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## The Afghan end: Three lousy options, pick one

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Kabul, Afghanistan - Compromise, conflict, or collapse: ask an Afghan what to expect in 2014 and you're likely to get a scenario that falls under one of those three headings. 2014, of course, is the year of the double whammy in Afghanistan: the next presidential election coupled with the departure of most American and other foreign forces. Many Afghans fear a turn for the worse, while others are no less afraid that everything will stay the same. Some even think things will get better when the occupying forces leave. Most predict a more conservative climate, but everyone is quick to say that it's anybody's guess.

Only one thing is certain in 2014: it will be a year of American military defeat. For more than a decade, US forces have fought many types of wars in Afghanistan, from a low-footprint invasion, to multiple surges, to a flirtation with Vietnam-style counterinsurgency, to a ramped-up, gloves-off air war. And yet, despite all the experiments in styles of war-making, the American military and its coalition partners have ended up in the same place: stalemate, which in a battle with guerrillas means defeat. For years, a modest-sized, generally unpopular, ragtag set of insurgents has fought the planet's most heavily armed, technologically advanced military to a standstill, leaving the country shaken and its citizens anxiously imagining the outcome of unpalatable scenarios.

The first, compromise, suggests the possibility of reaching some sort of almost inconceivable power-sharing agreement with multiple insurgent militias. While Washington presses for

negotiations with its designated enemy, "the Taliban", representatives of President Hamid Karzai's High Peace Council, which includes 12 members of the former Taliban government and many sympathisers, are making the rounds to talk disarmament and reconciliation with all the armed insurgent groups that the Afghan intelligence service has identified across the country. There are 1,500 of them.

One member of the Council told me, "It will take a long time before we get to Mullah Omar [the Taliban's titular leader]. Some of these militias can't even remember what they've been fighting about."

The second scenario, open conflict, would mean another dreaded round of civil war like the one in the 1990s, after the Soviet Union withdrew in defeat - the one that destroyed the Afghan capital, Kabul, devastated parts of the country, and gave rise to the Taliban.

The third scenario, collapse, sounds so apocalyptic that it's seldom brought up by Afghans, but it's implied in the exodus already underway of those citizens who can afford to leave the country. The departures aren't dramatic. There are no helicopters lifting off the roof of the US Embassy with desperate Afghans clamouring to get on board; just a record number of asylum applications in 2011, a year in which, according to official figures, almost 36,000 Afghans were openly looking for a safe place to land, preferably in Europe. That figure is likely to be at least matched, if not exceeded, when the UN releases the complete data for 2012.

The memory is still fresh... for Afghans

In January, I went to Kabul to learn what old friends and current officials are thinking about the critical months ahead. At the same time, Afghan President Karzai flew to Washington to confer with President Obama. Their talks seem to have differed radically from the conversations I had with ordinary Afghans. In Kabul, where strange rumours fly, an official reassured me that the future looked bright for the country because Karzai was expected to return from Washington with the promise of American radar systems, presumably for the Afghan Air Force, which is not yet "operational" (he actually returned with the promise of helicopters, cargo planes, fighter jets, and drones). Who knew that the fate of the nation and its suffering citizens hinged on that? In my conversations with ordinary Afghans, one thing that never came up was radar.

Another term that never seems to enter ordinary Afghan conversation, much as it obsesses Americans, is "al-Qaeda". President Obama, for instance, announced at a joint press conference with President Karzai: "Our core objective - the reason we went to war in the first place - is now within reach: ensuring that al-Qaeda can never again use Afghanistan to launch attacks against America." An Afghan journalist asked me, "Why does he worry so much about al-Qaeda in Afghanistan? Doesn't he know they are everywhere else?"

At the same Washington press conference, Obama said, "The nation we need to rebuild is our own." Afghans long ago gave up waiting for the US to make good on its promises to rebuild theirs. What's now striking, however, is the vast gulf between the pronouncements of American officialdom and the hopes of ordinary Afghans. It's a gap so wide you would hardly think - as Afghans once did - that we are fighting for them.

