



# Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

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## A Third Inning Ending to the Game in Afghanistan?

by Amin Tarzi

*Victory no longer happens when you capture the enemy capital. And we can't just declare victory in a photo op on an aircraft carrier. These events signal that the home team is ahead in the third inning. The game goes nine innings—or longer if necessary; and victory happens when you put in place a lasting stable environment.*

Retired U.S. Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni

This visionary statement is an appropriate way to reflect on Afghanistan's first peaceful transition of power in more than a century. How should we characterize this transition? Are the expedient arrangements that have put in place a "National Unity Government" in the aftermath of electoral disputes a victory for the international involvement that began in 2001 or are they just a home run in the third inning that the foreign players in the Afghan field are celebrating, while the fans, convinced this represents certain victory, exit the stands?

Afghanistan... (CONTINUED ON PG 2)

## Limitations of the "Yemen Model" to Counterterrorism

by Adam C. Seitz

On 10 September 2014, U.S. President Barak Obama addressed the nation to lay out his administration's strategy to "degrade and ultimately destroy the terrorist group known as ISIL [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant]." To this end President Obama proposed a counterterrorism strategy that relied on a "systematic campaign of airstrikes" and an "increase in support to forces fighting these terrorists on the ground." Comparing his strategy for ISIL to counterterrorism campaigns in Yemen and Somalia President Obama stated that, "This strategy of taking out terrorists who threaten us, while supporting partners on the front lines, is one that we have successfully pursued in Yemen and Somalia for years."

Yemen... (CONTINUED ON PG 3)

### MES Notes

#### Ucoming MES Lecture

On 6 October 2014 Middle East Studies will host Dr. Dafna Rand, Deputy Director of Studies and the inaugural Leon E. Panetta Fellow at the Center for a New American Security, to discuss "U.S. Democracy Promotion in the Arab World: Illusory Promise or Potential Opportunity?" as part of the AY14-15 MES Lecture Series "Perspectives on Democracy Promotion and Democratization in the Middle East and North Africa."

Further information about the MES Lecture Series is available at the MES website at <https://www.mcu.usmc.mil> under Affiliate Programs, or you can contact Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or [seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu](mailto:seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu).

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On 29 September 2014, Muhammad Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai became Afghanistan's second post-Taliban president. The transfer of power from outgoing President Hamid Karzai to Ghani also marked the first peaceful transition of power in Afghanistan since 1901 and the very first transition of power based on elections, albeit not without controversy. The ambiguous outcome of the 5 April presidential election led to a runoff between Ghani and his rival Abdullah Abdullah marred with major irregularities. Ghani and Abdullah refused to accept the runoff results, bringing the country once again to the brink of violence with the prospects of two parallel governments. After consultations and intervention by the United States and the United Nations, on 20 September, Ghani and Abdullah signed a four-page agreement to form a "National Unity Government" through which Ghani became president and Abdullah assumed the newly established position of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) with the "functions of an executive prime minister." As the CEO, Abdullah is answerable to Ghani; however, the functionality of this new form of government, yet to be defined constitutionally, is left to the goodwill of these two gentlemen and their political allies and perhaps some undeclared carrots and sticks of the states financing the bulk of Afghanistan's expenses.

Going back to General Zinni's statement, the photo op moment in the game in Afghanistan for the United States perhaps occurred on 30 September when Afghanistan and the United States signed the long-languishing Security and Defense Cooperation Agreement. The agreement legitimizes the presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan beyond 2014 when the mandate of the NATO's International Security Assistance Force expires and with it the bulk of international military engagement in that country.

The United States now has access to several Afghan facilities and points of embarkation and debarkation. This allows for a more orderly and timely downsizing for the U.S. forces currently stationed in Afghanistan and for the establishment of a new NATO-led mission to train, advise and assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. The agreement also enables the United States to have some degree of counterterrorism capability inside Afghanistan.

Under the rather vague Bonn Agreement of 2001, the head of the executive branch of the envisioned Afghan governing system was designed to be the mechanism through which the country would reorganize itself as a state and emerge as a democracy. The new agreement between Ghani and Abdullah on the formation of a "National Unity Government" is equally vague. This new government structure envisions an executive branch with a president and two vice-presidents as well as a CEO and two deputy CEOs. Under this structure, Afghanistan is expected to move ahead without large international military presence and, most likely, decreasing international monetary support.

