

TESTIMONY

U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan

SETH G. JONES

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Subcommittee on Middle East and South Asia on April 2, 2009

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Seth G. Jones¹
The RAND Corporation
Georgetown University

U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan²

Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Middle East and South Asia
United States House of Representatives

April 2, 2009

This testimony focuses on the way forward for the United States in Afghanistan given the Obama Administration's outline of a new strategy. It explores ways in which United States strategy in Afghanistan should evolve to most effectively achieve U.S. goals and bring about an end to the insurgency. This testimony dovetails fairly well with the U.S. government's recently-released strategy on Afghanistan and Pakistan, which outlines a new way forward that includes developing an integrated civilian-military counterinsurgency strategy, improving local governance, countering corruption, and developing more self-reliant Afghan security forces.³ The key challenge, however, will be in implementation.

U.S. Objectives

The United States should have several core objectives in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater. The first should be to eliminate the use of Afghanistan and Pakistan as a base of operations for international terrorist groups such as al Qa'ida, which threaten the U.S. homeland, U.S. allies in Europe and other areas of the world, and Pakistan and Afghanistan. Because of the strategic, operational, and tactical relationship between al Qa'ida and Afghan insurgent groups – including Mullah Muhammad Omar's Taliban and the Haqqani network – Taliban successes in Afghanistan will likely provide a conducive environment for international terrorist groups. This development occurred in areas controlled by the Taliban during the 1990s, and it has occurred in Pakistan since 2001. Consequently, preventing the international terrorist threat in Afghanistan and Pakistan will invariably require ending the Taliban-led insurgency. The second objective should be to support the establishment of legitimate governments in Afghanistan and Pakistan – at the

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² This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT324/>.

³ White House, *White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group's Report on U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan* (Washington, DC: The White House, March 2009).

national and local levels – that can help provide the governance and security that will give their people a stake in contributing to security.

Understanding the Threat

The current debate about Afghanistan is badly skewed by a naïve and poorly informed understanding of the situation. Most press accounts of Afghanistan erroneously refer to insurgents in Afghanistan as Taliban, including much of the discussion on trying to separate “moderate” from “radical” Taliban. This is a dangerous over-simplification of the insurgency and reflects a fundamental ignorance of the situation on the ground. In fact, the insurgency is much more complicated.

There are several striking themes about the security situation in Afghanistan. Perhaps the most significant is the diffuse, highly complex nature of the threat environment, which is perhaps best described as a “complex adaptive system.” The term refers to systems that are diverse (made up of multiple interconnected elements) and adaptive (possessing the capacity to change and learn from experience). There are at least five categories of actors in this system.

The first are insurgent groups, who are motivated to overthrow the Afghan government and coerce the withdrawal of international forces. They range from the Taliban to smaller groups such as the Haqqani network, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hezb-i-Islami, and al Qa’ida. A second category includes criminal groups that are involved in a range of activities, such as drug-trafficking and illicit timber and gem smuggling. The third includes local tribes, sub-tribes, and clans – most of which lie in the Pashtun belt in western, southern, and eastern Afghanistan. A fourth category involves warlords and their militias, many of whom became increasingly powerful after the 2001 overthrow of the Taliban regime. A fifth category includes government officials and security forces in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other neighboring states such as Iran, which have provided support to insurgent groups or become involved in criminal activity.

Over the past several years, there has been a notable increase in the number of groups active in Afghanistan, including the migration of some groups that have been active on other fronts. For example, Laskhar-e-Taiba (or Army of the Pure), which has historically focused its activities on Kashmir and India, is now active in Afghanistan. The proliferation of groups has led to an increasingly complex system. The interaction of these elements is dynamic and facilitated by the ease of communications between and among individuals and groups. For example, drug traffickers have developed close links with both insurgent groups and government officials in moving drugs along cross-border routes. Tribes and sub-tribes have collaborated with insurgent

groups in rural areas of the country, sometimes changing sides depending on whether the Afghan government and NATO forces are able to clear and hold territory. The nature of the threat environment marks a striking contrast from the 1990s, when the Taliban insurgency was perhaps more hierarchically structured.

