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# SPECIAL REPORT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report focuses on U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan's Pech valley between 2002 and 2013. The research, which the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) helped fund, is based on recorded interviews with approximately three hundred Americans and Afghans with experience of the Pech, including general officers, unit commanders, members of parliament, provincial and district governors, Afghan interpreters to U.S. forces, and U.S. and Afghan combat veterans. Interviews were conducted by phone or in person in the United States, Kabul, and at military bases in the Pech and other areas of eastern Afghanistan.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wesley Morgan, a 2011 graduate of Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, has reported on U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2007, writing for the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic*, *Foreign Policy*, Al Jazeera America, and the *Long War Journal*, and was the principal researcher on Michael R. Gordon and Bernard Trainor's *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, From George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (2012). His own book on the Pech valley is scheduled for publication in 2016.

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*Wesley Morgan*

## Ten Years in Afghanistan's Pech Valley

### Summary

- From 2002 until their withdrawal in 2013, U.S. conventional and special operations forces were involved in combat operations in Afghanistan's Pech valley system. Today, Afghan government security forces hold the Pech and a tributary valley, the Waygal, where U.S. special operations forces continue to mount an aerial campaign against isolated but potentially threatening al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan elements.
- U.S. efforts in the Pech have been hampered by separate chains of command and sometimes by conflicting missions of special operations forces engaged in counterterrorism and conventional forces conducting counterinsurgency, reconstruction, and security force assistance.
- Among the early U.S. missteps was to rely overmuch on a few former mujahideen commanders for manpower and intelligence, one of many ways in which the parallel U.S. military efforts got in each other's way.
- The enemy that U.S. units fought in the Pech is not the enemy that counterterrorism forces went there to find, but instead a diverse generation of fighters who have thrived in the region. The al-Qaeda presence there now, though only a small part of the array of insurgent groups, is larger than when U.S. counterterrorism forces arrived in 2002.
- The U.S. military's unit rotation system, to the detriment of U.S. efforts, hindered the development of institutional knowledge about areas such as the Pech.
- U.S. forces have only sometimes worked with Afghan forces in the Pech in the ways most beneficial to both nationalities of troops, have pursued scattershot and often underresourced approaches to advising Afghan forces in the field, and have at times left Afghan officials out of key decisions.
- Militant groups are likely to challenge Afghan forces in the Pech in some of the same ways they challenged U.S. forces. Concrete steps could be taken to prepare Afghan troops for this and enhance their counterterrorism capability, but would require time.

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## Introduction

In the U.S. and NATO military campaign in Afghanistan, few areas have proved as costly and complex for Western troops to operate in as the Pech valley system, which straddles the provinces of Kunar and Nuristan. Ferocious fighting in the steep mountains above the Pech River and its tributaries (the Korengal, Waygal, Shuryak, and Watapur) has produced a years-long stream of fatalities and much publicized acts of heroism. Media portrayals of the Pech have included award-winning articles, documentaries, and even a feature film.<sup>1</sup>

What the vivid media depictions of the Pech and grim statistics—such as the 120 American lives lost there and four Medals of Honor earned—do not capture are the basic dysfunctions of the U.S. campaign that have played out in the valley since 2002. Controversial battles, such as the 2008 firefight at Wanat village that cost nine American lives, have been investigated and reinvestigated, but in pursuit of the tactical lessons learned for the next unit deploying there, not strategic or political ones.<sup>2</sup>

The Pech valley region is in many ways highly atypical of Afghanistan. The area's relatively sparse population (just one-seventh of 1 percent of the national population) includes a far more diverse mixture of linguistic groups than most areas of the country where Western troops have been involved. Much of the Pech economy is based on trade in timber, a resource not only absent from most of Afghanistan but also illegal to traffic.<sup>3</sup> Many of the difficulties U.S. forces encountered in the Pech, however, have also plagued the broader Western military efforts across the country (and in other combat theaters), including scarcity of military resources, unit rotation, and loss of continuity of effort.

The same is true of the mistakes U.S. forces have made, starting with a fundamental one that has pervaded each phase of the mission in the Pech. As with Afghanistan more broadly, U.S. special operations forces came to the Pech with a narrow counterterrorism mission—the pursuit of Arab al-Qaeda leaders and the Afghans suspected of harboring them. As the years passed, new units deployed with the different, more ambitious tasks of improving regional security, jump-starting international development with U.S.-funded reconstruction projects, and strengthening the provincial and district governments and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The U.S. military's labels for this later, larger project have included *counterinsurgency* and *security force assistance*.<sup>4</sup> Yet the counterterrorism mission never went away, even as the counterinsurgency mission faltered and retracted into more limited security force assistance—a transition that did not go smoothly and required reinserting U.S. forces into bases they had just recently turned over to ANSF and that quickly all but collapsed. Today, although all U.S. ground forces in the Pech have been replaced by ANSF, the U.S. military's counterterrorism units continue to routinely strike targets in the area that they describe as camps or command posts of al-Qaeda and allied international terrorist organizations, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> The result is that, for more than a decade, the military and other U.S. government agencies have been conducting two parallel campaigns in the Pech—sometimes in mutually supportive ways and sometimes in conflict with one another, the focus and effectiveness of each campaign continually changing.

