



In 2013, A U.S. Air Force loadmaster scans for threats using night vision goggles aboard a C-130 aircraft after completing a cargo drop over Ghazni, province in Afghanistan. (U.S. Air Force/ Ben Bloker)

The Meaning of Setbacks in Iraq and Afghanistan

By Carter Malkasian

From 2011 to 2017, similar processes played out in Iraq and Afghanistan that are deeply significant yet understudied. Between 2011 and 2014, after much effort and some success, the United States drew down its military forces in both countries. Hopes were high that the Iraqi and the Afghan governments could take over. Their armies and police were vastly superior in numbers, equipment, and training to those of their adversaries. Nevertheless, the Iraqi and Afghan states both came to the brink of collapse. Gains that had come at high cost and sacrifice for the United States unraveled. Terrorist threats re-emerged. The United States re-entered the conflicts. So far, it has not fully withdrawn. Why these events came to pass has not yet been fully studied. This article explores what happened and the implications for U.S. strategy.¹

Hypothetical explanations for what happened vary. Sectarian divisions and corruption are widely cited, as is the difficulty of compelling the government of Iraq or Afghanistan to align with U.S. interests. An additional less cited explanation is that identity gives insurgents an edge in morale over governments supported by foreign occupiers. All three explanations have something in common: they are insensitive to the influence of U.S. intervention. The United States could not alter or diffuse these sectarian, ethnic, cultural, and religious dynamics. When the United States departed, the dynamics reinforced themselves and undid progress painfully wrought. There is little the United States could have done differently to have avoided this outcome, other than to have continued occupation.

The unraveling of Iraq and Afghanistan bears significance for the study of strategy, conflict stabilization, and military operations against insurgents and terrorists. The United States has spent the better part of two decades fighting wars against terrorism. The main theaters were Iraq and Afghanistan but also extended to conflicts in Syria, Libya, Somalia, Mali, and the Philippines. Today, the era of intervention seems to be winding down. Yet the wars linger on as we wait for a definitive end. U.S. intervention was pinned on the assumption that with U.S. assistance, these countries could stand up on their own within a few years and the United States could depart. The United States would invest a military commitment (whether in a surge or an advisory mission), break insurgent or terrorist momentum, build a more capable army and police force, and then hand things off to the government to either carry on the fight or rule in peace. The notion has been fundamental to America's

Dr. Carter Malkasian spent several years as a civilian with the U.S. military and U.S. State Department in Iraq and Syria. He is the author of "War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier" and "Illusions of Victory: The Anbar Awakening and the Rise of the Islamic State."

strategic theory of intervention. Until the very end of 2018, it informed U.S. strategy in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, and even now can still be felt.

Iraq and Afghanistan suggest that this notion is deeply flawed. It seems very difficult for intervention to yield lasting change. Unbuttressed, governments retreated and terrorists returned. On the basis of Iraq and Afghanistan, it seems bold to forecast that a state under serious insurgent or terrorist threat will be enabled to fight on its own effectively after a U.S. withdrawal. The challenges are too great. All bets are off once U.S. troops leave. The United States should not retread this road in ongoing and future intervention. Surges, exit strategies, ambitious security force assistance goals, and sustainable good governance may be misconceived. Instead, the United States should look to alternative strategies.

Two alternatives warrant consideration. The first is an open-ended U.S. presence of a few thousand troops or less. This is the surest way to suppress threats, though it promises no grand military victories and slowly piles up expenses. The second option is remote intervention by managing the conflict from afar through funding and counterterrorism operations. This may sound like abdication, but it is actually a revolutionary idea. When an intervention may span decades, letting a conflict run its natural course can offer as many opportunities for a solution as directly intervening.

Afghanistan and Iraq are, of course, outlier cases. The same outcomes will not pan out in all situations—think El Salvador and Colombia. Sometimes outright victory or negotiated settlements are possible without an extended presence. Still, the Iraq and Afghanistan experiences should cast doubt on the whole cost-benefit relationship of intervention.

Successes in Iraq and Afghanistan

Between 2006 and 2011, the United States made substantial progress against insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, the United States was fighting

al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the Sunni resistance, and the Shi'a Jaysh al-Mahdi for control of the cities. In Afghanistan, the main enemies were al-Qaeda and the Taliban, which had resurged in 2006 to overtake much of the countryside and threatened the viability of the state. To overcome the insurgencies, the United States sent tens of thousands of reinforcements and developed sound counterinsurgency tactics. The first "surge" took place in 2007 in Iraq; the second was from 2009 to 2011 in Afghanistan. U.S. troop numbers peaked at 185,000 in Iraq and 100,000 in Afghanistan.

The surges were designed to suppress insurgent activity and set the conditions for the host governments and their militaries to rule or continue fighting without a U.S. military presence. This was the fundamental strategic idea that underpinned both interventions. The Iraq surge was to be a temporary year-long boost of 30,000 troops. In his speech announcing the 2007 surge, President George W. Bush stated:

Victory in Iraq will bring . . . a functioning democracy that polices its territory, upholds the rule of law, respects fundamental human liberties, and answers to its people . . . it will be a country that fights terrorists instead of harboring them. . . . If we increase our support at this crucial moment, and help the Iraqis break the current cycle of violence, we can hasten the day our troops begin coming home.²

He envisioned the Iraqi government taking over against a defeated insurgency. President Barack Obama's goal in Afghanistan was more modest but followed the same logic. The Afghan surge was 54,000 troops. The goal was to break Taliban momentum and enable the Afghan government to carry on the war so that the United States could pull back the surge reinforcements.³ Obama set a firm date of the end of 2011 to begin drawing down. In both cases, the presidents believed the way out of indefinite

commitment was to enable the government to stand on its own. Indeed, the notion can be considered an enduring component of U.S. strategic thought on intervention. Their thought is strikingly similar to the Vietnamization strategy of the Vietnam War in which the U.S. military was to enable the South Vietnamese government and military to take over the war and allow U.S. forces to withdraw.

