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Beginning to Smell in Afghanistan

Posted By [Steve Breyman](#)

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The Army's Col. Timothy R. Reese is, at least for the time being, still the chief of the Operations Command Advisory Team in Baghdad. His job is to advise Iraqi general, Abud Qanbar, in charge of security in Baghdad. Prior to his deployment to Iraq, Reese ran the Combat Studies Institute at Fort Leavenworth, where he helped author the Army's history of the Iraq War.

Reese caused a stir this past week when a [memo](#) prepared for the staff of Gen. Ray Odierno, U.S. commander in Iraq, made its way to the public sphere. Now widely published, the memo goes on a truth bender about the Iraqi government and military and U.S.-Iraqi relations.

Let's hope that when his current tour ends, Reese will return to Fort Leavenworth or some other plum post. Let's hope, for his sake, that he does not simply rotate over to Afghanistan, as have tens of thousands of other U.S. servicemen and women. But should the latter be his fate, I drafted a memo to help get him started and to shorten his stay, along with those of all foreign combat forces in Afghanistan.

Prior to penning his memo, Reese read military intelligence reports from Baghdad province and the rest of Iraq. I do not have access to such materials for Afghanistan (or anywhere else). My "intelligence" is solely open source. I suspect the memo below would appear even harsher if I had inside knowledge. The draft deliberately follows the structure of the Reese memo, directly borrowing from it where possible and pertinent.

The U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are not identical. A Reese memo from Afghanistan will thus not be identical to a Reese memo from Iraq. There may, however, be sufficient overlap to get us thinking about why there is a surge but no deadline for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan.

It's Time for the U.S. to Declare Victory and Go Home

As the old saying goes, "guests, like fish, begin to smell after three days." Because we have no status-of-forces-agreement with Afghanistan, we cannot even pose as guests as in Iraq, let alone welcome ones. After almost eight years in Afghanistan, it is hard to exaggerate how pungent must be our odor to Afghans.

Today the Afghan Security Forces (ASF: national army and national police) are good enough to keep the government of Afghanistan (GOA) from being overthrown by the separate or combined actions of the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and assorted other violent extremists. Afghanistan may well collapse into chaos due to other causes, but we have made the ASF strong enough for the internal security mission. Perhaps it is one of those infamous paradoxes of counterinsurgency that while the ASF is not good in any objective sense, it is good enough for Afghanistan in 2009. The United States has achieved our objectives in Afghanistan. We ought to declare victory and bring our combat forces home. Due to our tendency to look after the tactical details and miss the proverbial forest for the trees, this critically important strategic realization is in danger of being missed.

Equally important to realize is that we aren't making the GOA and the ASF better in any significant ways with our current approach. Remaining in Afghanistan indefinitely – we have no pullout date as yet – will yield little in the way of improving the abilities of the ASF or the functioning of the GOA. Furthermore, in light of the GOA's long-running concern for civilian casualties from tactical air strikes, the security of U.S. forces is at risk. Afghanistan is not a country with a history of treating even its welcomed guests well. This is not to say we can be defeated, only that the current rise in U.S. and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) casualties is sure to continue into the foreseeable future because we can no longer bring to bear our overwhelming advantage in firepower for fear of collateral damage. The use of the military instrument of national power in its current form has accomplished all that can be expected. In the next section I will present an admittedly one-sided view of the evidence in support of this view.

The general lack of progress in essential services and good governance is now so broad that it ought to be clear that we no longer are moving the Afghans "forward." Below is an outline of the information on which I base this assessment:

1. The ineffectiveness and corruption of GOA ministries and officials is the stuff of legend.
2. Anti-corruption efforts are little more than a campaign tool for Karzai. Even the president's brother is suspected of involvement in opium trafficking.
3. The GOA is failing to take rational steps to improve its public infrastructure.
4. There is no progress toward resolving the warlord problem.
5. National reconciliation is at best at a standstill and perhaps going backward.
6. Incorporation of the private armies of warlords into the ASF has not happened as agreed upon, and there is no evidence that it will.
7. The situation of Afghan national minorities continues to fester.
8. Political violence and intimidation is rampant in the civilian community as well as in military and legal institutions.

The rate of improvement of the ASF is far slower than it should be given the amount of effort and resources being provided by the U.S. and its allies. The U.S. and its partners have made

as much progress in building the ASF as is possible. Since the start of the surge in 2007 we have again expanded and improved the ASF. They are now at the point where the Taliban and its allies – outfitted mostly with small arms and IEDs – cannot militarily defeat ASF forces. This is a remarkable tale for which many can be justifiably proud. We have reached the point of diminishing returns, however, and need to find a new set of tools. The massive partnering efforts of U.S. combat forces with ASF is not yielding benefits commensurate with the effort and is now generating its own opposition. Again, some touch points for this assessment are:

1. If there ever was a window where the seeds of a professional military culture could have been implanted, it is now long past. U.S. and ISAF combat forces will not be here long enough or with sufficient influence to change it.
2. The military culture of the warlord model remains entrenched and will not change. The senior leadership of the ASF is incapable of change in the current environment.
 - (a) Corruption among officers (especially in the National Police) is widespread.
 - (b) Neglect and mistreatment of enlisted men is the norm.
 - (c) Cronyism and nepotism are rampant in the assignment and promotion system.
 - (d) Laziness is endemic.
 - (e) Extreme centralization of command and control is the norm.
 - (f) Lack of initiative is legion.
 - (g) Unwillingness to change, do anything new blocks progress.
 - (h) Near total ineffectiveness of the Afghan national army and national police institutional organizations and systems prevents the ASF from becoming self-sustaining.
 - (i) For every positive story about a good ASF junior officer with initiative, or an ASF commander who conducts a rehearsal or an after action review or some individual training event, there are 10 examples of the most basic lack of military understanding despite the massive partnership efforts by our combat forces and advisory efforts.
3. The ASF leadership is flawed in serious ways. Below are some salient examples:
 - (a) They are unable to plan ahead.
 - (b) They are unable to stand up to the warlords.
 - (c) They were and are unable to conduct a public relations effort in support of the continued U.S. and ISAF presence.
 - (d) They are unable to instill discipline among their officers and units for the most basic military standards.
 - (e) They are unable to stop the nepotism and cronyism.
 - (f) They are unable to take basic steps to manage the force development process.
 - (g) They are unable to stick to their deals with U.S. commanders.

Yet despite all their grievous shortcomings noted above, ASF military capability is sufficient to handle the current level of threats from the Taliban and what remains of al-Qaeda. Our combat forces' presence here on the streets and in the rural areas adds only marginally to their capability while exposing us to attacks to which we cannot effectively respond.

The GOA and the ASF will not be toppled by violence. The situation has changed markedly since the 1990s when the warlords of what came to be known as the Northern Alliance were thrown out by the Taliban. The extent of al-Qaeda influence in Afghanistan is so limited as to be insignificant. It is unable to conduct mass casualty attacks. Warlords are generally working with the president (he has been very good to them) and his political allies. We are merely convenient targets for delivering a message against Karzai by certain groups.

Extremist violence from all groups is directed toward affecting their political standing within the existing power structure of Afghanistan.

There is no coherent national Taliban insurgency, but rather a series of provincial hit-and-run attacks (frequently on soft targets) and convoy and patrol ambushes, using IEDs, Kalashnikovs, and RPGs. This is not to say the Taliban will not sometimes stand and fight, or cannot embarrass the GOA and the ASF. But these firefights do not threaten the viability of the GOA. Violent extremist groups may still pose a threat to the stability of the GOA. But this is because the GOA has made itself vulnerable through its incompetence and corruption. After eight years of U.S. presence, it is time to admit that we cannot undo this incompetence nor stem this endemic corruption through continued combat operations.

Our combat operations to date have been the victim of circular logic. We conduct operations to kill or capture violent extremists of all types to protect the Afghan people and support the GOA. The violent extremists attack us because we are still here conducting military operations. The attacks which kill and maim U.S. combat troops are signals or messages sent by various groups as part of the political struggle for power in Afghanistan. Our operations are in support of an Afghan government that no longer relishes our help while at the same time our operations generate the extremist opposition to us as various groups jockey for power in Afghanistan.

Gen. McChrystal is changing our strategy to protect civilians and to downplay the prior emphasis on "high-value targets" and other violent extremist individuals (restricting air strikes, ending the reported body count of the Taliban, etc.). He plans to "clear, build and hold." This new approach is likely to reduce Afghan civilian casualties from our combat operations. It is also likely to increase U.S. and ISAF casualties. As we saw with Iraq, high casualty levels are likely to generate controversy among the public and among its elected representatives in Congress. This is not a politically sustainable strategy.

The GOA and ASF will continue to squeeze the U.S. and ISAF for all the "goodies" that it can, while resisting our efforts to change the institutional problems that prevent the ASF from getting better. They will insolently tolerate us as long as they can suckle at Uncle Sam's bounteous mammary glands. Meanwhile the level of GOA resistance to U.S. freedom of movement and operations will grow. Resentment on both sides will build and reinforce itself.

The reality of Afghanistan in August 2009 is analogous to a father teaching his kid to ride a bike without training wheels. We now have an Afghan government that has gained its balance (after a sort) and thinks it knows how to ride the bike in the race. And in fact they probably do know how to ride, at least well enough for the road they are on against their current competitors. Our hand on the back of the seat is holding them back and causing resentment. We need to let go before we both tumble to the ground.

Therefore, we should declare our intentions to withdraw all U.S. military forces from Afghanistan by August 2010. This will be a strategic paradigm shift, but one likely to save us considerable blood and treasure. We should end our combat operations now, save those for our own force protection, narrowly defined, as we withdraw. We should revise the force flow into Afghanistan accordingly. The emphasis should shift toward advising only and advising the ASF to prepare for our withdrawal. During the withdrawal period the USG and GOA can develop a new strategic framework agreement that may include some lasting military presence at a large training base, airbases, or key headquarters locations. But it should not

include the presence of any combat forces save those for force-protection needs or the occasional exercise. These changes will not only align our actions with the reality of Afghanistan in 2009, they will remove the causes of increasing friction. Finally, it will set the conditions for a new relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan without the complications of the residual effects of the U.S. invasion and occupation.