Behind the scenes during the war in the Pech, U.S. and Pakistani intelligence agencies have played critical but largely opaque roles. This report focuses on the involvement of U.S. forces about which more information is available: infantry units, provincial reconstruction teams, ANSF adviser teams, and counterterrorism forces (a subset of special operations forces).

## A Rocky Introduction: Missteps Entering Kunar, 2002–04

The first American special operations forces (SOF) arrived in Kunar in pursuit of senior al-Qaeda targets in the spring of 2002, setting up a base just south of the provincial capital,

Asadabad.<sup>6</sup> A year and a half later, in the fall of 2003, U.S. forces pushed west into the Pech and its capillaries in a major counterterrorist operation called Operation Winter Strike/Mountain Resolve, leaving behind the first American base in the valley: Camp Blessing, located outside the district capital of Manogai and named after the first U.S. soldier to be killed in the Pech.<sup>7</sup>

Through 2004, the U.S. mission in the Pech was led by SOF and its purpose was counterterrorism. By the end of that year, when the Pech mission was turned over to conventional forces whose task was described as counterinsurgency rather than counterterrorism, the SOF counterterrorism goals remained unmet.<sup>8</sup> No senior al-Qaeda operatives had been found, yet the populations of Kunar and the Pech had become acquainted with some of the central tools of post-9/11 U.S. counterterrorism strategy: drone strikes, night raids, and detention at Bagram Airfield and Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. Because few U.S. lives were lost during these years and media coverage was less than it was later, the 2002 to 2004 period in the Pech is little known to U.S. audiences. In interviews with Afghans who lived in Kunar at the time, however, the missteps of these early days are often described as the most memorable and consequential actions U.S. forces took, setting the tone for what came later.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Hunting the Wrong Enemies, Making the Wrong Friends***

With hindsight, one of the largest mistakes U.S. forces made in the first two years in Kunar was their willingness to ally themselves with whichever Afghans were the first or most convincing in offering their help. This phenomenon took place at both low and high levels, had consequences both great and small, and was compounded by a general lack of detailed information going in—U.S. forces routinely used Russian-language maps in those years, for example, simply because they were the most detailed maps available.<sup>10</sup>

The Kunar-Nuristan region is diverse, especially the more remote valleys feeding the Pech that U.S. SOF suspected, by virtue of their physical isolation, were harboring al-Qaeda remnants. “It is the most difficult HUMINT [human intelligence] environment I’ve ever seen,” a retired senior military intelligence official with experience of Kunar and Nuristan spanning a decade said in an interview.<sup>11</sup> Some of the Pech’s tributary valleys, such as the Korengal, which proved the deadliest to U.S. forces over the years, speak dialects of Pashai as the primary language. Others, such as the Waygal valley, speak one of the several Nuristani languages. Yet because their bases and routes of access were in Kunar’s lowlands, populated by Pashtuns, U.S. special operations forces mainly turned to nearby Pashtun populations for assistance in understanding the region and finding the militants they sought. In some Nuristani areas, U.S. forces never learned the true names of the towns they were operating in, only the Pashtun ones.

Too often U.S. forces failed to build the necessary relationships and understanding needed to separate good intelligence from bad, needlessly creating new enemies. Between 2002 and 2004, lacking other (or at least easier) ways to come by manpower and intelligence, U.S. SOF often bypassed the fledgling provincial government in Asadabad and allied themselves with a group of former mujahideen commanders and commercial strongmen who had irregular armed forces available. These provincial power brokers—chief among them Malik Zarin of northern Kunar, Haji Jan Dad Safi of southern Kunar, and Matiullah Khan Safi of the Pech valley—sometimes held quasi-governmental posts that gave them the appearance of legitimacy and were ready with suggestions of whom U.S. SOF should target. The problem was differentiating between targets who might be genuine enemies and those who might simply be political, economic, or familial rivals of local partners. One of the most prominent and controversial detentions in the first year in Kunar—that of the notable Pech valley resident and anti-Taliban commander Haji Ruhullah Wakil and his militia

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commander Sabar Lal Melma, who were sent to Guantanamo and released years later for lack of evidence—fits this pattern. Whether or not the original allegations against Ruhullah and Sabar Lal were true, a list of Ruhullah’s rivals and a list of the commanders on whom U.S. special operations forces were relying for intelligence, as many interview subjects pointed out, would be virtually identical.<sup>12</sup>

An interview subject who deployed twice to Kunar in 2002–03 as an SOF intelligence specialist and worked closely especially with Malik Zarin described the problem this way:

These guys were the power back then. Malik Zarin realized we were willing to give him all the guns and money he wanted, and he saw a great opportunity to use American forces as surrogates, risk fewer of his own people, and enrich himself, all by giving us information. It tended to be accurate, but I’m sure he was also using me to eliminate competition. If that competition was shooting at me, I was willing to help.<sup>13</sup>

