



# Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

MES Insights • Volume 4, Issue 2

March 2013

## Transition in Afghanistan: Lessons from the Past

Amin Tarzi

As the United States is preparing its gradual disengagement from its longest foreign armed conflict ever, myriad issues remain unresolved. If not recognized and dealt with prior to the final downsizing of U.S. and other NATO troops in 2014, these could, and most likely will, result in Afghanistan's returning to a state of civil war or a highly dysfunctional state, deepening political instability in region and potentially beyond.

### Threat Mitigation

The core status of Afghanistan as a political entity to the United States' national interests after 9/11 has been threat mitigation. Yet this reality is somewhat lost not only in the political parlance and understanding in Washington, but also more importantly in the actions taken inside Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban regime. These thoughts and actions have inflated the Afghan political players' sense of their country's importance, both regionally and internationally, leading to an exaggerated perception of political viability and willingness to take risks.

Had Afghanistan not become the hub for terrorists with international reach in the aftermath of the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 and the ensuing civil war, the country would have remained at the same level of importance to the U.S. as Tajikistan—a land-locked, mountainous state with mineral resources which are too costly to extract by anyone except for regional powers such as China, Russia or India. Currently, Afghanistan's importance to the U.S. has little to do with Afghanistan itself but rather the important political ramifications for U.S. power and prestige.

### MES Notes

#### MES Lecture Series 2012-13 Upcoming Dates

On 8 May 2013 Middle East Studies at the Marine Corps University will host a panel on Turkey featuring; Sinan Ciddi (Georgetown University), Diba Nigar Göksel (Turkish Policy Quarterly), and Ömer Taşpınar (National Defense University)..

Further information about the MES Lecture Series is available at: <http://www.mcu.usmc.mil>, under the Middle East Studies tab or via Facebook at: [middleeaststudies.mcu](https://www.facebook.com/middleeaststudies.mcu).

POC for the lecture series is Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or [seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu](mailto:seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu).

#### MES at MCU Disclaimer

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual author and do not necessarily represent the views of either the Marine Corps University or any other governmental agency. Any references to this newsletter should include the foregoing statement.

## Mission Creep

The United States and its allies began Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in October 2001 to destroy al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan and Taliban military installations and to bring the terrorists to justice. By December, the Taliban regime had fallen, and al-Qaeda leadership had scattered, been killed, or fled across the border to Pakistan.

At this time, the mission of OEF crept outside the terrorism mandate for the first but not last time. State-building, democratization and human rights—albeit selectively and haphazardly in all cases—were adopted as the marching orders of the international community in the untested laboratory called Afghanistan. In retrospect, a broader mission beyond the destruction of al-Qaeda was necessary for the international community to cultivate the ground for a viable Afghan state and civil society to germinate. This necessity is stipulated in the preamble to the Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions (Bonn Agreement) which opens with a determination to “end the tragic conflict in Afghanistan and promote national reconciliation, lasting peace, stability and respect for human rights in the country.” However, in reality, the various international actors—states and organizations alike—involved in Afghanistan since 2001 did not connect the need for state reorganization in some aspects and formation in others with their fundamental reason for involvement in that country. In some cases, threat mitigation was altogether forgotten and aspects of state-building became the primary objectives. While in others, fighting terrorism actually undermined efforts such as institutional building. A blending of these actions under a more cohesive strategy would have facilitated the emergence of an Afghanistan on the road to becoming a peaceful member of international community.

Eleven years later, the vision of the Bonn Agreement has only been partially realized. Parts of each of the five sections have been achieved or at least tackled, but none has been completed. As the United States and its allies look towards a new horizon in Afghanistan, the next decade and beyond will be shaped, by design or not, by the intended and unintended programs of state- and nation-building that have crept into the original mission of OEF. Securing U.S. interests in Afghanistan and the region requires both long-term strategic vision with short-term realistic and achievable goals and the ability to understand the more immediate Afghan political landscape and how to influence it in the short-term while a greater degree of coercive power is still available on the ground.

## Afghan Political Canvass

Under the Bonn Agreement, the head of the executive branch of the Afghan government, more precisely the person of Hamid Karzai, was designed to be the mechanism through which the country would begin the process of state reconstitution that would ultimately lead to an established democracy.[1] Constitutionally, Karzai cannot remain in power beyond 2014 and has announced his decision to abide by the rules. However, in his long tenure as the Afghan ruler (second in duration in more than a century), he not only has been able to mold the executive branch so that his proxies will

## MES Notes (cont.)

February 2013

Dr. Amin Tarzi published “The Maturation of Afghan Historiography” in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 45 (2013).

20 February 2013

Dr. Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled “The Egyptian Winter: Muslim Brothers Playing Pharaoh,” to 157th Joint Reserve Detachment, Capitol Hill at Cannon House Office Building, Washington, DC.

28 February 2013

Dr. Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled “Future of Egypt and the Role of the Armed Forces,” to the Board of Trustees of the Marines’ Memorial Club, San Francisco, CA.

5 March 2013

Dr. Amin Tarzi Presented the Keynote Address “Towards a ‘Whole of Government’ Approach to Maritime Security and Transnational Threats,” at the 5th International Maritime Conference sponsored by the National Centre for Maritime Policy and the Pakistan Navy and held at Bahria University, Karachi, Pakistan.

continue in his stead, but also has manipulated the judiciary, rendering it almost solely a tool of the executive, and managed to make the legislative body irrelevant. Karzai, not unlike previous successful Afghan rulers, has surrounded himself with concentric rings of immediate family and patrons, important allies of many persuasions, and even adversaries who are seeking upward mobility. Karzai's success has depended on keeping membership in his circles fluid. This model, of course, has not served well the current Afghan political structure, based on institutional democracy not monarchy as before, and has elevated the individual over the institution as the most important factor of stability and resulted in shifting loyalties for self preservation becoming the norm rather than exception.

