

Afghanistan: the Delusions of Victory

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At first, the American war in Afghanistan was generally seen as a clear victory.¹ Strong political leadership and overwhelming military superiority had been enough to destroy the Taliban in a few weeks and to dismantle the al-Qaida network in Afghanistan. The mood of the media changed in spring 2002, with the failure of the Anaconda operation in March and the growing disorder in the provinces. The real turning point, however, was the resurgence of an armed opposition in summer 2002 and the failed attempt to assassinate Karzai in September.

More than a year after the fall of the Taliban, there is still no Afghan state, but rather a weak and divided government in Kabul. The national army is almost non-existent, with only a few thousand men. Powerful warlords have consolidated their control of the provinces and Afghanistan is again the world's foremost opium producer. Besides, the result of the Pakistani elections in October 2002 showed strong support for the pro-Taliban and pro-al-Qaida parties near the Afghan frontier. Every day, opposition forces attack US troops, preventing the stabilization of the country. Even the US military now accepts the idea that all is not well in Afghanistan, but has so far failed to come up with a winning strategy.

On the moral front, the activities of the US army and its allies are coming under increasing criticism from human-rights watchdogs.² The slaughter of thousands of Taliban war prisoners by Dostum, a key US ally in the North and former communist militiaman, has been exposed by

1. For an example of the standard wishful thinking, see Olivier Roy, *Les illusions du 11 septembre* (Seuil, 2002).

2. The number of civilians who died in the bombing remains unknown since the US army refuses to provide the relevant data. It is likely that between a few hundred and a few thousand civilians were killed. Besides, the fragmentation bombs are becoming de facto mines, exposing civilians to more casualties.

several journalists.³ The bombing of a wedding at the end of July killed around 50 civilians. The Taliban prisoners, detained without trial for an unlimited period, are not being treated in accordance with the Geneva Convention. Finally, the torture of suspects at US bases (Bagram in Afghanistan and Diego-Garcia in the Indian Ocean) has been denounced by some sections of the American media.⁴

To understand the current dynamics of the civil war, we must first turn to the strategy of Osama bin Laden, then to the failure of the state-building policy, and finally to the armed opposition and the American war against counter-insurgency.

Bin Laden's Strategy

We should first emphasize the inherent rationality of the 11 September attacks on the WTC and the Pentagon. To put it this way is to go against the interpretation of this attack in terms of »religious fanaticism«, »clash of civilizations«, or even »psychological disorder«; 11 September was definitively – leaving aside all moral considerations for the moment – a highly successful and efficient strategic move.

The input was minimal: twenty militants, probably less than a million dollars, and a significant level of secrecy and organization, especially given the fact that the assassination of Masud, on 9 September, was part of the plot.⁵ Set against that, the impact was dramatic: 3000 dead and about 100 billion dollars' worth of immediate losses. Moreover, civic freedoms in the United States have suffered a real setback.

But to talk of rationality supposes that there is an objective. Here we must assume that bin Laden is the product of the current situation in the Middle East: the economic, cultural, and military domination of Western countries, especially the United States. With the fall of the USSR, the US

3. See *Newsweek* (26 August); the documentary by Jamie Doran, *Massacre at Mazar*, with Afghan testimonies of US soldiers' participation in the torture and killing of war prisoners; and also a report from the Physicians for Human Rights »www.phrusa.org/research/afghanistan/report_graves.html«. The UN has deliberately suspended the investigation, despite the fact that several witnesses have been killed or imprisoned by Dostum.

4. *Washington Post* (26 December 2002).

