

NOREF Report

On the eve: Afghan views of the future as foreign forces withdraw

Jonathan Steele

Executive summary

With two years left before the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan completes its mission, Afghans are in a state of confusion and uncertainty about their individual prospects and their country's fate. Interviews with a wide range of government and opposition politicians, civil society activists and ordinary Afghans reveal disappointment with the results of 11 years of foreign involvement, and anxiety that the coming years will bring economic hardship and greater political violence and insecurity.

With few exceptions, Afghans are united in the belief that the Taliban will be unable to capture Kabul by force after foreign troops depart. However, most also believe that the Taliban and other insurgent groups will take control of large parts of the countryside, leaving Afghanistan in a fragile divide between the cities and the rural areas.

Foreign non-governmental organisations will have to decide whether to work in Taliban areas or abandon them.

Many Afghans fear a resumption of violence between elite groups in Kabul, as happened in the 1990s. They see a breakdown in central government and a move towards regionalisation of power. This could happen, even ahead of the departure of foreign forces at the end of 2014, if the elections due in April 2014 are tainted by charges of fraud or indefinitely postponed. To reduce this risk, leading Afghan politicians want a significant number of U.S. troops to remain after 2014 as a deterrent to internal political players and their foreign supporters.

The prospect of a negotiated end to the insurgency as a result of talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government is not rated highly, and there is less hope invested in a peace process than there was two or three years ago. Few Afghans consider the Taliban to be independent actors. The key is held by Pakistan, but there is no clarity about Pakistan's goals in Afghanistan.

Jonathan Steele is a former Chief Foreign Correspondent for *The Guardian* who now works as a commentator on international affairs. Twice winner of the International Reporter of the Year award in the British Press Awards, he has visited Kabul regularly since 1981 and is the author of *Ghosts of Afghanistan: The Haunted Battleground*, a history of four decades of war.

Introduction

Eleven years after it began in October 2001, the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan is coming to a gradual end. By December 31st 2014, only a few thousand U.S. forces will remain in the country. They will have a radically different mission from those that are leaving. Instead of taking part in combat against the Taliban and other insurgents they will be confined to training and mentoring the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). A few will conduct counter-terrorism operations against suspected al-Qaeda terrorists.

Security: weakness of the Afghan National Army and police

- The ANSF have been built up to a level of 352,000 but they are less well equipped than the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and have minimal air assets: a few fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters and no drones or missiles. Their ground equipment is markedly inferior.
- Troops have been trained at great speed over a short period of 12 weeks.
- There is a high level of desertion from the ranks as well as low rates of re-enlistment after the first three years of service. As a result, the Afghan National Army (ANA) has to replace one-third of its entire force every year.¹
- No Afghan army battalion is capable of operating without U.S. advisers.²
- ISAF nations have promised to maintain funding for the ANSF at a level of \$4 billion annually until 2024, but there is doubt whether these pledges will be fully delivered. They include the payment of soldiers' salaries as well as money for fuel, ammunition and equipment. For reasons of cost-cutting, ISAF and the U.S., which is paying roughly three-quarters of the ANSF's expenses, have announced plans to reduce the number of Afghan troops and police

by 2016 to 228,500, regardless of the security situation in Afghanistan.

ISAF nations also contribute a huge percentage of the Afghan government's general budget. This is likely to decline in coming years, obliging the government either to develop alternative sources of revenue, which in the short term looks impractical, or to cut spending and make thousands of employees redundant. As foreign troops depart and embassies reduce their diplomatic and aid agency staff as well as the use of international consultants, thousands of other Afghans will lose their jobs as translators, drivers and clerical assistants. The drop in their consumer spending as well as the reduction in local purchases by foreigners will further depress the economy.

Richer Afghans are moving their money and their families to Dubai and other Gulf states. Afghan buyers spent 220 million dirhams (\$60.7 million) on property in Dubai in the first six months of this year, a 27 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2011, according to Dubai government data.³ Building construction is slowing down in Kabul and there is an increase in the number of houses put up for sale.

