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Afghanistan: colour coded chaos

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The first account of what happened in a remote part of southern Helmand under Taliban control ticked all boxes: 15 men and two women had been found beheaded as punishment for attending a mixed-sex party, with music and dancing. Subsequent accounts muddied the water: the heads of the victims were not cut off, the dead may have been caught up in a fight between two Taliban commanders over the women, and may have included some of the Taliban themselves. The executions were only the start of a bloody 24 hours. Ten Afghan soldiers died in a Taliban assault on a checkpoint and two US soldiers were killed by their Afghan allies after a dispute broke out during a joint patrol.

Reality keeps on intruding into the official narrative of the war, which is being allegedly wound down. The theory being that as Afghan army and police "stand up" to the fight, their western allies and mentors can draw down and go home. The Taliban routinely claim every Isaf death, but it was the incident in which they were not involved which has the potential to destroy the heart of Isaf's withdrawal; 42 coalition soldiers have been shot this year by the men they are supposed to be training, 12 this month alone. Each time one of these "green on blue" attacks occurs, a phrase which makes the deaths sound like the instructions in a knitting pattern, coalition spokesmen play down their significance. They have, we are continually told, no wider significance. There is no common thread, little evidence of infiltration and the majority of such attacks are the result of personal grudges.

A team of US military psychologists investigated last year what these grudges were. Their findings so concerned them that they called their report [A Crisis of Trust and Cultural Incompatibility](#). Extensive research among the Afghan National Army – 68 focus groups – and US military personnel alike concluded: "One group sees the other as a bunch of violent, reckless,

intrusive, arrogant, self-serving profane, infidel bullies hiding behind high technology; and the other group [the US soldiers] generally views the former as a bunch of cowardly, incompetent, obtuse, thieving, complacent, lazy, pot-smoking, treacherous, and murderous radicals. Such is the state of progress in the current partnering programme." Over a decade of fighting shoulder-to-shoulder had created mutual loathing that was impossible to camouflage. The mutual grudge match ranged from big issues – night raids, failure to treat Afghan military casualties with the same urgency as their own – to trivial ones - urinating in public, personal hygiene, thievery. "They simply do not trust us, and after all this time, it is highly unlikely that they ever will," the report said.

This is, perhaps, worse than finding the ANA is riddled with Taliban sleeper cells. Infiltration can be stopped by counter-intelligence. But what, after this length of time, reduces sheer bad faith? Mutual loathing (if this is the opinion of trained soldiers, what must it be like among the population?) strikes at the heart of the strategy of the draw down, which relies on the ability of Isaf units to forge working relationships with their Afghan counterparts.

And then, of course, there is the war itself, which is also proving stubbornly resistant to a redemptive ending. Barack Obama's surge of 30,000 troops was concentrated on Helmand and Kandahar provinces, two of the most volatile areas in Southern [Afghanistan](#). The surge is nearly over, but those two provinces still rank as the most violent in the country. Ten districts out of Afghanistan's 405, account for half of all insurgent violence, and [six of those are in Helmand province](#). So what exactly did the surge achieve and how much of it will be sustainable? Afghan ambivalence to the "help" they have had from abroad was encapsulated recently by Independence Day, 93 years since Amir Amanullah Khan proclaimed independence from the British empire. Opinion was divided: was it a real day, or a meaningless exercise in flag-waving, with foreign troops still deployed in their homeland?