These factors help explain the lack of success of the largest U.S. counterterrorist mission during this period, Operation Winter Strike in November and December of 2003. The theory behind the operation, according to interviewees and contemporary press reports, was that by targeting commanders loyal to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HIG) group in the Pech’s remote tributaries, U.S. SOF might locate and capture or kill senior al-Qaeda figures such as Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Bin Laden’s correspondence and the accounts of his wives reportedly show that by this time he was already in Pakistan, and whether he ever passed through Kunar or Nuristan at all remains an open question.<sup>14</sup>

Most interview subjects now acknowledge that the theory linking bin Laden to Hekmatyar’s organization, which drove Winter Strike, may have been overplayed, a product of the fuzzy understanding that U.S. forces had of their environment in Kunar and the motives of their intelligence sources during those early years. Yet the operation left behind a major base that would house U.S. troops for another nine years and resulted in the deaths of civilians in at least one air strike in the Waygal. Afghan interviewees often cited civilian deaths due to strikes based on misleading—and sometimes altogether bogus—intelligence as a major initial misstep on the part of U.S. forces.

### ***Fighting Two Wars in Parallel***

In 2004, in the aftermath of the Winter Strike counterterrorism operation, the U.S. military mission in Kunar took a new turn with the establishment of the provincial reconstruction team (PRT) in Asadabad. Like U.S. and NATO PRTs elsewhere in Afghanistan, PRT Asadabad’s mission was not counterterrorism but instead bolstering the Kunar provincial government through reconstruction projects and mentoring government officials. (In the Pech, as in many other parts of Afghanistan, the most prominent of the U.S.-funded reconstruction projects were multiyear road-paving projects.) As conventional U.S. infantry units took over the Pech mission in late 2004 and into 2005, they complemented the PRT’s governance and reconstruction mission with efforts to introduce Afghan National Army (ANA) and police forces to the area.

The earlier SOF counterterrorism efforts, though, never went away altogether and sometimes conflicted with these new U.S. military tasks. The allies that U.S. SOF had found in 2002–03 kept militias and often flouted the provincial government that the PRT and other U.S. forces—including special operations forces—were tasked to support, especially economically, when the commanders’ financial interests lay with the banned commerce of timber and gems. Additionally, in pursuing terrorist targets, U.S. special operations forces had created, trained, and paid irregular military forces (dubbed Afghan Militia Forces) that competed with Afghan government forces in recruitment, and that U.S. conventional forces were later charged with the delicate task of disbanding.<sup>15</sup>

The command structures under which different U.S. military forces operated compounded these disconnects. U.S. military doctrine calls for “unity of effort” if not “unity of command,” but in far-flung areas of Afghanistan, neither condition was typically present until the late stages of the war. Instead, U.S. conventional forces and SOF answered to complex, parallel chains of command that converged only in Tampa, the headquarters of U.S. Central Command. During the 2002 to 2004 period, U.S. conventional forces in Afghanistan fell under one chain of command, headed by a three-star U.S. general in Kabul; U.S. special operations units, meanwhile, answered to two separate chains of command headed by two-star generals located outside of Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> The only common superior the three commanding generals had was the four-star commander in Tampa. Many interviewees, including a former commander of the overall U.S. force in Afghanistan, cited these command arrangements as detrimental to the goal of unity of effort and to both day-to-day operations in Kunar and the broader coordination of counterterrorism with other U.S. tasks in the country.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Creating a New Generation of Opponents***

U.S. forces came to Kunar between 2002 and 2004 with a list of militant targets they saw as opponents. At the top of the list were foreign terrorist leaders, such as bin Laden and Zawahiri, who turned out not to be there. Further down were former mujahideen commanders suspected of harboring them or otherwise opposing the new Afghan government, such as Hekmatyar and his Kunar- and Nuristan-based subordinates Haji Ghafor and Kashmir Khan.

By the time U.S. conventional forces took over the Pech mission in late 2004, however, they were targeting militant commanders on a new and growing list of Kunaris who had taken up arms against U.S. troops and the Afghan government, one in which aging figures such as Hekmatyar, Haji Ghafor, and Kashmir Khan did not figure. The new figures, with whom U.S. troops would fight for years as the Pech emerged as a stage for a troop-heavy counterinsurgency campaign, had often opposed the pre-2001 Taliban regime. They fought instead for religious or economic reasons—opposing the government and by extension U.S. forces, for example, because of the government’s ban on, and illegal exploitation of, the thriving Kunar timber trade. Rarely in the years ahead would U.S. forces fight any of the former mujahideen commanders whom U.S. SOF had initially seen as their main enemies in the Pech.