The Iraq surge—and the accompanying “awakening”—succeeded in bringing down violence. In a widely-read article, political scientists Stephen Biddle, Jake Shapiro, and Jeffrey Friedman calculated that attack numbers fell throughout Iraq, and Iraqi civilian and U.S. military deaths fell by 92 percent.⁴ By the middle of 2008, AQI was on the run, and Iraq’s cities and towns had become peaceful. Progress was less dramatic in Afghanistan. The number of attacks dropped only slightly. Insurgents continued to operate in inaccessible hills and mountains and in Pakistani safe havens. While many tribes stood up against the Taliban, there was no sweeping awakening akin to what had happened in Iraq. Nevertheless, the provinces that had been in danger—Helmand, Kandahar, Kunduz, and Ghazni—were largely secured. In the key population centers and farmlands, violence plummeted.

The Achilles’ heel of the Iraq and Afghanistan counterinsurgency campaigns was their cost. Deploying one soldier for one year cost an estimated \$750,000 to \$1,000,000. For the whole 100,000 in Afghanistan, the estimate reached \$110 billion.⁵ This was the same time that President Obama was trying to rebuild the U.S. economy amid the great recession. In 2011, the White House was preparing a deficit reduction plan of \$1 trillion over ten years. Reducing the number of forces in Iraq and Afghanistan was to be a significant component of the expected savings.

Obama had always opposed the Iraq war and entered office inclined to reduce forces. When Iraqi prime minister Nuri al-Maliki would not come to terms on a legal arrangement for a continued U.S.

presence at the end of 2011, the U.S. Administration pulled out all the troops. The Administration assessed that AQI was too beaten to return and that the Iraqi government would continue to function.

In Afghanistan, the drawdown was more gradual. In 2011, the Administration decided to withdraw 33,000 troops by the end of 2012 and then go to an unspecified “advisory presence” by the end of 2014. It was later decided that the advisory presence would start with 9,800 troops and wind down to a small contingent of a few hundred or so at the U.S. Embassy by the end of 2016. The Afghan government and military were expected to carry on the war alone from that point.

The Fragility of Success

After 2011, U.S. successes in both Iraq and Afghanistan collapsed. Almost to the day that U.S. troops pulled out of Iraq, Maliki and the Iraqi government intensified persecution of the Sunni population. Between 2009 and 2011, Maliki had already stolen the 2010 elections from the Sunni’s preferred bloc and gutted the Sons of Iraq militias, which had been suppressing AQI. From 2011 to 2013, he tried to imprison Sunni politicians, thereby marginalizing Sunni political representation and creating a fatal rift between Sunni tribal movements and the government. In the ensuing months, protests broke out in Sunni cities, supported by much of the Sunni population. Maliki’s measures inflamed fears of Shi’a and Iranian expansionism.

AQI—renamed the Islamic State by future caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—re-emerged as a major player in Iraq. Many Sunnis turned to the Islamic State as a protector from or check on the government.⁶ Amid the protests and their enmity toward the Iraqi government, Sunni leaders ended up abiding the Islamic State. In the view of many, it was better to work with the Islamic State and accept its version of change than oppose it and thereby help the government. Moreover, few wanted to object to

a movement so vigorously claiming Islamic credentials. Even those uncomfortable with the Islamic State often said nothing.⁷ Undoubtedly, Sunni leaders had trouble controlling the situation. A leading Sunni tribal leader explained to me: “The question of 2013 and 2014 that every shaykh faced was: ‘Is fighting the Islamic State a possibility if doing so is in support of a Shi’a government and against Islam?’”

In December 2013, severe clashes between Sunnis and the Iraqi army broke out in Anbar.⁸ The Islamic State seized the opportunity and, on January 1, launched its own attack. The Iraqi army performed poorly. Soldiers often fled and abandoned their weapons, equipment, and vehicles, sometimes shedding their uniforms and donning civilian clothes to avoid being targeted. Large numbers of humvees and tanks fell into the Islamic State’s hands. So many soldiers deserted that the two divisions in Anbar dwindled to under 30 percent strength.⁹ A few Sunni tribal leaders fought harder, but they too failed to hold back the tide. Most of their brethren either refused to side with the sectarian government or outright aligned with the Islamic State against the common government enemy.¹⁰

In June 2014, the Islamic State launched an even more ambitious offensive against Mosul and cities farther south along the Tigris. The offensive grew as Sunnis and antigovernment Sunni militias joined the movement. Two thousand fighters attacked ten thousand Iraqi soldiers and police in Mosul. Again, the police and soldiers showed scant will to fight. Within four days of the outset of the attack, nearly the entire defending 2nd Iraqi Division deserted.¹¹ Even the Kurdish Peshmerga, traditionally stauncher fighters, retreated to their capital of Irbil. Significant portions of the population welcomed the Islamic State as liberators from Shi’a oppression or as a legitimate Islamic movement. The Islamic State now controlled almost all of Sunni Arab Iraq.

During the next three years, the United States returned to Iraq, executed a major air campaign,

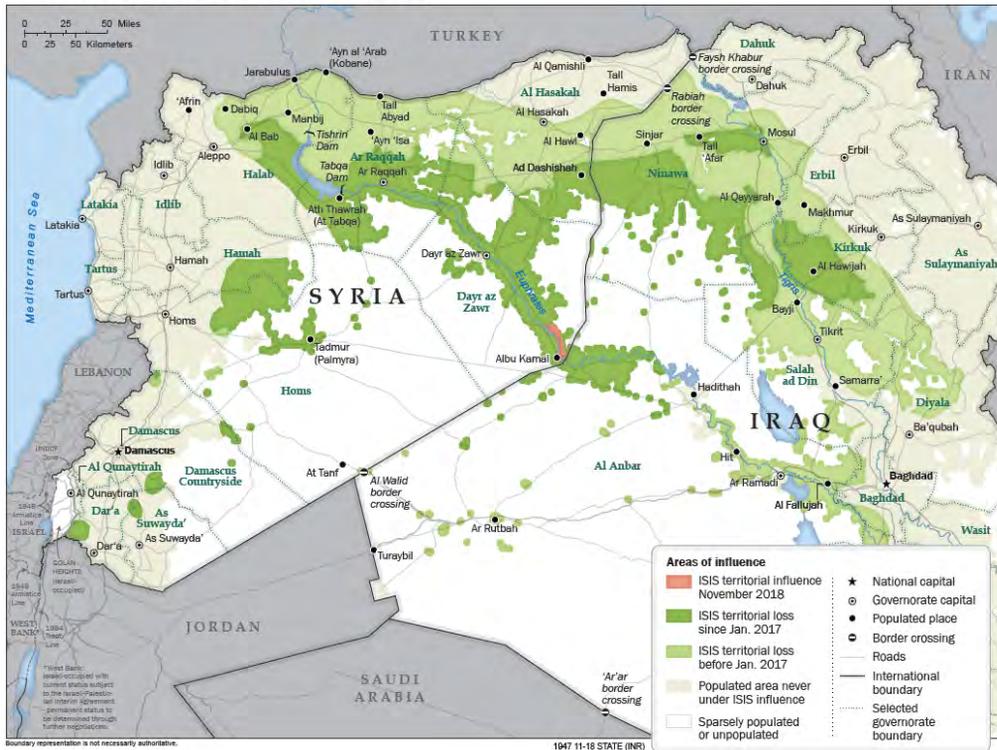
and sent advisors and special operations forces. Even with advisors, the vast bulk of the Iraqi army rarely stood and fought. Soldiers deploying to Ramadi reported that as many as 80 percent of their colleagues deserted before arriving in the city.¹² U.S. advisors often assessed that soldiers had very poor morale. They commented that the Iraqi army would attack only with overwhelming superiority, and the smallest setback could cause soldiers to flee. It was U.S. airstrikes, a small core of Iraqi special operations forces, and Shi’a militia forces that eventually—over three years of hard fighting and massive destruction—pushed the Islamic State back.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban were regaining ground even before the United States had drawn down to 9,800 at the end of 2014. Things got worse from there. In autumn 2015, the Taliban closed in on provincial capitals, attacking Kunduz city and then the defenses of Lashkar Gah (capital of Helmand). As in Iraq, the army and police performed poorly, summoning varying levels of resistance. Too many abandoned their post at the sight of the Taliban. A decade of U.S. training and advising seemed to have come to naught.

Kunduz is the most famous example. Roughly 500 Taliban routed 3,000 police, army, and other militias. There was almost a complete breakdown in the will to fight. Within two days of the beginning of the attack, the Taliban were occupying the city. A few scattered police posts and army patrols fought. Most fled before suffering any casualties. The army and police suffered fewer than 20 killed and wounded. Entire police posts, often well-fortified, were abandoned. Two full army battalions, roughly 1,000 men, ran away, leaving humvees, weapons, and ammunition behind.¹³ Though Afghan special operations forces drove the Taliban out after a week (during which the devastating accidental airstrike on the Doctors Without Borders hospital occurred), it was the first time a provincial capital had fallen to the Taliban.

The situation worsened in 2016. The Taliban surrounded and assaulted four provincial capitals.

FIGURE 1. Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Areas of Influence as of August 2018. (U.S. Department of State)



Source: Office of the Special Envoy to Defeat ISIS, U.S. Department of State.

Government casualties in 2015 and 2016 exceeded 40,000 police and soldiers. Replacements could not make up the losses. Police losses doubled the number of new recruits.¹⁴ By the end of the year, the Taliban controlled large portions of several provinces, and the army and police were on the ropes.

As in Iraq, the United States reasserted itself. First the Obama administration eased restrictions on the use of airstrikes and cancelled plans to draw down further. Then in August 2017 the Trump Administration authorized reinforcing Afghanistan to a total of 14,000 troops in country and issued a new strategy centered on bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table.

Premature Withdrawal

In both Iraq and Afghanistan, governments verged on collapse, and the United States found itself forced

to return to the wars it had hoped and planned to end. Why did this come to pass? Why did the well-resourced and -trained Iraqi and Afghan militaries fail?

