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Wali Karzai: A Deal We Should Refuse

By Kelley B. Vlahos

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There is a “chubby” man with a big smile on his face sitting in the middle of the crossroads at Kandahar. He is smiling, no doubt, because he knows he has the power to influence the success or failure of the international military mission in Afghanistan today.

And he embodies everything that is wrong with that mission in the first place.

How can one man dictate the outcome of the latest military “surge” into southern Afghanistan? Well, when you figure this fat man is Ahmed Wali Karzai, brother of President Hamid Karzai, it becomes evident that this latest attempt at winning over hearts and minds, i.e., “population-centric warfare,” is pretty much [doomed from the start](#).

Known as the “King of Kandahar,” Karzai has an iron grip on every political and commercial enterprise in southern Afghanistan. Though he vehemently denies much of it, numerous reports have him pegged as the “godfather” who lets nothing – trucks carrying supplies, private security guards, property transactions, even [opium shipments](#), and the secret police – move until he gets a cut. He’s been accused of taking over local law enforcement, stealing land for his cronies, stuffing ballot boxes for his brother, and disappearing his political enemies.

With his family's hands in nearly every lucrative industry that exists in Afghanistan, including construction, security, fuel, and food, brother Karzai reportedly makes a cool billion off the foreign occupation each year – the ultimate war profiteer.

Described as the “chubby 49-year-old half-brother of Hamid Karzai,” Ahmed has one official title – head of the provincial legislative council – but that’s just a fig leaf over the [“shadowy empire” he’s built in Kandahar](#), which happens to be the birthplace of the Taliban movement and the city on which the American counterinsurgency has pinned all of its latest hopes for ratification.

Simply put, here is yet another slippery Karzai with whom the military has struck a Faustian bargain in pursuit of its ever evolving fix for Afghanistan. In the process, everything becomes compromised and sullied, the opposite of what President Barack Obama had [charged back in December](#) at the announcement of his “new” strategy:

“The days of providing a blank check are over. ... And going forward, we will be clear about what we expect from those who receive our assistance. We will support Afghan ministries, governors, and local leaders that combat corruption and deliver for the people. We expect those who are ineffective or corrupt to be held accountable.”

Unless, of course, their name is Karzai. The Obama administration was already forced to swallow and grin at [the tainted results of Hamid’s reelection](#) in 2009. Meanwhile, critics complain “the King of Kabul” has [done little to combat corruption](#) or “deliver for the people,” beyond the [poppy palaces of the city’s elite](#) and the warlords who matter to the preservation of his power.

Last month the administration launched a [charm offensive](#) on the visiting President Karzai, reportedly to “mend fences,” but no doubt it was to make sure everyone stayed on the same sheet of music in Kandahar. But first, officials reportedly had to assure a previously livid Karzai that his brother would not be put on some “capture or kill” list as one top military official [suggested back in March](#).

As if on cue, NATO forces in Kandahar [announced in late May](#) that Ahmed Wali Karzai will have a role to play in the upcoming operations. They said he wants to “stand out of the way” of the handpicked provincial governor, Tooryalai Wesa, and that “he is trying to help his country, that he’s trying to help us and he’s trying to help his people,” even though, said the report, “Western officials and analysts view him as a potential obstacle to winning the trust of local Afghans in Kandahar, amid a major operation by U.S. and Afghan forces to break the Taliban’s influence in its spiritual heartland.”

Sure, he is “trying to help” and is most certainly “a potential obstacle to winning the trust of local Afghans” – but not necessarily for the reasons suggested. As usual, a lot more is going on than meets the eye. Seems Karzai has already been helping out quite a bit, delivering intelligence to U.S. Special Operations Forces for night raids against suspected Taliban leaders throughout Kandahar City. He is doing this through his own secret police/intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security (NDS).

As Inter Press Service reporter Gareth Porter [pointed out recently](#), American officials, far from marginalizing the most notorious, possibly the most corrupt man in Kandahar, have instead enlisted him to snitch on his political enemies – for a price still unknown – so that commandos can raid more homes and drop more bombs, in a province of 900,000 Afghans, most of whom we have promised to protect.

In an email to Porter, Lt. Col. Tadd Sholtis acknowledged that the U.S. was taking intelligence from Karzai – that it would be “foolish” not to – but he assured Karzai’s contribution is among “multiple methods” of information-gathering, and that everything was evaluated with respect to “self-interest or bias.”

Meanwhile, Karzai has boasted openly of his influence in this regard, telling the London *Times* in a May report titled “[NATO Gambles with Collaboration with Ahmad Wali Karzai in Kandahar](#),” that he has provided “the majority of intelligence in the region.” This was backed by an unnamed NATO source, who told *Time* that “most of our intelligence comes directly or indirectly from him.”

That same article suggested that Karzai, who has called himself the “[Nancy Pelosi of Kandahar](#),” has been very mature and professional about the whole arrangement. “[Wali Karzai] in the past has threatened to call down NATO air strikes or arrange night raids by U.S. Special Forces on tribal elders who defied him,” sources told the magazine.