5. The US agencies apparently slipped up: for example, the Taliban's foreign minister warned the US consulate in Peshawar of a coming plot as early as August 2001.

became the only major power in the region, as demonstrated by the Gulf War in 1991. At that point, bin Laden, who was previously working with the CIA in support of the Afghan mujahideen,⁶ broke with the United States because of the permanent presence of US troops on the sacred territory of Saudi Arabia. Basically, al-Qaida constitutes a revolt against American hegemony in the Middle East and, within the framework of Islamist rhetoric, its pronouncements include many not-so-new arguments concerning Palestine, the embargo against Iraq, and so on.⁷

Al-Qaida wants to transform indirect domination – via economy or culture – into a more military one, the likely consequence of which would be to increase the gap between the West and the Muslim world. We find here echoes of the strategy of the Left in the 1970s, for example the Red Army Faction. However, the latter never gained enough support among the wider society to be able to survive and to change the political agenda in the long term. In contrast, al-Qaida has popular appeal in the Muslim world.

Besides this grand strategy, the intermediate objective for bin Laden was to create a base for his transnational movement, built during the Afghan war, with the »Arabs« fighting alongside the mujahideen. Having failed to find a safe place in Sudan, bin Laden had to return to Afghanistan in 1996. At that time, numerous Islamist movements had training camps there: Kashmiri fighters, Pakistani Sunni radical movements (Lashkar-i Taleba being one of the most important), Central Asian Islamist parties, and so on. Those movements were not only working with the Taleban: Sayyaf and Masud also used to welcome Islamist activists, as well as the Hezb-i islami of Hekmatyar, who had long been favored by Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) and the US. However, for a number of reasons, most of them were in the eastern part of Afghanistan and near Kunduz, two places where the Taleban quickly found support.⁸

In these terms, the connection between bin Laden and the Taleban was largely coincidental in the sense that the sociological background and strategy of the two movements differed significantly. Besides, the Taleban initially enjoyed strong Pakistani and US support. We must remember

6. See John Cooley, *Unholy Wars, Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism* (Pluto Press, 2002).

7. François Burgat, *Face to Face with Political Islam* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

8. For a general account of the war see Gilles Dorronsoro, *La révolution afghane* (Karthala, 2000).

that the fall of Kabul in September 1996 was welcomed as a »positive step« by the State Department. The change in US policy occurred only at the beginning of 1997, but it never manifested itself as support for the opposition, and Pakistan was basically free to do what it pleased to support the Taliban.

At that point, al-Qaida suffered some severe blows, mostly in Europe, but nevertheless managed to reorganize itself in Pakistan. The organization acquired a degree of prestige and strong support from the fundamentalist movements in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. The link now became definitive between al-Qaida and the Taliban. Besides, the Afghan-Pakistani border is a good hiding-place and perfect terrain for training militants as guerillas, for example, to fight US troops.

The American Strategy

In the aftermath of 11 September, feelings in the US were running so high that negotiations with the Taliban to dismantle al-Qaida were practically excluded. War was the only option and the State Department brilliantly gained the support of Afghanistan's neighboring states. With Pakistan's dramatic shift in allegiance, the Taliban regime became totally isolated. At that point, the military strategy seems to have been largely improvised and a result of the tensions existing between the State Department and the Pentagon.⁹

The initial US strategy was based on a close relationship with Pakistan. The idea was to topple the Taliban and to replace them with a more moderate movement that would protect Pakistani interests in Afghanistan and clean up the radical movements which were still sheltering there. A first move was a poorly publicized rebellion in Khost in October 2001, but it did not succeed and the Taliban were able to reoccupy the city in a few hours. The loyalty of Haqani, a famous Jihad commander, to the Taliban made it difficult to destabilize the eastern part of Afghanistan. After that, the Pakistani government, which was in charge of the operation, tried to infiltrate commanders inside Afghanistan to spread the revolt against the Taliban. The operation suffered a resounding setback as Abdul Haq, a well-known commander of the Jihad against the Soviets, was captured

9. For an account of the war from the US government point of view, see Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (Simon and Schuster, 2002).

and executed by the Taleban. Hamid Karzai was able to escape from Kandahar, thanks to an American helicopter.

