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The Never-Ending War

By Tom Engelhardt
November 5, 2015

In an effort to attack Taliban fighters, an air strike by a U.S. plane killed dozens of civilians in Kunduz, Afghanistan. In the wake of the attack, an American general responded in unequivocal fashion. “I take this possible loss of life or injury to innocent Afghans very seriously,” he said. “I have ordered a complete investigation into the reasons and results of this attack, which I will share with the Afghan people.”

In an effort to attack Taliban fighters, an air strike by a U.S. plane killed dozens of civilians in Kunduz, Afghanistan. In the wake of the attack, an American general responded in unequivocal fashion. “I want to offer my deepest condolences to those innocent civilians who were harmed and killed on Saturday,” he said. “I’ve ordered a thorough investigation into this tragic incident... we will share the results of the investigation once it is complete.”

The first of those air strikes took place in 2009 and targeted fuel tankers hijacked by the Taliban. The second took place last month and targeted a hospital that Afghan officials say was used as a safe haven by the Taliban. The striking similarities between the two attacks are rooted not in uncanny coincidence but in the law of averages. Bomb a country long enough and such echoes are bound to occur.

Of course, U.S. planes have been carrying out attacks and terrorizing innocent Afghans in and around Kunduz (and elsewhere in the country) since 2001. This is, after all, America’s war in

Afghanistan, which has produced eerily repetitive tragedies; a war that's also seen almost endless announcements of achievements, improvements, and progress; a war that seems to regularly circle back on itself.

"The Taliban is gone," Army General Tommy Franks, the chief of U.S. Central Command, announced in 2002. "Afghanistan is rising from the oppression of the Taliban into an independent, democratic nation." Six years later, the Taliban was, oddly enough, still around. But things were still going well. "We're clearly not done... But I do know that we're making good progress, and each and every day we're making a difference in the Afghan people's lives," said Army Major General Jeffrey Schloesser. In 2010, Army General David Petraeus offered his unique assessment of the war. "We're making progress, and progress is winning, if you will," he insisted. This summer, another five years having passed, Army General John Campbell weighed in: "We have done a great job, both from both a conventional perspective and our special operating forces, and from the Afghan security forces... I see [the Afghans] continue to progress and continue to be very resilient."

There have been so many claims of "progress" these last 14 years (and so many air strike apologies as well) and yet each announcement of further success seems to signal the very opposite. Days after Campbell spoke, for instance, Brigadier General Wilson Shoffner, the U.S. deputy chief of staff for communications in Afghanistan, told reporters, "Kunduz is – is not now, and has not been in danger of being overrun by the Taliban... that's sort of how we see it." Just over a month later, Kunduz fell to the Taliban.

This is the war that *TomDispatch* regular Ann Jones has monitored, analyzed, and covered since its opening stages, first as a humanitarian worker and then as a reporter. While the military was spinning tales of progress, Jones had a far more realistic assessment. "The story of success in Afghanistan was always more fairy tale than fact – one scam used to sell another," she wrote at this site in 2006, drawing attention to "a threefold failure: no peace, no democracy, and no reconstruction." After embedding with U.S. troops in 2010 she said all the things America's generals never did. "I'd been 'on the front' of this war for less than two weeks, and I already needed a vacation," she wrote. "Being outside the wire had filled me with sorrow as I watched earnest, heavily armed and armored boys try to win over white-bearded Afghans – men of extraordinary dignity – who have seen all this before and know the outcome."