The emergence of a complex adaptive system in Afghanistan has largely occurred because of a weak government. Afghanistan has historically lacked a strong central government, putting it at the mercy of regional powers like British India, Pakistan, and the Soviet Union. A series of violent civil wars beginning with the 1979 Soviet invasion and continuing through the Taliban conquests in the 1990s further weakened whatever vestigial state was in place. After the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001, governance remained weak. Governance woes worsened in the first few years after President Hamid Karzai's government was established. As one World Bank study concluded, the primary beneficiaries of assistance were "the urban elite." This triggered deep-seated frustration and resentment among the rural population. Indeed, the Afghan government suffered from a number of systemic problems, including fragmented administrative structures, and had difficulty attracting and retaining skilled professionals with management and administrative experience. Weak administration and lack of control in some provinces made tax policy and administration virtually impossible. In many rural areas, the government made no effort to collect taxes. The Afghan government also struggled to provide security outside of the capital. The result was a weak security apparatus after the overthrow of the Taliban regime that could not establish a monopoly of the legitimate use of force within the country.

Weaknesses of the Insurgency

The Taliban and other insurgent groups are not particularly popular. These sentiments are apparent in a range of public opinion polls. A recent ABC/BBC poll indicated that only 4 percent of Afghans support a Taliban government. When asked who posed the biggest danger in the country, 58 percent said the Taliban. In addition, nearly 70 percent said that it was "good" or "mostly good" that U.S. forces overthrew the Taliban regime in 2001.⁴

It's not difficult to see why. The Taliban subscribe to a radical interpretation of Sunni Islam, grounded in Deobandism, a school of thought emanating from the Dar ul-Ulum madrassa (Islamic school) in 1867 in Deoband, India. The objective of senior Taliban leaders is to establish an extreme version of sharia (Islamic law) across the country, which they refer to as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. In the 1990s, the Taliban closed cinemas and banned music, along with almost every other conceivable kind of entertainment. In Kabul, the Taliban carried out brutal

⁴ ABC News, BBC, ARD, *Afghanistan: Where Things Stand* (Kabul: ABC News, BBC, ARD, February 2009).

punishments in front of large crowds in the former soccer stadium. The Taliban were – and still are – unpopular. Most Afghans don't subscribe to their religious zealotry, which the founders of Deobandism wouldn't even recognize. And the rapid collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, barely two months after the war started, served as a striking testament to the group's weak foundation.

The leaders of many insurgent groups are unified by a common hatred of U.S. and allied forces, as well as opposition to Hamid Karzai's government, which they view as selling out to Western infidels. But they have very different ideologies and support bases. Some, like al Qa'ida, have a broad global agenda that includes fighting the United States and its allies (the far enemy), and overthrowing Western-friendly regimes in the Middle East (the near enemy) to establish a pan-Islamic caliphate. Others, like the Taliban and Haqqani network, are focused on Afghanistan and re-establishing their extremist ideology there.

Foot soldiers join the insurgency for multiple reasons. Some are motivated by money. "Some insurgent groups pay better than we do," one U.S. soldier in the southern province of Kandahar told me recently. "It's basic economics." Others are motivated by tribal rivalry or coercion, since insurgent groups sometimes threaten villagers or their families unless they cooperate. What's more, several insurgent groups have a history of fighting each other. In the mid-1990s, the Taliban and forces loyal to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar engaged in intense battles in southern and eastern Afghanistan. They also competed for funding and logistical support from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate. After suffering repeated battlefield losses to the Taliban in eastern Afghanistan and being marginalized by the Pakistani intelligence agency, Hekmatyar eventually fled to Iran in 1997.

Security challenges don't stem from a strong insurgency, but rather a weak and increasingly unpopular government. Opinion polls show a growing belief that government officials have become increasingly corrupt and are unable to deliver services or protect the public. In short, the unpopularity of the government has created a vacuum that is being filled by insurgent groups, all of whom enjoy sanctuary in Pakistan. The fractured nature of the insurgency and the limited popularity of insurgent groups means that there is an opportunity for breaking apart key elements of the insurgency – especially those who are motivated by non-ideological reasons.

U.S. Footprint

What does the fractured, localized nature of the insurgency mean for a U.S. footprint and U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan? How many U.S. troops are needed? Table 1 highlights the

challenge in answering the question. Some studies argue that a rough estimate needed to win a counterinsurgency is 20 security forces per 1,000 inhabitants. As the U.S. Army and Marine Corps counterinsurgency manual notes: "Twenty counterinsurgents per 1,000 residents is often considered the minimum troop density required for effective COIN operations; however as with any fixed ratio, such calculations remain very dependent upon the situation."⁵ Table 1 lists the population estimates in provinces where most of the insurgency is taking place, which translates into a force requirement of approximately 271,652 forces.

