

Why Are We Still In Afghanistan?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, as well as the recent recommendation from General Stanley McChrystal that we simply continue to [“muddle along”](#) in Afghanistan, brought to light again what a pointless and tragic muddle the whole exercise has been. The longest war in which American troops have fought is that in Afghanistan, which is now 17 years old. Nearly [one trillion dollars have been spent](#) by the American government on this effort, with no end in sight. There were once 100,000 American soldiers in the country; that number is now about 14,000. That’s progress, but no one in authority in Washington seems to want to leave Afghanistan entirely, allowing it to fight its own battles. The Taliban are back;

the central government controls only 54 percent of the districts, and the rest – nearly half the country – is either under Taliban control, or is territory contested between the Taliban and government forces.

On August 11, there was a devastating attack by the Taliban on an Afghan commando base in the district of Ajristan, 90 miles west of Ghazni city. Afghan officials and soldiers fled; as many as 100 commandos and police officers were killed, according to a senior Afghan official. The Taliban control the battlefield: it is they who decide when and where to attack, and then to either fade away, or to stand and fight. In Ghazni, it seems they decided to attempt to conquer this strategically-placed city of 270,000. First, they managed to take all but two of the 18 rural districts surrounding the city. [Then they lay siege](#), for five days, to the city, finally taking control of it, but then were dislodged by a combination of American bombings and Afghan troops on the ground. Aside from the one hundred Afghan soldiers and police killed in the initial attack on August 11, [several hundred more Afghan soldiers](#) were killed during the siege and takeover of Ghazni.

Furthermore, elsewhere in Afghanistan, simultaneously with the Ghazni attack, the Taliban [managed to kill](#) more than 100 other Afghan soldiers in two separate attacks. According to American officials, these three attacks have together been a “catastrophe.”

As the New York Times reported:

The Ghazni assault has demonstrated a stunning display of Taliban tenacity that belies the official Afghan and American narrative of progress in the war and the possibility for peace talks. It also has revealed remarkable bumbling by the Afghan military, including the wrong kind of ammunition sent to besieged police officers. Moreover, the siege has raised basic questions about what conditions the Taliban might accept for peace talks.

The Taliban's forces in Afghanistan are constantly replenished by volunteers who are eager to fight both the Afghan army, allied as it is to the infidel Americans and other NATO forces, and those Infidels themselves. The Afghan soldiers, even with American training and weaponry, have not performed as well as those of the Taliban. That's not surprising. For the Taliban are fueled by religious fervor; the Afghan soldiers defending territory from being taken by the Taliban are merely doing their jobs. This makes a difference.

What can the Americans do? They can finally recognize the futility of their remaining on the ground in Afghanistan, and pull out their last remaining troops, some 14,000 of them. They can still supply the Afghan army with weapons, but the Afghans have to understand that it is their country, and it is they who will have to fight for it. There is a limit to what we should be expected to do. It's been 17 years. We have been there long enough. It's long past time for the Afghan army to pull up its socks.

Could the Taliban take over the entire country? It's one thing to keep waging guerrilla warfare, where the time and place is of your choosing, inflicting high casualties on the enemy, before making your escape. It is quite another to take, and hold, and above all to effectively administer, a large city. When the Taliban have taken cities in the past, the results have been disastrous for them. They have highly effective soldiers, but not administrators to take care of the local hospitals, schools, police and firemen, water and food and energy supplies. Those tasks require different skills. When the Taliban controlled Kabul from September 1996 to 2001, their administration of what they called the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" was a study in chaos. And there is another problem. The Taliban are almost entirely Pashtun, a tribe that constitutes 60% of the Afghan population. At the high-water mark of Taliban control of the country, in 2000, when 90% of the country's territory was controlled by them, the Taliban

were governing many people whose languages, including Dari, they did not speak, and who mistrusted them on ethnic grounds. The Taliban also gave their own Pashtuns all the important administrative jobs in the cities they ran, ignoring the desire of the locals. Those Pashtuns were chosen even if they had no relevant experience, over non-Pashtuns with a great deal of such experience. There is no reason to think that, should they take over a half-dozen major Afghan cities, that they would behave any differently today.

How did the Taliban rule in Kabul, and Herat, and other cities where they took over the local administration? Women were forced to wear the burqa at all times in public, because, according to one Taliban spokesman, "the face of a woman is a source of corruption" for men not related to them. One Taliban commander forbade women even from walking outside near his office, lest they "distract" him. In a systematic segregation sometimes referred to as gender apartheid, in this Islamic Emirate women were not allowed to work, they were not allowed to be educated after the age of eight, and until the age of eight they were permitted to study only the Qur'an. Since almost all the teachers in elementary schools were women, the ban on women working led to the closing of all the elementary schools. Punishments of criminals were Shari'a-compliant and therefore barbaric – lots of amputations and executions. This only increased hatred of the Taliban among local populations.