One of the clearest similarities between the defeats in Iraq and Afghanistan is that the reduction of U.S. advisors and air support that accompanied the respective drawdowns was a major shock. In Iraq, no airstrikes were available at all during the 2014 attacks. In Afghanistan, air support was still possible after 2014 but was much decreased in availability; airstrikes went from roughly 340 per month in 2012 to roughly 80 per month during 2015.¹⁵ When assistance was provided, it was too little to do more than save key cities from capture. The White House expected that the Afghan army and police had the numerical and material superiority to succeed on their own. White House officials often

asked why the Afghan army needed air support when the Taliban so clearly did not.¹⁶ Additionally, with drastically fewer advisors, supervision of manning and supply nearly disappeared. Corruption and simple mismanagement sapped combat strength.

A strong case exists that had U.S. forces been present or been used more vigorously, setbacks would not have occurred or at least would have been blunted. Yet the shock of U.S. withdrawal in and of itself cannot explain why the Iraqi and Afghan militaries could not stand on their own without U.S. support. The goal had been for them to do so. The very fact that U.S. support was still needed at all is proof of failure.

Sectarian and Ethnic Divides

For Iraq, a critical factor is sectarian divisions. Maliki's oppressive policies encouraged Sunnis to support and join the Islamic State. Those policies particularly inhibited tribal leaders and politicians from siding in any way with the government. The policies divided tribal movements formerly united against AQI. Furthermore, sectarian policies trickled into the Iraqi army. Maliki purged the army of experienced commanders who had been trained by the U.S. military, especially Sunnis, and replaced them with less skilled loyalists.¹⁷ The edge the Americans had trained into the army dulled. The net effect of Maliki's policies was to strengthen support for the Islamic State while weakening the government's defenses.

The important thing here is that sectarianism was not merely the outcome of Maliki's policies. It was a function of a deeper dynamic. The Sunni-Shi'a sectarian divide and real fear underpinned Maliki's oppressive policies. The defensiveness of Shi'a politicians and parties in the wake of decades of Sunni oppression—a belief that the Sunnis were plotting to do it again—propelled Maliki to ill-advised lengths. As Adeed Dawisha has argued, the Shi'a political leadership feared a Sunni resurgence because of Saddam's and AQI's histories of violence.¹⁸ This fear was a powerful force against

Sunni-Shi'a reconciliation. Maliki depended on the support of a coalition of Shi'a groups, armed with militias, to maintain his premiership. He had to heed their sectarian defensiveness. It compounded his own biases toward oppressing the Sunnis.

Corruption

In Afghanistan, corruption mattered more than sectarian (or ethnic) rifts. Corruption within the Afghan government whittled away the numerical and material superiority of the army and police.¹⁹ Politicians and commanders skimmed pay, weapons, ammunition, vehicles, and fuel, either to sell it or hoard it to build their own power. On the battlefield, soldiers and police were left undersupplied and undermanned. Stockpiles were shallower than they should have been. Commanders put "ghost soldiers" on the rolls to pocket pay of nonexistent personnel. In Helmand, the total number of army, police, and local police was supposed to be 28,400. The actual number in 2015 was closer to 19,000. Individual soldiers and police lacked the standard number of magazines and rocket-propelled grenade rounds. In November 2016, General John W. Nicholson Jr., commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan, told Congress that corruption and poor leadership were at the root of recent defeats.²⁰

Corruption was a function of deeply ingrained cultural, social, and political factors. In Afghanistan, communities run on patronage. Because of the power of tribal ties, a leader must deliver resources to his superiors for promotion and resources to his community for their survival. The community takes precedence over the good of the nation. Corruption provides the resources for patronage to work. Tribes, warlords, and politicians all use it for this purpose.²¹

Efforts to defeat corruption were disappointing. Institutionalization of meritocratic appointments, improved training, inspections, electronic pay systems, and various other ideas amounted to little. Patronage systems subverted, circumvented, or

subsumed them. Historically, this is unsurprising. Political scientists and economists such as Samuel Huntington, Roger Myerson, Francis Fukuyama, and many others consider patronage systems inherent to the functioning of developing states.²² Corruption is known to take decades to reform, often as an outgrowth of prolonged political struggle and the development of state capacity and human capital.²³ Sometimes and in some places in Afghanistan, the negative effects of corruption could be managed. For the government, which could not escape the patronage system, corruption was extremely difficult to suppress and a drag on military effectiveness.

Morale

A final reason for the defeats of Iraq and Afghanistan pertains to both cases—poor morale. For all the importance of sectarian rifts or corruption, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the average soldier and policeman simply did not want to fight as much as his Islamic State or Taliban counterpart. In battle after battle, numerically superior and well-supplied police and soldiers in intact defensive positions made a collective decision to throw in the towel rather than go another round. When under duress, police and soldiers too often just gave up. In the words of an Afghan villager:

I saw with my own eyes government forces leave checkpoints. . . . I don't think the government can push the Taliban back. They don't fight. . . . We see the Americans supporting the government forces when they are trying to retake checkpoints, but then it's too late.²⁴

During the key battles—Kunduz, Marjah, Ramadi, Mosul—soldiers and police enjoyed numerical superiority and at least equal amounts of ammunition and supply (even after the effects of corruption) yet retreated without putting up much resistance. In Kunduz, the critical case of Afghan defeat, a post-battle evaluation found that nowhere had

soldiers or police left their posts because of a shortage of ammunition.²⁵ Whatever its prevalence, corruption had not denied these men the means to fight.

Poor morale may have partly been a secondary effect of sectarian rifts and corruption. It could not have been inspiring for a soldier to serve a government mired in sectarian infighting or to serve leaders more concerned with pocketing money than the welfare of their men. Still, these explanations are incomplete. The Iraqi army was predominantly Shi'a, after all. Presumably, government sectarianism was to their benefit. And the Islamic State was hardly a paragon of equality and diversity. The relationship of poor morale to corruption is similarly ambiguous. Forces under notoriously corrupt commanders could exhibit high levels of morale. Conversely, relatively scrupulous commanders often had trouble keeping their men in the field. The best units—the Afghan special operations forces—with the lowest corruption still needed U.S. advisors and airstrikes to make up for hesitancy under fire.

The reason for poor morale should therefore be tied to independent factors. A strong contender is identity. U.S.-built national-level forces could be said to have lacked the tie to what it meant to be Iraqi or Afghan necessary to generate high levels of morale.²⁶ In contrast, AQI (later the Islamic State) and the Taliban each stood for Islam and resistance to foreign occupation, virtues deeply rooted in what it means to be Iraqi or Afghan. They had an ability to inspire as well as unite that the Western-installed governments could never match. Iraq and Afghanistan have proud histories of resisting colonization. Iraqi kings and prime ministers have been delegitimized by their support for Great Britain. Among tribal leaders, participation in the 1920 revolt against the British is a badge of honor. The Afghans of course pride themselves on the defeat of a series of occupiers, especially the British in the 19th century and Soviets in the 20th century.²⁷

As the predecessor of the Islamic State, AQI had demonstrated this ability to inspire from 2005



A decade of training and advising by the United States seemed to have come to naught, as many Afghan security forces abandoned their posts as the Taliban closed in on Kunduz in 2015. (U.S. Air Force/Dustin Payne)

to 2007. During those years, AQI had risen on its own and overwhelmed the tribes and other resistance groups, gaining widespread support from locals. AQI and later the Islamic State gathered this momentum naturally, with limited outside help, thanks in part to ideology. Sunnis may have questioned AQI's version of Islam, but jihad against the infidel appears to have been inspiring.²⁸

The Iraqi national army, by comparison, never acquired a sense of nationalism. Its soldiers were caught between the extremism of the Islamic State and the sectarianism of Shi'a militias. The army stood for a vague attempt at nationalism, while the Islamic State stood for both Sunni identity and Islam, and the Shi'a militias stood for Shi'a identity and Islam. U.S. commanders assessed army soldiers to be far less ideologically inclined than their more aggressive Shi'a militia counterparts. Iraqi generals were known to despair that their army was nothing, a shadow of Saddam Hussein's army.²⁹ "There is no sense of nation," said one U.S. general, an astute observer of the Iraqi army. "The republic goes no farther than Baghdad."³⁰

In Afghanistan, the effect of identity was even more pronounced. The fact that the government had been created by the United States and hosted

thousands of U.S. troops constrained its ability to muster high levels of morale. Former Taliban ambassador to the United Nations and member of the Afghan High Peace Council, Abdul Hakim Mujahed—a religious scholar with access to the Taliban but an independent perspective—explained this clearly to me in 2014:

*The insurgency is strong now. There are two things that make them strong. First, the government fails to defend Islam. Second, the government fails to defend Afghan sovereignty. The United States keeps doing night raids and killing civilians, even though, time after time, President Karzai orders them to stop.*³¹

Afghan generals found the same thing. One general admitted, "The enemies are ideological people; their slogan is Jihad and Heaven but our army doesn't have that motive and slogan."³²

Too often, the police and soldiers did not believe in the government.³³ In 2015, the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies surveyed 1,657 national police in 11 provinces throughout Afghanistan and asked them about their beliefs. Respondents were deeply conflicted about why they were fighting. Only 11 percent had joined the police to fight the Taliban. Certainly,

a far larger percentage of Taliban had joined to fight the government. The image of a puppet government was a key factor. According to the report, many interviewees claimed that police “rank and file are not convinced that they are fighting for a just cause.”³⁴ Seventy percent of respondents said the government was overly influenced by the West. Nearly a third believed that Taliban authority was legitimate. On top of this, 83 percent believed that violence was justified against a government that criticized Islam, which Western influence presumably encouraged.³⁵ These figures imply shortcomings in the legitimacy of violence on behalf of a government that did not always live up to the ideal of Afghan identity.

The accomplished anthropologist David Edwards touches on the link between morale and identity in *Caravan of Martyrs*, in which he examines the causes of martyrdom and suicide bombing in Afghanistan. Edwards finds that just as an Afghan tribesman is obligated to defend his family and land, so too is he obligated to do everything in his power to defend the Afghan homeland and seek vengeance when that is not possible. A man who does otherwise is nothing. Prolonged U.S. occupation prods at this obligation. Not all Afghans are driven to become suicide bombers, but enough are:

*Some find that the way they can recover their honor and identity is by killing themselves in the process of killing those who have defiled their honor. . . . The bomber reclaims lost honor and standing in the community, he does his duty (farz'ain) according to Islam (as interpreted by Taliban clerics), and he performs the political act of striking an unjust oppressor.*³⁶

In my own study of Afghanistan and Iraq, I have come to feel that our very presence treads on what it means to be Afghan or Iraqi. It dares young men to fight. It animates Taliban and Islamic State fighters. It saps the will of policemen and soldiers, giving cause to flee rather than fight. This explanation is powerful

because it answers questions that sectarianism or corruption cannot. It is dangerous because it can be misinterpreted to mean that all Muslims are bent on war or, worse, are fanatics. On the contrary, the point is that it is tougher to risk life for country when fighting alongside what some would call an occupier.

The Intractability of Iraq and Afghanistan

What could have been done to address these problems? The list is long. Biddle, McMaster, and others have pointed out that the United States could have applied greater pressure, especially in the form of conditionality, upon the Iraqi and Afghan governments to adhere to the precepts of democracy or to counter corruption.³⁷ There are numerous occasions when the United States was hands off in sectarian politics in Iraq and countercorruption reforms in Afghanistan. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan has argued that much greater attention could also have been paid to accountability of U.S. funds and to the indictment of criminals.³⁸ On poor morale, I myself have claimed that the United States could have pressured for better leadership.

Though I am in favor of all these measures, the difference they would have made is questionable. It is unlikely they could have changed the underlying dynamics that pulled Iraq and Afghanistan back to violence. The thing about sectarian rifts, corruption, and identity is that none are terribly responsive to actions on the part of the United States. There are few quick solutions.³⁹ Only as long as they were physically present could U.S. boots and guns countervail the effects of such ingrained dynamics. Once the United States drew down, the dynamics reasserted themselves, and each country relapsed into civil war.

Obama's strategy to deal with the setbacks in the two countries after 2014 reflected a recognition of this reality. The strategy was designed to avoid overcommitment. Fewer than 5,000 troops were sent to Iraq. Most were dedicated to training

and advising and were forbidden to enter combat. Heavy airstrikes were used to give the Iraqi forces an advantage. In reaction to setbacks in Afghanistan, Obama eased restrictions on airstrikes (though less than in Iraq) and reversed his plans to withdraw. First, in 2015, he decided to keep 9,800 troops into 2016. Then, in May 2016, he decided to keep 8,400, with no drawdown timeline. Nonetheless, he remained determined to hold numbers below 10,000 and not fall back into a heavy commitment. In both countries, the onus was placed on the host government to bear the brunt of combat.

Rethinking Intervention

The lesson is that internal cultural, historical, and social dynamics could not be redirected in the span of a few years. The strategy of intervening, building up a government, and then withdrawing was off. U.S. forces could never leave without risking the re-emergence of the threat. In practice, the entire notion of an “exit strategy” was inconsistent with the goal of keeping a government afloat or a terrorist threat suppressed. In this regard, the cost of the surges dramatically outweighed the gains. The surges had bought only a few years of peace. The same long-term result could have been attained with far fewer forces.

Today, the United States seems to be moving away from interventions. The *U.S. National Defense Strategy of 2018* focuses on China and Russia as major adversaries instead of insurgents and terrorists in the Middle East and South Asia. At the end of 2018, President Trump announced that the United States would leave Syria, and newspapers reported he would halve forces in Afghanistan. Intervention may soon be in America’s rear-view mirror. But that has not happened yet. Violence in Syria and Afghanistan continues, and President Trump’s stated goal is to stay in Iraq and to see through a peace settlement in Afghanistan. Intervention and conflict stabilization remain relevant issues.

We should rethink counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, intervention, and stabilization. The idea that a military intervention can have an end—or last just a few years—and create lasting change has justified strategies for Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Vietnam before them. It is influential and appealing to politicians who want to do something but think the United States cannot stay forever. Its persistence can be seen in the continuing U.S. military presence in Syria and the reinforcement of Afghanistan in 2017. The idea should be viewed cautiously. Afghanistan and Iraq exemplify how intervention may be a costly, open-ended project. Gains may last only as long as intervening forces are present.

The two cases do not make a general theory, but they are weighty enough to merit significant consideration in any policy discussion on intervention. The cases where an intervening power succeeded without long-term presence, such as Oman, El Salvador, and Colombia, seem to be too few and too unique to be a basis for policy.⁴⁰ They do not lessen the need for caution. In the most well-known cases of success, decades of occupation, violence, and sometimes oppression facilitated change, not a few years of military operations. The more famous successes—Malaya, Philippines, Northern Ireland, and Bosnia—were multi-decade (and larger) commitments and thus underline the main point. It can be argued that the interveners never left. Although certain circumstances may facilitate success, that result would appear rather hopeful barring decades-long presence.

Where does this leave the United States in terms of strategy and intervention? How should we rethink? Two options deserve consideration. Others exist and are worthy of study, but these two strike me as sober.

The first is a long-term, open-ended commitment in order to sustain successes. Understanding that military commitment is likely to be severely prolonged and permanent gains are unlikely should encourage highly selective intervention choices and thrifty strategies that are sustainable over the long

term. The key question for any strategist should be: what is the minimum force to secure the minimum U.S. interests for as long as possible? Such an option means accepting limited aims and persistent violence in order to foreswear a heavy and expensive troop presence. The latter may do better at reducing violence but is more often than not too costly to be sustainable over the time spans required in intervention. The former is preferable—probably a force of 500 to 15,000 to suppress terrorist threats for an open-ended commitment. This too is hardly cheap. But if we seek to suppress terrorist threats, the United States may have to pay for troop deployments for decades and accept the accompanying casualties.

There are times when a full-blown intervention of tens of thousands of troops over decades has been warranted. Successful ones, however, entail keeping large numbers of forces in place for extended periods. That has only been acceptable when the stakes are very high, such as the Philippines, Germany, Japan, or South Korea. The stakes of the Middle East and South Asia have always been more ambiguous. In places like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, the acme of good strategy is to deploy the lightest force possible to maintain pressure on terrorists and prevent the host government (or partner) from falling.

The prolonged nature of this line of strategic thinking was frustrating for the Obama Administration, as it is for the Trump Administration. That frustration has so far been unavoidable. The cost of open-ended commitment should give any general, secretary of defense, senator, or commander-in-chief pause. The prospect of protracted costs should devalue intervention, often deterring the endeavor entirely.

This brings us to the second option. In this option, the United States would not directly intervene militarily at all. Instead, it would fund capable partners, execute select counterterrorist strikes from offshore against critical threats when necessary, and try to manage events indirectly. Living with

instability somewhere in the world and riding out any terrorist threat may be better than the financial and human expenses of addressing it directly. Under this option, the United States would let the civil wars run their course, thinking beyond outright intervention and focusing on attaining the best outcome over a few decades. Over time, insurgencies may weaken, and new opportunities may emerge. A government may find its legs on its own, or a more capable leader may take the reins. Insurgent organizations may collapse from their own discord. The difficulties inherent in leadership transitions may weaken an adversary's grasp on power. Extremist ideologies may burn themselves out. Even if insurgents win in a country like Iraq or Afghanistan, their regimes may only last a decade before a new civil war resumes and a new player—perhaps more friendly to the United States—takes the stage. All this could occur within the time span of a costly intervention.

Letting countries find their own path may have unappreciated virtues. For one, if sending troops delegitimizes partners, staying out would give a partner the chance of preserving real legitimacy and standing on its own, instead of permanently depending upon the United States. Ditching “occupying” troops is a way an ally could retain legitimacy and the adversary *might* be defeated, setting the stage for stability and peace.⁴¹ Staying out offers the definitive solution that eludes intervention. This policy would be a gamble. An adversary might win—but so might an ally. The situation could be better than any that might be attained by U.S. troops. If U.S. troops are on the ground, the lesson of Iraq and Afghanistan is that the host military will have trouble ever building such legitimacy, foreign forces will have to stay, and the vicious cycle will go on and on.

The last observation I would like to bring up concerns the morality of intervention. A moral dilemma arises from the pursuit of light, low-cost, sustainable intervention strategies. If the intervening power is not staying permanently and in

sufficient force to suppress insurgents or terrorists, then it may be sustaining instability. It is saving an endangered government but not doing enough to halt violence afflicting its constituents. The painful fact is that the local population may be better off under order instilled by a victorious adversary. The intervening power is exposing them to harm in order to defend its own people from terrorist attack or some other threat. In contrast to the massive, overly expensive intervention that brings at least temporary stability, the sustainable, affordable strategy can leave the local population in a state of unending civil war. At the end of the day, intervention can boil down to a terrible tradeoff between the well-being of American (or European or Chinese or Russian) citizens and the well-being of the people of the host nation. Professor Odd Arne Westad wrote at the end of his magisterial *The Global Cold War* that “Cold War ideologies and superpower interventions . . . helped put a number of Third World countries in a state of semipermanent civil war” and caused untold harm to their peoples in pursuit of marginal interests. His finding echoes around us today. In the broad sweep of history, it is responsible to ask ourselves how often intervention is truly worth it. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ The research for this article comes from years spent as a civilian advisor in Iraq and Afghanistan and more recently in repeated trips to each country. Some of the research has already appeared in two books—*War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier and Illusions of Victory: The Anbar Awakening and the Rise of the Islamic State*. Other research is from an ongoing book project on the Afghan war.

² “President Bush Addresses Nation on Iraq War,” transcript, *Washington Post*, January 10, 2007.

³ Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 498.

⁴ Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Friedman, and Jacob Shapiro, “Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007,” *International Security* 37, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 7–11.

⁵ Todd Harrison, *Estimating Funding for Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary

Assessments, 2009); Todd Harrison, “Analysis of the FY2012 Defense Budget,” Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2011, 6–7.

⁶ Discussion with U.S. military advisors, al-Asad airbase, al-Anbar province, January 8, 2016.

⁷ Discussion with key Albu Nimr tribal leader, Amman, Jordan, March 9, 2017.

⁸ Yasir Ghazi, “Deadly Clashes between Iraqi Forces and Tribal Fighters in Anbar,” *New York Times*, December 30, 2013; “Al Qaeda Seizes Partial Control of 2 Cities in Western Iraq,” *The Long War Journal* (blog), www.longwarjournal.org, January 2, 2014; Michael Knights, “The ISIL’s Stand in the Ramadi-Falluja Corridor,” *CTC Sentinel*, May 29, 2014.

⁹ Discussion with Marine command, Kuwait, August 24, 2015.

¹⁰ Ghazi, “Deadly Clashes Between Iraqi Forces and Tribal Fighters in Anbar”; “Al Qaeda Seizes Partial Control of 2 Cities in Western Iraq”; Liz Sly, “Al-Qaeda Force Captures Fallujah Amid Rise in Violence in Iraq,” *Washington Post*, January 3, 2014; Knights, “The ISIL’s Stand in the Ramadi-Falluja Corridor”; Erin Banco, “Sunni Tribesmen Helped ISIS Take Control of Ramadi, Leaders Say,” *International Business Times*, May 22, 2015; Robert Tollast, “Civil Wars of Iraq’s Sunni Tribes: Fault Lines Within 8 Sunni Tribes and Sub-tribes, 2003–2016,” 1001IraqiThoughts.com, March 28, 2016.

¹¹ Jessica Lewis, “The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham Captures Mosul and Advances Toward Baghdad,” Institute for the Study of War, June 11, 2014; Ned Parker, Isabel Coles, and Raheem Salman, “Special Report: How Mosul Fell—An Iraqi General Disputes Baghdad’s story,” Reuters, October 14, 2014.