There were at least three weaknesses in this strategy. The first was to assume that there were credible alternatives to the Taleban in the South. It appears that, except in the eastern provinces, the »khan« (traditional leaders) have been weak at least since the beginning of the civil war. Besides, it is difficult to imagine that the tribal leaders would have been able to cooperate quickly and smoothly. The second problem was the idea that the Taleban had no autonomy from the ISI; in fact, the Taleban were by no means ISI puppets, as could have been concluded from a few examples. The move to take Herat in spring 1995 was premature and made against the will of ISI officers, the assassination of Najibullah in 1996 after the fall of Kabul was a diplomatic mistake, and the negotiations concerning commercial agreements between the two countries were difficult. The last point is the timing of the operation. The negotiations were conducted with the tribal leaders at the same time as the US was bombing the cities, with the inevitable »collateral damage«. Abdul Haq, in his last interview before his death, explained quite frankly that it was impossible to rally the elders under those circumstances.

More than a year after the fall of the Taleban, there is still no Afghan state, but rather a weak and divided government in Kabul. The national army is almost non-existent, with only a few thousand men. Powerful warlords have consolidated their control of the provinces and Afghanistan is again the world's foremost opium producer.

The failure of the first strategy led to a second and much more direct one: the use of airpower to break the resistance of the Taleban.¹⁰ After some heavy bombing, the Taleban were unable to maintain a coordinated military organization and there was a general breakdown in the movement. The Taleban evacuated the cities in disorder and quickly disbanded. At that point – and, it must be emphasized, not before – the destabilization of the South succeeded. Millions of dollars were distributed amongst the local militia, who were happy to line up alongside with the victors and to resume the production of opium, banned by the Taleban a

10. There was a sense of urgency and the fear of a stalemate with winter coming, see Bob Woodward, *op. cit.*

year before. The violence in Kandahar amongst the pro-American militias was an early warning of the disorder to come. At that point, the US largely lost its advantage because it did not operate on the ground, but decided to put its faith in unreliable Afghan militiamen. The result was that, in Tora Bora for example, the al-Qaida militants – and first of all bin Laden – were usually able to escape to Pakistan. The same thing happened with Mullah Omar, who took refuge in his native province of Uruzgan, north of Kandahar.

The Failure of State-Building

The fall of the Taleban has created a vacuum that has been filled mostly by warlords of the kind which appeared to have been eliminated between 1994 and 2000.¹¹ Since December 2001, the local warlords have been able to advance their autonomy militarily and economically. In the North East, the Jamiat is dominated by Fahim, minister of defense and the successor of Masud. In the West, Ismaël Khan, a former commandant of the Jamiat, is in control of Herat, but his influence ceases in the Pashtun areas. Dostum is occupying part of Mazar-i Sharif, but his main stronghold is his native Sheberghan. There are frequent clashes with his principal enemy, Ustad Atta, a close ally of Fahim. The Hezb-i Wahdat is in control of most of the Hazarajat, but relations are still tense between the two factions of the party led by Akbari and Khalili. In the South, the situation is even more fragmented: the US-financed militia controls the cities, but fighting is common in the countryside.

The other worrying development is the return of regional power to the Afghan scene. Despite the Kabul December 2002 declaration, a document signed by Karzai and Afghanistan's neighbors calling for constructive and supportive bilateral relations, all the main Afghan factions have foreign backing. The Jamiat is supported by Russia, Ismael Kahn by Iran, Dostum by the Uzbeks, and Iran, again, has contacts with Shiite groups such as the Sepah-i Mohammad and the Sepah-i Quds in Northern Afghanistan.

11. Apparent as early as December 2001; Gilles Dorronsoro, «Après les Taleban: fragmentation politique, hiérarchie communautaire et classes sociales en Afghanistan», *Cultures et Conflits* (janvier 2002).