Table 1: Example of Counterinsurgency Force Requirements

Province	Population Estimates⁶
Helmand	745,000
Kandahar	886,000
Nimruz	149,000
Farah	338,000
Oruzgan	627,000
Herat	1,182,000
Ghazni	931,000
Zabol	258,000
Paktika	352,000
Khowst	300,000
Paktia	415,000
Lowgar	292,000
Wardak	413,000
Parwan	726,000
Kapisa	360,000
Kabul	3,314,000
Laghman	373,000
Nurestan	112,000
Konar	321,000
Nangarhar	1,089,000
Day Kundi	399,600
Total Population	13,582,600

<i>Security forces needed for counterinsurgency (20 forces per 1,000 inhabitants)</i>	<i>271,652 forces</i>
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But this still leaves several critical questions unanswered. What percentage of these forces should be international and what percentage should be Afghan? Among Afghan forces, what percentage should be national and what percentage should be local forces (including tribal

⁵ U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency*, FM 3-24, MCWP 3-33.5 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army and Headquarters Marine Corps Combat Development Command (December 2006), p. 1-13.

⁶ The population data comes from the U.S. Agency for International Development. Note that since Afghanistan has not had a recent census, these population figures are only rough estimates.

forces)? Even among Afghan national forces, what percentage should be police and what should be army? Among Afghan local forces, what type should they be, since there are a range of options from the current Afghan Public Protection Program in Wardak to more traditional *lashkars* or *arbakai*?

There is no clear-cut answer – and certainly no magic number – of U.S. and Afghan forces. However, the current problem that the U.S. faces is that the clock is ticking more than seven years into the Afghan insurgency. Local perceptions of the U.S. have deteriorated over the past several years from high levels in 2001. This suggests that the percentage of Afghan security forces (both national and local) needs to increase in the south and east. A relatively small U.S. and international footprint of, for example, 50,000 forces in the south and east may be more than adequate if they can effectively leverage a mixture of Afghan National Police, Afghan National Army, National Directorate of Security (Afghanistan's intelligence agency), and tribal forces in urban and rural areas.

Based on the increasing Pashtun aversion to outside forces, it is unlikely that the United States and NATO will defeat the Taliban and other insurgent groups in Afghanistan through a heavy international military footprint that tries to clear, hold, and build territory. Virtually all counterinsurgency studies – from David Galula to Roger Trinquier – have focused on building the capacity of local forces.⁷ Victory is usually a function of the struggle between the local government and insurgents. Most outside forces are unlikely to remain for the duration of any counterinsurgency, at least as a major combatant force.⁸ Most domestic populations tire of their forces engaged in struggles overseas, as even the Soviet population did in Afghanistan in the 1980s. In addition, a lead outside role may be interpreted by the population as an occupation, eliciting nationalist reactions that impede success.⁹ And a lead indigenous role can provide a focus for national aspirations and show the population that they – and not foreign forces – control their destiny.

This reality should lead to a strategy that involves conducting clandestine operations by leveraging local entities and building Afghan capacity – rather than a large U.S. footprint.

⁷ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 2006); Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency*, trans. Daniel Lee (New York: Praeger, 2006).

⁸ Kimberly Marten Zisk, *Enforcing the Peace: Learning from the Imperial Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Amitai Etzioni, "A Self-Restrained Approach to Nation-Building By Foreign Powers," *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 1 (2004); Etzioni, *From Empire to Community: A New Approach to International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Stephen T. Hosmer, *The Army's Role in Counterinsurgency and Insurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, R-3947-A, 1990), pp. 30-31.

⁹ David M. Edelstein, "Occupational Hazards: Why Military Occupations Succeed or Fail," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Summer 2004), p. 51.

A Bottom-Up Strategy

The United States and others in the international community have focused the bulk of their efforts since 2001 in trying to create a strong central government capable of establishing security and delivering services. This goal is ahistorical in Afghanistan and it is not likely to be effective. In addition, the local nature of power in Afghanistan – including in Pashtun areas of the country, which are populated by a range of tribes, sub-tribes, clans, and qawms – makes this objective unpopular among many Afghans, who remain skeptical of a strong central government. This may be one reason why a recent Asia Foundation opinion poll indicated that Afghans still turn to local institutions – including tribal elders – to help resolve disputes.¹⁰

Security and stability in Afghanistan have historically required a balance between top-down efforts from the central government, and bottom-up efforts from local actors. During the reign of King Zahir Shah (1933-1973), for example, security was established using a combination of Afghan *national* forces – police, military, and intelligence – and *local* entities. Much has changed since then. But the weak nature of the Afghan state, the inadequate level of international forces, and the local nature of the insurgency require building a bottom-up capacity to complement national forces.