Security: expectation of Taliban gains

The difference in equipment and experience between ISAF and the ANSF is bound to lead to a loss of territory to the Taliban and the other main insurgency group, Hezb-i Islami.

- In provinces such as Kunar and Wardak, where U.S. troops have already reduced their presence, the Taliban have moved in to fill the gap. This trend is expected to continue throughout 2013 and 2014. "We will lose significant areas in the south and east", according to Haneef Atmar, who served as President Hamid Karzai's Interior Minister until 2010. He is now a leading figure in a group of opposition parties which are campaigning for reform of the electoral law before the 2014 presidential and provincial polls.

1. Rod Nordland, "The Afghan army's turnover threatens US strategy", *New York Times*, October 15th 2012.

2. Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "Afghan security force's rapid expansion comes at a cost as readiness lags", *Washington Post*, October 21st 2012.

3. Praveen Menon, and Matthew Green, "Afghans seek shelter in Dubai ahead of pullout", *Reuters*, September 12th.

- Rural Afghans and local elders are seeking accommodation with the Taliban. “People fear the Taliban and some send their boys to join them, as an insurance policy. They will suspect you if you don’t send a son. In the absence of government in rural areas it’s natural that people seek protection. But don’t confuse coercion with support”, according to Atmar.
 - “The Afghan National Army cannot destroy the Taliban. The madrassas are producing new fighters all the time. They will never run out of people”, said Engineer Sayed Jawed, the director of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Helping the Afghan Farmer Organisation (HAFO). Originally from Helmand, he makes regular visits back to his home province. “When the US and UK leave, the Taliban will establish power in the weakest and most remote areas. The ANA doesn’t have helicopters to airlift troops there. The ANA may be able to protect Gereshk and Lashkar Gah [Helmand’s main towns] but not the countryside”, Jawed added.
 - Adding to the pressure, the Taliban has stepped up its assassinations of government officials and others associated with Kabul, ISAF or even foreign NGOs in recent months. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan reported 237 incidents of targeted killings, which resulted in the death of 255 civilians and injuries to 101 in the first half of 2012, a 53 per cent increase over the same period in 2011.⁴
- The expectation is that this trend will continue as the areas controlled by the insurgency spread. Many will flee to Kabul.
- Most of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), the groups of foreign specialists supporting the Afghan civilian police and supervising aid and reconstruction projects who live on foreign military bases around Afghanistan, will be disbanded during 2013. The rest will go in 2014. European diplomats in Kabul worry that this will mean the end of anywhere in the provinces that is safe for EU staff and other consultants to live in while monitoring aid delivery. The projects are likely to be halted.
 - With the closing of the PRTs there will be nowhere for provincial governors to come for cash to pay their staff and those who work on infrastructure schemes, since there is as yet no properly functioning arrangement for the central government in Kabul to deliver funds transparently and accountably to governors and other local officials.
 - The expansion of insurgent-controlled territory will force foreign and Afghan NGOs to think hard about whether to make contact with the Taliban. There is a precedent from the 1980s, during the Soviet occupation, when many foreign NGOs mounted cross-border operations from Pakistan into areas run by the *mujahideen*. In the second half of the 1990s, when the Taliban controlled most of Afghanistan, the main UN agencies and a few NGOs worked there. However, since the start of the latest insurgency in 2003, NGOs have steered clear of Taliban-controlled areas. That may have to change. The Norwegian Refugee Council is planning to open an office in Kandahar with the aim of having access to Taliban-run districts of the province. Other agencies may do likewise.

Humanitarian issues

- The number of civilians displaced by conflict has been growing sharply over the last two years. The total grew by 45 per cent between 2010 and 2011.⁵ In the first 10 months of 2012 it went up by another 58,000 people, bringing the total to almost half a million since 2001.⁶

4. United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan, *Mid-Year Report 2012, Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*, UNAMA, Kabul, July 2012, p 16.

5. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Conflict-Induced Internally Displaced Persons in Afghanistan, Interpretation of Data as of May 1 2012*, July 2012, p 6.

6. UNHCR, *Statistical Summary of Conflict-Induced Internal Displacement*, August 31st 2012.

Kabul will not fall

Few Afghans expect the capital to fall to insurgents as it did in 1992 when the *mujahideen* took over and again in 1996 when they in turn were ousted by the Taliban after four years of fighting

between *mujahideen* factions in Kabul. There are two provisos to this expectation. One is that sufficient foreign funding for the ANSF continues, as promised, for at least another decade. Some analysts point to the precedent of the Najibullah government, which survived for three years after the last Soviet troops withdrew, but collapsed in 1992 when Moscow ceased sending fuel, weaponry and cash to pay Afghan troops.

In the words of Abdullah Abdullah, who served as Foreign Minister in Karzai's first term, fought against him in the 2009 presidential election and now heads the National Coalition of Afghanistan, a group of opposition politicians, "It's impossible for the Taliban to capture Kabul. It was a different time in 1996. People have experienced the Taliban. A popular base for them no longer exists."

A similar view is held by Shukria Barakzai, an independent Pashtun member of parliament. "They cannot capture Kabul. In 1996 the Taliban were messengers of security. They came after a period of violence, bloodshed, and injustice. Everything in Kabul was destroyed and people were tired."

Sayed Mohammed Akbar Agha used to be a senior Taliban military commander. He helped to revive their insurgency after 2001 but was arrested in Pakistan in 2005. He spent five years in prison there and in Afghanistan before being pardoned by Karzai on condition that he move to Kabul. He claims the Taliban have sufficient forces to capture Kabul but would prefer a negotiated settlement in which they shared power in a government of national unity that included technocrats as ministers. "I don't think they want to destroy Afghanistan or the National Army. They don't want to repeat what they did before and people would not support them if they tried," he said. (Like other former Taliban figures in Kabul, he has been denounced by the movement as a turncoat and it is not clear how much, if at all, his opinions reflect Taliban thinking.)

The other proviso for protecting Kabul is that U.S. forces remain in Afghanistan in some capacity after 2014.

Will a small force of U.S. troops remain after 2014?

Afghan attitudes towards the presence and performance of U.S. troops are volatile, confused and sometimes contradictory. In a conversation with one female and three male students who serve as volunteers for the Afghan Red Crescent, I found a strong desire for the U.S. to leave Afghanistan. Their attitude was based in part on national pride and a sense that their country should recover its sovereignty, and in part on the argument that the departure of foreign forces would make jihad unnecessary and deprive the Taliban of their main recruitment tool. At the same time, three of the four students were convinced that the Americans would not leave Afghanistan, in spite of what President Obama has said, because they believed the Pentagon needed Afghanistan as a place to keep bases for global purposes. According to Mirwais Wardak, the director of the Peace Training and Research Organisation (PTRO), which does regular surveys of Afghan attitudes, this is a common perception. "Many Afghans think the Americans will never leave. They think the Americans are playing games and creating chaos deliberately so they can stay here," he said.

Masood Karokhail, the director of the Liaison Office, a Kabul think-tank, said: "Sometimes we hear the foreigners are leaving, sometimes that they're staying. We're not getting a clear message." Among the elite who have done well since the Americans came in 2001, some fear they are leaving too soon. Shukria Barakzai, the MP, said "2014 is not the right date or the right timetable. They shouldn't be in such a rush. For Afghanistan to stand with shaking feet, a weak hand and an empty pocket is not right. Probably 2016 would be better."

