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Foreign Policy in Focus

Afghanistan under the Knife

By John Feffer

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It was a primitive form of surgery. Almost ten years ago, the United States and its allies stuck a knife deep into Afghanistan in an attempt to remove two malignancies, al-Qaeda and the Taliban. One of those, Osama bin Laden's crew, is nearly gone. The Taliban, after going into remission for a brief period, has come back.

The knife remains in the patient.

With bin Laden gone, the debate has intensified: what to do with the knife? The generals want to keep it in there. Remove the knife, they argue, and the patient will bleed out. Wrong, says the other side. The knife is doing more harm than good. Remove the knife immediately and the patient still has a chance of recovery.

If the initial surgery was primitive, then these post-operative choices are equally unsophisticated. But before turning to a more reasonable plan of care, let's look more closely at the patient's vital signs.

Approximately 100,000 U.S. troops are currently in Afghanistan, alongside about 30,000 coalition forces. More than [1,400 U.S. soldiers have died](#) in the conflict, and thousands of Afghan civilians have died as well. Washington spends about \$10 billion a month on the war. As a presidential candidate, Barack Obama argued for drawing down the war in Iraq and refocusing on the "good war" in Afghanistan. As president, he [pushed for more troops in sooner and out sooner](#): the so-called surge. Obama pledged that the United States would start removing troops in July 2011, though Secretary of Defense Robert Gates [almost immediately began suggesting](#) that this was not a firm deadline.

Before the raid that killed bin Laden, [the U.S. government drew up a plan](#) to withdraw 5,000 troops from Afghanistan in July and as many as 5,000 more by year's end. After the raid, pressure has built to accelerate this timetable. A [bipartisan group of lawmakers has sent a letter](#) to the president calling "to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan that are not crucial to the immediate national security objective of combating al-Qaeda."

This is a popular position. Now, nearly half of all Americans — 42 percent, [according to a recent USA Today poll](#) — think that we made a mistake invading Afghanistan. Mistake or not, [a majority of Americans want out](#), and that includes 62 percent of those politically crucial independents.

Our allies are also preparing to bail. The Dutch pulled out last year. Canada is [leaving this year](#). British Prime Minister [David Cameron is now pushing for an early withdrawal](#) of British troops. The Italian government and the German parliament [are angling to complete withdrawal](#) by 2014.

And the Afghans? It's not easy to gauge public opinion in strife-torn countries. But [according to a poll](#) commissioned by *The Washington Post* and others published last December, more than half of all Afghans want U.S. troops out, the sooner the better, and 77 percent of respondents trust the local police to protect them versus only 36 percent who put their faith in foreign troops. According to the Asia Foundation's [2010 annual country report](#), 83 percent of Afghans support negotiations with and reintegration of armed opposition groups.

The surgery has had some significant side effects. Our military funding of Pakistan and our reliance on the country as a supply conduit for U.S. troops in Afghanistan has [created a monster](#) out of Pakistan's army and intelligence service. Our drone attacks in the tribal areas of that

country are creating the conditions of a potential failed nuclear state. As for the patient itself, Afghanistan remains poor, [dependent on opium production](#), and divided by myriad internecine conflicts. Our counter-insurgency campaign has [failed to win hearts and minds](#).

The costs of the war have been immense. The people of the United States, most NATO countries, and even Afghanistan no longer support the military intervention. And, with bin Laden dead and the number of his operatives in Afghanistan down to a hundred or so, the central military objective of neutralizing al-Qaeda has been accomplished.

Nurse, please sew up the patient and let's move on. Resources are limited.

But wait, the critics caution: the war in Afghanistan was never about al-Qaeda. I was on the [Diane Rehm Show last week](#), and journalist Jonathan Landay made a case for staying in Afghanistan to separate all the factions in the country's civil war, serve as a check on the neighboring countries that are jockeying for position, and ultimately prevent India and Pakistan from going to war. Pull out the knife, in other words, and not only with the patient bleed out but the infection will spread rapidly and destroy others.

Obviously it's time for a consult. Once we take a step back to consider a range of options, the choice between pulling out the knife immediately and keeping it in indefinitely resembles the choice between a lobotomy and decapitation.

First of all, it is neither militarily nor politically feasible to remove all U.S. troops tomorrow. And few make this argument. The [recent bill introduced by John Garamendi \(D-CA\)](#), for instance, proposed that the United States reduce our commitment by 90 percent by 2013. Most congressional efforts, including Howard Dean's [latest grassroots campaign](#), have focused on getting the president to provide a timetable for withdrawal.