All this is to say Jones has been remarkably, consistently, undeniably ahead of the curve on the conflict, a reality reflected in her revelatory look at the deeply personal costs of America's second Afghan War in her now-classic book, *They Were Soldiers: How the Wounded Return from America's Wars – The Untold Story*. She's done what billions of U.S. taxpayer dollars, 17 U.S. intelligence agencies, the finest officers produced by America's premier military academies, and untold numbers of analysts with access to highly classified information, have failed to do: accurately assess the situation in a country the U.S. has been intimately enmeshed in, on and off now, for the better part of four decades. With that in mind, let Jones give you the lowdown on the current state of "progress" there. When you're through, chances are – even if you lack a top-secret clearance and have never set foot in the Greater Middle East – you'll have a better grasp of the reality of the war than either the Pentagon or the president has ever had. ~ Nick Turse

**Afghanistan “After” the American War
Once More Down the Rabbit Hole
By Ann Jones**

Ten months ago, on December 28, 2014, a ceremony in Kabul officially marked the conclusion of America’s very long war in Afghanistan. President Obama called that day “a milestone for our country.” After more than 13 years, he said, “our combat mission in Afghanistan is ending, and the longest war in American history is coming to a responsible conclusion.”

That was then. This is now. In between, on September 28, 2015, came another milestone: the Taliban takeover of Kunduz, the capital of the province of the same name in northern Afghanistan, and with a population of about 270,000, the country’s fifth-largest city.

A few invaders strolled unopposed to the city center to raise the white flag of the Taliban. Others went door to door, searching for Afghan women who worked for women’s organizations or the government. They looted homes, offices, and schools, stealing cars and smashing computers. They destroyed three radio stations run by women. They attacked the offices of the American-led organization Women for Afghan Women and burned its women’s shelter to the ground. They denied reports on Kabul TV stations that they had raped women in the university dormitory and the women’s prison, then threatened to kill the reporters who broadcast the stories.

They called the mobile phones of targeted women who had escaped the city and warned them they would be killed if they returned. No longer safe in Kunduz, those women found that they were not safe in the places to which they had fled either. London’s *Telegraph* reported that “the lasting legacy of [the Taliban’s] invasion may ultimately prove to be the dismantlement of the city’s women’s rights network.”

The next day I got an email from a woman newly assigned to the American Embassy in Afghanistan. Security rules keep her confined behind the walls of the embassy grounds, she said. Still, knowing that Afghan women are not “secure,” she is determined to help them. Her plan, admittedly still in the brainstorming stage, calls for “programs that will teach women how to defend themselves in some form or another,” because “the best way for women to be safe is for them to know how to keep themselves safe.”

I think of all my brave Afghan colleagues who go to work in women’s organizations, like those in Kunduz, every day under threat of death. I think of fearless Afghan women across the country – activists, parliamentarians, doctors, teachers, organizers, policewomen, actresses, TV presenters, singers, radio broadcasters, journalists, government ministers, provincial officials, candidates for public office – who over the last 10 years have been assassinated one by one, by teams of armed men on motorcycles, or by a bomb attached to the underside of a car, or by masked squads with ropes or Kalashnikovs. These killings have gone on year after year, the names of the dead women remembered and their numbers tallied by Human Rights Watch, while the Afghan government and the Bush or Obama administrations uttered scarcely a word of protest or condolence, and Afghan police failed to arrest a single assassin. George W. Bush famously claimed to have “liberated” Afghan women. Fourteen years later, with the Taliban again rising, with Washington having sunk tens of billions of dollars into the training and arming

of hundreds of thousands of Afghan men to defend their country, it's now time to offer Afghan women a course in how to defend themselves?

The *New York Times* recently reprinted maps from the *Long War Journal* illustrating the enclaves the Taliban now occupy not just in Kunduz city, but throughout the land. They added up to about one-fifth of Afghan territory, and the movement was said to “probably either control or heavily influence about half of the country.” According to the United Nations, the “Taliban insurgency has spread through more of Afghanistan than at any point since 2001,” when it was driven from power.

As if to dramatize the circumstances depicted on the map, the *Times* also reported that reinforcements from the Afghan National Army (ANA) could not immediately travel from their headquarters in the capital, Kabul, to Kunduz because in between lay Baghlan Province, and it, too, was largely in the hands of the Taliban.