Status-of-forces agreement

U.S. policy is to negotiate a status-of-forces agreement (SOFA) with the Afghan government to specify the rights and responsibilities of a residual force of U.S. troops to stay after 2014. Washington will decide on the exact numbers; the figure currently being mentioned by U.S. officials is between 10,000 and 15,000. The pattern is

similar to what Washington tried to achieve in Iraq in 2008, although the talks broke down there over Iraq's refusal to allow U.S. troops immunity for offences committed on Iraqi soil. As a result, the U.S. withdrew all its troops and closed its Iraqi bases.

Haneef Atmar, the former Interior Minister, is one of those who believes U.S. troops are needed after 2014 to train and support Afghan security forces, continue the counter-terrorism campaign and provide strategic deterrence against regional interference. However, he fears a breakdown in the SOFA talks may happen, just as it did in Iraq. He says Karzai still feels betrayed by Washington because of arguments over the cleanliness of the 2009 election and has become excessively anti-American. "He is bringing all sorts of impediments to an agreement and insisting on elements that the U.S. will never accept", Atmar said.

Other Afghans argue that the Afghan need for a long-term U.S. troop presence is much greater than it was for the Iraqi government in 2008. Iraq was not facing an insurgency on the scale of the Taliban movement, nor was it so dependent on foreign aid because it had large oil revenues. Rangin Spanta, Karzai's National Security Adviser, is convinced there will be a deal but it will require major Afghan concessions. "I'm sure we will reach agreement", he said. "The SOFA will specify the modalities for the U.S. troop presence, their rights, responsibilities and immunity, the number of bases and the modality for their use. For the first time in our history we will officially provide bases for foreign troops. It will be a very emotional, sensitive issue."

Spanta said the U.S. and Afghanistan had common aims in fighting terrorism. This meant Afghanistan would even permit the U.S. to continue the controversial strategy of using bases on Afghan territory for drone strikes on targets in Pakistan. "If we can recognise their necessity in the fight against terrorism and it serves our security, then why not, as long as it's within the principles of international law?"

Civil war in Kabul

The long struggle between the Taliban and the Afghan government is by any standard a civil war. In many ways it is a continuation of the war between the Taliban and the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance which started in the 1990s. When the U.S. attacked Afghanistan in order to topple the Taliban regime after September 11th 2001, it was doing so on the side of the Northern Alliance in order to give its ground troops victory.

Yet when Afghans talk of civil war they usually mean the battle among *mujahideen* leaders which broke out in Kabul after 1992. Many fear this could happen again when foreign troops depart.

"The biggest danger is within the government. If the army disintegrates into ethnic groups, there will be civil war", said Mirwais Wardak, a Pashtun and the director of PTRO. "Sixty per cent of high-ranking officers in the army are Tajiks and Panjshiris [the Tajik group that was the backbone of the Northern Alliance and still wields great influence in the ruling elite]. There is little reason for the Pashtun to support the Afghan National Army, so the Pashtun may say we cannot kill a Talib."

Haneef Atmar, a Pashtun, said he feared "disunity among top Afghan leaders because of pressure from regional forces. The Afghan National Security Forces have not been built to resist factional and ethnic influences. Generals are not appointed on merit. They retain loyalty to factional interests."

Many Afghans claim that several of the country's top players who have a warlord past are strengthening their position and even re-arming their followers. This could lead to a trend towards "regionalisation" and away from central government. This does not necessarily mean that top players would make separate deals with the Taliban. The more likely scenario is that they will build their forces to be ready for any contingency, including defending their territory from rivals' attacks.⁷ As Mirwais Wardak put it, "Fahim [Mohammed Fahim, since 2009 Afghanistan's vice-president, a former military chief of the Northern Alliance and the country's leading Tajik

7. Graham Bowley, "Afghan warlord's call to arms rattles officials", *New York Times*, November 12th 2012.

from the Panjshir] and Karzai and Khalili [Karim Khalili, the second vice-president and leader of Hezb-i Wahdat, the main Hazara party] can't get on together. The fear we have is of violence at the top. All these people are trying to arm their local commanders. Civil war could start in Kabul, earlier than in Helmand or Kandahar."