## **A War of Rotations: Problems in Counterinsurgency, 2004–11**

In November 2004, a platoon of U.S. conventional forces took the reins at Camp Blessing, then the only U.S. base in the Pech, and began to conduct what they termed counterinsurgency operations. The goal of these operations was not to locate high-level al-Qaeda operatives but to complement PRT Asadabad’s reconstruction and governance projects in one of two ways: improving security around populated areas or dispersing the local militants who were contesting the government’s control in and around the Pech.<sup>18</sup>

Over the next six years, the U.S. presence in the Pech grew from a small contingent of about eighty Marines into something much larger. The peak force in 2010 comprised a full battalion of more than eight hundred infantrymen and their support troops, spread out into as many as ten outposts, from which U.S. platoons conducted daily counterinsurgency operations. The growth came in increments—typically when one unit was ending its six-, twelve-, or fifteen-month deployment and a new one was arriving. In all, between 2004 and 2012, no fewer than thirteen U.S. units held responsibility for Camp Blessing and the Pech.<sup>19</sup>

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During its previous counterinsurgency, Vietnam, the U.S. military had rotated personnel in and out of the theater of war, not units—a unit would “plant the flag” on Vietnamese soil and stay for a period of years, new troops coming and going constantly on one-year assignments. Critics of this system charged that it lessened unit cohesion and led to indiscipline, so in Afghanistan and Iraq, the military adopted a unit rotation system that it and other Western militaries had grown accustomed to in the Balkans. Units trained together in the United States, deployed together to a region of Afghanistan, and returned home together at the end of six or twelve months (or longer during the peak years of the war, from 2006 to 2008). This coming and going of units came to be as detrimental a feature of the U.S. campaign in the Pech and other regions of Afghanistan and Iraq as the coming and going of individual soldiers had been in Vietnam, despite various military efforts to mitigate the inevitable loss of institutional knowledge that accompanied each rotation.

The effects of frequent rotation at senior levels, too, radiated from Kabul outward to U.S. units across the country. When the scope of U.S. involvement in the Pech increased threefold in 2006, it was in part because the senior U.S. commander in Afghanistan at the time, Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry, advocated long-term U.S.-funded reconstruction efforts in Nuristan north of the Pech, and lower-level commanders judged the Pech to be the best access route from which to approach that task.<sup>20</sup> Later senior U.S. officers in Kabul, especially International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) commander General Stanley McChrystal, took the opposing view that U.S. forces should be divesting themselves of responsibilities in Nuristan.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Who Is the Enemy?***

The rotation approach made it difficult for unit after U.S. unit to answer a question that might seem like it should only have needed asking once, at the outset: “Who is the enemy?”

The Korengal valley, which joins the Pech from the south and eventually became home to five U.S. outposts, is a stark example. The first SOF team to occupy Camp Blessing in 2004 learned early on that going into the Korengal was a good way to get into a firefight but concluded that it was so because of a built-in commercial conflict between the Korengali people, whose valley housed some of the only good timber in the Pech region available for commercial exploitation, and the Pashtuns on the Pech itself, with whom the SOF team was allied and from whom the team recruited irregular troops and informants. The informants, the SOF team judged, were goading the team to attack commercial rivals in the Korengal by claiming they were harboring wanted militants.<sup>22</sup> But the next SOF team to rotate in reached the opposite conclusion, assessing that the Korengal was indeed a safe haven for insurgents who were fomenting trouble elsewhere in the Pech and in Kunar.<sup>23</sup>

Over the years, one U.S. infantry unit after another developed its own theories about the Korengal. When one unit established the first three Korengal outposts in 2006, it did so because its commanders believed outside militants were coercing the Korengalis into supporting the insurgency. By the end of its sixteen-month tour, though, the same unit had come to the conclusion that it was the Korengalis themselves who were running the insurgency there, protecting their commercial timber interest from the U.S. and government forces that had encroached first with raids and then with outposts.<sup>24</sup> Under that interpretation, what the U.S. unit was doing in the Korengal was not counterinsurgency as the U.S. military conceived of it—that is, separating insurgents from a civilian population by standing between them—and it raised the question, which division-level headquarters would debate for three years, of whether to even stay in the Korengal.

After a hasty transition, the next unit—which had been training for Iraq until its destination changed three months before deployment—relearned the same lesson, losing soldiers as it did so.<sup>25</sup> Two more infantry companies followed in the Korengal before the

final one came full circle to the first U.S. SOF team's view that the valley was best left alone. After lengthy deliberations at ISAF headquarters in Kabul, the outposts were shut down in 2010. As one Korengali elder put it to a researcher after U.S. troops had been gone for several years, "The Americans were a tool, used by the Safis in the Pech to rid them of their competition in the timber trade."<sup>26</sup>

Another example concerns the involvement of the Afghan Taliban in Kunar: Rotation has a way of masking the fluidity of the ever-changing balance of insurgent groups. When U.S. forces entered Kunar in 2002, the presence of the Taliban proper in the province was minimal. As the years of conflict in the Pech wore on, however, local militants who had initially either operated independently, as in the Korengal, or as part of Kunar-specific militant groups with roots in the 1980s jihad, gradually declared allegiance to the Afghan Taliban to benefit from the larger insurgency's funding, arms, and manpower. The Taliban in turn benefited in various ways, for example by exploiting local insurgent successes against U.S. forces in Kunar for propaganda value.<sup>27</sup> To U.S. units deploying in 2010 or 2011, it was obvious neither that the Taliban's prominent role in Kunar was a relatively recent development, nor that it was brought on in part by the U.S. presence.