To take just one example: the official American view of events in Afghanistan is wonderfully black and white. The President, for instance, speaks of the way US forces heroically "pushed the Taliban out of their strongholds". Like other top US officials over the years, he forgets whom we pushed into the Afghan government, our "stronghold" in the years after the 2001 invasion: ex-Taliban and Taliban-like fundamentalists, the most brutal civil warriors, and serial human rights violators.

Afghans, however, haven't forgotten just whom the US put in place to govern them - exactly the men they feared and hated most in exactly the place where few Afghans wanted them to be. Early on, between 2002 and 2004, 90 percent of Afghans surveyed nationwide told the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission that such men should not be allowed to hold public office; 76 percent wanted them tried as war criminals.

In my recent conversations, many Afghans still cited the first *loya jirga*, an assembly convened in 2003 to ratify the newly drafted constitution, or the first presidential election in 2004, or the parliamentary election of 2005, all held under international auspices, as the moments when the aspirations of Afghans and the "international community" parted company. In that first parliament, as in the earlier gatherings, most of the men were affiliated with armed militias; every other member was a former jihadi, and nearly half were affiliated with fundamentalist Islamist parties, including the Taliban.

In this way, Afghans were consigned to live under a government of bloodstained warlords and fundamentalists, who turned out to be Washington's guys. Many had once battled the Soviets using American money and weapons, and quite a few, like the former warlord, druglord, minister of defence, and current vice president Muhammad Qasim Fahim, had been very chummy with the CIA.

In the US, such details of our Afghan War, now in its 12th year, are long forgotten, but to Afghans who live under the rule of the same old suspects, the memory remains painfully raw. Worse, Afghans know that it is these very men, rearmed and ready, who will once again compete for power in 2014.

#### How to vote early in Afghanistan

President Karzai is barred by term limits from standing for reelection in 2014, but many Kabulis believe he reached a private agreement with the usual suspects at a meeting late last year. In early January, he seemed to seal the deal by announcing that, for the sake of frugality, the voter cards issued for past elections will be reused in 2014. Far too many of those cards were issued for the 2004 election, suspiciously more than the number of eligible voters. During the 2009 campaign, anyone could buy fistfuls of them at bargain basement prices. So this decision seemed to kill off the last faint hope of an election in which Afghans might actually have a say about the leadership of the country.

Fewer than 35 percent of voters cast ballots in the last presidential contest, when Karzai's men were caught on video stuffing ballot boxes (afterward, President Obama phoned to congratulate Karzai on his "victory"). Only dedicated or paid henchmen are likely to show up for the next

"good enough for Afghans" exercise in democracy. Once again, an "election" may be just the elaborate stage set for announcing to a disillusioned public the names of those who will run the show in Kabul for the next few years.

Kabulis might live with that, as they've lived with Karzai all these years, but they fear power-hungry Afghan politicians could "compromise" as well with insurgent leaders like that old American favourite from the war against the Soviets, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who recently told a TV audience that he intends to claim his rightful place in government. Such compromises could stick the Afghan people with a shaky power-sharing deal among the most ultra-conservative, self-interested, sociopathic, and corrupt men in the country. If that deal, in turn, were to fall apart, as most power-sharing agreements worldwide do within a year or two, the big men might well plunge the country back into a 1990s-style civil war, with no regard for the civilians caught in their path.

These worst-case scenarios are everyday Kabuli nightmares. After all, during decades of war, the savvy citizens of the capital have learned to expect the worst from the men currently characterised in a popular local graffiti this way: "Mujahideen=Criminals. Taliban=Dumbheads."

Ordinary Kabulis express reasonable fears for the future of the country, but impatient free-marketeering businessmen are voting with their feet right now, or laying plans to leave soon. They've made Kabul hum (often with foreign aid funds, which are equivalent to about 90 percent of the country's economic activity), but they aren't about to wait around for the results of election 2014. *Carpe diem* has become their version of financial advice. As a result, they are snatching what they can and packing their bags.

Millions of dollars reportedly take flight from Kabul International Airport every day: officially about \$4.6 billion in 2011, or just about the size of Afghanistan's annual budget. Hordes of businessmen and bankers (like those who, in 2004, set up the Ponzi scheme called the Kabul Bank, from which about a billion dollars went missing) are heading for cushy spots like Dubai, where they have already established residence on prime real estate.

