So Bergen backs Obama's escalation strategy for Afghanistan. He's not alone. It's still the consensus view among national security specialists in Washington, at the Pentaton, among thinktanks (including those who've been co-opted into being part of McChrystal's "advisers' group"). But it's fast losing political support.

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