The Pakistani government is becoming less and less cooperative: relations with the US are deteriorating and the Afghan government has been strongly anti-Pakistan lately on the issue of trade routes. There is no proof that the ISI is helping the Afghan opposition, but, after some initial pressure on the fundamentalist movements – the arrest of Sufi Mohammad, for example – Musharraf has chosen to soften his approach. The government has neither the will nor the means to curb the increasing strength of these movements. The Pakistani madrasa are producing up to 250 000 students («talebans») a year and there is no easy way of changing this situation, particularly given the continuing impoverishment of the education system in Pakistan. Whatever the policy of Islamabad may be, the situation on the Afghan border is, at least as regards the tribal area, beyond the control of central government for the moment.

Is the current fragmentation of Afghanistan a transitory process or a long-term one? To put it another way: how will the so-called «international community» make a success of the «state-building process» now going on in Afghanistan? For the time being, the presence of 5000 soldiers of the ISAF is ensuring the stability of the capital, but results outside Kabul have been very limited. We see four main obstacles to the reconstruction of the state.

There is a strong ideological commitment against the US, linked to the fundamentalist trend in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

There is no unity concerning the general organization of the country in the future. How can common ground be found between Dostum, a former communist, the Shiite of the Hezb-i wahdat, the Islamists in the Jamiat, and hard-line fundamentalists like Sayyaf? Interpretation of Sharia'h law, the accepted basis of the legal system, is much debated. The more liberal-minded Karzai and the UN-supported NGOs are clearly in a minority.¹² The risk is that quite different modes of life will be established in more progressive Mazar-i Sharif or Kabul and in strongly fundamentalist places such as Kandahar or even Jalalabad (not to mention the countryside).

12. The head of the Supreme Court has recently called for the banning of cable TV and co-education.

Second, the government in Kabul does not reflect a viable compromise between communities and political parties. In the Loya jirga (assembly) convened in spring 2002, the US envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, pushed aside the former king, Zahir Shah and imposed Hamid Karzai as the new President. Without local support, he is very isolated and his authority does not extend beyond the capital. In Kabul, real authority is in the hands of Fahim and the Panjshiris, notably in the secret services, the army, the police, and the diplomatic service. Fahim is using his official position as defense minister to consolidate his party. The helicopters bought from Russia in a forty-million-dollar deal will reinforce Fahim's troops rather than the Afghan army.¹³

Third, the ethnicization of the war in Afghanistan is very real. Inter-ethnic tensions have increased since the fall of the Taleban due to the already mentioned killing of thousands of Taleban after their surrender and the ethnic cleansing in the North conducted against the Pashtun minority. The Pashtuns, more than the Taleban, are the real losers of the war and they are largely excluded from power in Kabul and subject to foreign military operations.

Finally, the economic situation is very bad, partly because of the return of around two million refugees from Pakistan and Iran. The countries that promised to give 4.5 billion dollars at the beginning of 2002 in Tokyo have not delivered. The humanitarian help given in 2002 was essentially for emergency purposes, with scarcely anything left for reconstruction.

The Guerilla and American Counter-Insurgency

What kind of guerillas are fighting the US forces in Afghanistan? So far, the guerillas have been militarily ineffective, with few casualties on the American side, although they have been able to maintain enough pressure to oblige the US army to continue military operations. Three different factions are collaborating against the US troops and the Karzai government.

The first faction, and perhaps the most important in the long run, is the Taleban, or more precisely, the neo-Taleban. The new movement, rebuilt after the defeat in 2001, is probably less centralized and recruitment less based on religion. The Taleban are still popular in the Pashtun areas,

13. See Akram Gizabi, *Jane's Defense Weekly* (7 February 2003).

particularly in Kandahar, and the call to Jihad against foreign troops is familiar. Mullah Omar has retained a following due to the apparent failures of the Karzai government regarding law and order and economic development. In large parts of the Pashtun rural areas, the economic and security situation was probably better under the Taleban. The neo-Taleban have strong support in the Pakistani madrasas and can easily recruit new members due to high unemployment and the deep anti-Western feelings among the population.