As they take their investments elsewhere and the American effort winds down, the Afghan economy contracts ever more grimly, opportunities dwindle, and jobs disappear. Housing prices in Kabul are falling for the first time since the start of the occupation as rich Afghans and profiteering private American contractors, who guzzled the money that Washington and the "international community" poured into the country, move on.

At the same time, a money-laundering building boom in Kabul appears to have stalled, leaving tall, half-built office blocks like so many skeletons amid the scalloped Pakistani palaces, vertical malls, and grand madrassas erected in the past four or five years by political and business insiders and well-connected conservative clerics.

Most of the Afghan tycoons seeking asylum elsewhere don't fear for their lives, just their pocketbooks: they're not political refugees, but free-market rats abandoning the sinking ship of state. Joining in the exodus (but not included in the statistics) are countless illegal *émigrés*

seeking jobs or fleeing for their lives, paying human smugglers money they can't afford as they head for Europe by circuitous and dangerous routes.

Threatened Afghans have fled from every abrupt change of government in the last century, making them the largest population of refugees from a single country on the planet. Once again, those who can are voting with their feet (or their pocketbooks) - and voting early.

Afghanistan's historic tragedy is that its violent political shifts - from king to communists to warlords to religious fundamentalists to the Americans - have meant the flight of the very people most capable of rebuilding the country along peaceful and prosperous lines. And their departure only contributes to the economic and political collapse they themselves seek to avoid. Left behind are ordinary Afghans - the illiterate and unskilled, but also a tough core of educated, ambitious citizens, including women's rights activists, unwilling to surrender their dream of living once again in a free and peaceful Afghanistan.

### The military monster

These days Kabul resounds with the blasts of suicide bombers, IEDs, and sporadic gunfire. Armed men are everywhere in anonymous uniforms that defy identification. Any man with money can buy a squad of bodyguards, clad in classy camouflage and wraparound shades, and armed with assault weapons. Yet Kabulis, trying to carry on normal lives in the relative safety of the capital, seem to maintain a distance from the war going on in the provinces.

Asked that crucial question - do you think American forces should stay or go? - the Kabulis I talked with tended to answer in a theoretical way, very unlike the visceral response one gets in the countryside, where villages are bombed and civilians killed, or in the makeshift camps for internally displaced people that now crowd the outer fringes of Kabul (by the time US Marines surged into Taliban-controlled Helmand Province in the south in 2010 to bring counterinsurgency-style protection to the residents there, tens of thousands of them had already moved to those camps in Kabul). Afghans in the countryside want to be rid of armed men. All of them. Kabulis just want to be secure, and if that means keeping some US troops at Bagram Air Base near the capital, as Afghan and American officials are currently discussing, well, it's nothing to them.

In fact, most Kabulis I spoke to think that's what's going to happen. After all, American officials have been talking for years about keeping permanent bases in Afghanistan (though they avoid the term "permanent" when speaking to the American press), and American military officers now regularly appear on Afghan TV to say, "The United States will never abandon Afghanistan." Afghans reason: Americans would not have spent nearly 12 years fighting in this country if it were not the most strategic place on the planet and absolutely essential to their plans to "push on" Iran and China next. Everybody knows that pushing on other countries is an American specialty.

Besides, Afghans can see with their own eyes that US command centres, including multiple bases in Kabul, and Bagram Air Base, only 50 kilometres away, are still being expanded and upgraded. Beyond the high walls of the American Embassy compound, they can also see the tall

new apartment blocks going up for an expanding staff, even if Washington now claims that staff will be reduced in the years to come.

Why, then, would President Obama announce the drawdown of US troops to perhaps a few thousand special operations forces and advisors, if Washington didn't mean to leave? Afghans have a theory about that, too. It's a ruse, many claim, to encourage all other foreign forces to depart so that the Americans can have everything to themselves. Afghanistan, as they imagine it, is so important that the US, which has fought the longest war in its history there, will be satisfied with nothing less.