### ***Why Did We Come and What Happens After We Leave?***

Just as critically, unit rotation created a situation in which U.S. units in the Pech rarely understood much about what fellow U.S. units that preceded them had achieved—or failed to achieve—or why. A platoon occupying a given outpost or securing the paving of a certain stretch of road was likely to have a distorted, inaccurate view of the original reasons for that outpost or road project, more so the longer it had been active.

The Waygal valley, where U.S. units in 2006 established a pair of outposts at Aranas in Bella and initiated a road project intended to connect Aranas to the larger town of Nangalam on the Pech, is a good example. According to interviewees who made the decision to establish the outposts, the perceived value of the Aranas outpost was as a platform for intelligence collection in an area where a number of militant leaders had been reported over the previous year, and the perceived value of the Bella outpost was mainly to support the Aranas outpost with 120mm mortar fire.<sup>28</sup> The battalion that established the outposts also cooperated with PRT Asadabad and the Army Corps of Engineers to begin paving a road up the Waygal valley to the outposts, so that when air transport was not available because of weather, military convoys could resupply the two bases without fear of roadside bombs, which are much more difficult to plant on paved rather than unpaved roads.

The next battalion in the Pech closed the Aranas outpost early on, in part—again according to interviews, both from the units and for the U.S. Central Command investigation into events in the valley—because officers in the new unit did not understand the previous unit's rationale for building it. The second outpost, Bella, was left open for an additional nine months, even though the sister base it had been built to support no longer existed. The Waygal road project remained on the books for even longer, taking on a new reconstruction purpose much different from its original resupply role.

U.S. units have also often overestimated both what they can achieve during a set deployment period and the permanence of the actions they take: For example, it is much harder to close an outpost in the Pech's formidable terrain than it is to build one. A string of bases were built along the Pech road in 2006 to keep infantry platoons near the road while it was being paved. The idea was that once the paving was complete the platoons could be shifted elsewhere and the bases closed or transferred to ANSF troops. Instead, either in their original locations or in new, consolidated ones nearby, the bases stayed in place long after the paving was completed in 2008, some of them until 2011 and the last until 2013.

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## “Putting an Afghan Face on It”: Too Little, Too Late

Another way in which U.S. units in the Pech differed over the years was in their willingness to engage with ANSF partner forces. Every U.S. infantry unit worked with the ANA and police in the Pech, without exception, but it is clear that cultural and command factors within the units led some to do so more wholeheartedly than others.

This difference touches on what has perhaps been the greatest of all U.S. failures in the Pech, as in many other regions of Afghanistan: a persistent unwillingness, until the very late years of the war, to treat Afghan forces, commanders, and officials as equals, in spite of much lip service paid to that very notion through programs with names like “embedded partnership.” Many interviewees cited the practice of “putting an Afghan face on” missions, in which a U.S. unit—to satisfy a requirement from higher headquarters—might bring a handful of ANA troops along on a U.S. patrol but would not jointly plan patrols or permit the ANA to fill important unit-level roles on them.<sup>29</sup>

One reason for this persistent problem is a lack of understanding of the capabilities of ANSF partner units, or perhaps a lack of empathy for them. To a U.S. soldier on a one-year deployment, it is all too easy to dismiss a ragtag-looking ANA soldier as poorly disciplined or badly motivated, without considering that the ANA soldier in question goes home only rarely, faces extreme danger when he does so, is paid poorly and often led poorly, and so on.

A second reason has to do with well-founded fears about operational security: Many U.S. units have incorporated ANSF partners into the planning of an operation, only to see the plans apparently leaked and the operation compromised.<sup>30</sup>

A third reason is the haphazard, seesaw approach the U.S. military has taken to providing ANSF units with American combat advisers over the years in comparison with some other ISAF members, such as the United Kingdom, or to the more serious U.S. advisory efforts in Vietnam.

This phenomenon is worthy of its own report, but it has reared its head at key times in the Pech, especially leading up to the 2011 withdrawal of U.S. forces from all but one of their Pech bases, which had to be partly reversed soon afterward. According to interviewees, ANSF leaders were largely excluded from the planning of the withdrawal operation, in part for both fear that an already cumbersome approval process would be further delayed and because ANA officers in the Pech made it clear that they wanted to leave as badly as any U.S. officers did.<sup>31</sup> When it came time for senior ISAF leadership to brief the Pech “realignment” to senior Afghan civilian officials, however, the Afghan Ministry of Defense balked, refusing to approve the withdrawal of ANA forces alongside U.S. forces.<sup>32</sup>

The result was a late-in-the-game adjustment that left an ANA unit in a tenuous situation, alone in the Pech when its U.S. partners had intended for it to leave with them. Interviewees from the ANA unit in question felt that the U.S.-only withdrawal was tantamount to abandonment.<sup>33</sup> Within four months, U.S. advisers had resumed short-duration visits to the Pech bases that the previous U.S. unit had left. Within six months, a U.S. company reoccupied Camp Blessing, paving the way for a longer, slower “re-departure” of U.S. forces during 2012 and 2013.<sup>34</sup>

