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The Afghan End Game?

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By Ann Jones
January 27,

The euphemisms will come fast and furious. Our soldiers will be greeted as “heroes” who, as in Iraq, left with their “heads held high,” and if in 2014 or 2015 or even 2019, the last of them, as also in Iraq, slip away in the dark of night after lying to their Afghan “allies” about their plans, few here will notice.

This will be the nature of the great Afghan drawdown. The words “retreat,” “loss,” “defeat,” “disaster,” and their siblings and cousins won’t be allowed on the premises. But make no mistake, the country that, only years ago, liked to call itself the globe’s “sole superpower” or even “hyperpower,” whose leaders dreamed of a *Pax Americana* across the Greater Middle East, if not the rest of the globe is... not to put too fine a point on it, packing its bags, throwing in the towel, quietly admitting -- in actions, if not in words -- to mission unaccomplished, and heading if not exactly home, at least boot by boot off the Eurasian landmass.

Washington has, in a word, had enough. Too much, in fact. It’s lost its appetite for invasions and occupations of Eurasia, though special operations raids, drone wars, and cyberwars still look deceptively cheap and easy as a means to control... well, whatever. As a result, the Afghan drawdown of 2013-2014, that implicit acknowledgement of yet another lost war, should set the curtain falling on the American Century as we’ve known it. It should be recognized as a

landmark, the moment in history when the sun truly began to set on a great empire. Here in the United States, though, one thing is just about guaranteed: not many are going to be paying the slightest attention.

No one even thinks to ask the question: In the mighty battle lost, who exactly beat us? Where exactly is the triumphant enemy? Perhaps we should be relieved that the question is not being raised, because it's a hard one to answer. Could it really have been the scattered *jihadis* of al-Qaeda and its wannabes? Or the various modestly armed Sunni and Shiite minority insurgencies in Iraq, or their Pashtun equivalents in Afghanistan with their suicide bombers and low-tech roadside bombs? Or was it something more basic, something having to do with a planet no longer amenable to imperial expeditions? Did the local and global body politic simply and mysteriously spit us out as the distasteful thing we had become? Or is it even possible, as Pogo once suggested, that in those distant, unwelcoming lands, we met the enemy and he was us? Did we in some bizarre fashion fight ourselves and lose? After all, last year, more American servicemen died from suicide than on the battlefield in Afghanistan; and a startling number of Americans were killed in "green on blue" or "insider" attacks by Afghan "allies" rather than by that fragmented movement we still call the Taliban.

Whoever or whatever was responsible, our Afghan disaster was remarkably foreseeable. In fact, anyone who, from 2006 on, read Ann Jones's Afghan reports at TomDispatch wouldn't have had a doubt about the outcome of the war. Her first piece, after all, was prophetically entitled "Why It's Not Working in Afghanistan." ("The answer is a threefold failure: no peace, no democracy, and no reconstruction.") From Western private-contractors-cum-looters making a figurative killing off the "reconstruction" of the country to an Afghan army that was largely a figment of the American imagination to up-armored U.S. soldiers on well-guarded bases whose high-tech equipment and comforts of home blinded them to the nature of the enemy, hers has long been a tale of impending failure. Now, that war seems headed for its predictable end, not for the Afghans who, as Jones indicates in her latest sweeping report from Kabul, may face terrible years ahead, but for the U.S. After more than 11 years, the war that is often labeled the longest in American history is slowly winding down and that's no small thing.

So leave the mystery of who beat us to the historians, but mark the moment. It's historic. *Tom*

Counting Down to 2014 in Afghanistan

Three Lousy Options: Pick One

By Ann Jones

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, U.S. 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 sympathizers, 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 U.S. Embassy with desperate Afghans clamoring 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 U.N. releases the complete data for 2012.

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 rumors 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 U.S. 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 U.S. forces heroically “pushed the Taliban out of their strongholds.” Like other top U.S. 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 U.S. 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% of Afghans surveyed nationwide told the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission that such men should not be allowed to hold public office; 76% 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 defense, and current vice-president Muhammad Qasim Fahim, had been very chummy with the CIA.

In the U.S., 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% 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 favorite 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 characterized 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% 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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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 U.S. command centers, including multiple bases in Kabul, and Bagram Air Base, only 30 miles 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 U.S. 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 U.S., 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 defense 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) criticized 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 militarization of American policy that followed.

So commanding did the U.S. military become in Kabul and Washington that, over the years, it ate the State Department, gobbled up the incompetent bureaucracy of the U.S. 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 militarization 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 U.S. 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% of boys attended high school, and 6% 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 defense 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 county’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 U.S. also terminated its covert aid. The mujahideen parties -- Islamists all -- 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.