The most effective bottom-up strategy in Afghanistan is likely to be one that taps into already-existing local institutions in two ways: by helping legitimate local actors provide security and services to their populations, and by better connecting them to the central government when necessary. A bottom-up strategy should be deeply inter-linked with counterinsurgency goals, especially in recognizing that the local population – including their security – should be the center of gravity. Local tribal and religious leaders best understand their community needs, but need help in delivering services. In some areas they also need security, since many have been killed by insurgent groups or forced to flee to urban areas. If organized and run appropriately, village- and district-level institutions that include legitimate local actors can effectively (a) assess local needs, (b) design aid programs to meet these needs, (c) help ensure sufficient security for their projects and their constituents, and (d) monitor the adequate completion of programs.

One component of a bottom-up strategy should be to co-opt key tribes, sub-tribes, and clans that have sometimes cooperated with the Taliban and other insurgent groups – such as the Alikozai in the south or Achakzai in the west and south. There are numerous disenchanting and aggrieved tribes that exercise a historical tendency of defying the central government. Their motivations are often local, defensive, and non-ideological. And their struggle is aimed at re-establishing an

¹⁰ Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2008: A Survey of the Afghan People* (Kabul: Asia Foundation, 2008).

equilibrium that has been disrupted at the local level, or to returning to a previous political and social arrangement that has been compromised. President Karzai's reconciliation process has tended to focus on negotiating with insurgent groups, such as the Taliban and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami, that do not have compatible goals with the Afghan state. But reconciling with tribes and aiding them in turning against the Taliban and other groups is likely to be a more effective strategy. This ultimately requires a clandestine effort.

Building Afghan Capacity

More U.S. forces in Afghanistan may be helpful, but *only* if they are used to build Afghan capacity. A key need is to address the partnering gap that has plagued Afghanistan police and army efforts. It does not appear likely that organizations such as the European Union will fill this vacuum. A few steps may be helpful with the limited resources. One is to concentrate on mentoring senior-level police in the field, not rank-and-file, since they have influence over subordinates. Corruption is often a top-down phenomenon. This means embedding partnering teams with district-level police chiefs and their deputies. It also means focusing on areas where the insurgency is most severe, especially in Afghanistan's south and east.

A second step is to push incoming military units into partnering roles, rather than engaging in direct action. This will be easier for U.S. and other international units to do with Afghan army than with police forces. Most soldiers are not ideal for police mentoring and training, since there are stark differences between the police and military cultures. But a shortage of resources in Afghanistan requires coming up with sub-optimal solutions. This could be done in several ways: providing incoming brigade combat teams with several months of training to play a mentoring role; and reallocating Military Police companies to do mentoring and training, as the United States did in Iraq. European governments, the United States, and the UN should devote more human, technical and financial resources to mentoring and professionalizing the Ministry of Interior. Given the serious personnel shortages crippling police training, the international community will have to redouble efforts to reform the Ministry of Interior. Without significant reform, the ongoing efforts to build a competent police force will be undermined.

In addition, NATO should more directly involve Afghans in campaign planning and operations, including integrating Afghan military and intelligence personnel into joint operations centers.

Role of Neighbors

Afghanistan, by reason of its poverty, isolation, and geography, has always been a weak state at the mercy of its more powerful neighbors. When those neighbors see a mutual benefit in a peaceful Afghanistan, the country is stable. When they do not, it is in turmoil. Reconstituting the post 9/11 regional consensus in support of the government that emerged from the Bonn process should be the central focus of Western diplomacy. In 2001, the U.S. government effectively involved regional powers in negotiating a way forward after the overthrow of the Taliban regime. Senior officials from Pakistan, India, Iran, Russia, the United States, and Europe were present at Bonn to help put together a stable Afghan state. All of these governments played helpful roles in brokering the outcome of that conference, helping secure both international and domestic support for the successor regime under Hamid Karzai. But this regional approach quickly floundered. The Bush Administration rebuffed concrete offers of assistance from Iran, and eventually cut off all contacts with Tehran. In 2006 the U.S. administration reluctantly resumed discussions with Iran over Iraq.

The U.S. needs to revive this regional approach – and it has already begun to do so. The costs of continued regional tension are severe. The most serious danger would be a continuation of (1) Pakistani assistance to Pashtun groups such as the Taliban and (2) Iranian, Russian, and Indian assistance to Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara elements in the country, should NATO's efforts begin to falter and the Karzai regime increasingly weaken. This would be a formula for renewed civil war on a much larger scale, as Afghanistan experienced in the early 1990s.