For months, the Taliban had been capturing bits and pieces of Kunduz Province, yet their attack apparently took the city's defenders by surprise. Afghan security forces numbering 7,000 scattered or retreated before the advance of a few hundred Taliban fighters. While its commanders tried to figure out what to do in response, American Major General Todd Semonite wrapped up his stint as head of the American mission training the Afghan National Army by congratulating ANA officers at a ceremony at “Resolute Support” headquarters in Kabul.

“You have made phenomenal progress,” he told them, “in budgetary programming, pay, personnel, and force structure systems... improving accountability while finding savings in the budget.” We know what the major general said because the U.S. military itself proudly released his statement to the press, as if it were something other than one more incandescent example of American obliviousness to the condition of the country U.S. forces have occupied for 14 years.

Withdrawing Withdrawal

Worried, I wrote to Mahbouba Seraj, an old friend in Kabul, with whom I had worked for many years, to ask how she was. She replied at once:

“I believe you were reading my mind, feeling my desperation. The situation here is going from bad to worse. No one knows how a group of 500 men can enter a province that is protected with a full military garrison – top generals in command of more than 7,000 police and army troops – and do what they did in Kunduz. They burned, looted, raped, and killed people, and there was no one to put a stop to it. This attack, which nobody saw coming, is yet another mystery of mismanagement, miscommunication, or something much bigger and more sinister than that.”

Such dark imaginings spring to mind easily when you live with Afghan uncertainty, reassured by the good intentions of strangers while bad stuff goes on all around you. Worse yet, often enough such seemingly paranoid unease proves to be dead on.

After the taking of Kunduz, President Obama was said to be “rethinking” the situation. Within days, he announced that the U.S. force of 9,800 still in Afghanistan – the force he had planned to

cut by half this year and reduce to 1,000 by the end of 2016 – would remain in place, perhaps until 2017, until, that is, he has left office and the fallout of this American war in Afghanistan has landed on another president's shoulders. What happens in the aftermath of Obama's officially concluded but never ended "good war" will be up to the second lucky winner in a row to inherit one or more leftover, unjustifiable wars.

By the time Obama made this second announcement, the Taliban had finally slipped out of Kunduz. They might have withdrawn right away, having made their point – that they are now capable of taking a major provincial capital garrisoned by the Afghan National Army.

Yet they chose to stay on for 15 days, long enough to terrify and murder enough citizens to make an indelible impression. Afghans of a certain age remembered in vivid flashbacks what they endured under Taliban rule before the American invasion of 2001. They could see for themselves that the men former President Hamid Karzai referred to as his "angry brothers" are still angry, and in all the long years they have waited for the inevitable departure of the Americans, they have not grown more tolerant. One woman who narrowly escaped from Kunduz summed it up simply: "They haven't changed one bit."

In an Afghan State of Mind

A few days later, my friend Mahbouba wrote me again. "For now," she said, "the light at the end of the tunnel is President Obama's speech supporting Afghans and his decision to keep troops in Afghanistan."

Like so many Afghans, one day she's desperate, the next she finds a glimmer of light in the gloom. That schizoid zigzag has become a way of life for embattled Afghans like her in this peculiar period "after" America's war that couldn't be won and will not end. In this darkening time, they face the growing strength of the Taliban, the intrusion of followers of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, the emergence of new splinter groups of Afghan ISIS supporters, and even the resurgence of "remnants of Al Qaeda." Yes, the very same bunch that President Obama assured us in 2013 could "never again establish a safe haven" in Afghanistan.

All these forces, along with the Afghan National Army, are now contesting control of parts of the country. That army, trained largely by U.S. forces for that staggering price of at least \$65 billion dollars (such costs have now been "classified"), is not exactly the stunning force that's been advertised. John Sopko, the special inspector general for Afghanistan, reported to Congress last March that the U.S. military had "overestimated the size of the Afghan police and army by a significant margin." Factor in U.S. military "accounting errors" and plenty of "ghost" personnel, and the actual size of the Afghan force is anybody's guess. In addition, that force, under pressure since last spring from a fierce, unrelenting Taliban offensive, has been losing an "unsustainable" average of 330 killed and wounded a week (and hemorrhaging a disastrous 4,000 deserters a month). It still needs the support of U.S. forces, especially Special Operations troops like those who, on October 3rd, "mistakenly" called in deliberate multiple air assaults on a Médecins Sans Frontières hospital at Kunduz, resulting in the largest loss of life (30 dead in addition to many more wounded) the humanitarian organization has suffered in its 35 years in that country.