The direction ANSF have taken in the Pech as U.S. units have stepped back again beginning in 2012 suggests that the Afghan government has had a more consistent view than the U.S. military all along. Now planning and executing operations with little U.S. support besides overhead surveillance and occasional air strikes, the ANA have reestablished outposts in areas (such as the Waygal) that U.S. troops had left, and in other areas (such as Chapa Dara) where the United States never established bases. The ANSF’s ability to incorporate artillery and specialized troops like the ANA Commandos and the Afghan National Civil Order Police impressed interviewees who saw the Chapa Dara operation, though U.S. support still included surveillance and attack aircraft.<sup>35</sup> So far no reports have emerged of any of



the twenty-plus ANSF positions in the Pech and the Waygal being overrun, but such attacks have occurred elsewhere in Kunar.<sup>36</sup>

Yet these operations entail serious risk—not least that local populations will tire of a heavy-handed ANSF presence in the same way they tired of the presence of U.S. forces—and have been undertaken for reasons sometimes opaque to U.S. commanders and advisers (who advised against the June 2013 Waygal operation).<sup>37</sup> Provincial and national political considerations, which did not always figure into the calculus of U.S. units in the Pech, appear to drive the Afghan government's desire for these operations. “Optics” that may appear unimportant to U.S. military advisers or even their ANA counterparts, such as whether government forces are able to reach a particular remote district center on short notice even if they are not able to stay there, may be very important indeed to legislators, provincial governors, or national policymakers in Kabul.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

That U.S. SOF are reported to remain actively engaged in counterterrorism operations in the Pech and points north, albeit mostly by air strike now, gives the present situation there a back-to-the-future quality. The ANA are in the Pech on their bases, for their own reasons (which have little to do with counterterrorism), and the road there is paved (though how long it will continue to be maintained against seasonal damage is impossible to say). These Afghan forces are engaged in regular combat with many of the same local insurgents and Afghan Taliban forces that U.S. forces tangled with in the past.

But transnational militants from Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and al-Qaeda are in the Pech too, if in small numbers, in high tributary valleys where they are inaccessible to ANSF and pose a vexing counterterrorism problem. In the aftermath of the withdrawal of U.S. conventional forces from the Pech, al-Qaeda leaders carved out an enclave in some of the same remote valleys where U.S. counterterrorism forces sought them in vain between 2002 and 2004.

The small al-Qaeda element led by Qatari militant Farouq al-Qahtani, which has provoked concern in some quarters of the U.S. military and intelligence community, is reportedly located in the same Nuristani valleys north of the Pech where U.S. counterterrorism forces searched in vain for al-Qaeda in 2002 and 2003. Declassified correspondence between Osama bin Laden and senior al-Qaeda managerial figure Atiyah Abd al-Rahman reveals that shortly before bin Laden's death in 2011, al-Qaeda senior leadership in Pakistan was considering sending some of its cadres from Waziristan to join Qatari al-Qaeda operative Farouq al-Qahtani in the tributaries north of the Pech in Nuristan.<sup>38</sup> Little is known about the scope or reach of this al-Qaeda enclave, or about the stature of Farouq al-Qahtani within al-Qaeda. A recent memoir by a former CIA deputy director, however, took a strikingly apprehensive tone, referring to Qahtani as a “counterterrorism expert's worst nightmare” and even suggesting that he could eventually eclipse Ayman al-Zawahiri as al-Qaeda's post-bin Laden leader.<sup>39</sup> It is difficult not to view the presence of this al-Qaeda branch in Nuristan as a legacy of U.S. military actions in the region.

The U.S. military experience in the Pech provides lessons applicable to the future role of both ANSF and U.S. forces in the region as long as counterterrorism and advising activities continue:

- **Find better ways for military units to store institutional knowledge of an area.**

The U.S. military's unit rotation system will be used in one form or another in any long-term overseas operation, and as described has plenty of drawbacks—not all of which are inevitable. With each passing year, the military has made a greater effort to prepare units for the areas of Afghanistan to which they will be deployed, and in some

cases has tried to send units on repeat deployments to the same area. Other interviewee suggestions included deploying division or brigade headquarters units for longer periods than combat battalions to provide continuity; retaining outgoing unit leaders as ANSF advisers, PRT officers, or in some other capacity; and creating region-specific secure web forums on which leaders who served in a particular area could share knowledge and lessons, both before and during deployments.

