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West's cover-ups belie its Afghan strategy

By Fouad Pervez
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In the past nearly 10 years, the United States has expended substantial blood and treasure to try and stabilize Afghanistan. However, recent events suggest US efforts are problematic in themselves and that the chaos will only worsen. There are critical problems with accountability, transparency, and public scrutiny, all of which not only make it harder for the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to shift away from unproductive policies. These also create serious domestic political issues in Afghanistan.

The news about the women killed in a botched raid on February 12 is emblematic of all the current woes in Afghanistan. The military finally admitted that US Special [Operations](#) Forces were responsible for the deaths of three women, two of whom were pregnant, in a nighttime raid. They already admitted the same raid resulted in the deaths of two men, a policeman, and a prosecutor. More troubling is the accusation that the troops dug the bullets out of the women's bodies to cover up the evidence. General Stanley McChrystal, the US and NATO commander in Afghanistan, is now ordering an investigation of the raid.

The incident is a prime example of the current problems in the Afghanistan strategy. First, McChrystal launched an investigation only after the story of the alleged cover-up gained widespread media coverage. Officials from the US-led NATO command have denied the tampering charge, though Afghan officials pointed out that NATO officials were perplexed by the evidence precisely because of the tampering. Afghan officials were unable to perform an autopsy on the bodies and were denied access to the bodies at the scene. There were also several bullets missing from the scene. Given the oddities surrounding the case in the first place, the Pentagon should have launched an investigation much earlier.

The initial Pentagon report claimed the men were insurgents, and that the women were found already dead, bound and gagged, possibly from an honor killing. Thus, it was filled with inaccuracies, if not outright lies. More than a dozen survivors, witnesses, and local investigators strongly disputed the Pentagon's initial claims, too, but there was no investigation until the story finally got wider media coverage in the past week.

This incident follows the pattern of others. Many nighttime raids conducted in Afghanistan are based on poor intelligence and result in the deaths of many civilians. Yet there is little in the way of public accountability. No information is available about reprimands handed out to troops who kill civilians, intelligence officers who obtain poor information, or higher-up commanders who plan these botched raids. This incident is one of the few where any information about an investigation is even public. If they find the [soldiers](#) did indeed commit a crime, will they be punished? Given the track record, it seems unlikely. We may never even hear about the results.

Public accountability

Public information does matter here. Despite his statements, McChrystal has actually increased nighttime raids, even after they triggered angry protests in Afghanistan. Although these raids cause over half of all civilian deaths in Afghanistan, and despite political pressure to curb them, he has consistently backed such missions. In addition, since last summer, American and NATO troops have also killed 30 Afghans and wounded 80 more when firing at convoys and checkpoints - few, if any, were real threats. These attacks have turned villagers against the foreign troops. Many of those detained at Bagram Air Base joined the insurgency in response to these attacks. In addition, the numbers don't include civilian fatalities at the hands of private [security](#) contractors.

Given this information, public accountability for these civilian fatalities is quite important. Doling out punishment to those whose mistakes led to civilian deaths signals to Afghans that the US is committed to limiting what has been a huge problem over the past nine years. It suggests that Americans are legitimately trying to change military behavior, and will punish those who do not comply. However, this commitment is not credible if there is no accountability.

True, civilian casualties have declined overall because of fewer aerial bombardments. But ground raids and checkpoint firings have not declined, and the United States and NATO are not publicly reprimanding soldiers for their actions.

McChrystal certainly understands the issue. He went so far as to say that the troops "have shot an amazing number of people, but to my knowledge, none has ever proven to be a threat". This trend runs counter to the emphasis on counterinsurgency (COIN) in Afghanistan. McChrystal has frequently noted that winning hearts and minds, and minimizing civilian casualties, is crucial to the mission. However, shooting deaths of civilians related to convoys, checkpoints, and nighttime raids have all either increased or remained the same. NATO and the US keep killing civilians at a high rate, turning the population against them. Part of the issue is the United States continues to rely on locals without any understanding of political realities on the ground. Tribal leaders and warlords remain a key source of repeatedly poor intelligence. After all, these are self-

interested actors playing local politics. Yet the United States not only refuses to admit this is a failing strategy, it continues to use it for the raids.