As Afghanistan moves closer to the expected uncertainty of the post-2014 period, the fluidity of these loyalties among the elite has increased not only within the Afghan political spectrum, but also with foreign countries, especially Pakistan, Iran, India, some of the Gulf Arab states, and Russia. The Afghan elite, including Karzai, while regarding the United States as a vital partner in their own survival and perhaps in the survival of their country as it stands today, has moved its private distrust of and antagonism towards the United States to the public sphere and wear their objection to U.S. policies in Afghanistan as a badge of honor vis-à-vis their wider Afghan constituency. There seems to be an overarching debate on how to balance the potential value of maintaining a U.S. military presence to limit the expected political and cultural encroachments from Pakistan and Iran with the shared understanding that closeness with the United States is becoming a political liability within Afghan political calculations. The only groups well disposed towards the U.S. in deeds and words are the majority of urban women and youth and the nascent and increasingly significant civil society, again mostly concentrated in the major urban centers. These groups share two commonalities which partly explain their positive disposition towards the United States. They owe their resurgence in the Afghan political arena to the U.S., and they are not armed nor have alliances with or trust any of the armed groups within Afghanistan, including Afghan National Security Forces. They also share the view that Afghanistan's future most likely will be one dominated by Islamists and/or their apologists, no matter which one of the current elite groupings manages to stay on top—or if the country reverts to civil war.

### **Looking to History for Insights**

The history of Afghanistan provides some lessons worth examining. Perhaps it is time to debunk the notion of Afghanistan as the graveyard of empires. Undoubtedly, the invasion and ensuing war in that country contributed to the eventual demise of the Soviet Union. However, in the British case, when viewed strategically, the British Raj did not lose in Afghanistan. All of the policies of the British in India—i.e. the “Forward Policy,” the “Stationary School,” or “Masterly Inactivity”—had one main objective: Safeguarding India from Russian possible advancements. After the Clarendon-Gorchakov Agreement of 1872-73 between Russia and Britain defined part of the Afghan-Russian boundary and Russia pledged that Afghanistan was outside of her sphere of influence, Afghanistan became part of the so-called “Great Game” between the two imperial powers. Afghanistan was never an objective in itself. Rather it was to serve as a buffer between the two expanding empires. Surely, the result of the First Anglo-Afghan War of 1839-41, part of the “Forward Policy,” was a stunning defeat for the British; however, the main objective for the British was achieved perfectly. The Russians since the minor Panjdeh incident of 1885 through the duration of the British rule of India in 1947 never crossed their agreed upon frontier with Afghanistan. In fact, the boundary was respected until 1979. If the British experience in Afghanistan can be summed up as a defeat, then the Allies lost the Second World War as surely there were defeats in battles.

### **Bottom Line**

Afghanistan has been the recipient of much more U.S. attention in terms of national interest priority than the country has ever merited, and the country and its constituency have not had the

capacity to absorb the impact of such attention. Thus, Afghans of almost all persuasions have come to believe that the future stability of their country is a major pillar of United States national security. As such, as 2014 approaches, the main goals of the United States with the support of its allies ought to hinge on discerning and prioritizing which issues related to Afghanistan have direct links to U.S. national interests. Related to this, Afghanistan's elite needs to understand—in a discreet but forceful manner—that their country is not as pivotal as the last decade might have indicated and that threat mitigation will be the principal policy outcome they should expect from the U.S., which can be done with or without their support. Should the upcoming Afghan government be supportive, there could be incentives which would help both the individual elites and the county at large. Otherwise, the U.S. could seek to prevent Afghanistan's devolving into a black hole of transnational violent terrorism by aligning with different elements within Afghanistan and of regional states. While the last point is neither the preferable option nor its achievement guaranteed, if at all feasible, it has remained for some time the talk among Afghan circles. Thus, it could serve as leverage for achieving the preferred outcome.

Looking to history for insights, the final British policy worked to achieve their strategic objectives. They provided the ruler with financial, military, and political support in exchange for his commitment to keep the Russians out. While that period presented different circumstances, one lesson that could be taken from this is that Afghanistan is best managed when left alone within its own borders but with outside support with clearly and simply defined objectives. Again, very little details from this historical experience remain today. Yet, the overall theme of leaving the Afghans to manage their own country with international financial, technical and political support—including the training and maintenance of their armed forces—might very well be the best scenario as OEF comes to an end. The Afghans' responsibility: Not allowing their country to reemerge as fertile ground for terrorists with international reach. This would be a strategic victory for OEF, the longest U.S. military involvement anywhere.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### Notes:

[1] Amin Tarzi, "Afghanistan: Political Reform" in *Beyond Settlement: Making Peace Last after Civil Conflict*, edited by Vanessa E. Shields and Nicholas D.J. Baldwin (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), p. 44.

Middle East Studies at Marine Corps University

---

Dr. Amin Tarzi • Director, MES • [tarzia@grc.usmcu.edu](mailto:tarzia@grc.usmcu.edu)  
Adam C. Seitz • Senior Research Associate, MES • [seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu](mailto:seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu)