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Is war in Afghanistan necessary?

By Doug Badow
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The massive document leak on U.S. policy in Afghanistan is causing more Americans to ask: Why are we in Afghanistan? There is no good answer.

The original justification for war long ago disappeared. Today, says CIA Director Leon Panetta, “At most, we’re looking at 50 to 100, maybe less” al-Qaida operatives in Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, John Bolton argues that the Taliban and al-Qaida must be defeated lest they “reconquer Afghanistan and make it a base for international terrorism.” However, the Taliban leadership appeared unhappy that its guests brought down the wrath of Washington back in 2001. The Taliban likely would avoid a repeat performance.

In any case, al-Qaida doesn’t need Afghanistan. Pakistan’s northwest has proved to be a hospitable home. Other failed or semi-failed states could similarly host terrorists.

It’s hard to fathom another reason for staying. Would withdrawal harm U.S. credibility? Unfortunately, the longer Washington and its allies stay, the greater will be its ultimate loss of face.

Of course, leaving Afghanistan a better place is a worthy objective, but is not easily achieved through outside military intervention. Civilian deaths in Afghanistan may run 10,000, and as fighting grows more intense more civilians will be harmed.

Sadly, Americans are directly responsible for many deaths. Then-U.S. commander Gen. Stanley McChrystal complained in March: “We’ve shot an amazing number of people [at checkpoints] and killed a number and, to my knowledge, none has proven to have been a real threat.”

There are still Afghans who hope to create a liberal society. But the Western allies already have been at war in Afghanistan for nearly nine years. Yet after the sacrifice of nearly 2,000 lives and expenditures approaching \$400 billion, the country remains a wreck.

In June Gen. McChrystal briefed NATO members. He indicated that just five of 116 areas were rated “secure.” In only five of 122 districts did the government exercise full authority.

Taliban attacks are up. The Afghanistan Rights Monitor recently complained that “the insurgency has become more resilient, multi-structured and deadly.” When I visited in May, allied personnel warned that many areas had become much more dangerous.

Nevertheless, some war advocates praise the new allied strategy. However, manpower remains inadequate. Traditional counter-insurgency doctrine suggests that more than 600,000 troops are needed, which would mean quintupling current force levels.

Islamabad continues to play a double game, aiding the Pashtun Taliban forces. One Westerner working with the Afghan government told me: “Pakistan is in a state of undeclared war with NATO and Afghanistan.”

Nor is salvation likely to come from an increasing number of Afghan security personnel. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction recently noted that only 23 percent of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and 12 percent of the Afghan National Police (ANP) were rated in the top of four categories, meaning they were capable of independent action. On my recent trip one Afghan complained that sending in the ANP is the best way to turn people into Taliban.

Then there is the Afghan government, which is noted for its corruption. Kabul is a vampire city in which the well-connected elite live off of drug or Western money. A long-time associate of President Karzai told me that no Afghan politician could long survive without “taking care of” his family and friends.

The daunting challenge facing the U.S. and its allies is evident from operations in both Marja and Kandahar. The town of Marja was a Taliban sanctuary targeted by the U.S. military in February. In May Gen. McChrystal complained of the perception that Marja had become “a bleeding ulcer.”

The far larger operation planned for Kandahar has been put off from June and support for the Taliban remains worrisomely strong. Again, success will depend on effective local governance which does not exist.

Washington is pursuing the wrong objective in the wrong place. The West's critical objectives are to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming an al-Qaida training ground and to avoid destabilizing next-door nuclear-armed Pakistan.

The first has been achieved, and could be maintained through a negotiated withdrawal with the Taliban — which likely would prefer not to be deposed again — backed by air/drone strikes and Special Forces intervention if necessary. The second would be best served by deescalating the conflict. The war is a major source of instability in Pakistan.

Failing to “win” in Afghanistan would be bad. But carrying on in a war not worth fighting would be worse. Washington and its allies should leave nation-building in Afghanistan to the Afghan people.