Nothing stays steady in Afghanistan. Even promising developments have a way of turning dark. Yet my friend Mahbouba, tossed between hope and despair, always tries to take in the big picture, even as it shifts its shape before her eyes. A member of the Afghan royal family, she was imprisoned in 1978 as a young university graduate, together with her family, by Soviet-inspired Afghan communists who helped to overthrow the country's first president. Eventually released, she and her family fled to the United States just before the Soviet army invaded in 1979. She became an American citizen, devoted to American-style democracy as she found it at that time.

After American bombs brought down the Taliban government in 2001, she returned to Kabul to work with civil society and international aid organizations for democracy and for women. She coached female members of parliament. She headed the Afghan Women's Network. She ran for parliament herself and failed to be elected only because, in the Afghan version of democracy, autocracy often intervenes. In her case, election officials "mistakenly" did not deliver the ballots that would have allowed her constituents to vote.

Such was the new Afghan "democracy" run by Washington's handpicked warlords. (Lesson still not learned: It's a mistake to think that America's old combat cronies in its distant wars will behave in high office like George Washington.) In this surreal context, where nothing is quite what it is said to be, Mahbouba has worked through the long, long years of war and setbacks of every sort.

Now she writes of the catastrophic taking of Kunduz, "It has already become just another bureaucratic problem: yet another indicator of something or other slightly amiss. The government again has put in place a 'fact-finding committee' with two men in charge, one representing the president [Ashraf Ghani], and the other the country's Chief Executive Officer [Abdullah Abdullah]." Such bureaucratic duplication is the result of what Mahbouba calls "the two-headed legacy: this divided government with its disparate policies coming to nothing, crippling the country." That contentious, unequal power-sharing deal was cobbled together just a year ago when Secretary of State John Kerry resolved a bitter presidential campaign between the two men by inventing a new entity, "the National Unity Government," unknown in the Afghan constitution.

Now, like so many think-tankers and politicians in Washington, the two top officials of this American-made, semi-functional two-headed administration are trying to sort out what happened in Kunduz, or assigning others to do so. Then they may appoint another committee to discover what, if anything, should or could be done. But as many Afghans observe, such weighty matters sent to committee regularly fail to reemerge.

In the meantime, Afghans like Mahbouba Seraj continue to do their best in terrible circumstances, while worrying about where the next catastrophe may come from. In the last four decades, they've been through a coup d'état that overthrew the last king; three presidential assassinations (one republican, two Communists); a Soviet invasion that launched a 10-year CIA proxy war (in conjunction with the Saudis and the Pakistanis) to give the Soviet Union its own "Vietnam"; a ruinous, murderous three-year civil war among multiple factions of America's old allies, the mujahidin, after the Soviets left in defeat; the torture, castration, execution, and public hanging (by the Taliban) of Najibullah, the president the Russians had left in place (and who is

now regaining post-mortem popularity); the suffocating five-year rule of the Taliban; an American-led invasion that returned a rogue's gallery of war criminals to power and started a 14-year war now ended officially, but not where it counts – in Afghanistan. No wonder people in that country are always waiting for the next combat boot to drop.

Of that prospect, Mahbouba writes: “The West lost Afghanistan and they know it. Right now, what is happening is a policy of containment, an effort to keep all the problems, failures, crises, and internal fighting within the borders of this country because the world cannot afford to have them spill out.”