After thirteen years of effort by dozens of states, including the participation of the world's most powerful military alliance—NATO—with tens of thousands of casualties and mind boggling expenditures, has Afghanistan achieved a "lasting stable environment" so the states that supported Afghanistan can declare victory? The answer is still uncertain, and the game still in the third inning with the home-team ahead. However, as the old baseball sage Yogi Berra cautioned, "It ain't over till it's over." Can the new president-CEO team in Afghanistan hold the country together, manage to reduce corruption, and increase the state's capacities to manage the ongoing insurgency? The next six innings will determine that. Al-Qaeda remains a threat, and its offshoots are posing much more serious challenges in different arenas. In retrospect, one of the lessons of Afghanistan should be that the capture of Kabul from the Taliban in a few weeks was not victory; rather, it was the beginning of a long process for which most of the participants were not ready.

As the game in Afghanistan nears the next inning, it would be wise to look back to the lessons of the first three innings and adjust the strategies against outfits such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant accordingly.

## MES Notes (cont.)

24 July - 5 August 2014

Amin Tarzi presented 14 PME sessions on topics pertaining to Middle East and South Asia to the 11th MEU and sailors on board USS *Makin Island* as part of the U.S. Navy's Regional Security Education Program, Pacific Ocean.

13 August 2014

Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "South Asia and Afghanistan" at the Senior Executives in National and International Security, Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge, MA.

21 August 2014

Amin Tarzi presented a paper entitled "Nuclear Weapons Program as Safeguard of the Iranian Regime" at the 4th World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies, Ankara, Turkey.

26 August 2014

Adam Seitz presented a paper entitled "Balanced Instability, Internal War and the Future of Yemen" as part of the workshop "The Future of Yemen" at the 2014 Gulf Research Meeting, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom.

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President Obama's use of Yemen and Somalia as models for a strategy against ISIL has once again reignited debate on the overall effectiveness of U.S. counterterrorism strategy in both cases. In the case of the "Yemen Model," a strategy, which has relied upon a combination of airstrikes and support for local forces, has thus far fallen short of the ultimate objective of destroying al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its local affiliate Ansar al-Sharia (AAS). Indeed, most intelligence and think-tank estimates point to an increase in the number of attacks and the size of AQAP in recent years. This is not to say that U.S. counterterrorism strategy has been completely ineffective, but rather that U.S. efforts have been limited by realities on the ground, especially those contributing to a lack of reliable and effective local partners. Understanding how the political and security environment in Yemen have limited U.S. counterterrorism efforts against AQAP may be useful in managing expectations as the U.S. seeks to duplicate the successes of the "Yemen Model" in Iraq and Syria.

## MES Notes (cont.)

16 September 2014

Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Syria and Iraq" to the Prague Security Studies Institute, Prague, Czech Republic.

19 September 2014

Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "The Contested Environment of State Sovereignty: A New Emerging Security Paradigm in the Middle East" to Training Command, Military Academy of the Czech Republic, Olomouc, Czech Republic.

30 September 2014

Adam Seitz presented a paper via VTC entitled "Patronage Politics in Transition: Challenges to the Political and Economic Interests of the Yemeni Armed Forces" as part of the workshop "Businessmen in Arms: How the Military and other Armed Groups Profit in MENA" at the Bonn International Center for Conversation, Bonn, Germany.

## Finding Willing, Able and Effective Local Partners

U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Yemen underscore the difficulty of finding and providing support to local partners to dismantle and destroy AQAP and AAS. Following the 11 September 2001 terror attacks by al-Qaeda, then Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh agreed to partner with the United States in the Global War on Terror. From November 2002 until December 2009, this partnership translated, primarily, into the United States providing support to the Yemeni government's efforts to strengthen its counterterrorism capabilities with military aid and intelligence sharing. President Saleh's commitment to combating terrorism, and especially destroying al-Qaeda and its affiliates, however, was questionable at best. Instead Saleh used U.S. counterterrorism aid to build-up a praetorian guard while sidelining potential opposition. According to a report by the Washington based think-tank American Enterprise Institute, western intelligence sources accused the Yemeni security apparatus of being complicit, or at the very least complacent, in a 2006 prison break, in which twenty-three members of al-Qaeda, including the mastermind of the 2000 USS *Cole* bombing, escaped through a tunnel leading from the prison to a mosque.<sup>1</sup> The prison break came at a time when the U.S. was heavily engaged in Iraq and the threat from al-Qaeda in Yemen was seen as relatively contained, resulting in less interest and aid for the Saleh regime. The incident, and especially the timing, contributed to the perception that Saleh was using the threat posed by al-Qaeda and counterterrorism aid to pursue his own personal agenda, calling into question the Saleh regime's commitment to defeating al-Qaeda in Yemen, as well as the overall effectiveness of a strategy that relies on a potentially unreliable partner. Political factionalization and divisions within the armed forces in the wake of the 2011 uprisings have further impaired U.S. efforts to effectively provide support to and partner with the Yemeni military.

## Limitations of Airstrikes: Is "Disrupt" Enough?

The case of Yemen highlights the utility and limitations of targeted airstrikes. Since 2010, a combination of drone strikes and partnerships with regional and local allies, have been effective in disrupting AQAP's ability to plan, coordinate and conduct attacks against the U.S. and its allies.<sup>2</sup> Following a reassessment of the Yemeni military's ability to effectively combat the growing threat posed by AQAP and the attempted downing of a U.S. bound commercial airliner in December 2009, U.S. counterterrorism strategy shifted to include a greater role for drones to support the efforts of the Yemeni armed forces. Political unrest and insecurity resulting from the 2011 uprisings across the Arab world, has required the U.S. to increasingly depend on drone strikes for mitigating the threat AQAP poses to the U.S. and its allies, as political factionalization and a divided Yemeni military have further limited the ability of the U.S. to provide effective support to forces fighting AQAP. Although U.S. counterterrorism strategy in Yemen has been effective in disrupting AQAP's ability to plan, coordinate and conduct attacks against the U.S. and its allies, it falls short of dismantling and ultimately destroying the organization. But as realities on the ground continue to evolve, with recent military and political successes by the Houthis providing potential opportunities and challenges for all involved, so too must the strategy for combating AQAP in Yemen.

## Moving From Disrupt to Dismantle and Destroy?

The question remains as to whether the “Yemen Model” can contribute to the dismantling and ultimate destruction of AQAP. Such a strategy, which has shifted AQAPs operations in Yemen from targeting the far enemy to the targeting the close enemy, has already begun to shift the perception of the Yemeni government and key tribal elites. While AQAP was seen as manageable under Saleh, the threat that the organization poses to Yemen’s internal stability has increased significantly since 2011. In the spring of 2011, AQAP, and its local affiliate AAS, sought to exploit the political unrest and take territory in the south. Their gains were reversed the following spring when tribal militias cooperating with the armed forces supported by the U.S., recaptured the city of Zinjibar. Finally, while in recent months AQAP has been able to capitalize on growing political unrest and insecurity, its focus on the near fight, and especially high profile attacks against the Yemeni armed forces, have had a significant impact on Yemeni public opinion.<sup>3</sup> Miscalculations by AQAP—including its capture of Zinjibar in 2011, the attack on the Defense Ministry and an adjacent hospital in December 2013, and assassinations and brutal executions of members of the Yemeni security forces—are slowly chipping away at its local support base and slowly elevating the threat of AQAP as seen by the Yemeni government and influential elites. While the change in domestic perception may well contribute the demise of AQAP in Yemen, realities on the ground today, including internal factionalization, a divided and largely ineffective military and increased sectarian tensions, are likely to continue to limit U.S. counterterrorism options and aims for the foreseeable future. At the same time, realities on the ground may shift once again presenting new challenges for efforts to combat to AQAP.

While Yemen is not Iraq or Syria, the “Yemen Model” and the factors which have limited U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Yemen should be taken into consideration when devising a strategy for combating ISIL in Iraq and Syria. If disrupting ISIL’s ability to conduct attacks against the U.S. and its allies is the objective, the case of Yemen should provide a model for success. But if the objective is dismantling and ultimately destroying ISIL, the “Yemen Model” may not produce such results. In the end, the case of Yemen underscores the fact that any strategy cannot dictate realities on the ground, but rather realities on the ground must inform strategy.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Christopher Harnisch, “Denying Al-Qaeda a Safe Haven in Yemen,” American Enterprise Institute *AEI Critical Threats*, 30 October 2009, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/denying-al-qaeda-safe-haven-yemen>.

<sup>2</sup>See Adam C. Seitz, “In Yemen, If Not Drones, Then What?,” *MES Insights*, Volume 4, Issue 6, December 2014, [https://www.mcu.usmc.mil/Middle%20East%20Studies%20Documents/MES%20Insights/MES\\_insights\\_v4\\_i6.pdf](https://www.mcu.usmc.mil/Middle%20East%20Studies%20Documents/MES%20Insights/MES_insights_v4_i6.pdf).

<sup>3</sup>Abu Bakr al-Yamani, “Massacre of soldiers by AQAP rallies Yemenis around army,” *Al-Shorfa.com*, 13 August 2014, [http://al-shorfa.com/en\\_GB/articles/meii/features/2014/08/13/feature-01](http://al-shorfa.com/en_GB/articles/meii/features/2014/08/13/feature-01).

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