The press hasn't helped matters much. Coverage of Afghanistan tends to focus solely on [President Hamid Karzai's](#) intransigence against the United States and general instability in the country. There is very little mention of civilian deaths or the lack of accountability for these deaths, both of which are driving the public outrage. These incidents should be major stories - the February 12 raid deserved much more coverage. The press initially echoed the Pentagon's words about the incident, making no effort to check any of the information, even though this view was challenged from the beginning. The Times of London exposed the incident after a detailed investigation, its damning article came out on March 13 - about a month before The New York Times and the Los Angeles Times covered the story.

This pattern has repeated itself with other shooting deaths. The Pentagon denies everything and the press follows along until somebody else does some real research. This happened with the 2008 Azizabad raid that killed almost 100 civilians. The Pentagon denied the civilian casualties, and the coverage repeated those lies, until a video surfaced that disproved those claims. NATO officials reportedly intimidate, censor, and punish reporters who call them on their lies as well, making matters even worse. Thus there is a general lack of public and media scrutiny of Afghanistan, coupled with the lack of military or political accountability for actions on the ground.

Karzai's concerns

These issues have all created serious domestic issues in Afghanistan. Karzai has, not surprisingly, lashed out at the United States in the past few weeks. Although he is a corrupt and ineffective leader, handpicked as America's "guy" in Afghanistan, he actually has legitimate gripes this time. As the civilian deaths continue, anger is growing in the streets throughout Afghanistan. Even if mounting fatalities didn't bother him, Karzai has little choice but to harshly attack these American and NATO activities. He would face serious domestic costs if he did not come down strongly against the United States on this issue. Given how unpopular Karzai is, particularly after the almost certainly fraudulent elections, he may have a difficult time reversing his hard line against America lest he lose power. "Moderates" will have a hard time as well. US actions are undoubtedly increasing the political power of hardliners.

The lack of accountability undermines the credibility of the US and NATO commitment to winning hearts and minds. The lack of scrutiny over the military policy in Afghanistan, largely from the media, allows leaders to continue actions that are failing. And the continuation of these policies, particularly nighttime raids relying on poor intelligence from warlords and tribal leaders, coupled with a lack of accountability when these policies go wrong, is turning the populace increasingly against US and NATO forces. Not surprisingly, American and NATO troops are being attacked more frequently, especially with IEDs.

Another consequence of these policies is the limitation of political space in Afghanistan, essentially forcing Afghani political leaders into a box where they have to take a hard line against America. This is a dangerous combination that threatens to destabilize Afghanistan even

more, if that is even possible. If the United States and NATO are determined to stay the course, something [President Obama](#) certainly seems committed to, they need to address these particular issues immediately.

Increased accountability might be the easiest, and most important, first step. It would provide Afghans a strong signal that the United States is committed to pursuing a more transparent and responsible military policy.

A very public process punishing those responsible for civilian deaths, particularly for the troops involved in the February 12 raid, would be a positive [development](#). Limiting nighttime raids, or at least accounting for realities on the ground when gathering intelligence, would also make a big difference. Pressure on the mainstream American media to cover the story from the Afghani perspective, thus focusing on the civilian fatalities and trying to understand the anger without falling back on the simplistic and inaccurate cultural/religious angle, which has been the dominant narrative over the past nine years, could make a substantial difference, too.

Not surprisingly, a recent Pentagon report on Afghanistan paints a grim picture. The insurgency is growing stronger and deeper. In 92 of 121 districts the [US military](#) identified as strategically important for stabilizing the country, the populace is sympathetic to the insurgents. Violence increased 87% from the same time period last year.

However, if none of these key problems are addressed, there is little reason to expect the situation in Afghanistan to improve anytime soon.