The second group is the Hezb-i Islami of Hekmatyar. Evicted from Pakistan and Afghanistan after his defeat at the hands of the Taleban, he took refuge in Iran from where he was expelled in autumn 2001. He survived a CIA assassination attempt and took refuge on the Afghan-Pakistani border. He still has support in the East and followers in big cities (Kabul).

Third, international combatants, mostly Arabs, are back in Afghanistan less than eighteen months after the American invasion. They are now operating in smaller groups (ten to fifteen men) and dispersed in training camps along the border.

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With no short-term prospect of winning, this guerilla will prove difficult to eradicate because it has a safe place to retreat to, sufficient arms and money, and strong motivation. On the first point, the guerillas are heavily dependent on a safe haven in Pakistan. The presence of Hekmatyar, Haqqani, Mullah Omar – and probably bin Laden – is sufficient proof that the Afghan-Pakistani border is a reasonably safe refuge for the worst enemies of the US. Second, there are plenty of arms left and opportunities to buy more with money from the drugs trade: a good indicator of this is the fact that nearly all the arms captured by the US army were new weapons. Finally, there is a strong ideological commitment against the US, linked to the fundamentalist trend in Afghanistan and Pakistan. During the first month of the war, people from Afghanistan were welcomed in the same way as in 1980, as mujahideen. The recent elections saw the victory of the fundamentalists in the North Western Frontier Province and Baluchistan. They are now the main political forces in these two provinces and this serves practically to rule out any dramatic action

on the part of central government. Music, at least in public places, is de facto forbidden in Peshawar, another sign of the growing influence of the fundamentalists.

Since Afghanistan has not been stabilized, the US army is obliged to continue a counter-insurgency war for an indeterminate period. At the moment, more than 8000 men in Afghanistan and about 55 000 men in the neighboring countries are participating in these operations, at a cost of two billion dollars a month.

There has been a shift in US strategy in recent months. Until last fall, the US army was strongly against the state-building policy, which was supposed to be part of the UN mandate; however, it now appears that the US army has changed its mind. US troops are more active in the humanitarian field. With the so-called »Provisional Reconstruction Team«, the US is trying to position itself as the local leader and coordinator of the NGOs. If the plan is implemented, the distinction between military and humanitarian operations in Afghanistan will completely disappear.¹⁴ The second policy shift is a deeper involvement in local fighting, with the result that US troops are now becoming part of local vendettas.

Two shortcomings are limiting the effectiveness of the counter-insurgency strategy. First, there is a growing rejection of foreign troops in the Pashtun area due to their brutal tactics and the estrangement of the Pashtun from the Karzai government. Second, the weakness of US intelligence. Despite the availability of huge rewards, Mullah Omar, Hekmatyar, and bin Laden are, at the time this article is being written, still at large, and not very far from the American bases. Afghan society and especially the Pashtun clans are difficult to penetrate; while foreign powers are traditionally used to settle scores with local enemies, it does not mean that the Afghans are ready to accept foreign rule easily.

Conclusion: the Delusions of Military Victory

For the US, the initial objectives of the war have only very partially been fulfilled. Bin Laden has not been found and the training camps are back on the frontier. The US will be obliged to fight on in Afghanistan for at least a few more years (five years would be optimistic). So far, the guerilla is militarily ineffective, but is doing enough to prevent the stabilization

14. Several NGOs, worried about their security, have protested against this project.

of the country. The rebuilding of the state would require a major change in the distribution of political power. So far, the US has been unable or unwilling to open up political institutions to other ethnic and political groups, so compromising the state-building process.

In a larger perspective, the invasion of Iraq will perhaps have the same sort of effect. A quick military victory and a very unstable political situation with the same risk of an indefinite American military presence in hostile territory. With the likely occupation of Iraq, US troops will be heavily committed, from Central Asia to the Gulf, with the exception of Iran. For American power the risk is military overstretch and growing popular rejection. The gain in terms of security is debatable.