¹² Discussion with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) officer, Baghdad, July 29, 2016.

¹³ “Unhappy Anniversary: Afghanistan and a Resurgent Taliban,” *Economist*, October 3, 2015.

¹⁴ Mujib Mashal and Fahim Abed, “Afghan Forces, Their Numbers Dwindling Sharply, Face a Resurgent Taliban,” *New York Times*, October 13, 2016.

¹⁵ These figures are for numbers of weapons released. “U.S. Airpower in Afghanistan: 2012–2017,” AFCENT Public Affairs Release, June 2017.

¹⁶ Author’s observation from time as political advisor to General Dunford, Commander, International Security Assistance Force, 2013–14.

¹⁷ Parker, Coles, and Salman, “Special Report: How Mosul Fell”; visit to CTS training facility, Baghdad, January 7, 2016; discussion with UNDP officer, July 30, 2016.

¹⁸ Adeed Dawisha, *Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 270.

¹⁹ In Iraq, corruption was also a problem, just to a lesser extent than in Afghanistan. Maliki's politicization of the army allowed corruption to rise. Senior officers were involved in oil smuggling, blackmailing contractors, sale of military equipment on the black market, and ghost soldier schemes. It undermined army effectiveness. Manning in Mosul in 2014 was at less than half of the assigned 25,000 soldiers and police. At the time of the battle, heavy weapons and ammunition for all types of arms was lacking, leaving soldiers worse off to face the Islamic State fighters. "Former Mosul Mayor Says Corruption Led to ISIS Takeover," *Al-Monitor*, July 2, 2014; Parker, Coles, and Salman, "Special Report: How Mosul Fell."

²⁰ See also Vanda Felbab-Brown, "How Predatory Crime and Corruption in Afghanistan Underpin the Taliban Insurgency," *Brookings Institute*, April 18, 2017, <www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/04/18/how-predatory-crime-and-corruption-in-afghanistan-underpin-the-taliban-insurgency/>.

²¹ Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 304.

²² Roger Myerson, "Foundations of the State in Theory and Practice," home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/fieldman.pdf, October 2007; Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

²³ Francis Fukuyama, "What is Corruption?" in *Against Corruption: A Collection of Essays* (London: UK Government Stationery Office, 2016); Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 334.

²⁴ Sune Engel Rasmussen, "First Helmand, Then Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, September 21, 2016.

²⁵ "Saleh: Weakness in Leadership Was the Cause of the Collapse of Kunduz," *VOA Pashto*, November 21, 2015.

²⁶ For a discussion of "Will to Fight: Sacred Values, Identify Fusion, and Spiritual Formidability," see Scott Atran, "The Islamic State Revolution," in *Beyond Convergence: World Without Order*, ed. Hilary Matfess and Michael Miklaucic (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2016).

²⁷ Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 341–342.

²⁸ Anthony Shadid, "In Anbar, U.S.-Allied Tribal Chiefs Feel Deep Sense of Abandonment," *Washington Post*, October 3, 2009; Sam Dagher, "In Anbar Province, New Leadership, but Old Problems Persist," *New York Times*, September 12, 2009.

²⁹ Discussion with U.S. military advisors, al-Asad airbase, Anbar province, January 8, 2016; discussion with

Marine command, Kuwait, August 24, 2015; discussion with key Abu Nimr tribal leader, Amman, Jordan, March 9, 2017.

³⁰ Discussion with U.S. generals, Irbil, Iraq, October 20, 2015.

³¹ Discussion with Abdul Hakim Mujahed, former Taliban ambassador to the United Nations, Kabul, January 18, 2014.

³² Antonio Giustozzi, *The Army of Afghanistan: A Political History of a Fragile Institution* (London: Hurst, 2015), 203.

³³ Discussion with Kabul University professor, Kabul, March 2, 2016.

³⁴ Robert Zaman and Abdul Hadi Khalid, "Trends of Radicalization among the Ranks of the Afghan National Police," *Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies*, November 2015, 19–20.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15–17, 19–20.

³⁶ David Edwards, *Caravan of Martyrs: Sacrifice and Suicide Bombing in Afghanistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 148.

³⁷ Stephen Biddle, "Policy Implications for the United States," in David Lake and Eli Berman, eds., *Proxy Wars: Fighting Terrorists, Insurgents, and Drug Lords through Local Agents* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, forthcoming.). Stephen Biddle, "Building Security Forces and Stabilizing Nations: The Problem of Agency," *Daedalus* 6, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 126–138; Michelle Hughes and Michael Miklaucic, eds., *Impunity: Countering Illicit Power in War and Transition* (Washington, DC: Center for Complex Operations, 2016); Sarah Chayes, *Thieves of State: How Corruption Threatens Global Security* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2016).

³⁸ "Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan," *Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction*, September 2017.

³⁹ As James Fearon wrote in his seminal piece on Iraq's civil war, sectarian rifts during civil war are notoriously difficult to mend: "The historical evidence suggests that this is a Sisyphean task." James Fearon, "Iraq's Civil War," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2007): 7.

⁴⁰ Oman was a communist insurgency in an Islamic state, a counterinsurgent's dream. El Salvador is the size of a postage stamp and the insurgency's outside backer—the Soviet Union—collapsed. Colombia had a good government and actually enjoyed long-term U.S. support, so it may not even be an exception to the rule.

⁴¹ For support for this approach see Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 335.

⁴² Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 396–407.