There is a great deal at stake for both sides of the Atlantic in the growing instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Recent publicly-released intelligence estimates in the United States have directly linked the security of the U.S. homeland to terrorist groups operating out of Pakistan's border region. Resolving the growing challenge in Afghanistan and its neighbor, Pakistan, will take time. Research that the RAND Corporation has done indicates that it takes an average of 14 years for governments to defeat insurgent groups. Many also end in a draw, with neither side winning. Insurgencies can also have long tails: approximately 25 percent of insurgencies won by the government and 11 percent won by insurgents lasted more than 20 years. This means that any U.S. strategy must be long-term, or it will never succeed.

The costs of failing to deal with the regional problem are severe. The Pakistan-Afghanistan border region is the headquarters of al Qa'ida, which has close links with the Taliban. Al Qa'ida possesses a robust strategic, logistics, and public relations network in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This infrastructure has enabled it to play an important role in orchestrating international terrorist

But the key solutions are not just military. Afghans need better governance. One key step must be to address the massive corruption at the national and local level, which has steadily alienated the local population and fueled support for insurgent groups. While corruption is endemic in many societies, several forms of corruption have specifically contributed to the Afghan insurgency: drug-trafficking, bribery among senior officials, and pervasive extortion among Afghan police and judges. Indeed, one of the key counter-narcotics steps that has been missing is effective judicial prosecution in Afghanistan of senior-level individuals involved in the drug trade, including government officials.

While there are no universally applicable anti-corruption strategies, there are a number of insightful lessons from successful cases such as Singapore, Liberia, Botswana, and Estonia. Effective efforts have generally included the immediate firing of corrupt officials, bolstering of the justice system, professionalization of new staff, and incentive and performance assessment programs. Even then, broader reforms have frequently played an important role. In Uganda, for example, the Museveni government that came to power in 1986 implemented a strategy that involved passing economic reforms and deregulation, reforming the civil service, strengthening the auditor general's office, empowering a reputable inspector general to investigate and prosecute corruption, and implementing an anti-corruption public information campaign.

Corrupt Afghan government officials, including those involved in the drug trade, need to be prosecuted and removed from office. Ambassador Thomas Schweich, who served as U.S. Coordinator for Counternarcotics and Justice Reform in Afghanistan, revealed that “a lot of intelligence ... indicated that senior Afghan officials were deeply involved in the narcotics trade. Narco-traffickers were buying off hundreds of police chiefs, judges and other officials. Narco-corruption went to the top of the Afghan government.”¹² The United States and other NATO countries also have intelligence on who many of these officials are, though a substantial amount of information is kept at the classified level. Senior officials within the Afghan government have thus far been unwilling to target government officials involved in corruption, partly because they do not want to alienate powerful political figures in the midst of an insurgency. President Karzai's efforts to establish a High Office of Oversight and Anti-Corruption and create special anti-corruption units in the Office of the Attorney General and in the Judiciary were largely window-dressing.

The United States and others in the international community should encourage Afghan leaders to draft sweeping anti-corruption legislation, arrest and prosecute corrupt officials at the national and local level, create Inspector General offices in key ministries, provide support to the justice

¹² Thomas Schweich, “Is Afghanistan a Narco-State?” *New York Times Magazine*, July 27, 2008.

system (including protecting judges, prosecutors, and witnesses involved in corruption trials), and conduct a robust public information campaign. Undermining high-level corruption in Afghanistan is just as much about finding the *political will* to implement effective anti-corruption programs as it is about developing them.

A Generation of War

The struggle in Afghanistan and Pakistan is for the hearts and minds of Afghans and Pakistanis. As Ayman al-Zawahiri wrote in a letter to Abu Musab al Zarqawi in 2005, “we are in a ... battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Umma. And that however far our capabilities reach, they will never be equal to one thousandth of the capabilities of the kingdom of Satan that is waging war on us.”¹³ Afghanistan is now entering its thirtieth consecutive year of war, which began in 1979 with the Soviet invasion. Several generations of Afghans have endured far too much violence. The average life expectancy at birth for both Afghan males and females is 44 years, which means that most people have never experienced peace and security. The centerpiece of any successful counterinsurgency strategy must be the Afghan population, especially ensuring their protection and security. Tragically, this has not been the case since 2001, but it must be a priority for the future.

¹³ The quote is from Her Majesty's Government, *Pursue, Prevent, Protect, Prepare: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering International Terrorism* (London: Home Department, March 2009), p. 153.