I was there to listen, but at times I did mention to Afghans that America's post-9/11 wars and occupations were threatening to break the country. "We just can't afford this war anymore," I said.

Afghans only laugh at that. They've seen the way Americans throw money around. They've seen the way American money corrupted the Afghan government, and many reminded me that American politicians like Afghan ones are bought and sold, and its elections won by money. Americans, they know, are as rich as Croesus and very friendly, though on the whole not very well mannered or honest or smart.

#### Operation Enduring Presence

More than 11 years later, the tragedy of the American war in Afghanistan is simple enough: it has proven remarkably irrelevant to the lives of the Afghan people - and to American troops as well. Washington has long appeared to be fighting its own war in defence of a form of government and a set of long-discredited government officials that ordinary Afghans would never have chosen for themselves and have no power to replace.

In the early years of the war (2001-2005), George W Bush's administration was far too distracted planning and launching another war in Iraq to maintain anything but a minimal military presence in Afghanistan - and that mainly outside the capital. Many journalists (including me) criticised Bush for not finishing the war he started there when he had the chance, but today Kabulis look back on that soldierless period of peace and hope with a certain nostalgia. In some quarters, the Bush years have even acquired something like the sheen of a lost Golden Age - compared, that is, to the thoroughgoing militarisation of American policy that followed.

So commanding did the US military become in Kabul and Washington that, over the years, it ate the State Department, gobbled up the incompetent bureaucracy of the US Agency for International Development, and established Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in the countryside to carry out maniacal "development" projects and throw bales of cash at all the wrong "leaders".

Of course, the military also killed a great many people, both "enemies" and civilians. As in Vietnam, it won the battles, but lost the war. When I asked Afghans from Mazar-e-Sharif in the north how they accounted for the relative peacefulness and stability of their area, the answer seemed self-evident: "Americans didn't come here."

Other consequences, all deleterious, flowed from the militarisation of foreign policy. In Afghanistan and the United States, so intimately ensnarled over all these years, the income gap between the rich and everyone else has grown exponentially, in large part because in both countries the rich have made money off war-making, while ordinary citizens have slipped into poverty for lack of jobs and basic services.

Relying on the military, the US neglected the crucial elements of civil life in Afghanistan that make things bearable - like education and health care. Yes, I've heard the repeated claims that, thanks to us, millions of children are now attending school. But for how long? According to UNICEF, in the years 2005-2010, in the whole of Afghanistan only 18 percent of boys attended high school, and 6 percent of girls. What kind of report card is that? After 11 years of underfunded work on health care in a country the size of Texas, infant mortality still remains the highest in the world.

By 2014, the defence of Afghanistan will have been handed over to the woeful Afghan National Security Force, also known in military-speak as the "Enduring Presence Force". In that year, for Washington, the American war will be officially over, whether it's actually at an end or not, and it will be up to Afghans to do the enduring.

Here's where that final scenario - collapse - haunts the Kabuli imagination. Economic collapse means joblessness, poverty, hunger, and a great swelling of the ranks of children cadging a living in the streets. Already street children are said to number a million strong in Kabul, and 4 million across the country. Only blocks from the Presidential Palace, they are there in startling numbers selling newspapers, phone cards, toilet paper, or simply begging for small change. Are they the country's future?

And if the state collapses, too? Afghans of a certain age remember well the last time the country was left on its own, after the Soviets departed in 1989, and the US also terminated its covert aid. The mujahideen parties - Islamists all of them - agreed to take turns ruling the country, but things soon fell apart and they took turns instead lobbing rockets into Kabul, killing tens of thousands of civilians, reducing entire districts to rubble, raiding and raping - until the Taliban came up from the south and put a stop to everything.

Afghan civilians who remember that era hope that this time Karzai will step down as he promises, and that the usual suspects will find ways to maintain traditional power balances, however undemocratic, in something that passes for peace. Afghan civilians are, however, betting that if a collision comes, one-third of those Afghan Security Forces trained at fabulous expense to protect them will fight for the government (whoever that may be), one-third will fight for the opposition, and one-third will simply desert and go home. That sounds almost like a plan.