The Taliban will continue to fight, keeping Afghan soldiers constantly off-guard, but despite its attempt to hold Ghazni, it may discover that taking and holding cities can become massive administrative headaches. Right now 54 percent of Afghanistan's 400 districts are held by the government, 14 percent by the Taliban, and the rest is considered contested territory. If the Americans on the ground pull out, let's assume that all the contested territory falls to the Taliban. That still leaves more than half the territory, almost all of it a wide swathe in the center of the country, under

government control.

An American decision to pull out entirely could have two very different effects. It could demoralize the Afghan forces, who appear to think they cannot defeat or hold off the Taliban without American support. That could lead, some fear, to a complete Taliban takeover. But I don't think the Taliban is eager to run most Afghan cities, after its past experience. It wants to push out the Infidel foreigners, and keep the Afghan forces constantly off-balance, but not take on what they previously discovered was the unhappy task of actual administration of those cities, where their strict rules, for example, about women led to all sorts of unintended and unwelcome consequences. They don't want to take the blame for deficiencies in mundane things – in police and fire protection, in the running of the schools and hospitals, in garbage collection, in maintenance of infrastructure. The Taliban have always had their eyes on higher things, like imposing the Sharia, making sure that women are properly burqaed and submissive, that thieves have their hands chopped off, that homosexuals are executed. That's what matters most to them.

A second, very different possible effect of an American pullout of its last 14,000 troops, is that it could make the Afghans realize that they must not count on help from the Americans forever, that 17 years was long enough, that Afghanistan is their country, and the fight against the Taliban is their fight. And that pullout might just work as shock therapy, strengthening their resolve to go on.

Afghanistan, like Iraq, has been a tremendous drain on American resources. Neither we, nor the Afghan army, have been able to destroy the Taliban in 17 years of trying. After all, its forces can find refuge, whenever they need to, in Pakistan, which despite its protestations to the Americans, has never stopped supporting the Taliban. And Iran, which has been the Taliban's enemy in the past, especially after the

Taliban killed eight Iranian diplomats, in an attack on the Iranian consulate in Mazar-i-sharif in 1998, has more recently been supplying weapons, money, and training to the Taliban, in order to bleed the Americans still in Afghanistan.

If the Americans leave, the Iranians will have no reason to keep supporting the Taliban which, after all, consists of uber-Sunnis. The Taliban may try again to wipe out the Shi'a Hazara, as they were attempting to do back in 2001 until the American troops arrived. Should that happen, Iranian troops could conceivably enter Afghanistan – for years they have had tens of thousands of troops stationed at Iran's Afghan border – to protect their fellow Shi'a.

The Taliban, with an estimated 60,000 recruits, would have a hard time destroying the Afghan army, which has about 200,000 soldiers. Each of its attacks has resulted in a dozen, or a few dozen, or at most, as on August 11, with three simultaneous attacks, 200 enemy killed. The five-day siege of Ghazni resulted in another 200 Afghan soldiers being killed. These attacks keep the Afghans constantly on edge, wondering where the next such attack is coming from, but they do not inflict the kind of massive defeat that could lead to a collapse of the Afghan military. And even in Ghazni, the Taliban lost more men than did the Afghan army. If somehow the Taliban could destroy the entire Afghan army, a much larger force, the Pashtun-populated Taliban would not be able successfully to rule over all of Afghanistan, for 40% of the population, being non-Pashtun, sees the group not as Muslim liberators but, rather, as Pashtun conquerors. This tribal enmity limits the Taliban's appeal. If the Taliban tried to impose its rule everywhere, it would in turn become the victim of guerrilla warfare by non-Pashtuns.

The war in Afghanistan has no end. The Afghan army cannot defeat the Taliban, which has repeatedly demonstrated its remarkable resilience. Nor can the Taliban defeat the entire Afghan army, or successfully rule over the 40% of the

population that is non-Pashtun. An American withdrawal of ground forces will let the Taliban and the Afghan army go at it, for a long time.

Ideally, this continuing conflict could draw in other forces. Iran, having reverted to its former anti-Taliban stance, could come in, as noted just above, to protect the threatened Shi'a Hazara. Or its soldiers might simply enter Afghanistan not for the specific purpose of protecting the Hazara, but in order to prevent the establishment of an uber-Sunni state on its eastern border. Pakistan, which has never wavered in its support for the Taliban that, after all, got its start among Afghan refugees in that country, could come in to help the Taliban's Pashtuns – there are many Pashtuns in Pakistan. And Saudi Arabia, seeing the possibility of opening another front against its mortal enemy Iran, might supply the Taliban with funds and weapons, especially if Iran enters Afghanistan to protect the Hazara and its own interests.

So imagine Afghanistan as a battleground where the Taliban, the Afghan army, Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia are all involved. Why should we care, after our losses of men, materiel, and money during these last 17 years, losses that have gained us nothing, if these Muslim enemies fight each other, and ideally become stuck, in the tar baby that is Afghanistan?

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