Second, the withdrawal should be accompanied by a significant uptick in economic and political assistance. Compared with the amount of money lavished on destroying the country, the United States has provided only modest sums for its reconstruction. And, frankly, much of the latter was [wasted](#), as administration officials [concede](#). The U.S. Agency for International Development [has overhauled its programs](#), but more can be done to involve Afghans — rather than just non-native NGOs — in the rebuilding process.

Third, the administration has to be serious about political negotiations with the Taliban. Washington has [reportedly accelerated its direct talks](#) with the Taliban. But it has also [conducted air strikes](#) on precisely the layer of Taliban leadership most likely to respond to such overtures. We can't continue to shoot now and talk later. There [will never be a military solution](#) to the Afghanistan war. Bring in the diplomats and empower them to make real deals.

Finally, Afghanistan is a regional problem, so the solution must be regional as well. We're not going to keep Pakistan and India from each other's throats with 100,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Our presence hasn't prevented Iran and Tajikistan from pursuing their own national interests in the country either. We can only hope to restrain the efforts of neighbors to play out their conflicts on Afghan territory as part of a deal that constrains our military ambitions as well.

Now, let's go back to the hospital. A patient comes into a doctor's office with a knife in his chest. "Doctor, what do you suggest?"

The doctor examines the wound. "I could stick it in deeper," he says.

"No, I don't like that option," the patient responds.

"Okay, I could take it out immediately and discharge you," the doctor offers.

"Those are the only two choices?" The patient looks around. "Isn't this a hospital? Can't you pull out the knife in a way that minimizes the pain, stanches the bleeding, reduces the risk of infection, and actually makes me better?"

The doctor looks around. "Ah, yes, we *are* in a hospital. I suppose I could pull together a team to come up with a better plan."

Dr. Obama: your patient is waiting.

Arab Summer?

The revolutions of 1989 toppled a number of undemocratic regimes but failed, in Tiananmen Square, to transform Chinese politics. Similarly, the Arab Spring has come up against serious resistance. And the Obama administration continues to hesitate.

In Syria, the government of Bashar al-Assad has [killed at least 850 people and imprisoned 8,000 others](#). "In an age where Islamic extremism and terrorism continue to dominate Washington's foreign policy relations in the Middle East, the Obama administration has been careful not to prematurely push Assad overboard," writes Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF) contributor Daniel DePetris in [Don't Count Bashar Out](#). "White House rhetoric is heating up, President Obama's National Security Council continues to demand that Assad halt the killing of unarmed protesters, and the administration has recently drafted individual sanctions. But in the case of Syria, Washington has yet to adopt the regime-change outlook that became so prevalent during the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings."

In Yemen, too, Washington has been reluctant to jettison an ally. "Since Obama came to office in January 2009, U.S. security assistance to the Yemeni regime has gone up 20-fold," writes FPIF columnist Stephen Zunes in [Yemen on the Edge](#). "Despite such large-scale unconditional support, however, the 32-year reign of autocratic President Ali Abdullah Saleh may finally be coming to an end. Yet the Obama administration has been ambivalent in its support for a democratic transition in this impoverished but strategically important country."

Meanwhile, the leaders of the Arab Spring are looking around for role models. FPIF contributor Richard Javad Heydarian looks at the potential of Turkey to serve as an example for aspiring Arab democrats. "Political freedom, accountability, corruption, and economic justice are at the center of democratic protests," he writes in [Arab Spring, Turkish Summer?](#) "Turkey's record on these issues has drawn the notice of many in the Islamic world. But Turkey's experience with electoral politics and market economics is unique, a response to the specifics of Turkish history and culture. The example therefore may not be replicable."

Finally, in our [Fiesta](#) coverage of culture and foreign policy, FPIF contributor Peter Certo looks at the latest offering from monologist Mike Daisey, a jeremiad against Apple. In [Blood on the Trackpads](#), Certo describes how Daisey "traces Apple's journey from a two-man pirate enterprise to one of the largest, most secretive tech companies in the world. Through careful expositions and humorous outbursts, Daisey chronicles some three decades of the company's breakthroughs, blunders, tribulations, and triumphs, portraying the rapt attention and comically emotional investment of a true believer and often a fervent critic -- portraying, in effect, himself."