“Take the panic building right now in Uzbekistan, for example, a country that has no army of its own and is very anxious, perhaps afraid, because of what is happening right across its border with Afghanistan. Everyone knows which one of the world's egomaniacal Strongmen may decide to ‘help’ and ‘protect’ the Uzbeks.”

Given recent events in Syria, it's once again eerily possible to imagine the specter of Russian forces materializing, as in 1979, just across the Amu Darya River on Afghanistan's northern border. To think of it is to be lost in dark memories of that invasion and the terrible proxy war that followed: the Red Army meets the ragtag mujahidin, Ronald Reagan's devoutly religious “freedom fighters,” armed and directed by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan's CIA equivalent, the ISI. Sadly enough, so many decades later, we still live with the sequel to that war, and thanks to America's hapless, misbegotten “nation building” of the post-9/11 years, Afghans have never been able to shake off the military and political “leadership” of Washington's aging warlord cronies, still clinging close to the money tree.

A Patrick Chapatte cartoon catches the ultimate nightmare of America's second Afghan War in what should be, but can't yet be, called its waning days: following road signs pointing the way to “Afghan Pullout,” U.S. soldiers in an armored vehicle drive in a circle, round and round and round and round.

Fear of the Future

At the moment, as Mahbouba reports from Kabul, “There is a heavy cloud of mistrust and doubt hanging over this country. No one believes anyone anymore. Rumors and conspiracy theories are flying everywhere, joined by a fear of the future and the unknown. Young Afghan men, mostly educated, full of energy and ambition, are leaving the country in droves every day. There is no work for them here. No future. The poorer ones don't find the makings of a single meal to feed their families.”

Afghan boys and men have long gone to Pakistan or Iran in search of work, but now they set out on a trek thousands of miles long with Europe as their ultimate goal, joining untold numbers of Syrians and Iraqis in a desperate migration the likes of which we have not seen before. Last year, 58,500 Afghans successfully sought asylum in Europe. In the first seven months of this year, 77,700 made their way to Turkey or Europe and applied for asylum. By October, the number had risen to a staggering 120,000. Today, tens of thousands more risk their lives to leave the land that Washington “built.”

As yet another generation of potential Afghan leaders flees the once lovely city (the third brain-draining mass migration since the 1980s), the older Kabul disappears from view, dwarfed by mammoth new construction projects: glass-faced office towers, block after block of ornate palatial homes, enormous wedding palaces aglow in multicolored neon. Here is evidence that, in the course of an endless war, some well-connected men have grown extremely wealthy very fast. And the already immense gap between rich and poor, noted in the Karzai years, continues to widen, as does the distrust of the people in their “democratically elected” government. In these matters, if no others, canny Afghans closely follow the example of their American 1% counterparts.

The two-headed government seems unconcerned. In fact, Afghans now claim that it has completely set aside its pre-election promises to fight the country’s rampant corruption. People joke that President Ghani, who once co-wrote a book called *Fixing Failed States*, should get to work on his memoir, to be titled, so the quipsters say, *Failed Government*. Afghans who once viewed former president Hamid Karzai as no more than “the mayor of Kabul,” playing second fiddle to U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, now fear that President Ghani stands in a similar relation to the commander of American and coalition forces, U.S. Army General John Campbell.

They say, too, that Ghani has gathered around him a group of men who work for their own ends and give no thought to their country. That, of course, is nothing new in Afghan political life, but after the great hope the new government engendered only one year ago, the letdown feels like a plunge into some abyss. It’s clear that where self-interest and corruption flourish, righteous and angry men will rise up. As every Afghan knows, that’s how the Taliban first got its start.

Mahbouba ended her latest missive to me this way: “Nothing is certain here. But one thing I can tell you is this: Afghanistan needs leaders worthy of the people. Our soldiers, who are losing their lives all over this country, would never abandon their duties if they had good commanders and honest leaders. Our young men would not leave the country if these old men made way for them. It is our misfortune to be cursed with bad leaders whom we did not choose for ourselves. There are not that many of them in number, but they thrive like cancer in this land.”