- **Learn from insurgents' past behavior.** Militant groups in the Pech are likely to use tactics against ANSF similar to those that proved effective against U.S. units: close-in ambushes aimed at capturing ANSF members; massed attacks on vulnerable outposts or observation posts; IED strikes on one-way-in, one-way-out roads; and attacks on helicopters. Tactics that yield dramatic propaganda footage or cause military forces to leave long-term positions achieve insurgent goals, whether against U.S. forces or ANSF. How ANSF react to such events is important, and they should build the capability to quickly fly or drive commando-like quick-reaction units to the scene, a capability not currently supported by the ANSF's small helicopter force.
- **Keeping a lid on international terrorist elements requires both intelligence and airpower.** As long as the U.S. military is at Bagram (and even afterward, using longer-range platforms), it will be able to regularly fly drones and other surveillance and strike aircraft over Kunar and Nuristan. U.S. military interview subjects were bullish about the ability of counterterrorism forces to continue to locate and strike al-Qaeda targets in valleys inaccessible to ANSF. But the continuing presence of Farouq al-Qahtani suggests the limitations of this capability—especially of the all-important intelligence aspect of it. Inevitably, as U.S. forces have come out of the Pech and then out of Kunar altogether, intelligence has suffered. Ways must be found to retain a strong intelligence and strike capability in a region where intelligence has always been an American weak point, whether by retaining U.S. counterterrorism elements dedicated to Kunar-Nuristan or by training Afghan personnel on sensitive intelligence and strike equipment and techniques.
- **Study what has happened.** Throughout the war in Afghanistan, the military has dutifully conducted detailed investigations into everything from criminal activity to commanders' dereliction of duty to the loss of expensive equipment. It should put similar effort into understanding from a historical perspective what has happened in each region where U.S. units consistently operated over the years. As the 2011 withdrawal from the Pech makes clear, leaving is one thing, but staying away can be another, especially given the large capability gaps between the U.S. counterterrorism forces still targeting al-Qaeda in Kunar-Nuristan and ANSF.

*The military...should put similar effort into understanding from a historical perspective what has happened in each region where U.S. units consistently operated over the years.*

## Notes

1. See Ed Darack, *Victory Point: Operations Red Wings and Whalers* (New York: Penguin, 2009); Sebastian Junger, *War* (New York: Twelve, 2010); Elizabeth Rubin, "Battle Company Is Out There," *New York Times Magazine*, February 24, 2008; Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington's documentary *Restrepo*; and the fictionalized 2014 movie *Lone Survivor*.
2. See, for example, the declassified U.S. Central Command investigation into Wanat and its annexes, [www2.centcom.mil/sites/foia/rr/CENTCOM%20Regulation%20CCR%2025210/Forms/AllItems.aspx](http://www2.centcom.mil/sites/foia/rr/CENTCOM%20Regulation%20CCR%2025210/Forms/AllItems.aspx).
3. The illegal timber economy in Kunar and Nuristan is a complex subject prone to outside misunderstanding. For a primer, see Harry R. Bader, Clint Hanna, Clint Douglas, and John D. Fox, "Illegal Timber Exploitation and Counterinsurgency Operations in Kunar Province of Afghanistan: A Case Study Describing the Nexus Among Insurgents, Criminal Cartels, and Communities Within the Forest Sector," *Journal of Sustainable Forestry* 32, no. 4 (2013): 329–53.
4. The U.S. counterterrorism and counterinsurgency missions in Afghanistan have often overlapped, and the security force assistance mission has gone by many names, including, currently, "train, advise, assist." For a useful discussion of the terms *counterinsurgency* and *counterterrorism* in the context of Afghanistan by an officer who commanded a battalion on the counterinsurgency mission in the Pech and later commanded counterterrorism forces, see William Ostlund, "Irregular Warfare: Counterterrorism Forces in Support of Counterinsurgency Operations," The Land Warfare Papers no. 91 (2012), [www.ausa.org/publications/ilw/ilw\\_pubs/landwarfarepapers/Documents/LWP\\_91\\_web.pdf](http://www.ausa.org/publications/ilw/ilw_pubs/landwarfarepapers/Documents/LWP_91_web.pdf).
5. Press releases by the ISAF Joint Command through the spring of 2013, and continuing coverage by Khaama Press and the *Long War Journal*, detail the drumbeat of counterterrorism strikes in the mountains north of the Pech.
6. Interview with former SOF detachment commander, November 2014. "Anything related to UBL and chasing his ghost" was how the subject described the objective of the original counterterrorism forces who occupied Asadabad in the spring of 2002. "Any old fart that was rumored to be associated with UBL or an old acquaintance was on the target deck."
7. Operations Mountain Resolve and Winter Strike were conducted simultaneously by conventional U.S. Army units and U.S. SOF, with the conventional forces' supporting efforts dubbed Mountain Resolve and the SOF mission Winter Strike.
8. The primary targets of Winter Strike, according to interviewees, were HIG commanders Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Haji Ghafar, and Kashmir Khan, all of whom remain free men to this day. The main Arab commander U.S. special operations forces became familiar with in 2004, the Egyptian national known by the nom de guerre Abu Ikhlas al-Masri, was not apprehended until 2010, at the tail end of the U.S. counterinsurgency mission in the Pech.
9. Interviews with former and current Afghan national and provincial government officials, February–March 2013.
10. Interviews with former Ranger company commanders, February 2014.
11. Interview with former director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, March 2015.
12. For the story of Haji Ruhullah and the grimmer tale of his associate Sabar Lal Melma, who was killed by U.S. special operations forces four years after his release, see Nancy Youssef, "Where's Pentagon Terrorism Suspect? Talking to Karzai," *McClatchy Newspapers*, July 7, 2009, [www.mcclatchydc.com/2009/07/07/71434/wheres-pentagon-terrorism-suspect.html](http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2009/07/07/71434/wheres-pentagon-terrorism-suspect.html), and Ray Rivera, "Anger After a Raid Kills a Wealthy Afghan With a Murky Past," *New York Times*, September 4, 2011, [www.nytimes.com/2011/09/05/world/asia/05insurgent.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/05/world/asia/05insurgent.html).
13. Interview with former SOF detachment intelligence chief, May 2014.
14. For bin Laden's wives' accounts of the timeline of his movements, see Bruce Riedel, "Bin Laden's Wives' Stories of Post-9/11 Life Casts More Suspicion on Pakistan," *Daily Beast*, March 8, 2012, [www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/03/08/osama-s-wives-stories-of-post-9-11-life-casts-more-suspicion-on-pakistan.html](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/03/08/osama-s-wives-stories-of-post-9-11-life-casts-more-suspicion-on-pakistan.html).
15. Interviews with former SOF detachment members, June 2013, November 2013, and May 2014; interview with former Marine company executive officer, December 2013.
16. The arrangement is described in United States Special Operations Command History and Research Office, *USSOCOM History* (Tampa: 2007), pp. 106–11, [www.socom.mil/Documents/history6thedition.pdf](http://www.socom.mil/Documents/history6thedition.pdf).
17. Interview with former Combined Forces Command Afghanistan commanding general, March 2014.
18. Interviews with former Marine battalion commander and company executive officer, December 2012 and December 2013.
19. In chronological order, the units were Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha 936; Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha 361; K Company, 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines; I Company, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines; E Company, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines; C Company, 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines; 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry; 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry; 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry; 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry; 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry; D Company, 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry; and D Company, 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry (the only unit to serve twice in the Pech).
20. Interviews with former brigade commander of 3rd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, and former battalion commander of 1-32 Infantry, 2013 and 2014.
21. For an account of the competing concerns that led ISAF under General McChrystal to delay pulling out of the Korengal, Kamdesh, Barg-e Matal, and other remote areas in 2009 and 2010, see Jake Tapper, *The Outpost: An Untold Story of American Valor* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 431–56.
22. Interview with former SOF detachment commander, June 2013.
23. Interview with former SOF detachment senior noncommissioned officer, November 2013.
24. Interviews with former battalion commander and staff and company commander, 1-32 Infantry, 2013 and 2014.
25. Interviews with former battalion commander and staff and company commander, 2-503 Infantry, 2013 and 2014.
26. Haji Zalwar Khan, quoted in Matt Trevithick and Daniel Seckman, "Heart of Darkness: Into Afghanistan's Taliban Valley," *Daily Beast*, November 15, 2014, [www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/11/15/heart-of-darkness-into-afghanistan-s-korengal.html](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/11/15/heart-of-darkness-into-afghanistan-s-korengal.html).
27. For a description of how one Kunari Salafi group gradually embraced the Taliban, see Thomas Ruttig, "On Kunar's Salafi Insurgents," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, January 14, 2010, [www.afghanistan-analysts.org/on-kunars-salafi-insurgents](http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/on-kunars-salafi-insurgents).