Another contingency, often mentioned by Afghans in Kabul, is that the 2014 presidential elections will be damaged by fraud, as the 2009 elections were. Western diplomats have an interest in projecting an image of stability and order as foreign troops withdraw and they reject this speculation, preferring to argue that Karzai will stand down calmly in April 2014 after reaching the constitutional limit of two consecutive terms, since he knows anything else would risk an abrupt end to U.S. financial and military support for the country. However, Afghan analysts and opposition politicians in the Afghan capital offer numerous negative scenarios, from the possibility that Karzai will use the deteriorating security situation in the provinces to declare a state of emergency and postpone the elections to the risk that he will put one of his two brothers up as a candidate and manipulate the count to get either elected. In response, it is said, the warlords could mount a coup.

Talks with the Taliban and the role of Pakistan

When the idea of negotiations with the Taliban first arose some three years ago, it was quickly embraced by many Afghans. It was even supported by professional women in Kabul who had suffered during the Taliban's rule from their enforcement of burqa-wearing and the ban on women working outside the home. Faced with the prospect of years of war, they felt that negotiations with the Taliban would at least offer the prospect of peace. The greatest human rights were security and the right to life.

Although some still support the argument, the notion of talks with the Taliban has lost its urgency. There are a number of reasons for the change. One is the widely felt sense among Kabulis that the Taliban cannot take power in the capital city and that no concessions need to be made

to them. Afghans seem resigned to the country splitting into an urban–rural divide. This seems a realistic scenario, at least over the next few years. As long as Kabul remains relatively safe, there is less concern about the fate of rural Pashtuns who may come under Taliban control over the next few years. The Tajiks of the Northern Alliance and the Uzbeks in the northern provinces are strongly opposed to any deal with the Taliban.

A second reason is that attempts to negotiate with the Taliban have got nowhere over the last 12 months. The Americans made a tentative agreement with the Taliban early in 2012 on holding "talks about talks". They agreed to let the Taliban open an office in Qatar. However, the deal foundered when the U.S. Congress refused to implement one of the agreement's elements, which was to release five senior Taliban leaders held in Guantánamo. Other initiatives for preliminary talks between the Taliban and Afghan negotiators have also failed to bear fruit, so that there is now a general sense in Kabul that the Taliban are biding their time and little progress will be achieved by the time the Americans withdraw.

Since the U.S. president's re-election, Obama administration officials have expressed a new willingness to have talks with the Taliban; however, this looks more like lip-service to the desirability of a political solution rather than a serious shift of emphasis in U.S. policy. The bedrock of U.S. policy remains military: the "garrison strategy" of building up the ANSF to replace foreign troops and pursue the war against the Taliban by patrolling and launching occasional offensives from a series of bases.

The third, and most important, reason for the decline in Afghan interest in talks with the Taliban is the perception that the Taliban are not independent actors. They are increasingly seen by Afghans as puppets of Pakistan. If there is to be a serious negotiation for peace, they believe it will happen only when Pakistan wants it. There is, therefore, little point in making overtures to the Taliban without first ensuring that Pakistan is fully engaged in the process.

This is the view of Maulavi Qalamuddin, former head of the Taliban's Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Elimination of Vice. In that capacity

he supervised the use of strict Islamic laws including the stoning of adulterers and attacks by police squads on men whose beards were not considered long enough and on women showing too much ankle beneath their burqas. Arrested in 2003, he was released the following year and is now one of five former Taliban leaders who sit on the Karzai-appointed High Peace Council. The father of two daughters and still a strict Islamist, he forbids them to work outside the home because all offices are integrated and have male employees. However, he no longer backs the Taliban, in part, he said, because “all their money comes from Pakistan. The Americans must push Pakistan to stop supporting the Taliban.”

