

## Apocalypse Afghanistan

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**W**ith the amount of US 21<sup>st</sup> Century firepower and international aid deployed to Afghanistan in order to shore up the country's last, best hope for modernity – President Hamid Karzai – one could be forgiven for staring in disbelief at the nightly news wondering why such a mighty fighting force seems incapable of defeating a rag-tag outfit such as the Taliban.

So far, US forces, along with their NATO allies under the mandate of Operation Enduring Freedom, (which began in early October 2001), have been unable to deliver the knock-out blow to just one sub-national group of tribesmen. The Taliban are arguably the largest but by no means the only armed militants who inhabit the rugged terrain of Afghanistan.

For Afghanistan to evolve into something akin to a modern state, all armed groups that currently exist, no matter their ethnic or sectarian affiliations, need to be disarmed. And, as these tribal groups believe in their respective right to self-defence against their own fellow countrymen almost as fiercely as Americans believe in their right to bear arms, the job ahead for the nascent Afghan National Army (ANA) will be difficult to say the least.

Training and mentoring the ANA is what is considered the 'primary mission' of the deployed NATO and non-NATO forces, widely known by their collective acronym, ISAF (International Security Assistance Force). But the ANA's performance to date has left their Western trainers and mentors underwhelmed. Instances of desertion, infiltration by Taliban, lack of discipline and commitment have meant that the time-line necessary to 'complete the mission' is constantly being pushed back. Furthermore, 'mission creep' invariably means ISAF forces are exposed to major fire fights. They are being targeted while out on patrol with ANA units largely because the ANA, even in its current capacity, is unable, and in some cases unwilling, to proactively and independently root out the 'enemy'.

Past and present generations in the West often reflect either through experiences passed down, or visual art, on times when enemies were visible agents of radical change. They wore uniforms and displayed themselves boldly on the battlefield. They portrayed a chivalry that is deeply ingrained in Western lore on the profession of arms. Unfortunately, in Afghanistan the notion of 'the enemy' is ambiguous. Depending on whom you ask, the enemy can be the ISAF forces since they are foreign and are seen to have no right to be in Afghanistan. They can be the current Afghan government which, outside of the capital Kabul, has little to no legitimacy. They can be neighbouring tribes and clans either inside a particular ethnic or sectarian-based militant group or external to them. They can also be other regional states

such as India or Pakistan, both of which are actively interfering on the Afghan chessboard, muddying the waters further. Without an exceptionally sophisticated understanding of the players involved, and their mercurial motivations, the Western politicians who made this latest mad dash into what is commonly referred to as ‘the graveyard of empires’, are prone to oversimplify matters for public consumption. Western capitals still see this war as a ‘War on Terrorism’, in spite of the fact that this term is no longer in vogue. The phrase ‘War on Terrorism’ defined the war between the West and the destabilising forces of Al Qaeda, nominally headed by the spectre of Osama bin Laden and his Afghan ally, Taliban leader, Mullah Omar. All other complicating factors that make the reality of this war so difficult to fathom are generally left out, or become the marginal fodder for academics and the stalwarts among anti-war leftists.

Western soldiers engaged in this latest attempt to tame Afghanistan are portrayed by the mainstream media as heroes fighting terrorists who want to hurt us. Yes, our soldiers on the ground are heroes, but for different reasons. They are heroes because in spite of the futile mission they were assigned by their political masters, they have been carrying out their orders to the very best of their abilities. In fact in many instances demonstrating the gallantry and chivalry of their respective units’ traditions and carrying out their missions with the great restraint demanded of them.

But the real question is: does this basis of duty and professionalism demand that ISAF contributing nations continue their engagement in Afghanistan for the duration – however long this is quantified? What happens when over the next two to four years billions of dollars more get ploughed into the ANA, resulting in no significant improvement to their ability to act as a sovereign military force? What happens when it is found that aid monies being dispensed to Afghanistan made no appreciable difference to the Afghan people not just in Kabul, but throughout the war-torn country? What happens when the latest ‘time-table’ for Western withdrawal slips as a consequence of Hamid Karzai’s political ineptitude? What will happen to the morale of our troops?

We’ve been down this road before, and, if history is any guide, the ISAF mission will fail. Why? Because backing a ‘Western surrogate’ like Karzai has a history of failure. During the 1970s, the US State Department got into all sorts of trouble for backing non-communist dictators – strongmen and kleptocrats who dressed in expensive suits and confidently strolled down the corridors of power. We in the West conveniently turned our gaze from these men’s overt political oppression, flagrant human rights abuses and war crimes. That these people were perceived to be under our control and served our interests, was the overriding factor. But as our recent experience with Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein showed, such ‘friends’ are fickle indeed.

So, considering that Western politicians lack the will and resolve to artfully use that long forgotten skill called ‘Statecraft’ to provide an elegant ISAF exit strategy from Afghanistan, what are the alternatives? ‘Staying the course’ and keeping the public whose support is vital to continuing Western engagement in Afghanistan, in relative ignorance? Hope that the rising casualty toll in ISAF personnel will remain a newsworthy, but minor story? Ensure that senior officers keep to the political spin – spun out from their civilian leaders – that the war is winnable?

There is no way out and we are held hostage to the political mediocrity that got us into this dire circumstance.



ISAF AH-64 Helicopter image:

[http://www.namsa.nato.int/gallery/systems/AH64\\_apache\\_isaf.jpg](http://www.namsa.nato.int/gallery/systems/AH64_apache_isaf.jpg)

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