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28. Interview with former 1-32 Infantry battalion commander, December 2012.
29. Interviews with former embedded training team advisers to the Afghan National Army, January 2011, August 2013, October 2013, and March 2014.
30. For an instance of this on Operation Rock Penetrator, see Drew Brown, "U.S.: Insurgents Knew of Kunar Operation," *Stars and Stripes*, May 23, 2008, [www.stripes.com/news/u-s-insurgents-knew-of-kunar-operation-1.79181](http://www.stripes.com/news/u-s-insurgents-knew-of-kunar-operation-1.79181).
31. Interviews with former brigade commander of 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division and former 1-327 Infantry battalion commander, July 2014 and October 2013.
32. Interviews with former ISAF commanding general and deputy chief of staff for operations, April 2013 and February 2014.
33. Interviews with battalion commander, operations officer, and sergeant major, 2-2-201 ANA battalion, March 2013.
34. See Michael Phillips, "Afghan Base Tests U.S. Exit Plans," *Wall Street Journal*, November 8, 2011, [www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203658804576639071125306378](http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203658804576639071125306378).
35. Interviews with squadron commander and operations officer, 3-89 Cavalry, April 2014 and May 2014.
36. See Niamatullah Karyab and Rod Nordland, "Taliban Raid Afghan Army Base, Killing Soldiers in Their Sleep," *New York Times*, February 23, 2014, [www.nytimes.com/2014/02/24/world/asia/taliban-attack-afghan-army-base-killing-soldiers-in-their-sleep.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/24/world/asia/taliban-attack-afghan-army-base-killing-soldiers-in-their-sleep.html).
37. Interviews with former ISAF Joint Command commanding general and political adviser, February 2015 and September 2013.
38. See correspondence between bin Laden and Atiyah dated July 17, 2010, and October 2010: [www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english2/Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Abu%20Abdallah%20dtd%2017%20July%202010.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english2/Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Abu%20Abdallah%20dtd%2017%20July%202010.pdf) and [www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letters-from-abbottabad-bin-ladin-sidelined](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letters-from-abbottabad-bin-ladin-sidelined).
39. Michael Morell with Bill Harlow, *The Great War of Our Time: The CIA's Fight Against Terrorism from al Qa'ida to ISIS* (New York: Twelve, 2015), 312–13.

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