This is also the view of Abdullah Abdullah, an opposition politician who is close to the Tajik elite and extremely sceptical of any talks with the Taliban. “Pakistan still supports the Taliban. Its position hasn’t changed”, he said.

Rangin Spanta, Karzai’s national security adviser, gave a nuanced assessment of Pakistan’s objectives in Afghanistan. He commended the release of nine Taliban commanders and leaders from Pakistani prisons in November 2012. “I hope this is a sign of seriousness by Pakistan, and an opportunity for more confidence-building measures between us and Pakistan. The peace process has been stagnating for three years. I hope this will be a kind of breach in the barricade”, he said. “We know the Taliban are deeply dependent on Pakistan. Without a green light from Pakistan it’s hopeless to expect them to join the process.” He saw several strands in Pakistani thinking on Afghanistan. One was Pakistan’s historic mistrust of Afghan policy-makers who have never accepted the Durand line as the international border between the two countries. Another was “the investment Pakistan put into the jihad [against the Soviets] which made Afghanistan a kind of extension of Pakistan as part of an Islamic *umma* in this region ruled by Pakistan”. Other factors were Pakistan’s “Indophobia” and on the Afghan side the fact that many people looked down on Pakistan, an attitude which Pakistanis understandably resented. Finally, there was Afghanistan’s ability to provide “strategic depth” for Pakistan as long as the two countries could eventually surmount their mistrust. Spanta cited the analogy of the current friendship between

France and Germany after decades of war and enmity. These points explained the attitudes of Pakistan’s civilian politicians. “But it is not enough for the ‘deep state’ in Pakistan, i.e. the army. If the state here is weak, they will have a long arm like Syria did in Lebanon. It’s hard to change this mentality, and their notion that Afghanistan will be vulnerable after 2014 and there will be a new occupation and a re-Talibanisation”, Spanta said.

Power-sharing with the Taliban

In spite of the general loss of urgency for negotiations with the Taliban, a few Afghans still support them, even to the point of advocating a power-sharing arrangement with the Taliban. They believe this would be the only way of ending the war which has become a strategic stalemate that will keep the country divided for the indefinite future. Sayed Jawed believes that most people in rural Pashtun areas are with the Taliban, and that concessions have to be made to them through negotiations. “They can move everywhere. They can disrupt the life of the country. They can disrupt the army and police. How can you expect them to surrender? You surrender when you’re weak”, he said. It was necessary to discover their wish-list and give them something. “In a power-sharing arrangement give them the judiciary, security, police and defence which they’re good at, but not development issues. Other non-Taliban ministers can force them not to violate human rights”, he added.

Against his view is that of another Pashtun with good grass-roots contacts in the southern and eastern provinces, Masood Karokhail, the director of the Liaison Office. “The Taliban are really brutal. They are becoming more aggressive in order to pressure communities to take sides before 2014. This generation of Taliban could be worse than the first Taliban. Elders are being killed for having links with the government. They behead people and video it, and bully mullahs not to hold religious funerals for people who have had links with the government”, he said. Although he argued that talks with the Taliban for a nationwide compromise were not advisable, since he mistrusted the Taliban leaders’ sincerity, he shared the prediction that the Taliban would capture more ground and that NGOs would have to decide at the local level

whether to work with them as well as with the Kabul government and its representatives.

Conclusion

Afghans are deeply uncertain about their country's future. Their short-term prediction is that security will worsen between now and 2014 and that the economy will suffer severely from the departure of foreign troops and the likely shrinkage of foreign funding for aid and development.

Although few believe Kabul will fall, most Afghans expect a sharper division to emerge between the main cities, which will enjoy relative stability, and the countryside, where fighting will intensify. On both counts, their predictions seem sound.

Whether any peace deal can be found to prevent a new round of violence will depend very largely on Pakistan's decision-makers. The U.S. could play a role in pressing Pakistan to support negotiations with the Afghan insurgents, but it might not succeed.