Realistically, the military has no real choice but to “lie down with dogs,” said foreign policy writer Conn Hallinan, but it better expect to “rise up with fleas.”

“We have to work with Karzai because it is [Hamid] Karzai’s brother, and he is president. And we have to work with Karzai because there is no other game in town,” Hallinan told Antiwar.com.

He said the military’s critical deficits in on-the-ground intelligence – not completely understanding the key players and Kandahar’s complicated tribal politics – forced NATO into this disadvantage from the beginning. Never mind that this is what the Army’s [Human Terrain Teams](#) were supposed to take care of.

“How are you going to go around [Karzai]? In order to go around him you have to know the clan lines, who the tribal leaders are, who is up and who is down – and it’s not clear we’d get the right answers [on our own] anyway.”

Even more daunting is Karzai’s control over the local private security companies, i.e., local militias, detailed recently in [a report \[.pdf\]](#) by none other than [Kimberly Kagan](#) and Carl Forsberg at the Institute for the Study of War:

“Although there are numerous private security companies in Kandahar, they are ultimately controlled or influenced by a small number of power brokers. Ahmad Wali Karzai retains significant influence with the PSCs run by the Karzai family, including Asia Security Group and Watan Risk Management. He also directly controls other forces,

including his own personal security detail and the Kandahar Strike Force. Finally, his hand-picked commanders, Haji Seyid Jan Khakrezwal and Akhtar Mohammad, respectively control the Provincial Council Security Force and the security forces that operate in Ayno Mena, the gated community in Kandahar that he financed and developed. Finally, Watan Risk Management has subcontracted to the security forces of Commander Ruhullah , Haji Seyid Jan Khakrezwal's nephew, to secure Highway One from Kandahar to Kabul.”

Of course, Kagan and Forsberg use this as a launching point to insist that Karzai must be forced to step aside from all this influence in order for the international forces to “shape the formation of Kandahar’s new private security structure,” ultimately placing it under the Afghan army’s control:

“The formation of a powerful conglomerate of PSCs under the political control of local power brokers like Ahmed Wali Karzai would undermine the long-term stability of southern Afghanistan and the strength of Afghanistan’s legitimate security institutions. ...

“Shaping the formation of Kandahar’s new private security architecture requires ISAF to engage in the process at an early stage and set the conditions for the creation of the new structure. ISAF should use its influence to remove the process from the control of local power brokers, such as Ahmed Wali Karzai or Ruhullah.”

While such a recommendation may seem reasonable enough from the comfort of one’s think-tank, to believe Karzai – a man who is routinely quoted as saying stuff like “I hold the key to five provinces … I am the most successful person here” – is going to cede such authority without a fight seems somewhat naive, or in Kagan’s case, still stuck in the Iraq Surge Myth circa 2008.

The military seems to know this, and facing a Taliban enemy that is already [assassinating their new friends](#) throughout the city, realize they can’t afford to ostracize Karzai now:

From the *Times* article:

“Senior coalition officers would prefer to see the back of Wali Karzai but they have come to the conclusion that their only option is to work with him. They are trying, in the words of one officer, to ‘remodel’ a man accused of running a private fiefdom in the south.”

This is a very tall order, even for the U.S., which is quite used to whitewashing bad guys all over the world for political and strategic convenience. With [the best lobbyists in town](#), even [Mobutu](#), [Barre](#), and [Savimbi](#) enjoyed American comforts when it was expedient enough to offer it.

That, it would seem, is the last word, for now. The military needs a PR success and quick – the president wants to begin pulling out troops by next summer and the majority of the American public, [which no longer believes in the mission](#), is already squirming, albeit quietly, to get out.

But at what price? First, the administration turns a blind eye to the fraudulent presidential election, basically sending the message that truth and fairness is pursued in democracies only when it is diplomatically convenient. Then, it ignores the barefaced shakedown of the Afghan people by Kabul's elites, who we know are buoyed by foreign aid and the drug trade.

We have said nothing as Afghan children are left homeless, [targets of kidnapping, rape, abuse, and human trafficking.](#)

Now the administration appears willing to sideline the reform/protect part of its “population-centric” approach, reconciling itself to a [special operations mission](#) for which it must rely on a known scoundrel who has, up to now, used the war as his own private cash machine, leaving little for the common people who live there.

As an incredulous David Ignatius [pointed out in an April column](#), “if the United States accommodates the existing power structure, it will appear to be condoning corruption here – a bad message for the public in Afghanistan and America alike.”

No doubt the Kandaharis are already listening, and they know that as long as the fat man continues to smile, their battle for the future of Kandahar is all but lost. Pretty soon, all those reports that suggest the people [might eventually prefer the Taliban](#) may be realized. Then what are we truly there for?

“If they send one million soldiers to Kandahar and Ahmed Wali is still here,” [said one Kandahari woman](#) who did not want to be named, “it will not improve the security situation.”

Shekiba Hashimi, a female lawmaker from Kandahar, reiterated that sentiment. “If Ahmed Wali was not there, I can tell you that the situation would improve.”